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‘An emotional stalemate’: Cold intimacies in heterosexual young people’s dating practices

Abstract

In this paper we consider the ways in which heterosexual young people navigate emotionality in their early dating practices. We draw on the ‘cold intimacy’ thesis (Illouz, 2007, 2012, 2018; Hochschild, 1994) that posits that emotions have increasingly become things to be evaluated, measured, quantified, and categorized. Within the context of young people’s relationships, research suggests that while they are often open about the physical aspects of casual sex, they are reluctant to demonstrate emotional attachment, with vulnerability deemed shameful (Wade, 2017). We draw on in-depth interviews with dating app users aged 18-25 to explore these arguments. The accounts that the participants offer suggest that emotional attachment is rarely articulated, and is seen as a sign of weakness in the early stages of a relationship. In the arena of dating, emotions thus become bargaining chips, with the ‘winner’ being the party with the least to lose, the least invested and the least emotionally attached. While this is true for both the young men and women interviewed, our findings demonstrate the gendered imbalance of power in intimate relationships, as female participants fear emotional hurt, while male participants avoid potential rejection and humiliation. As a result, most connections remain in the limbo of what we identify as the ‘failed talking stage’. This is underpinned by the removal of channels of accountability, coupled with entrenched heteronormative sexual scripts dictating gender roles at this stage.

Introduction

Claims about the democratisation of sexual relations (e.g. Giddens, 1992; Roseneil, 2000) have been accompanied by a popular understanding that that modern dating practices, epitomised by the use of mobile dating apps, have resulted in a ‘dating apocalypse’ (Sales, 2015), where relationships are centred on temporality and an avoidance of commitment. The unstructured nature of modern dating has become a source of public concern and moral panic, particularly stigmatising young people, who are perceived to be on the frontline of modern dating practices. As it is implied that young people use mobile dating apps to ‘meet strangers online for sexual adventures’ (Pascoe, 2011: 5), with no thought given to love or commitment, emotions have been neglected in the study of young adults’ intimate relationships, particularly in the context of

mobile dating. Within sociological work, this is represented by the ‘cold intimacy’ thesis, which is represented most notably in the work of Eva Illouz (2007, 2012, 2018), which argues that increased rationalization and individualism has led to a cooling of intimacy since romantic decisions are now based on bargaining and reason (Twamley, 2019), as well as earlier work by Arlie Hochschild (1983), which argued that the self-reliance and autonomy fostered by feminist texts has undermined emotionally rich intimate relationships.

Drawing on interviews with sixteen young dating app users, this paper explores the posited rationality of emotion and the cold intimacy thesis, whereby emotions are rationalised and controlled within modern dating practices. Challenging normative representations of modern dating practices, we argue that emotions are absent not in favour of commitment phobia nor sexual promiscuity, but rather, emotions are managed to protect one’s vulnerability. Our analysis shows that in early romantic encounters, emotions are regarded as shameful or embarrassing, and something to be denied or controlled. Participants avoid displaying emotional attachment through fear of rejection or humiliation, which has led to an emotional stalemate, where relationships fail to progress beyond the early, experimental, stage. Our findings demonstrate the gendered imbalance of power in intimate relationships, as female participants fear emotional hurt, while male participants avoid potential rejection and humiliation. As a result, most connections remain in the limbo of what we identify as the ‘failed talking stage’. This is underpinned by the removal of channels of accountability, coupled with entrenched heteronormative sexual scripts dictating gender roles at this stage.

The research findings here aim to contribute to scholarship on digital intimacy and the early romantic relationships by highlighting the lived experiences of emotionality amongst young, heterosexual, dating app users, who are often underrepresented in sociological research.

Literature Review

The cold intimacy thesis has emerged as various sociologists have explored the intersection of neoliberalism, feminism, technology and therapeutic culture and their impact on personal life (Bauman, 2003; Furedi, 2004; Illouz, 2012; Hochschild, 1994). Most notably Eva Illouz (2007, 2012, 2018) argues that the convergence of therapy and feminism have produced a process of

rationalisation in personal life. Emotions and intimate relationships have increasingly become things to be evaluated, measured, quantified, and categorised. To ensure autonomy, individuals avoid strong attachments to others, and manage their own emotions in a neutral, scientific manner to become their own therapists. According to Illouz, an unintended consequence of this approach is making intimate relationships 'cold' (Illouz, 2007) by encouraging emotional distance and self-control instead of the necessary commitments, sacrifices, and vulnerabilities. Illouz maintains that the choice and individual self-fulfilment that consumer society is predicated on undermines commitment, as multiple options dampen our ability to develop strong feelings for a specific person, with the possibility of choice fundamentally altering our ability to commit. Men, in particular, have developed a commitment-phobia driven by what Illouz terms a new 'architecture of choice' (2012: 91), which inhibits decision-making and commitment.

