

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

The grim view of online dating—Rethinking Tinder

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Abstract

This paper recounts a dystopian tragedy, analogous to online dating, where people choose their partners from an enormous number of people, where rejections are made in the blink of an eye based on physical appearance and where men outnumber women. The moral of the story is discussed. It is argued that Tinder and other dating apps are a problem for justice and that this should be a public and political concern. It is suggested that we take measures to correct the inequalities in online dating.

1 | TINDERFELLA

*Doesn't seem to matter what I do
I'm always number two
No one knows how hard I tried, oh-oh, I
I have feelings that I can't explain
Drivin' me insane
All my life, been so polite
But I'll sleep alone tonight*

*'I'm Just Ken'
by Ryan Gosling
In Barbie*

Once upon a time, in a bleak and desolate future, people were forced to resort to obscure methods of dating.¹ People gathered in dimly lit foggy halls, where men were forced to remain

¹This paper focuses on the dating experiences of heterosexual cisgender men and women. It is important to acknowledge that individuals belonging to other groups may also face unique dating challenges that merit detailed ethical and philosophical analyses. However, such issues fall outside the scope of this particular paper and should be addressed in future work.

seated in rows while women paraded around on the floor fully visible in spotlights, scanning men like merchandise on display and selecting the man they wanted to date.

The men, desperate for female companionship in a world that had become lonelier than ever before, endured the spectacle night after night. The women, on the other hand, revelled in their power to choose, their eyes cold and calculating as they surveyed the sea of lonely faces, eventually picking their favourites.

The women, always outnumbered by the men by far but still in control, seemed to favour only the most physically attractive among them. The handsome, tall and confident men sat in the front rows, visible to women, ready to be swooped up by them. The average and unremarkable men in the middle and the back rows were left to wallow in their despair in darkness behind the fog that filtered them almost invisible to women.

Time went on and gloom began to creep into the minds of the men. They realized that the odds were stacked against them. For some, the rejections were too much to bear. They began to give up hope and stopped coming to the dating events, preferring the solitude of their own company to the constant reminder of their inadequacy. Many persisted, driven by a desperate need for human connection and hope for a female companion, even though they too felt their spirits slowly breaking and misogyny rising in their minds; still they continued to come, night after night, despite their growing unease, hoping against the odds that they would finally be chosen by someone—anyone. But as the weeks turned into months, even they began to wonder whether they were trapped in an endless cycle of futility and despair, doomed to spend the rest of their lives alone in a world that had forgotten them.

One night, a man in the middle row let out a deep sigh—heart sinking with each passing moment. He had been coming to these events for months now, hoping to find someone, anyone, who would choose him. He tried to stay positive even though he never seemed to catch anyone's eye. He—like so many men—was always rejected by the women, each one more gorgeous than the next. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks—he was doomed to a life of loneliness.

The man felt bitter and resentful towards the women who had the power to choose their partners. Why did they get to decide who was worthy of love and who wasn't? Why did they get to sit on a pedestal while he and the other men were relegated to the shadows because of bad luck in the genetic lottery?

As he looked around the dimly lit hall, he saw something that made his heart skip a beat. A woman, unlike anyone he had ever seen before, entered the room. She was beautiful, but unlike the rest. She was radiant, with flowing hair and a smile that could light up the darkest of rooms. Just perfect for him, the man thought. And to his amazement, unlike other women, she made her way towards the middle rows, scanning the faces of the men seated there.

Could it be that this woman was actually interested in him? He straightened his back, trying to look as confident as possible. But just as she was about to reach him, he saw that she could not see him because of the darkness and fog around him. Her eyes darted towards the front row, where a tall, handsome man was sitting.

His heart sank once again as he realized that he had been foolish to even hope that someone like her would choose him. He watched in despair as she made her way back to the front row, where the handsome man stood up to greet her. He wasn't sure whether he would even know what to say to the woman had she chosen him. The man felt like a car-chasing dog that has no idea what to do if he reaches it. As the couple left the hall together, the man couldn't help but feel a deep sense of longing and despair. Would he ever find someone who would choose him or was he doomed to an eternity of disappointment and loneliness?

