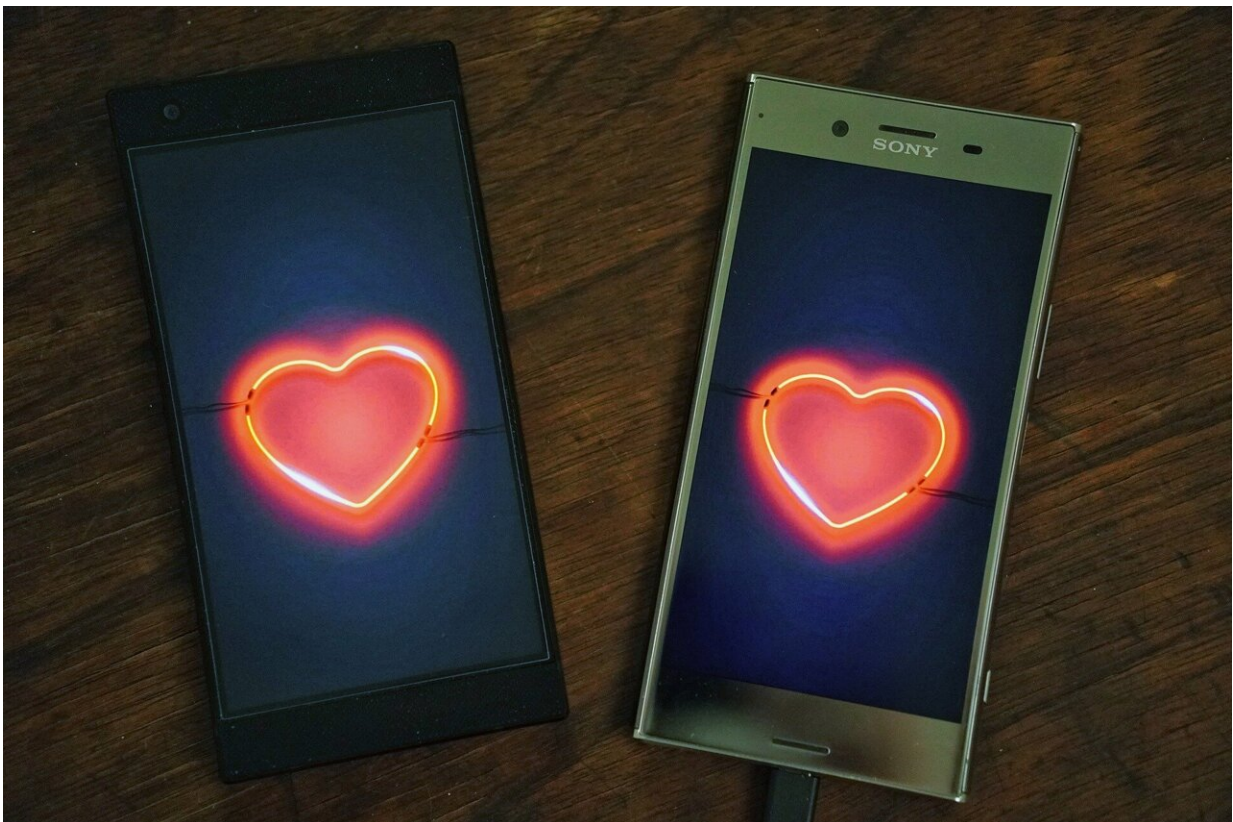


# Dating apps: Marketing experts' research reveals pitfalls to look out for, and tactics for success

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Dating can come with new and sometimes frustrating challenges. In the

past, relationships were often [arranged by families and guided by societal norms](#), limiting individual choice but sparing us the agony of endless decisions. Nowadays, those who are single have endless potential partners at their fingertips. A 2019 Pew Research Center study showed that couples who met online are [more diverse](#), be it in terms of income, education, political orientation and ethnicity.

## **Freedom can have its price**

According to [psychoanalyst Erich Fromm](#), freedom can sometimes come at the price of feelings of powerlessness and even isolation. We are marketing researchers exploring [online dating](#) to determine if the market ideology of freedom and endless choice extends to every aspect of human life. Our [research reveals](#) that users' feelings of anxiety and frustration stem from a clash between a perceived commodification of relationships and societal values.

