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Mobile intimacies? Uncertainty, ambivalence and fluidity in the intimate practices of dating app users in Germany and the UK

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Andrea Newerla**

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Abstract

Research on dating app practices has drawn on a dichotomous conception of love and sex, with users viewed as seeking either casual sex or a committed relationship. Drawing on qualitative interview data with dating app users in Germany and the UK, our analysis suggests that the love/sex dichotomy fails to fully account for participants' experiences. We argue that rather than imposing a normative framework, we should recognise the potentiality of movement and openness in app-based dating practices. We also challenge the critique of dating apps as entirely transactional, and instead argue that the emergence of what we identify as 'mobile' intimate practices demonstrate the diverse forms that intimacies can take within different relationships.

Keywords

Digital intimacy, dating apps, sexual practices, hook-up apps, relationships, love

The emergence of Tinder and subsequent apps onto the dating scene has been accompanied by a record low in marriage rates between mixed sex couples (ONS, 2018),

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prompting a media panic over the end of commitment (Sales, 2015). The easy access to sexual ‘hook-ups’ facilitated by dating apps is argued to have created a generation of commitment-phobic users, who are unable to form long-term intimate relationships. Various social theorists have supported this interpretation, including most notably Eva Illouz (2007, 2012, 2020) who maintains that the choice and individual self-fulfillment that consumer society is predicated on undermines commitment and encourages the seeking out of alternative partners, usually via the internet. Research on dating apps has generally relied on a dichotomous conception of love and sex, with users presented as seeking either long-term commitment or casual sex. Sex-focused encounters and relationships are often interpreted as neoliberal practices that do not serve the normative goal of establishing and developing a romantic-partner relationship, but remain aimless and unfulfilling. In contrast, forming a committed couple relationship is privileged as the pinnacle of intimate life (Roseneil et al., 2020), and a successful outcome to dating.

In this paper we draw on qualitative in-depth interviews with dating app users in Germany and the UK to explore these claims, and find that the love/sex dichotomy fails to fully account for participants’ dating practices. We argue that rather than focusing on casual sex or committed relationships as fixed outcomes, we should recognise the potentiality of movement and openness in app-based dating practices, with relationships not always progressing in a linear fashion towards the end-goal of a monogamous couple relationship. We also challenge the critique of dating apps as entirely transactional, and instead argue that the emergence of what we identify as ‘mobile’ intimate practices (Hahn, 2005) demonstrates the diverse forms that intimacies can take within different relationships.

Intimate relationships in mediated societies

Sociological discussion of mobile dating apps can be located in wider debates on the impact of technology on personal life. Early social scientific research into the possibilities afforded by the internet cautiously welcomed its emancipatory potential, predicting that online communication could offer increased safety, control and freedom (Boyd, 2007; Doring, 2000; Miller, 2011). The autonomy fostered by the internet was understood as a challenge to traditional hierarchies, including patriarchal relationships (Castells, 2007). Excitement at the romantic freedoms offered by the internet (Jagger, 2001), with traditional geographical constraints no longer applying (Poster, 1995; Valentine, 2006), suggested that technology may have facilitated the detraditionalisation of intimate relationships posited by theorists such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002).¹ From this perspective, increasing sexual fluidity and freedom represented a ‘queering’ of sexuality (Roseneil et al., 2020) that weakened the dominant patriarchal sexual and gender order.

More recently, pessimistic interpretations of the internet’s impact on interpersonal relations have come to predominate, to the extent that theorists have suggested a negative bias (Rosenfeld, 2018; Wang and Wellman, 2010), particularly with the emergence of dating apps. For Zygmund Bauman (2000, 2003), individualisation 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 internet-based 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 (Attwood, 2017). In this context, the plurality of choices on offer are far from a necessarily positive phenomenon, they create a situation where the pressure to choose correctly becomes virtually unbearable (Bauman, 2000: 63). The emergence of a ‘culture of narcissism’ prophesied by Christopher Lasch in the late 1970s appears to have been realised in the 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 the impact of technology has damaged individuals’ interpersonal skills, with individuals unable to be fully present in relationships or interactions because of the distraction of our phone and internet-mediated relationships (Turkle, 2011).