There was a persistent rumour circulating among the men who attended these dating events that similar events were being held in other locations too. The men couldn't resist having more opportunities to find a partner, so they started venturing to different venues to see whether the rumours were true.

To their surprise, they found that similar events were indeed being held elsewhere. Depending on the physical appearance of the women present, the dating events were held in different venues. Some women chose their partners in smaller lecture halls and concert venues, while the more attractive women chose their partners at large arenas, football fields, baseball stadiums and even at the Olympic stadiums. Men, increasingly desperate to find partners, wandered from one event to another, hoping to be accepted by someone.

One night, a man seated in the middle row of a large concert hall noticed something peculiar. 'Did you see that?' the man asked his neighbour. 'Isn't that the same guy who was picked at the theatre last week?' 'It's possible', the other man replied, continuing: 'It happens sometimes. Nowadays, it's more common than before. Women keep choosing the same few men. When these events started, it was different; it was easy to find a partner. I had one, but I was foolish and thought I could find someone better. I wish I had stayed with her'. 'Well, at least you've had a partner. I've never experienced that, and I don't think I ever will', the first man responded. 'The women never look here in the shadows. We can't blame them; we're so far away in the back and there are so many of us here, it's like we do not exist. The smoke and darkness make us invisible to these women, yet somehow we can see them and how they select the most handsome guys. Any woman who comes here is like a queen bee; she thinks that most men are under her thumb and will do anything for her – and, sadly, she is right'.

The men attended multiple events in order to increase their chances of finding a partner. However, as the events grew in size and popularity, it became increasingly difficult for most men to be selected by women. The women seemed to grow more demanding in their selection processes, and many men found this cruel. For instance, some women adopted height requirements when choosing a partner, refusing to even consider anyone who wasn't taller than herself. The most youthful and beautiful used even crueller requirements to narrow down their pool of potential mates.

When the most beautiful women attended the events, the venues were quickly filled to capacity, leaving many men waiting in line. Eventually, the events were moved to even larger stadiums to accommodate the crowds, with tens of thousands of men craving the attention of a single woman. Sometimes riots broke and the men started to fight each other.

Despite the large numbers of men, the women seemed to favour the handsome men in the first row, and many men began to notice that the same successful men were repeatedly being chosen by different women at different events. Some men grew frustrated with this pattern and began to shout at the women during the events, accusing them of promiscuity and acting unfairly.

The constant rejections caused some men to become depressed and even violent towards women. The misery inflicted upon them was incalculable. A rumour said that the men who had given up and left, accepting their fate, were happier than when they attended these grim events.

2 | TINDERELLA

*Don't play with me, it just hurts me
I'm bouncing off the walls
No-no-no, I'm not your plastic doll*

*'Plastic Doll'
by Lady Gaga*

Things were not much better for the women in this dystopian future. While the dating events initially seemed like a promising way to find a partner, as they grew in size, the difficulties also quickly escalated for the women.

'I once very carefully selected a guy, and after a few days, I saw him going to another dating event', one woman lamented, and went on: 'These men are acting like kids in a candy store, picking treats. They are going from woman to woman, only using us for their own perverted pleasures'. 'And the most attractive women are alluring to all the good men', another woman cursed, while continuing her complaint: 'We are deemed unworthy of love and respect; it's disgusting'. 'I'm never going to date anyone again', another declared in a resolute tone.

The dating events that were supposed to help people find a partner had become a cruel game of desperate competition, where women were reduced to mere objects of sexual desire, and men were nothing more than predators in search of their next conquest. The disappointed woman wondered whether she would ever find love or whether she was doomed to an eternity of heart-ache and loneliness.

3 | THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Not that long ago, when people looked for sexual and romantic partners their pool of potential partners consisted mostly of a small circle of people physically around them. People were dating, having sex with and marrying people from the same caste, people from the same part of their neighbourhood or people from the same cohort at their school or college. People mated mostly based on geography, age and social class. This assortative mating made most people happy—or at least relatively satisfied.

Today, things are different. Dating has moved online—and as it has been argued before, online dating should be an issue of public concern and justice (Bedi, 2015).

