

Breaking Up With Online Dating (Workshop at the YML2021 conference)

Let's establish a multi-disciplinary research agenda on the tech-mediated pursuit of human intimacy!

Call for contributions to the workshop at the [International Conference #YouthMediaLife 2021](#), 29 Mar 2021 – 01 Apr 2021 at the [University of Vienna, Austria](#)

Workshop Organizers: C. Löw & A. Rafetseder ([University of Vienna, Faculty of Computer Science](#)), R. Rothmann ([Research Institute AG & Co KG](#))

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Call for Contributions

The main motivation of this workshop is to bring together researchers and practitioners working on Online Dating as a social practice and subject of technological transformation. Its planned outcome is a **multi-disciplinary research agenda on Online Dating** and the **formation of a working group for further collaboration**.

To register for participation, please submit a short position statement of approximately 300 words: Characterize (inter)disciplinary research challenges, potential and problematic aspects of Online Dating from your point of view.

During the workshop, we aim to critically reflect and analyse the socio-technical interplay of digital dating tools and the human pursuit of romantic relationships, intimacy and sexuality. We plan to discuss how core humanistic values and ideas of human dignity can serve as points of reference in respect to change in this innermost private and vulnerable personal sphere.

We invite the full plurality of (inter-)disciplinary perspectives concerned with Online Dating; topics include (but are not limited to):

- Transformation of human intimacy, (e.g. formation of) intimate relationships, attachment, social practices, driven by Online Dating
- Coming-of-age in the era of Online Dating
- Human Computer Interaction: User-centered design and evaluation of Online Dating platforms, social media practice and design. Interface and Interaction Design of Online Dating platforms.
- Gender Studies: Queer identities and Online Dating platforms, structural inequality perpetuated by Online Dating platforms,
- Sociology of love, sociology of technology, youth media cultures and human intimacy, mediation of human intimacy through Online Dating platforms
- Online Dating practice and mental health
- Online Dating as an instance of Digital Humanism
- Methodological approaches to capturing usage practice and engage in technology assessment at the intersection of Online Dating platforms and human love and intimacy

Workshop Outcome

The proposed outcome of this workshop is a collection of submitted position statements, a research agenda of related challenges in multiple disciplines, and suggestions for future collaboration and development in the reflection of technology-mediated intimacy.

The position statements and research agenda will be collated and published at the YML conference website.

Submissions

To prepare the workshop timetable and group formation, we ask interested participants for short written **position statements** of about 300 words, touching on the following thought-provoking questions:

- Which challenges and/or opportunities exist in online dating from your professional point of view?
- What idealistic futures for intimate technology in the 21st century do you envision?
- What constitutes successful interdisciplinary work around this topic from your own scientific point of view?



Submit your position statement via e-mail to <mailto:yml2021-onlinedating@lists.cs.univie.ac.at>

Important Dates

- Submission of position statements by 10 Mar 2021, 23:00 CET
- Workshop: 30 Mar 2021, 18:00-19:30 CET
- Conference: 29 Mar 2021 – 01 Apr 2021

Further Information

- Workshop website: <https://wiki.univie.ac.at/x/mEe0Bw>
- Registration, attendance: <https://youthmedialife2021.univie.ac.at/registration/>
- Conference programme: https://youthmedialife2021.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/k_youthmedialife2021/yml2021-programme.pdf

Position Statements

Peter Rantaša (cognitive science)

Vienna Cognitive Science Hub, University of Vienna, Austria

Social relationships, partnership, and family in whatever form are essential for a successful life and the experience of happiness and satisfaction. The intrusion of unrelated and self-interested "third parties" through technologically mediated services in post-digital normality raises many questions. It requires holistic and long-term consideration of the individual and collective situational context at different stages of life, both in terms of descriptive ("methods") and normative ("ethics") aspects to answer them.

Technologies are always co-constitutive and formative for the potential and actualized lifeworlds of their users. The influence of dating apps extends far beyond the moment of their concrete use - it lives on in the lifestyles and relationships they create, down to the level of genetic inheritance in any descendants.

Interdisciplinary approaches for a comprehensive understanding of dating apps need compatible concepts from philosophy and cultural studies to technology (e.g., language, concept engineering, persuasive technologies/interfaces, AI), cognitive science (social cognition, affective science, psychology, biology, and medicine (mental health, happiness, addiction, love, sex/ development, aging), sociology, business administration (marketing, business models), economics and political economy, law, engineering, and computer science and probably some more. These must be aligned to a common goal.