Such architectures of choice include online dating, which has fused consumer logic onto intimate relationships (Illouz, 2007). Early romantic attachment is often intense within this context, however, long-term commitment is rendered impossible by the imagined availability of an alternative partner once the initial desire has dissipated. In this way, the internet unleashes a fantasy yet undermines actual romantic feelings (Illouz, 2007: 104). Yet far from heralding a loss of emotionality, capitalist culture has been accompanied by intensification of emotional life (Illouz, 2018), as we pursue emotional experiences for their own sake (Ahmed, 2010). To this extent, emotional life projects have become central to our identity, as consumer acts and emotional life have become symbiotic, as commodities facilitate the expression of emotions, and emotions are converted into commodities, or 'emodities' (Illouz, 2018). Ergo, 'consumer capitalism has increasingly transformed emotions into commodities, and it is this historical process which explains the intensification of emotional life' (Illouz, 2018: 10).

Similarly, Hochschild's observation that the self-help genre reflects a 'cultural cooling' (1994: 2) that emphasizes the primacy of the individual's needs and fails to acknowledge the complexity of human relations. Hochschild (1983) compared 'feminist' and 'traditional' self-help books directed at women in the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that feminist texts are 'cold' as they encourage readers to prioritise personal freedom and autonomy over strong emotional attachments. Moreover, Furedi (2012) argued that norms of symmetry and equality in intimate

relations encourage men and women to monitor their relationships with one another, rather than display the emotional vulnerability necessary to commit fully.

This is in contrast to Giddens' (1992) influential pure relationship, based on the principles of freedom and choice, wherein relationships are negotiated between partners and are sustained only for as long as they provide satisfaction. This reflects the detraditionalization of intimacy and serves as a blueprint for modern dating practices, as commitment is negotiated and contingent and comes without the guarantees of traditional ties such as marriage. Instead, 'it is a feature of the pure relationship that it can be terminated, more or less at will, by either partner at any particular point' (Giddens, 1992: 137). Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim proposed that young people reject traditional notions of family and marriage, instead seeking 'emotional commitment' (1995: 16). However, while there is a potential for greater freedom and negotiation in the detraditionalized 'pure relationship', such freedom can manifest into uncertainty and ambivalence (Lewis, 2005) where the temporality of relationships, and uncertainty of dissolution, becomes a source of anxiety and prevents individuals from forming meaningful bonds.

This pessimistic interpretation was taken by Bauman (2000, 2003), who argued that individualism and excessive consumerism has fundamentally damaged intimate relationships, which have come to be treated as things to be consumed rather than worked on and produced. Bauman argued that the internet and technology was key to this shift, as virtual connections undermine relationships, which can be 'deleted' (Bauman, 2003: xii), as online dating takes the form of online shopping (Bauman and Raud, 2015), culminating in casual relationships where neither party is willing to admit their feelings for one another, through fear of rejection. The emergence of a 'culture of narcissism' prophesized by Christopher Lasch in the late 1970s, appears to have been realised in popular use of social networking and dating apps, as individualisation and excessive consumerism have led 'personal relations [to] crumble under the emotional weight with which they are burdened' (Lasch, 1979: 188), with Lasch's theories regaining popularity in the past decade. It has also been argued that impact of technology has damaged individuals' interpersonal skills, as we are unable to be fully present in relationships or

interactions because of the distraction of our phone and internet-mediated relationships (Turkle, 2011).

For Illouz, casual sex has no clear normative core (2018: 135) and therefore creates uncertainty. The analytical concept with which she tries to grasp these processes is that of the negative relationship, comprised by negative bonds. Negative bonds, Illouz argues, characterise short lived relationships that require ‘little involvement of the self and [are] devoid of emotion’ (2018: 21), with the casual sexual relationship the most salient example. In contrast to the ‘narrative linearity’ of traditional heterosexual relationships, which progress in a series of milestones towards a specific goal, the casual sexual relationship is a singular episode wherein ‘any expectations of intimacy, commitment and responsibility are restricted to the encounter’ (ibid., 2018: 65). Illouz remains critical of the negative relationship, arguing that the nature of casual sex undermines long-term commitment and transforms sex into a service transaction. However, Illouz too raises concerns surrounding the relative normlessness of negative relationships, whereby the lack of rules and shared frame of meaning culminates in an inability to objectively define norms in an intimate context. For Illouz, the nature of casual sex as ‘cool, easy, emotionally detached [and] with no clear frame of definition’ (2018: 151) not only illustrates how sexual norms have become subject to reflexive negotiation, but depicts how the lack of a shared and clearly focused understanding of a relationship can create deep uncertainty.