Eva Illouz (2007, 2013, 2020) argues that the choice and individualisation that form the basis of consumer society undermine commitment and encourage the seeking out of alternative partners, usually via the internet. For Illouz, consumer logic has been extended to partner choice, 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. Online dating is the leading example of technologies of choice (Illouz, 2007), which have fused consumer logic onto intimate relationships. This comes as a result of the real and imagined increase in sexual partners, facilitated by the internet, and online dating specifically. Early romantic attachment is often intense within this context, however, long-term commitment is rendered impossible by the availability of an alternative, potentially more suitable partner once the initial desire has dissipated. In this way, the internet unleashes a fantasy yet inhibits actual romantic feelings (Illouz, 2007: 104).

Critiques of the impact of technology on personal life have largely focused on the threat it poses to commitment and coupledness. Within both wider society and academic research a hierarchy of intimacy dominates, in which certain relationships are prioritised and idealised (Budgeon, 2006; Roseneil et al., 2020). Specifically, Budgeon (2008) argues the monogamous couple relationship, underpinned by ideologies of family and marriage, is positioned at the centre of normative sexual practice, determining and regulating the acceptability and respectability of intimate relationships. As such, the couple relationship is assumed to take precedence over other ties, as ‘the central principle organising intimate life’ (Ketokivi, 2012: 486), thus neglecting the significance of intimacies and personal life outside of the couple relationship (van Hooff, 2017). Consistent with this narrative, the couple is deemed to be the most important relationship (Budgeon, 2008), and intimacies which deviate from the norm, such as those between non-monogamous partners and friends ‘challenge the privileging of conjugal relationships’ (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 138).² Addressing the privilege of coupledness, recent scholarship by Roseneil et al. (2020) examines the tenacity of the couple relationship in a variety of European contexts. Developing the concept of ‘intimate citizenship’, Roseneil et al. explore the ways in

which the couple norm is institutionalised, supported and mandated by social policy, legislation and everyday practice (2020), thus shaping the intimate life choices of those who are marginalised by the couple-normative discourse. As the authors suggest, the dominance of the couple norm is exposed in changing contexts (Roseneil et al., 2020), such as technological shifts.

From our perspective, reasons for a focus on the formation of couple relationships are to be found in the prevailing hetero- and mononormativity (Baker and Langdridge, 2010). Above all, the mechanisms of mononormativity, as Pieper and Bauer (2014: 2, author's translation from German) argue, have a very powerful function here:

‘At the level of psychological, psychoanalytical and social-scientific knowledge production, as well as in the legal system, the exclusively dyadic structure of couple relationships and consequently the normative apparatus of monogamy proves to be a self-evident pattern of orientation and order, which is secured by institutions, rituals, laws and codes of feeling. The patterns generated by regimes of knowledge and power make the lovers in the form of the romantic dyad appear as the only legitimately experienced practice.’

According to Pieper and Bauer (2014: 3, authors translation from German), this practice has ‘the character of an institution founded, as it were, in ‘nature’ and is thus ‘regarded as the foundation of human existence par excellence’. As a result, a governmental power/knowledge system (Foucault, 1982, 2009) has developed that both (pre) structures fields of action for shaping relationships and shapes discourses about intimate relationships. The couple thus becomes the dominant norm (and form) and appears ‘as an elementary, unquestionably valid form of living together’ (Pieper and Bauer 2014: 3, author's translation from German). The framing of the monogamous couple relationship as ‘natural’ undermines alternative relationships and intimacies that may be formed through dating apps.

We argue here for a theoretical approach that focuses on the mobility of intimate relationships (Hahn, 2005) in order to account for the diversity of contemporary intimate practices. The sexual couple functions as a normative ideal that marginalises alternative models and experiences, which we aim to explore here.

Dating app technology and the love/sex dichotomy

Dating apps are technological tools through which users can organise intimate contacts. These are suggested through rationalised procedures, for example through question catalogues that calculate match probabilities, as the needs of users can be realised simply and quickly by swiping. It is important to note that dating apps developed online dating into mobile dating, moving this activity from personal computers onto mobile phones, thereby collapsing physical and digital space. A major focus of research is the way that people use dating apps, and whether this is challenging traditional patterns of commitment.

Evidence suggests that many users engage in casual sex in addition to looking for a committed partnership (Ciocca et al., 2020; Denby and van Hooff, 2023; Timmermans

and Courtois, 2018; van Hooff, 2020). As these encounters are temporal and goal oriented, they can be easily established through the use of mobile dating (Illouz, 2020). This may be why users are more successful in realising sexual needs through dating apps than romantic ones. From a pessimistic interpretation, casual sex is thus an expression of the rationalised and neoliberal subject who is no longer capable of engaging in love relationships, a development that will eventually lead to the destruction of love.