If you are dating in 2020s, you are likely using Tinder—the most famous dating app—or some other dating app to find a partner. At first, you might be pleased to see that this will give you a practically endless number of candidates to choose from: everyone from your selected radius, which could be dozens or hundreds of miles, is a potential partner. Your potential partners would no longer be your classmates or co-workers only; you would have a virtually endless pool of potential partners because you could even date people at the opposite side of the globe while sitting comfortably in your home.

It is not only the number of potential partners that has changed the dating sphere during this millennium. The speed and method of rejecting or endorsing partners has changed too. In online dating apps, you can dismiss someone in a fraction of a second and get the next person in line immediately. First cuts are made based on candidates' physical appearance, thus violating the plausible moral principle of looking behind people's appearances (Midtgaard, 2023). The idea that we should avoid preferring attractive partners is perhaps philosophically compelling (D'alessandro, 2023), yet, following it online can be hard. Arguably, we should not discriminate while dating (Bedi, 2015; Zheng, 2016), but anti-discriminatory duties quickly become too demanding (Degn, 2023), especially when the algorithms of dating apps segregate people based on race (Nader, 2020) and encourage people to accumulate likes and matches as if people were playing a game (Nader, 2024).

While digital dating takes our biological urges to their limits, online dating apps are also filled with men. Roughly three out of four Tinder users are men. This skewed gender ratio makes things even worse—and not only for men but (at least in some aspects) for women also.

American journalist Jo Piazza (2015) claimed that 'Not since the introduction of the birth control pill have we seen a tool as liberating for women as online dating'. She thought so because online dating allows women to be much more selective than before and, for instance, check whether their 'matches' have a job without asking uncomfortable questions on a first date.

It is true that women on Tinder typically receive a much higher number of likes, matches and messages compared to men (Tyson et al., 2016), thus enabling women to become highly

selective. As an extreme example, the most liked women on Tinder—such as Eliana Silver, a university student in Scotland—can receive 100,000 likes in a week (Rosemurgey, 2021).² However, this can be overwhelming and time-consuming to manage, as many of the messages women receive may not be genuine or respectful. With so many potential matches on Tinder, it can be difficult to sift through them and find someone who is a good match. Women thus become extremely selective to narrow down the pool of candidates.

Many studies show that women are much more selective than men when choosing a partner (Abramova et al., 2016; Bokek-Cohen et al., 2008; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018) and attractive women are highly selective (Buss & Shackelford, 2008). Especially on Tinder, women are extremely selective (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Roshchupkina et al., 2023). For instance, partners' height is much more important for women than men: women want taller men more than men want shorter women (Stulp et al., 2013) and some women on Tinder use the candidate's height as a deal-breaker. Women also strongly prefer a highly educated potential partner—on Tinder too (Neyt et al., 2023). Highly attractive women ignore male approaches online more than less attractive women do (Ponseti et al., 2022). Ironically, because of high selectivity, women are more likely than men to cite the inability to find a partner who meets their own high expectations as a reason for being single (Cox, 2023). Female selectiveness appears to make most men go unnoticed as potential partners in women's mating preferences (Buss, 2021).

Female selectivity leads to female hypergamy (a phenomenon where a woman selects a partner who has higher social status than she does). Female hypergamy is present even in the most gender-equal countries such as Norway (Almås et al., 2023). Online, a person's status is mostly based on his or her physical attractiveness, undermining men's ability to increase the possibility of finding a partner through education and professional success. This does not mean that the traditional resource acquisition abilities such as (ability to accumulate) wealth, salary and social status are not important for women dating online. It means that women like to date men who are *both* handsome and have such abilities. Because of the features of online dating, women, in general, accomplish their sexual goals online more often than men do (Ponseti et al., 2022).