However, the early stages of relationships and more casual encounters are underrepresented in sociological research. Most notably, recent work by Lisa Wade (2017) on the ‘hook-up’ culture of US college students suggests that while young people are not necessarily engaging in increasing amounts of casual sex, they are reluctant to demonstrate emotional attachment, with emotional vulnerability deemed shameful. In this paper we develop Wade’s work to explore how a cultural belief that ‘showing emotion is shameful’, has damaging effects on intimacy. Specifically, considering Wade’s findings, this research will question whether emotional vulnerability remains fixed in accordance with gender, or whether, indeed, all genders face this ‘risk’, in a contemporary dating battlefield.

Consistent with heteronormative gender ideals which perpetuate the narrative that ‘men want sex while women want love’ (Monaghan and Robertson, 2012: 141), men are often perceived to be incapable of expressing emotional intimacy, positioning themselves in opposition to emotional women (author 2, 2017). Depicted in popular culture, the ‘fuckboy’ and ‘commitment-phobe’ is often framed as a masculine stereotype, characterised by an inability to sacrifice sexual freedom, and inability to ‘settle down’ (Sullivan *et al*, 2015). However, considering the greater ambiguation in gender roles, regarding how ‘men’s and women’s emotional behaviours are more similar than different’ (Wong and Rochlen, 2005: 62), traditional heteronormative gender ideals cannot be relied upon. Fundamentally, as gender roles become malleable, indicative of, and intricately connected to ‘social, cultural and economic contexts’ (Haywood, 2018: 26) including a rise of feminism, the sexual revolution and the proliferation of individualisation, traditional perceptions of heteronormative roles cannot be relied upon.

Indeed, while heterosexual relationships tend to be separated into masculine and feminine variables (Nahon and Lander, 2016), this paper explores the ways in which conditions of late modernity allow for greater ambiguity in gendered scripts. Specifically, this paper considers how repressing emotion, in the context of intimacy, is performed by all genders and is symptomatic of a ‘managed heart’ (Hochschild, 1983), wherein individuals control their emotions to protect themselves from emotional hurt.

Empirical evidence has not straightforwardly supported claims of a shift from committed to casual relationships. Jamieson (1998) cautions against interpreting declining rates of marriage and the trend towards cohabitation as evidence of a rejection of traditional forms of commitment. Research suggests that Tinder users (Hobbs *et al*, 2016) valued monogamy and commitment. Thus, the argument that there has been a rejection of commitment and long-term relationships has generally not been borne out in sociological research, with couple relationships standing firm at the centre of intimate life (Gabb and Fink, 2015; author 2, 2017). This is supported by US-based research (Rosenfeld, 2018), which also suggests that the majority of single people are not actively dating or engaging in casual sex, further challenging the representativeness of the popular ‘hook-up’ culture trope. However, research indicates that young women lack power in

heterosexual dating relationships (Chung, 2005; author 2, 2013) which continue to be characterised by gender inequality.

This paper takes up these sociological issues, to examine emotionality in dating for young heterosexual men and women. Before moving on to our findings we outline our methodology.

Methodology

Contributing towards an emergent body of research on dating app users, this paper questions the extent to which young adults refrain from expressing emotions in their intimate relationships, to protect themselves from vulnerability. To address this question, a qualitative research design was selected which utilised in depth face to face and digital interviews with eight heterosexual men and eight heterosexual women, aged between eighteen and twenty-five.

All participants identified as heterosexual, were actively engaged in dating, and had experience of dating apps. The focus on young adulthood was motivated by the underrepresentation of young adults in research on emotional intimacy, with the topic area a suitable 'gap' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013: 5) in existing literature. Discussions on intimacy in young adulthood have tended to focus on sexual intimacy, with young adults predominantly utilised to examine 'hook up culture' and casual sex (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001; Reid *et al*, 2011; Hobbs *et al*, 2016; van Oosten *et al*, 2017). Moreover, when emotional intimacy has been acknowledged in research on young adults' intimate relationships, normative assumptions on commitment phobia have been reproduced, particularly for young men. For this reason, we recruited young adults aged between eighteen and twenty-five and, with heterosexuality exposing 'gender differences, which more often than not function as gender inequalities' (Illouz, 2018: 14), heterosexuality was specified to allow comparisons in how male and female participants experience emotional intimacy. While ethnicity was not specified as a demographic requirement in the research advertisement, as to encourage a diverse sample, most participants in the sample were White-British, with only one Pakistani-British participant and one Black-British participant. The majority of participants were university educated, with ten participants studying at university at the time of the interview, and two graduates. Of the remaining four participants, three were in full-time employment and one in part-time employment.

Recruiting the research sample adopted a volunteer sampling technique, whereby a public advertisement was posted to the author's Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram profiles. The advertisement included a brief description of research, the required demographic characteristics of participants, and responsive contact details. With the post made public, the advertisement was shared a total of twenty-five times across Facebook and Instagram and reached a vast audience. Ten participants responded to the advertisement directly and a further six responded to the advertisement via chain referral. However, while the advertisement attracted a high volume of participants and generated a lot of preliminary interest, several participants did not pursue this interest when interviews were officially arranged. Consistent with Oliffe and Mroz's observation that 'men don't volunteer, they are recruited' (2005: 257), the high dropout rate was particularly common amongst male participants, who proved difficult to attract for interview.