From this perspective 'real' or authentic love is limited to romantic relationships. This 'real' love is often presented as something to be preserved and protected (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 2013, 2020). This is contrasted with the casual sex narrative; casual sex is a commodified social form, argues Illouz (2020), and serves the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2016) in accumulating further capital in the form of multiple sexual partners. In transactional terms, casual sex can be easily organised through the use of dating apps, which enable the subject to avoid longer term commitment (Illouz 2020: 117). Illouz argues that casual sex has no clear normative core (Illouz 2020: 135) and therefore creates uncertainties. The analytical concept with which she tries to grasp these processes is that of the *negative relationship*: the choice not to engage and not to commit. The prevalence of these forms of relationships is, according to Illouz, closely linked to an increase in technological use (dating app use) as well as scopic capitalism, a form of exploitation of women's bodies that is based on the male gaze. Negative relationships are argued by Illouz (ibid) to account for the decline in marriage and the birthrate, the rise in the number of single-person households, and the decrease in the frequency of sexual intercourse. This dichotomous and, in our view, reductionist way of looking at forms of love and desire frames romantic love (organised as the sexual couple) as something pre-social and non-commodifiable. As a result, forms of desire that are to be located beyond this are excluded and defamed.

Sex-focused practices and relationships are often interpreted as neoliberal practices (cf. Illouz 2020); without romance these relationships are merely expedient, based on pleasure and satisfaction. These practices then do not serve the goal of establishing and developing into a romantic couple relationship, but remain aimless, analytically understood as fluid (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 2013, 2020). Experiencing shared moments of desire and pleasure, however long or short they may be, does not seem, as Rubin (2011) notes, to be a legitimate goal on its own. In this light, casual sex is the choice of non-choice, because sexual partners relate to each other without, however, pursuing a specific goal; the goal of initiating a romantic love relationship. LeFebvre (2018: 1207) notes that the majority of research on Tinder has applied the 'Relationship Development Model' which involves five sequential steps: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding, with few relationships progressing past the 'experimenting' stage. She argues that a broader understanding of these stages should include the changes facilitated by mobile dating apps in regard to relationship initiation. Traditional understandings of relationship formation and development should be expanded to include the changes in interaction afforded by mobile dating, which we explore here.

There are increasing challenges to the narratives about dating apps and excessive consumerism, which have dominated popular and academic debate. Demographically, men outnumber women at least two-to-one on Tinder, the most widely used and notorious

dating app and in the popular imagination it has come to represent the worst of masculinity, with men using online dating as a way to avoid commitment (Illouz, 2007). There is little specific research on active male Tinder users, however evidence would suggest that the ‘hook-up’ culture that it is held responsible for (Sales, 2015) is limited to a minority of users, with US data suggesting that single heterosexuals are not particularly sexually active, with less than 20 per cent of those surveyed having a date or sexual encounter within the previous twelve months (Rosenfeld, 2018).

While research has demonstrated how dating app practices are intertwined with the neoliberal market and consumption practices (Chan, 2018), a study of 366 active Tinder users (Hobbs et al., 2016) found that most valued monogamy and commitment, and were using the app to find long-term relationships. A minority of participants were using the app to pursue casual sexual encounters, with most welcoming the agency it provided to find a partner. The authors argue that their findings provide a direct challenge to Bauman’s thesis that individualism and technology have rendered commitment impossible. Other research into Tinder users has produced similar findings. In their study of over 2000 young adults, Timmerman and Courtois (2018) found the majority of dating app users they surveyed did not meet other users face-to face. For those who did, only a third of these offline encounters led to casual sex, while over a quarter led to the formation of a committed relationship. They argue that their findings challenge the popular view that dating apps have undermined commitment. Quantitative analysis of relationships formed online using US data has also shown that these relationships are as stable as those formed offline (Rosenfeld, 2018), and that assumptions about the impact of Tinder on commitment and intimacy are overstated.