With many men using Tinder, there is a high level of competition for matches and attention. Men need to work hard to stand out and make a good impression on potential matches—yet anecdotal evidence and studies in social sciences indicate that women get the attention simply by existing (Tyson et al., 2016). Men have to be much more active online to find a partner than women. Perhaps paradoxically, some online dating apps, such as Bumble, allow only female users to contact matched profiles.³ Required activity from men puts women in a position where they can 'define the rules of the game more according to their own needs' (Ponseti et al., 2022). Larsen and Kennair (2024) interpret existing data on Tinder (Gerrard, 2021; Grøntvedt et al., 2020) so that the median man must swipe through almost 30,000 female profiles to get one sexual or romantic relationship. One consequence of these disparities in online dating is that women are more self-centred in their profiles and communication than men (for example, women are more likely to use first-person singular pronouns than men) (Davis & Fingerma, 2016).

The men women choose are the same men other women choose too. Statistics gathered during the prevalence of online dating from the United States and elsewhere show that being without a romantic or sexual partner is increasing especially among young men (Bozick, 2021; Ueda et al., 2020). Two-thirds of young American men are single while only one-third of young

²To my knowledge, the most successful men, while very successful, receive much fewer likes on Tinder than the most successful women do. In 2017, Stefan-Pierre Tomlin was said to be the most successful man on Tinder with 14,600 matches. One might point out though, that Silver received 100,000 *likes* and Tomlin 14,600 *matches* so we cannot really compare whether the most popular people on Tinder are men or women. However, the comparison shows an important point: the most liked woman, while having 100,000 men to choose from, accepted almost no-one, since as she stated herself: 'I didn't have too many matches because I'm quite picky'. (Cooley, 2021). Tomlin, on the other hand, was able to find more than 14,000 women on Tinder that he liked and found himself attracted to. The anecdote—while just an anecdote—indicates that the most successful women on Tinder are picky, while the most successful men are not.

³Although this has been changed in 2024 and now men can approach women in Bumble too.

American women are single (Pew Research, 2023).⁴ Yet, more young men than women would like to date someone (Cox, 2023). While many young men suffer from involuntary loneliness, those men who have many sexual partners—the rare winners in online dating—have even more sexual partners than such men had a decade ago (Harper et al., 2017).

The phenomenon where few men receive the attention of most women has a few plausible explanations. First, as seen, female selectivity leads to hypergamy where women are looking for the successful men. But such men are rare and therefore wanted by other women too. This is partly explained by a phenomenon called mate-choice-copying (Vakirtzis & Roberts, 2009), a form of partner selection in which the probability of a male being selected as a mate increases if he has previously mated with another female and decreases if he has previously been rejected. Men with attractive faces have more short-term sex partners than men with less attractive faces (Rhodes et al., 2005). These attractive men are the men women choose on Tinder. However, often the men who are popular do not want to settle down. They are living their dream; they can have sex with a different woman every night because most women want them.⁵

Second, the algorithms of Tinder show users the most attractive profiles foremost, thus making it difficult if not impossible for less attractive users to be even picked out by women. Whether it is mainly the filtering of Tinder's algorithms or the filtering of women's selective behaviour that explains the issue remains unclear because the algorithms of Tinder are not publicly available. Perhaps both play a role in the selection of partners on Tinder the way that the magical smoke and darkness, as well as women's high requirements and selectivity, explained the dire situation of men in the story.

While men struggle to stand out on Tinder, women, on the other hand, do not have such a problem. However, women have a hard time finding men who are both interested in a long-term relationship and who would fulfil women's criteria. As a Norwegian social media influencer, Malin Nesvoll, writes on her online dating experience: 'Those I find interesting are not interested in anything serious' (Heia, 2023). It should not be a surprise that given the features of online dating, such as using the physical appearance as the first criterion on whom to date, women struggle to find men who are interested in a long-term relationship.

All of these are concerning news for anyone caring about societal justice, because, for instance, misogyny is most prevalent in places where competition for women is tough and men have difficulties finding a partner (Brooks et al., 2022). Studies indicate that men are most inclined towards misogyny when they lack the security of a serious relationship and doubt their appeal to female partners (Bosson et al., 2022). It should not come as a surprise that some studies report that many women (71.8%) experience offensive behaviour on Tinder (Lopez & Vogel, 2017).

Because Tinder is a visual app, many women and men may feel pressure to present themselves in a certain way to attract matches. This may lead to body image concerns and feelings of insecurity, and feeling unsuccessful in online dating increases depression and anxiety for both men and women (Her & Timmermans, 2021). Many Tinder users also feel loneliness and low self-esteem (Rochat et al., 2019).