Ethical approval was granted for the study from ---- University in 2018, and The University of -- ----- in 2019. Interviews took place from January 2018 to April 2019, and each interview lasted between forty-five to ninety minutes. The location of each interview was decided upon by the participant, including study spaces on the ----- University campus, a café and a bar. While nine interviews were conducted face-to-face, seven interviews were conducted digitally, with four interviews conducted via Skype and three via Facebook. The four interviews conducted via Skype followed the same format as face-to-face interviews, however, Facebook interviews deviated from this format and were conducted asynchronously, with participants responding to questions at a convenient time. Admittedly, synchronicity was preferred in the research design, as synchronous interviewing is most comparable to oral communication, however, despite this preference, methodological advantages did emerge from asynchronous interviewing. As such, by virtue of asynchronous interviewing, participants were able to control when they responded, opting to respond at a convenient time in their busy schedules (James and Busher, 2006: 407), which widened the sample by including participants who otherwise would not be able to participate.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes. Asynchronous interviews conducted via Facebook were self-

transcribed as a 'text-based record of each interview' existed within the Facebook messenger application (James and Busher, 2012: 181), while oral interviews were transcribed from an audio recording. To disguise participants' characteristics, participants were afforded pseudonyms and transcripts were modified where specific individuals, places or events were referred to.

Despite initial issues in recruiting participants, the interviews yielded a large amount of data, revealing significant themes surrounding emotional vulnerability and gendered power imbalances in young adults' intimate relationships.

Findings

Managing Vulnerability

In anticipation that their relationships may not 'work' (Sophia) nor 'last' (Eva), female participants in this research alluded to concealing their feelings and refraining from becoming 'too attached', in anticipation that the relationship would eventually end:

'I feel scared to let my walls down just in case it doesn't last.' (Eva, Female, 21)

Participants were only willing to declare their feelings, and become 'attached', when certain that feelings would be reciprocated. Amidst a culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1979), reciprocity is integral to contemporary dating practices. While, in traditional and 'ritualized' version of love, emotions confirm commitment and vice versa (Illouz, 2012: 30), in the contemporary social context, there is no certainty of commitment as neither party are willing to 'put themselves on the line' (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001: 38) by confessing their emotions. Demonstrated by Wade's research into American hook-up culture, expressing emotion holds connotations with weakness and vulnerability. By virtue of this, while individuals may develop 'feelings' for one another, they will avoid admitting these feelings through fear of rejection (Wade, 2017) and would rather sacrifice their intimate relationships, than sacrifice their pride.

'I don't want to be the girl that's like "Hi. Hi. Hi." [gestures scrolling through messages on a phone screen] to be ignored.' (Amber, Female, 21)

‘I think at first, as silly as it is, whoever is less committed to the person, or “cares less” [gestures quotation marks] has the power, as if it doesn’t work, they are the one who doesn’t get hurt.’ (Sophia, Female, 21)

Theorised by Haywood, ‘emotional investment entails great emotional risk’ (2018: 47) and the unwillingness to communicate one’s emotions creates a power struggle, whereby neither party is willing to occupy a vulnerable role or take the ‘risk’. In the context of modern dating, individuals participate in, what can be termed, an ‘emotional stalemate’, in which they wait for one another to confess their feelings. Accordingly, whoever confesses their emotions first occupies the inferior ‘losing’ role as they not only risk rejection but, because they are more attached, they have more to lose when the relationship reaches a unilateral end.

‘Men are less open about their feelings so it’s always women who have to guess and risk being rejected. So really, we just wait until they show interest.’ (Alexa, Female, 21)

Reminiscent of Lahad’s research (2012) into singleness and waiting, participants demonstrated an imbalance of power in intimate relationships, distinguished by those who ‘wait’ and those who are ‘waited for’ (Lahad, 2012). Although female participants expressed that they often ‘wait’ for potential partners to demonstrate romantic interest as a means to protect themselves from rejection, they simultaneously affirm themselves as objects ‘waiting’ to be chosen.

‘Unless I really like a guy, I try to wait for him to make the first move and message me to show he’s interested.’ (Sophia, Female, 21)

Historically, as Illouz suggests, ‘the question of who took a risk was culturally scripted’ (2018: 177) with the initiation of an intimate relationship a prerogative of patriarchal courtship. However, with the dissolution of ritualised courtship, and an ambiguation of gender roles in heterosexual relationships, the responsibility of risk is negotiated ad hoc. Indeed, the equality posited by modern relationships could suggest an obsolescence of traditional gendered scripts, particularly regarding how women wait to be asked out on a date (Rose and Frieze, 1989; Glenn and Marquadt, 2001). However, from the narratives of female participants’ which detail ‘waiting

until [men] show interest' (Alexa), and male participants corroborating an expectation for men to 'risk being rejected' by making the first move (James), it may be suggested that women continue to occupy an inferior position.