The emerging research on dating apps has contributed much to our understanding of users, in terms of their motivations, practices and self-presentation, which frequently challenges assumptions about the proliferation of ‘hook-up’ culture. However, it tends to replicate the love/sex binary. It also fails to challenge the normative hierarchy of intimacy. Research has explored ways that networked technologies have facilitated queer intimacies that may have otherwise been difficult to establish offline (Campbell, 2004; McGlotten, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2010). These studies have shown how those who fall outside of heteronormative acceptability, have been able to use technologies to connect with networks of similarly desiring subjects (Attwood et al., 2017: 249). Similarly, Anderson (2017) explores how social media sites such as Facebook enable new practices of intimacy in donor families. Defining intimacy as relational and referring both to the experience and practices of belonging and connection, she shows how online intimacy is developed in relation to experiences of public and private, community, proximity and emotional intensity. These online practices of intimacy make possible new family formations and new understandings of kinship.

The research we present here engages with these more inclusive approaches, and endeavours to account for couple normativity in users’ experiences of using dating apps. In our analysis, we explore the ambivalences and possibilities involved in being a dating app user. In our analysis we argue that initiations of intimate relationships do not take place in a linear and fixed way with the clear goal of leading to a committed monogamous relationship, but that these processes are instead characterised by mobilities, as users meet

for sex, become friends, friends with benefits, possibly form a couple, and later decide to be friends again who do not have sex with each other and so on. Interpreting these processes from a dichotomous love/sex perspective obstructs this analytical view of the inherent mobility of contemporary intimate relationships.

Method

The data in this paper are drawn from two research projects exploring the ways in which individuals use and experience dating apps. Data from both studies was re-analysed and coded in order to explore commonalities. Both studies used the same methodological approach of in-depth interviews with a small number of participants, and combining the findings strengthened the claims made here about the mobilisation of intimate relationships.

For the UK study (van Hooff, 2020), in-depth face to face or telephone/Skype interviews were conducted with fifteen men actively using Tinder and other dating apps, between 2015 and 2017. The focus on men was motivated by a general lack of research on men and personal life or emotions, as Gabb and Fink (2015) note in their work on long-term relationships, with the topic area forming a suitable 'gap' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013: 5) in existing research. As noted above, media debate has focused on heterosexual men, and their use of dating apps to access casual sex rather than committed relationships, often with little empirical evidence to support these assumptions. Participants were recruited via snowball and purposive sampling. Ethical approval was granted for the study from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2015, and in order to disguise characteristics, transcripts were modified where specific individuals, places or events were referenced.

Each in-depth interview lasted between sixty to ninety minutes, and was recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify common themes. Interviews took place in a location selected by the participant, which was usually either a private university room, café or bar, or in one case the participant's workplace, with four of the interviews taking place over Skype and two by telephone, according to participants' preference. Follow up email or phone correspondence took place in the instance of five of the interviews in order to clarify points. All participants were active users of Tinder (and other dating apps), and had been using the app for a minimum of 2 months, and all were employed. The majority of participants were based in Manchester, with four in London, one in Glasgow, and one in Belfast. The men interviewed were aged between 26 and 47 years old, with an average age of 34.6, and were predominantly white British, with one British-Pakistani and two Black British participants.

For the German study (Newerla, 2021), in-depth face to face and online interviews were conducted in Germany between 2019 and 2021 with eight women aged between 20 and 43 years old, and five men aged between 26 and 47 years old. All participants actively used Tinder and/or other dating apps (e.g. OkCupid, Bumble). Twelve interviewees were German, and one interviewee was Italian. Nine identified themselves as heterosexual, two as gay and two as bisexual. The majority of participants were university graduates, or were actively studying in higher education, and all lived in German cities, although the

size of the cities (Gießen, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin) varied. Based on a critical examination of mono- and heteronormative perspectives that shape the current research landscape, this study focused on intimate relationships in their breadth and does not only ask about the emergence of romantically committed relationships (or sex dates). Thus, friends with benefits, affairs, polyamorous constellations and friendship networks were also included in the study, provided they were practices of the interviewees. The in-depth interviews lasted between seventy to one hundred and eighty minutes, were recorded and partly transcribed. Interviews took place in a university room, café or bar, or in the participant's homeplace, one interview took place over Skype. In a first analysis step, the collected data material was openly coded in the tradition of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1995), in order to be able to work out initial patterns of dating practices.