One can only draw an optimistic future with dating apps if we overcome the current market-driven platform capitalism. Innovation potentials, which open up through the currently prepared interfaces (VR, avatars, brain-computer interfaces, etc.) connected with machine learning, AI, and Big Data, need to be used in the real interest of the users to serve love in all its forms.

Kai Dröge (sociology)

Lucerne University of Applied Science and Art, Switzerland and
Institute for Social Research at the Goethe-University Frankfurt Main, Germany

These statements are based on research that I did some years ago together with my colleague Olivier Voirol from the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. This study was mainly based on qualitative in-depth interviews with users of dating platforms. Look at <http://romanticentrepreneur.net/> for more information (mostly in German, sorry).

I see online dating as part of a much broader development in which technical mediation becomes increasingly important in intimate spaces and relationships - think about how people relate to their own body via fitness trackers and apps, how our most private spaces become populated by connected things and digital assistants, how crucial social media is for personal relationships today.

One of my main research interests is the economic dimension of these developments – what I would call "*intimate digital economies*". Two statements about online dating in this direction:

Online Dating and the exploitation of emotional labor

Like with many online platforms, the biggest economic asset of any dating site is actually produced by their users – profiles, photos, intimate interactions like messages and dates, etc. Having a very active and attractive membership is the main selling point that draws new (paying) customers towards a particular platform. We have described this as a form of "emotional labor" (Arlie Hochschild), since the emotional interactions of the users produce an economic surplus value which can be exploited by the platform.

Online Dating and the exploitation of the romantic economy of love

Given how difficult it is to sell paid services on the internet, it is strange that users of dating platforms often pay a substantial monthly fee for what could be described as a very basic service. Our interviews show clearly that this is only possible because the modern romantic narrative conceptualizes the economics of love in a very particular way: In romantic interactions, we are supposed to not care about money, to engage in "conspicuous consumption" (Thorstein Veblen), to buy useless but expensive stuff like rings and flowers, or: to waste our money on dating platforms. This is what has made online dating into an important cash cow of the internet economy for many years.

Moritz Meister & Thomas Slunecko (cultural psychology)

Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Austria

In our view, *dating apps* provide a post-traditional mediatized solution to the initiation, organization and management of (usually) two persons' mutual awareness and coupling. Thereby, they also strongly affect individual subjectivation processes as well as social practices. That is because they require users to actively create individualized content while requiring a potentially large user community in order to provide 'choice' and frequent interactive use.

Multi-level societal changes through dating apps might be much stronger routed in a change of self-relatedness than, for instance, in an enhancement of sexual opportunities. As with Self-Tracking apps these changes seem to come about through a 'metricalization' of the own body – and in some cases also users' minds, e.g., with personality profiles based on questionnaire data and on-site activities in *OkCupid*. As long as digitally processing personal pictures and metrics is set in the context of a competitive 'dating-market', we suspect an economization of users' selves contrary to the principles of digital humanism

The overall objective of our method is to analyze apps and platforms as 'micro-dispositifs'. Thereby, we aim to identify the manifest as well as implicit knowledge they entail and how this knowledge is connected with specific modes of subjectivation.

One part is participating in and systematically stepping through an app's user interface (*walkthrough method*; Light et al. 2018), whereby a data basis of screenshots and field notes is created so that the constituent parts of the digital artifact's design (structure, functions, icons, animations, text, etc.) and the non-linguistically performed practices with them can be transcribed into linguistic expression and explicitly reconstructed.

One the other hand, those user interface-centered interpretations can be compared with the social orientations that manifest themselves in group discussion or narrative interviews with developers and users on an app. For analyzing the least two, reconstructive and praxeological methodology (like the documentary method) are well-proven. Together with the user interface walkthrough, this can constitute a productive interdisciplinary approach.

Albert Rafetseder (computer science / communication networks)

Cooperative Systems Research Group, Faculty of Computer Science, University of Vienna, Austria

Information and communication technology permeates all areas of our lives, including private and intimate ones such as partnership and sexuality. While operating mostly invisibly, it forms the very substrate that facilitates many of today's services, and from this position of power it mediates and surveys active, human-initiated as well as automated, operational communication.

Online Dating services are no exception in the way that they follow market dynamics and technological or artistic trends in app design. Their other aspects are rather novel, e.g. the way they introduce dynamics into the social networks they form, how they fuel and foster specific patterns in human communication, or their monetary and non-monetary economical ramifications from engagement and pay-for-use to presenting and rating oneself and others.