'I think a lot of boys don't actually want to date you, they just want to get in your bed. So, if I was to ask someone on a date I wouldn't feel confident that they would actually want to date me, or just use it as a means to an end.' (Juliet, Female, 22)

Consistent with patriarchal scripts which suggest 'men want sex while women want love' (Monaghan and Robertson, 2012: 141), women typically occupy the 'emotional' role in their intimate relationships (Hochschild, 1979; Mongeau *et al*, 2007; Ackerman *et al*, 2011; Illouz, 2012) and are more likely to display emotional investment, when compared to their male counterparts. As patriarchal scripts define women as emotional, there is little space for emotional attachment in contemporary displays of masculinity, thus perpetuating the idea that the emotional burden remains with women, and the assumption that men engage in a relationship for sex while women are seeking an emotional connection.

Avoiding Humiliation

The longstanding assumption that men value sexual intimacy while women seek emotional connection has been challenged in recent years, with men's emotionality coming to the forefront in discussions on masculinity. Demonstrated in the narratives of male participants in this research, alongside changing expectations of gender roles and plurality in 'sexual scripts' (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983) become much more ambiguous. While an emotional role was typically reserved for women in heterosexual relationships (Hochschild, 1979; Illouz, 2012), with greater ambiguity in heteronormative scripts and a shift towards greater equality, men have become much more emotionally expressive. As such, contrary to a heteronormative discourse which suggests men are emotionally unavailable commitment-phobes, characterised by their inability to display emotional intimacy (Sullivan *et al*, 2015), male participants in this research openly discussed their emotions when explaining how they were 'genuinely looking for a relationship' (Jay) and used dating apps to establish a romantic connection 'rather than a random one-night stand' (Sam). Moreover, when discussing

the moral panic surrounding commitment phobia, male participants, such as Carlos, explained that the avoidance of intimacy is not always symptomatic of commitment phobia, but is often used as a defence mechanism in anticipation of rejection:

‘I think men are open to ridicule in the sense that once they’ve opened up then they’ve lost their ego.’ (Carlos, Male, 25)

Arguably, neither the male nor female party is willing to admit their romantic feelings amidst a contemporary dating culture, where displaying emotion is deemed a sign of weakness (Wade, 2017). However, while both male and female participants displayed an avoidance of commitment, fuelled by the ambiguity surrounding modern dating practices and vulnerability attached to emotional expression, this fear of rejection manifested in different, gendered, ways. While for women, rejection was detrimental to one’s self-esteem, for men, rejection was detrimental to one’s ‘ego’ (Carlos):

‘You’ve got to be so careful, like if you send a girl a message and they think you’re too needy, they’ll just put it in a group chat with their mates, so I’m not going to let them know I like them unless I know they’re not going to take the piss!’. (James, Male, 25)

‘You only have to scroll through Twitter for a minute and you’ll undoubtedly see somebody’s retweet of a negative comment about lads [...] you get an army of women who have jumped on the bandwagon of “all men are trash”.’ (Sam, Male, 25)

For male participants, in this research, the threat of humiliation was heightened when there was the risk that one’s inability to ‘pick up a girl’ (Carlos) would be observed by men. As explained in O’Neill’s research on masculinities, ‘the confirmation of a man’s sexuality through a woman is imbricated in his need to be validated as masculine by other men’ (Buchbinder, 1998:110, cited in O’Neill, 2018: 59). Consistent with this, Carlos and Frankie explained that, to demonstrate one’s masculinity, one must be seen to ‘be able to pick up a girl’ (Carlos) as an inability to do so would risk ridicule and emasculation. Moreover, we find that the fear of ridicule is further accelerated as the private becomes public. While James recalls humiliation in

the context of a 'group chat', Sam alludes to Twitter to explain how private humiliation has become public, detailing a recent trend that intends to expose private conversations in a public domain.

An example of this trend is the popular Twitter account *SheRatesDogs*, which invites submissions from women about their dating experiences. The Twitter account is primarily compiled from screengrabs of private conversations between men and women on dating apps and, as the Twitter account suggests, some exchanges are humorous and some heinous. While the intention of *SheRatesDogs* is to expose degrading behaviour and challenge normalised misogyny in a comedic way, the format of exposing private conversations for entertainment purposes has led to a larger trend. Inspired by *SheRatesDogs*, an online trend has emerged where private interactions on dating apps are posted to social media, for the purpose of ridicule. However, unlike *SheRatesDogs*, this trend seeks not to expose derogatory behaviour, but instead is intended to ridicule the texts of neurodivergent dating app users, shame users who rely on chat up lines, and humiliate those who lack the communicative skills required to 'flirt' (Carlos) and interact with dating app users.