For the purposes of this paper, the data from both studies was re-coded using thematic analysis, to align with a social constructionist perspective in identifying 'socially embedded patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 38). The thematic analysis involved a preliminary reading of the data in order to identify broad themes, followed by detailed coding into general and sub-themes. This analysis supported the blended approach of combining the data of both studies, as we identified ambiguity and mobility of intimacy as central themes in both sets of findings.

Despite the initial issues in recruiting participants, the interviews of both studies yielded a huge amount of data. Any claims or comments relating to factors such as ethnicity or social class or gender are limited by the small sample size and lack of data collected about these categories, and the paper instead focuses on the qualitative experiences of being an active dating app user.

'Being open': Ambiguities and opportunities in dating app practices

The findings reveal a tension between participants' ideas about romantic love and commitment and the more fluid, undefined relationships and encounters that form most dating app practices. While alternative relationship practices pre-date online dating, our analysis shows that they have become available to users who initially may not have previously considered them a possibility. While the majority of models of intimacy, and especially the monogamous romantic model, are thought of as rigid and fixed forms of relationships, our findings demonstrate that other forms of intimate relationships exist, some of which do not have a name or a fixed form. Participants often lack the language to describe what is there; there is 'something', but it is difficult to articulate what this 'something' is. And yet this 'something' is perceived by the interviewees as an important intimate encounter.

In the interviews, ambiguities and mobility in the development processes of intimate relationships are not always perceived negatively. Thorsten, for example, describes himself as 'open' in dating processes. The 26-year-old student started using dating apps because he wants to meet women in order to develop 'something' with them. In the interview, he finds it difficult to describe this 'something' in detail. He doesn't go into an encounter with clear ideas, he says, but develops ideas by examining his experiences. For

him, dating practice is a process, a movement, not something that is rigid and fixed. That was the reason for entering into a polyamorous constellation with a woman: Both also meet other people and do not call themselves a couple because they do not want to limit themselves. Thorsten notes that he feels insecure due to the uncertainty of his current intimate relationship, but he also sees the potential that lies in the experiences of insecurity:

‘I also find insecurity an exciting thing. I know so many people who are security people. [...] I don’t want to be so obsessed with everything always being safe. I just find it much more interesting to live with such openness, to live with such contingency. Of course it’s not always nice, it can also be very difficult, but that’s precisely why I think it’s good to learn to endure it, to be able to live with it, to be able to deal with it. And not to let it limit or dominate you, but to recognise it, to articulate it, to be able to talk about it and to live with it.’ (Thorsten, M 26, German study)

Thorsten not only associates mobile dating with new opportunities for experimentation, he enjoys the possibilities that arise from this openness, as it allows the development of new forms of intimacy that are not predetermined by romantic ideals. Other participants also identify possibilities and opportunities for personal development and self-reflection that are afforded by the openness, ambiguities and uncertainty of mobile dating.

Mark has used dating apps for 4 years since a long-term relationship breakdown in his late 20s. He took a short time adjusting to the landscape of dating apps, and describes navigating between casual and committed relationships, and the overlap between the two. He suggests that the medium of a dating app opens up possibilities in ways that would not happen offline:

‘It opens up possibilities. So first of all I’m thinking if I want a long-term relationship with this person, and if not I think if there are other possibilities. but that’s not a bad thing I think, we live in a world that’s too po faced about sex. There’s something about Tinder that suggests that people are more open to whatever might happen. If you’re on Tinder you’re in a contract with each other, sex is a possibility, in a way that doesn’t happen outside of online dating. I’d never heard of polyamory before I went on Tinder, but now you can be open about seeing multiple people, rather than lying. That can only be a good thing.’ (Mark, M 32, UK study)

For Mark, connections made through an app have the potential to develop in various ways, and he describes this in positive terms. Diverse relationship forms such as polyamory, become a previously unheard of possibility, as he adjusts his expectations to non-normative relationship forms.