Some scholars have started to treat loneliness as a public health issue (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015; Holt-Lunstad & Perissinotto, 2023; Lederman, 2021; Lederman, 2023a) and, as I have proposed before, sexual loneliness should be seen as a public health problem too (Räsänen, 2023). However, technology does not provide a solution to loneliness because it cannot replace a true human connection; for example, people need the human touch and scent (Lederman, 2023b). Dating through algorithms and filters is thus a poor replacement for real human connection.

⁴This is perhaps explained by female hypergamy. Age is a proxy for social status; thus, women are more likely to be attracted to men who are older than themselves because such men have higher social status than younger men.

⁵For instance, attractive people have more difficulties sustaining a long-term relationship (Ma-Kellams et al., 2017).

The combination of the above-mentioned factors is very bad news. The ethical lesson of the story is that dating apps are a problem for justice. There are obvious and compelling moral reasons to abandon the use of Tinder and similar dating apps. There are very few winners in them. Women feel unsuccessful on Tinder because they can only get casual sex because the men women want do not want to settle down with them. On the other hand, many men feel unsuccessful because they cannot even get casual sex because most women simply don't choose them because even average women can be very selective when choosing a partner. Tinder's algorithms—the point of which is to show the most attractive profiles to the users—make the situation worse.

Some men who are unable to get a sexual partner despite wanting one identify as incels, but perhaps we need a similar category for women. Larsen and Kennair (2024) recently proposed a term 'insing'—involuntarily single woman. While many women have practically unlimited access to short-term relationships with highly attractive men, it can be very difficult for them to acquire a long-term partner (Larsen & Kennair, 2024). Amanda Romare (2021), a Swedish screenwriter and author, claims that incels get too much attention, as our culture blinds us to the plight of lonely women. She claims that it is not women but men who have more power in mating markets.

The experience of Romare and other women is no doubt true. However, the problem is not that men have the power in dating—many men do not have any power in dating. Only few men have almost all the power in dating, and because these are the men women are after when dating online, the same phenomenon creates *both* insings as well as incels.

John Rawls (1971) famously suggests that in designing a just society, we should imagine ourselves behind a veil of ignorance that keeps us from knowing who we are. Only by being ignorant of our circumstances, such as physical appearances, race and (dis)abilities, we can objectively consider how a just society should operate.

What would a Rawlsian ideal observer think about online dating where dating pools are practically unlimited, where the selection of potential partners can be done in a split second based on physical appearance only and where there are many more men than there are women? Surely, such an observer would think online dating apps, such as Tinder, are a very bad idea justice-wise even though, in theory, they would ensure the maximal freedom in selection. Just like a Rawlsian ideal observer would not choose a racist or sexist society because they could find themselves being discriminated against, they would not choose Tinder as our primary way of finding a partner, because they could find themselves at the bottom of the dating pool. A just dating sphere is a dating sphere that if you knew everything about it, you'd be willing to enter it in a random place.

The story should be considered a warning. An unfettered dating market, such as online dating, is like unregulated capitalism; the winners take it all. Online dating should thus never become a mainstream way of finding partners. Unfortunately, it might already be that.⁶ Whether or not that is the case already, the best thing to do is probably to stop using online dating apps and go back to other forms of dating, or at least revise how online dating apps should work.

When we had fewer options to choose our partners from, things were better for most people. Having faced a smaller pool of potential mates simply made people more satisfied with their decisions (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017; Goetz et al., 2019). Thus, when it comes to online dating, things were better when things were worse.⁷

⁶Whether it is mainstream depends on how the issue is framed. Some surveys say that 33 per cent of young American adults have used online dating apps (Cox, 2023). In Sweden, 40% of new relationships start online. <https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2022/natdejting-och-natporr/#graph-2240>

⁷Some political philosophers have also argued that sometimes less is more. See for instance Dworkin (1982), who challenges the assumption that it is necessarily better to have more choices rather than fewer. See also Gordon-Solmon (2017).

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