'If you're not seen as to be able to pick up a girl, then you're not an acceptable male. It's like if you can't flirt with a girl then there's no hope for you.' (Carlos, Male, 25)

'Sexual promiscuity is seen as a badge of honour, an unofficial points system within which men compete against each other. [...] As a young heterosexual male, opting out of this competition simply isn't an option... you run the risk of being ridiculed and you will be made to feel emasculated.' (Frankie, Male, 22)

Arguably, the awareness that a private conversation may be accessible in a public domain exacerbates not only the fear of humiliation, but men's hesitancy to display vulnerability. As Jon Ronson (2015) explains, in the internet age public shaming has taken on life-changing consequences and, in our research, the fear of public shaming has severely limited the willingness of male participants to express their emotions.

Failed Talking Stage

In accordance with traditional rituals of courtship, relationship formation is typically expected to progress in a linear fashion, as detailed in LeFebvre's 'Relationship Development Model' (2018). However, as modern relationships depart from traditional scripts of ritualised courtship, the linearity of the relationship becomes subject to reflexive negotiation. Indeed, the steps towards relationship formation have undergone drastic change, and our findings suggest this is further accelerated with the introduction of mobile dating. Akin to Illouz's theorisation of casual sex as 'cool, easy, emotionally detached [and] with no clear frame of definition' (2018: 151), participants in our research recall the nature of dating apps to be ambiguous and informal, facilitating relationships that are casual, undefined, and devoid of an expectation of longevity, with most centred on a temporary fling. Further, participants demonstrate how relationships formed online are not only seldom linear, but often fail to progress past the early, introductory stages. Reminiscent of LeFebvre's 'Relationship Development Model' (2018), participants recalled that few relationships progress past the introductory experimental stage, what Juliet calls 'the failed talking stage', with most interactions fading out after days or weeks of texting. Indeed, while Illouz (1998) and Glenn and Marquadt (2001) suggest the ambiguity surrounding modern dating encourages 'the talk' (ibid., 2001: 40), where couples must determine their intentions and decide upon their relationship status, our findings suggest that dating app users refrained from engaging in 'the talk', rather allowing their relationship to fade away. Significantly, the ease of ghosting was referred to by participants to explain how dating apps have facilitated new stages of relationship development, or non-development, with Penny recalling how relationships formed online often fail to progress:

'People can heavily engage with so many people at once before just simply ignoring any further contact and moving on to another person. I think it's made easier with online dating because there's less emotion and effort involved.' (Penny, Female, 24)

Unlike the more recognisable form of ghosting, where the disappearance is sudden, our participants allude to the existence of a subtle form of ghosting, centred around a gradual disappearance. As such, participants recall how there is no announcement nor explanation that the relationship has ended, but rather the disinterest of one party indicates that the talking stage

has ‘failed’. When describing this gradual decline, participants recalled how most conversations would migrate from a dating app to another social media platform, such as Instagram or WhatsApp, before slowly fading out, possibly after days or weeks of flirting and sexting. While all participants regarded it as an unsuccessful phase, for most participants in this research, the ‘talking stage’ is significant, as this is the context in which most interactions take place. Particularly, for Juliet and Alexa, the ‘talking stage’ has replaced in-person dating, as partners often get to know one another online, and seldom meet up beyond this virtual encounter:

‘I think [Tinder] promotes the skipping of the dating phase, and you go straight to talking over social media for a period of time before it fades out and you move onto the next match... not for me at all.’ (Juliet, Female, 22)

‘Boys seem to think that by texting you constantly and not making an effort to meet up with you is normal. I like the idea of going for a drink so I can actually get to know someone but, to be honest, I rarely get past the talking stage.’ (Alexa, Female 21)

As reported in Timmermans and Courtois’ (2018) research, young dating app users rarely meet their matches ‘in real life’. While research has suggested that users are often satisfied with communicating online, for participants in our research, including Juliet and Alexa, meeting in ‘real life’ was preferable, and was the intended progression from using dating apps. Jay also expresses frustration with the time and energy he had spent communicating with a match, only for her to ghost him when he suggested meeting in ‘real life’:

‘I was talking to this girl for weeks, we had loads in common and I thought it was going well, but when I mentioned meeting up, she just ghosted me. I think she just wanted someone to talk to, I don’t think she had any intention of it actually going somewhere.’ (Jay, Male, 24)

Frustration with ‘time-wasters’, who had no intention to meet nor progress the relationship, was a common sentiment amongst participants. Reminiscent of Lahad’s (2017) research, which draws upon time-wasting in the context of dating, participants in this research expressed a desire

to know whether they should ‘invest time in the relationship’, to avoid wasting time in a ‘dead-end relationship’ (2017: 76). Participants particularly expressed frustration for dating app users who did not make their intentions clear, such as those who talk to others on dating apps for an ego boost, as they felt they had wasted time which could have been spent with someone who shares their intentions. Further, some participants felt that time-wasting represented a fear of commitment, with dating app users deliberately delaying the relationship progression, as explained by Sophia:

‘A lot of people get so used to just casually dating that they become scared of actual commitment to people, so they end it before things get serious.’ (Sophia, Female, 21)

Research by author 2 (2022) has demonstrated that this type of online communication that does not lead to a long-term relationship is nonetheless meaningful to dating app users, and transcends the love/sex dichotomy that casts casual dating as a failure. For some of the participants here, this phase represented the opportunity to chat and flirt with someone without having to commit to anything else. Particularly, Eva and Penny draw comparisons between dating apps, such as Tinder, and social media platforms, including Instagram, to suggest there are specific connotations attached to different apps. For Eva, while Tinder is centred around casual sex, social media sites can afford new ways to meet people, casually interact and establish friendships and/or an emotional connection:

‘I think Tinder is a really bad way of dating, men just ask you for sex, it’s awful! But I do think social media sites aren’t too bad, they can be a really good way to meet new people.’ (Eva, Female, 21)

‘When you see people ‘hooking up’ and things from meeting on Tinder, then that’s what people expect from online dating.’ (Penny, Female, 24)

Certainly, the experimental ‘talking stage’ is one of great importance for participants in this research. However, despite being a significant stage in modern relationship progression, most participants expressed frustration with the ‘talking stage’ as this often represented an inevitable

hopelessness, with many participants entering the ‘talking stage’ with an anticipation of its end. Moreover, some felt stuck in a series of ‘failed talking stages’, where they would repeat the cycle of matching with a partner, transitioning the conversation from Tinder to social media where they would text and flirt, before gradually reducing the interaction and abandoning the ‘talking stage’, ready to begin the cycle again with another match. However, despite being an unfavourable pattern for most participants in our research, the cycle of the ‘failed talking stage’ was seen as an easier option than investing time and effort in developing a relationship.

Dating App Scripts

Research on mixed sex relationships has centred on the gendered cultural scripts which men and women draw upon when entering intimate relationships (Gagnon, 1990; Holland *et al*, 1992; Holland, 1993; Twamley, 2012). However, given the malleable nature of modern dating practices, it has been argued that traditional rituals of dating and courtship can no longer be relied upon, and have rather become replaced by more casual phases of ‘talking’ and ‘seeing’ (Kass, 1997; Glenn and Marquadt, 2001), which are not defined by traditional norms nor gendered scripts. Therefore, as dating practices become increasingly ambiguous, with an absence of ‘formal courtship’ and ‘updated social norms, rituals, and relationship milestones’ (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001; Carter, 2013), modern dating is depicted as a treacherous ground where nothing should be assumed, unless it has been explicitly agreed upon. Holmes (2011) notes that negotiating emotions within friendships can be difficult to manage in the context of social media and, consistent with this, romantic relationships appear to have similar issues, where understanding reflexive rules and displaying the ‘appropriate’ level of emotion is particularly fraught.

While the freedom afforded by modern dating scripts is indicative of great uncertainty (Lewis, 2005), such freedom also creates a possibility for greater plurality in gendered scripts. As traditional dating rituals can no longer be relied upon, individuals must negotiate and establish rules of their own, with the potential to challenge traditional gendered cultural scripts. Interestingly, new rules are formed with the emergence of mobile dating whereby women feel comfortable expressing their romantic interest by ‘swiping right’ (Jay) on Tinder or liking photos and ‘following’ men on Instagram and Snapchat (Alexa). However, despite the willingness of

female participants to demonstrate their romantic interest and intentions, they refrained from starting a conversation or making the first move 'due to fear of rejection', as Alexa states:

'I was really interested in one of my friends', friends. We'd never met but we followed each other on Instagram, then on Snapchat. After about 2 weeks, I thought I would message the guy, just to see if he replied. We've carried on chatting and have planned to meet up soon but even though I messaged first with a general comment, I'd never show interest or ask to meet up with him first, due to fear of rejection.' (Alexa, Female, 21)

Indeed, while some female participants embraced the liberation of modern dating practices and were keen to informally initiate the relationship, the power remained with men to formally make the first move and confirm the relationship. Consistent with this, male participants were aware that, in heterosexual encounters, they are expected to perform most of the labour of early romantic encounters and, despite greater plurality in gendered scripts which suggest 'men's and women's emotional behaviours are more similar than different' (Wong and Rochlen, 2005: 62), traditional scripts remain in place that encourage men to confirm the relationship. Echoing Alexa's admission that women often express romantic interest, but rely on men to progress the relationship, Jay noted that this script depicts a form of flirting, where women demonstrate attraction, but men must progress the relationship at this stage:

'Unless you're on Bumble, it's a given that it's up to the lads to start the conversation. It's weird, like girls will swipe right so they obviously like you, but they won't actually talk to you. I don't know, it's as if they think that they've done their bit, so now it's my turn?' (Jay, Male, 24)

However, while this was accepted as the dominant script by participants, some men were frustrated with the expectation that they would have to demonstrate vulnerability. As James notes:

'We're meant to be equal, but I'm still expected to risk being rejected because I'm a man?' (James, Male, 25)

Therefore, despite creating the possibility for more egalitarian dating scripts, responses from our participants indicate that the new rules, facilitated by mobile dating, remain embedded in traditional scripts and gender hierarchies. Moreover, not only have the channels of accountability that underpinned traditional relationship formation evaporated, the scripts that remain draw on entrenched heteronormative rules and frameworks.