Susanne, a 35-year old woman, describes something similar. In the interview, she reports that at some point in her life she realised that the romantic ideal was not for her. She is currently polyamorous and has multiple relationships. She regularly uses dating apps to meet new people; primarily for sex, but she is also open to more if they are

compatible and have the capacity to build something. In particular, she emphasises openness in the interview:

‘I think it’s always a question of how you use it yourself and I usually go in there with the feeling of ok I’m open for what’s coming now. There are phases where I say ok now I only want it for sex. And I always find this ‘only’ difficult. So I used it for sex. (...) I always call them ‘regular sex partners’, because I don’t find one night stands so desirable myself, but they happen and that’s okay. But I would tend to be more interested in meeting more often and building up something sexually. So I’m actually open to that, but I always waver back and forth. For example, when I don’t have the emotional capacity to get involved with someone. If I’m processing a break-up or something and honestly want to leave myself the space for it.’ (Susanne, F 34, German study)

As the interview excerpt shows, the love/sex dichotomy inadequately describes Susanne’s practices of intimacy. These are broader, more fluid and mobile. Susanne states that she enters into encounters openly. Something ‘more’ can happen between people who agree to have sex, but this is not inevitable. Rather, at the beginning of dates it is often not clear how and what type of relationship will develop beyond the sexual experience. And Susanne welcomes this openness, and views it as an opportunity to engage in diverse forms of relationships.

For Irfan, dating apps have provided new opportunities to meet potential partners outside of his usual circle, and he reports the freedom he feels meeting women this way. While he initially started using dating apps to find a girlfriend, his encounters and relationships have not developed straightforwardly. For him success on dating apps has taken the form of short-term relationships, relieved of the pressure of long-term commitment:

‘Successful encounters have been girls that I’ve continued to date for several months after meeting. Really nice, genuine people that I enjoy spending time with. Removing the expectations that you’re going to get married or stay together means you can actually enjoy being with them.’ (Irfan, M 28, UK study)

The use of dating apps has facilitated a broader view of the forms relationships may take, beyond the normative coupling. Relationships are now valued on the connection between partners rather than external expectations of how they should progress.

Mona also reports on a variety of (intimate) relationships that develop through mobile dating. In the interview, the 33-year-old woman emphasises that she has been able to find new friends through dating apps in particular:

‘I know a lot more of my friends here in Berlin through Tinder, and it never developed into something amorous, but more like: ‘hey, we get along really well, we text all the time, we want to meet up, that’s really cool, but there’s just nothing.’ (...) Really good friendships have developed on Tinder and also good conversations. (...) In general, I don’t have any expectations, except to somehow get to know someone who is somehow quite nice. Someone

who seems nice, okay, just a good evening, whatever it turns out to be. Whether it turns into friendship, as it does with some people because they understand each other well, but there's nothing interpersonal about it, or a one-night stand or something longer-term. That is absolutely open to me. (...) Everything can happen, nothing has to.' (Mona, F 33, German study)

In common with other participants, Mona does not perceive openness as threatening. She is relaxed about the ambiguities that arise from mobile dating 'whatever happens'. If for some people it is precisely this openness that is threatening, for others it is a way for things to develop, depending on the person and the time. The possibilities discussed by participants are not limited to committed relationships or casual sex, but include a range of undefined intimate relationships. It is this mobility in relationships that we are noting here, which we develop in the next section.

Mobility of intimate relationships

The dating practices of our interview participants are characterised by ambivalences, as the potentialities and possibilities afforded by dating apps as spaces for new forms of intimacy emerge. In their pursuit and realisation of these potentials, normativities are challenged and spaces are opened up for forms of love and desire that cannot be subsumed under the ideal of the romantic or partnership model. As previously noted, friendships formed through dating apps are an important experience for some of our participants. And the descriptions clearly show that these relationships, which were initially characterised by sexual attraction, are flexible and new forms of intimacy can develop.

For example, Matteo, a 34 year-old man, started to use dating apps in 2015. His main aim was to find a romantic partner: 'I was not so sex-positive as I am now and also the society was not really at the point we are now. So it was mainly to find a partner'. Due to geographical changes, Matteo found himself in new cities more frequently, where apps helped him meet new people. At this point, he was open to casual sex, but was not closed to the possibility of a romantic relationship if the person was 'right for him'. In Berlin, he developed a variety of ways to be intimate with people, blurring the boundaries of friendship and couplehood, as he describes in his relationship with Beate:

'It was only sexual, but there was a connection with Beate. She was a person that I was liking. When we started to play [sexually], I realized that I really enjoy this, the motion of playfulness and connection when it's in consent. It's clear what we are there for. (...) and from this moment on me and Beate started to have a sex relationship which also developed something more complex. I also developed feelings for Beate that were not immediately mutual (...) Beate was not interested in a relationship that was more romantic, but I was. But we found a common ground and we have been experimental quite a lot.' (Matteo, M 34, German study)

Subsequently, Beate fell in love with another person and Matteo transitioned to a friendship with her. Matteo says about this development: 'we are still in a good

connection'. At the time of the interview, it is not clear whether Beate's new relationship is open to additional sex partners. Matteo describes it as a possibility that he and Beate could share this kind of sexual intimacy again. But it may also remain a platonic friendship without sexual physicality, Matteo says in the interview. It becomes clear that he understands this intimate relationship as a process, that he is open to its mobility because he likes Beate and wants to see how their relationship will develop in the future.