I view Online Dating as a prototypical representative service for a discussion about the opportunities and limitations of technology design, from the intimate use and real-life outcomes to the human-facing aspects of, e.g., apps and websites, and down into the infrastructure. My hope is for better-educated developers to understand the societal consequences of their professional performance better, create more transparent services, and enable users to take better-informed decisions when using technology. In addition, I consider computer science as a scientific discipline to be overdue for sincere self-reflection about the ever-simplifying, problem-solving focused mindset it represents and continues to teach.

For the interdisciplinary workshop, I would like to reflect my insights into technical conditions and self-conceptions that shape technological artefacts, and build bridges to other scientific disciplines to foster the mutual understanding of viewpoints. This is as much a desire for an exchange about Online Dating as a particularly representative case, as well as a step towards posing the bigger questions of scientists' and engineers' roles and responsibilities in society, their goals, ambitions, and professional decency, etc. which are too often postponed in my field.

Christian Löw (human factors in technology design, qualitative research methods in informatics)

Cooperative Systems Research Group, Faculty of Computer Science, University of Vienna, Austria

As a computer scientist with a background in human-centered computing, interested in human factors in technology design and multidisciplinary work informing design and evaluation of technology, I would like to discuss two challenges that seem most relevant to me: (1) How to evaluate the interplay of Online Dating platforms and their effect on social practice, and subsequently how to derive implications for future design directions from this, and (2) How to evaluate user experience of Online Dating platforms.

I feel that (1) is already better described by other position statements submitted to this workshop and visible on this webpage, so further description is omitted. Ad (2): I am interested in the interplay of interface and interaction design of Online Dating platforms and applications and the subsequent user experience they elicit. On a meta-level, this interest relates to a critique of the common understanding of user experience as a technical term and its improvement and optimization, which, in my opinion, is too crude and narrow and, by lacking a broader view on the concept and setting of the technological application at hand, frequently fails to capture determining factors of a positive, desirable user experience. Within the context of Online Dating, this manifests itself by (1) a lack of denomination of what desirable user experience *is* or entails and (2) "contamination" of the intimate setting of technology designed to support its users in seeking out human intimacy and relationships with patterns of user experience not sensibly attuned with this purpose, e.g. in applying overly playful and addictive design patterns.

I would like to contribute to research towards a future of technology in relation to human intimacy that, in broad terms, enables users to safely pursue social contacts. This entails a sensible, ongoing evaluation of the interplay of such technology and its effect on social practice, as well as the critical disambiguation of other influencing, e.g. capitalistic factors.

Robert Rothmann (sociology / interdisciplinary legal studies)

Digital Human Rights Center, Research Institute AG & Co KG, Vienna, Austria

In recent years, online dating has evolved from a shady niche industry to a remarkable mainstream phenomenon. For the first time in human history, the arrangement of intimate relationships and sexuality is now taking place via digital technologies on a global mass market. The stock corporation Match Group alone offers its products in over 40 different languages and reports a worldwide turnover of 2.4 billion USD for 2020. In general, it is assumed that about 40% of all relationships in western societies start online nowadays (Rosenfeld 2019).

Thus, dating sites have the potential to transform our current notion of pick up and falling in love, while raising significant questions about the agency of technology and its socio-technical impact. On the one hand dating sites offer a low-threshold option for initial contacts and facilitate emancipatory empowerment, but they also lead to a number of questionable implications.

Beside issues like chat bot scam or sexual harassment, critical reference can be made to reductionistic tendencies in the design of these platforms, which are evident at least in the absence of the usual social context and body-to-body behavior and ultimately determines communication in a way that personal emotions are turned into computable data.

By this means, online dating results in an economic quantification of intimate practices and fosters a kind of digital positivism (Fuchs 2017), whereby the search for a suitable partner becomes a statistical calculation and algorithms act as pimps.

Instead of focusing on the monitoring and commodification of users' sensitive data, an ideal future development of dating technologies should seek to address a real human-centric approach that primarily serves the common good of love, whereby the principles of digital humanism can function as general ethical guidelines.

Successful interdisciplinary cooperation in this matter would be a collaboration of different scientific disciplines (like humanities, social sciences, and engineering studies) that complement each other in their methodical and epistemological approaches in analyzing the phenomenon and thereby enable a holistic view that is more than the sum of its parts.