Conclusion

Our findings support the cold intimacy thesis in that emotions are carefully managed, in the context of mobile dating, causing intimate relationships to become ‘cold’ (Illouz, 2007). However, while Hochschild (1983) and Illouz (2007, 2012, 2018) propose that individuals avoid romantic attachments and control their emotions as result of increased individualisation and rationality, we find that participants avoid commitment and emotional expression, in their early dating practices, in anticipation of rejection and humiliation. With similarities to Wade’s study on hook-up culture amongst US college students (2017), for participants here, emotions are managed as they are source of shame. Subsequently, participants maintain an emotional distance and refrain from expressing their feelings, in the context of mobile dating, to protect themselves from vulnerability. Further, our findings draw attention to a gendered experience of emotionality in mobile dating practices, wherein female participants fear emotional hurt, while male participants avoid potential rejection and humiliation.

We introduce a nuanced interpretation of young adults’ avoidance of commitment and emotional expression, by drawing attention the reasons by which commitment phobia manifests. While research has proposed that the cultural shift towards individualism has created a generation of ‘commitment phobes’, who refuse to settle for the ‘good enough option’ and replace partners in pursuit for a better option (Illouz, 1998; 2012), our research suggests that commitment phobia may be a response to the uncertainty of contemporary dating, where individuals avoid becoming attached, in anticipation that they will be rejected or humiliated. We find that, in the context of mobile dating, emotions become bargaining chips which are used against one another, with individuals withholding their emotions in order to ‘win’. However, the irony in this logic is that,

if intimacy is the prize, then neither party will ‘win’ as neither are willing to ‘put themselves on the line’ (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001: 38) and risk the possibility of rejection or humiliation.

Fundamentally, the endemic fear of being hurt or humiliated has led to participants spending most of their time and energy in what we identify as ‘the failed talking stage’. With ‘no formal courtship’ nor ‘norms and rules’ in contemporary dating (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001; Carter, 2013), we find participants reflexively negotiate and establish unique dating scripts. Indeed, with greater ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding modern dating scripts, a feature of modern dating is for partners to engage in ‘the talk’ (Glenn and Marquadt, 2001), where individuals determine their relationship status and intentions. However, because our participants are unwilling to risk rejection, they fail to communicate their interest and initiate ‘the talk’, meaning they often remain within a permanent state of uncertainty where relationships drift apart, as easily as they drifted together. Reminiscent of LeFebvre’s ‘Relationship Development Model’ (2018), our research finds participants remain in limbo within the experimental stage of a relationship and fail to progress past this introductory ‘talking stage’. Certainly, while we found the ‘talking stage’ has value, and can be an enjoyable process, moving past this stage proved difficult for our participants, with most relationships failing to progress past a virtual encounter.

Underpinning the issues above is a lack of accountability for dating app users. Arguably, contemporary dating scripts, facilitated by technological changes, allow dating app users to ghost without consequence (Illouz, 2018) and publicly humiliate one another (Ronson, 2015). Hence, in anticipation of rejection and/or humiliation, dating app users here were unable to trust anyone enough to display emotional vulnerability. Moreover, we find that rather than providing new freedoms, dating apps reinforce and recreate conventional hierarchies of masculinity and femininity, distinguished by those who wait for emotional commitment, and those who are waited for (Lahad, 2012). Albeit embracing modern dating scripts, including ‘liking photos’ and ‘following’ prospective partners on social media, we find female participants continue to ‘wait’ for male partners to make the first move, to protect themselves from rejection. Ergo, with women affirming themselves as objects ‘waiting’ to be chosen, we find that power remains with men to confirm the relationship. Therefore, contemporary mobile dating practices have not resulted in

increased fluidity and freedom in heterosexual encounters, but dating scripts remain structured by heteronormative frameworks.

Acknowledging the limitations of our research, particularly the heteronormative focus of the research, we advise for our analysis to be extended to research on emotionality within same-sex relationships, to consider the existence of the 'emotional stalemate' beyond the heterosexual couple. Moreover, we recommend for research to study emotionality amongst an older demographic of dating app users, to explore whether restrictive emotionality is characteristic of dating in young adulthood, or mobile dating more generally.

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