Rob, who has been using dating apps on and off since Tinder launched in 2012, explained how the connections made on apps evolve and develop depending on circumstance:

'Being on Tinder you can have a few girls that you're messaging or seeing or whatever, and it's actually good because you know you're not going to get married, because you live in different cities, or you're too different, but you still have this connection, when you're bored you can chat, or sext, and there's no expectation. I don't know how you'd define it, but I've had a few of those kind of relationships, and they're good because you're both on the same page'. (Rob, M 34, UK study)

Rob talks about a kind of liminal relationship, that retains an emotional and sexual connection, but is not going to develop into a committed couple relationship. These relationships eschew the conventional heteronormative conventions, however they are significant to participants, and are not time limited. While these kinds of relationships tend to be depicted in negative terms as 'breadcrumbing' (sporadic contact with no follow through) within popular culture (Bahou, 2020), for Rob they are meaningful ties, which do not fit into normative understandings of relationships.

Dating apps also have a variety of relationship forms available for Mona, who can easily organise various dates according to her immediate needs. Sometimes this is casual sex, although she prefers it when some form of relationship develops. Some dates have turned into friendships. In these cases, there was no sexual contact, but they enjoyed each other's company. However, these friendships are also physical: for example, one friend regularly comes over to cuddle and watch Netflix. She does not prioritize romantic relationships, and repeatedly mentions during the interview how important friendships are for her:

'It doesn't have to be the romantic partner you wake up next to, it has to be a person you just get along with. (...) This realisation that I don't have to expect a partner to fulfil all my needs, but that friendships are also a relationship that also fulfils needs like a romantic relationship, that was then for me like: bam. I communicate much more openly about this with my friends and also with the partners I am currently seeing.' (Mona, F 33, German study)

At the time of the interview, Mona is dating four people, all of whom she met through dating apps. Here, the apps have helped her find people who think and live like her:, as they are all interested in multiple relationships, see themselves as polyamorous and have openly communicated their relationship status through the apps. The experiences they have had have enabled them to communicate more openly about their own needs.

Participants used dating apps in creative ways, with sexual relationships developing into friendships or in Alex's case, a professional network. While dating apps have not led to the long term relationship he was originally seeking, his experiences illustrate the mobility of relationships:

'A long period on Tinder would be six plus dates, usually it doesn't go anywhere. Usually relationships are sexual. I'd always chat to multiple people at once and occasionally see multiple partners at once. Most encounters have been enjoyable and interesting, some I'm still friends with, one is now our company solicitor, but most I don't speak to.' (Alex, M 29, UK study)

Alex works in marketing, and his professional and personal networks regularly intersect and overlap. He describes this in positive terms, sexual encounters evolve as dates take up other roles in his life. For Alex the normative bracketing off of romantic and sexual relationships does not apply to his experience of using dating apps, and the normative 'hierarchy of intimacy' (Budgeon, 2006) does not currently apply to his personal relationships. Alex also highlights the transitions of into and out of different relationship forms as significant, echoing work by Broeker (2021) on 'rituals of transition' as key moments of communication and connection in themselves.

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated that the intimate relationships of dating app users often develop in diverse and unexpected ways, and that these relationships are usually highly mobile in their course, not following linear paths to traditional couplehood. We draw on work by the French sociologist Didier Eribon (2017) to analyse the processuality and mobility of intimate relationships (Newerla, 2021).³ He calls for an overcoming of the prevailing heteronormative ideal of love and, influenced by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, places the immanent experiences and practices of lovers at the centre of his analysis. Eribon is concerned with the diversity of relationships, the uniqueness of moments of love and the processual becoming of love: 'it is always a re-creation of itself as subject, as emotion, as affectivity, as erotic, sexual body' (Eribon 2017: 72, author's translation from German). If we turn to immanence rather than transcendence, we may perceive more strongly that love is creation: the creation of a shared space of experience. This space is a becoming, a process, not a goal or an outcome.

This perspective allows the analytical focus to be placed on the practice of creation in intimate relationships in their orientation towards or their confrontation with social hegemonies and ideals of love. This applies to the practices of the self (subjectification) as well as to the practices of the common (relationship, network, community, etc.). In a similar vein, Foucault (1997) argued that it is the critical task of subjects to develop new forms of relationships in order to overcome prevailing ideals of love, with all its normative consequences. Love and being a subject is an unfinishable becoming, says Eribon (2017: 132) in reference to Foucault (1997) and Barthes (2001). They are, so to speak, mobile and constantly changing. Uncertainty is then no longer something threatening, but is a

necessary precondition for diversity. This perspective is also useful because it makes it more difficult to establish new norms, which in turn produce exclusion. Eribon (2017: 133, author's translation from German) therefore advises developing a *politics of love* that opens up 'perspectives for the historical invention of ourselves, experimentation and innovation' and 'has no other programme than that of increasing differences and thus freedoms and possibilities.'

This is challenging in intimate practices, as uncertainty is closely associated with anxiety. While we have focused on potentialities in the context of this paper, the field of digital dating is characterised by ambivalences. We argue for an analytical opening to describe uncertainties in intimate practices in their ambivalences, and describe and analyse both the fears and anxieties found in dating practices, but also the potentialities for change that lie in the uncertainties. We also challenge the critique of dating apps as merely transactional, and instead argue that mobile intimate practices should not be dismissed as a rejection of meaningful love and care, but in fact demonstrate the various forms that they can take within different relationships that cannot be defined as strictly 'casual' or 'committed'. Sociology requires a broader theoretical approach to understand mobile intimacies (Hahn 2005). Social forms and ideals of love have to be critically examined sociologically and should not simply be transferred into sociological terms. This is especially true if deviant practices of intimacy are thereby also scientifically devalued as special or unconventional. For there is a danger that by focusing on long-term relationships and casual sex, the 'hierarchy of intimacy' is reproduced.

We recognise that the research findings we present in this paper are limited. For example, we can say little about the intersectionalities of gender, race, and class. Drawing on a small number of participants, it is not possible to make generalised statements, although qualitative research is about reconstruction of meaning and subjective perspectives. Finally, we also see neoliberal developments in the field of online dating and the consequences these developments have for the establishment of intimate relationships. However, due to the state of research, we have decided to focus on potentials of openness and mobility that have emerged in the field of mobile dating.

To conclude, we argue that a sociological analysis of online dating practices, which primarily focuses on the processes of the formation of committed relationships, cannot adequately describe the diversity and mobility of intimate relationships. This focus is also a product of social (hetero and mono) normativities, which also find expression in conceptual settings such as the dichotomy of committed love and casual sex described above. To interpret certain forms of desire, sexualities, and intimate relationships that deviate from romantic, mononormative relationship ideals solely with the idea of love or sex does not do justice to the ambivalences that emerge in our material: The relationship practices, self-awareness and rediscovery of forms of desire and intimacies are not to be characterised as linear realisations of ideals, but as ambiguous and searching, an oscillation between attempts at commitment and autonomy, between hedonism and care, between desire for togetherness and relationship diversity. From this, dynamically diverse and mobile relationship constellations develop, which can also constantly change their form. A sociology of intimate relationships should do justice to this diversity in relationship practices.

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Authors' contributions

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Notes

1. Hahn (2021) offers a different perspective on digital technology, pointing out that cultures were digitised even before the implementation of material technology (like smartphones and apps used in the field of dating). A historical view of dating cultures and their practices could change the view of current developments (Weigel 2017) and show that mating processes were already mediated before the spread of the internet and, in particular, dating apps (Carrington 2019).
2. Haritaworn et al. (2006) show that non-monogamous relationships are also subject to power and can also develop their “own regimes of normativity” (especially in relation to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class). The authors identify a gap in the consideration of power relations and normativities in non-monogamous contexts.
3. First and foremost, Eribon (2017) is concerned with developing a queer theory that does without psychoanalytical explanatory approaches. (Quotations translated by author one where an English edition was unavailable)
4. Foucault's remarks focus on the gay community at the beginning of the 1980s. In our opinion, this perspective can be transferred to other areas of life in which people try out forms of desire and ways of life beyond hetero- and/or mono-normativity.

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