Some study participants referred to online dating as "draining," expressing a hope that they could "finally" finish the process. Didier, a 51-year-old engineer living in Paris called online dating "mass manipulation"; Ella, a 25-year-old editor, said that at first, online dating was "exciting and new," but that as time went by, she found the experience depressing.

So why does it happen that faced with unlimited opportunities to love, we at times feel that love is not getting any closer?

## **'Liquid' modernity and the rise of emotional capitalism**

In his book [Liquid Love](#), British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that the modern world has ushered in an era of the "individual without ties,"

prioritizing freedom and flexibility over attachment. This has transformed traditional notions of love and relationships into more transient and "liquid" forms.

French-Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz [echoes these observations](#), contending that those living in today's capitalist societies face unique challenges due to evolving norms and values. According to Illouz, as a society, we no longer see love uniquely through a framework of moral virtue, commitment and stability, but this is the price we pay for greater control over our romantic lives, greater self-knowledge, and equality between the sexes. Amid the backdrop of media-promoted ideals that often set unrealistic standards for love, people find themselves hesitant to invest in the emotional work required for deeper connections.

## **Misaligned values**

In online dating settings, what happens when two individuals' values or expectations of a relationship are not aligned? As our [research shows](#), this misalignment can cause frustration—for example, one participant could be looking for a long-term relationship, while another could be more interested in casual relationships or broadening their horizons. Both would perceive the other's actions as inappropriate.

Mark, a 26-year-old management consultant, shared a sense of frustration he felt when the women he met on an app wanted to connect with him on [social media](#) or call frequently, as he preferred to establish boundaries. By contrast, Alice, a 54-year-old administrator, said that some of the men she met online were often not open about their marital status. She even worked out techniques to find out whether a potential partner was in a relationship, such as getting off the phone very quickly or always paying cash.

Sometimes these conflicting desires are even experienced by one and the

same person: they might strive for commitment, trust and closeness, yet be unwilling or unable to get off the hook of unlimited choice. Derek, a 38-year-old entrepreneur, reflected on the gap between his relationship expectations and his online-dating experience:

"For me, long-term relationships are about values—human values. And if I meet for a date and the morning after I have another new profile, I think 'Oh, great,' and the woman or the man you saw last night, they're at the bottom of the list."

This misalignment can lead to negative experiences, mistreatment, and even abuse online. Rose, a 23-year-old university lecturer, said that to her, going on dates was connected with a sense of fear because of the "horror stories" she had heard from others. Indeed, reports from other study participants (whose names we chose to withhold) had experiences ranging from distressing to traumatizing, including verbal abuse, encounters with individuals who bore no resemblance to their photos, and even a sexual assault by someone using a fake profile.

## **The gamification of dating**

The deinstitutionalized social setting of online dating can lead to situations where there are sometimes few or no shared social connections between the partners. This can lead to its being perceived as a "gamified" experience, as those met online are perceived as less "real" compared those encountered through friends or family. This diminished sense of reality can make behavior less predictable, as there are no specific sanctions for what would normally be seen as unethical behavior.

## **Denial and shame**

While many study participants enjoyed the choice provided by dating apps, some were hesitant to identify themselves as using them, highlighting the situational and temporary nature of this condition. Some talked about the "stigmatized" nature of online dating, the perception that if they find a partner this way, those in their social circle might think there was something "wrong" with them because they were not able to find a partner in "real life" by traditional means.

## **The uncertainty**

Such uncertainty arises when we're unsure about the norms and outcomes of social interactions. This can happen when there is a lack of clarity about the framework under which the interaction is taking place. As the relationship terms are not clarified, both parties feel vulnerable and prefer not to open up too much to avoid potentially being hurt. The communication codes are also often unclear, giving rise to [multiple discussions in online communities](#), where the users ask for advice in explaining behaviors of their dating partners.

## **The survival strategies**

### **Embrace the best authenticity in you and in others**

If you're using a dating app, consider a daring strategy: authenticity. Self-promotion is fine, even necessary, but so are conviction, realism and honesty. In that way you can try to match with partners who see you as the person you are and not the person you project. Definitely select flattering photos and showcase your desirable traits, but also show some conviction and your true self. Let some light in on the magic!

### **Use the app functions to narrow down the choice**

When seeking a relationship online, it's important to make the most of the available resources, ensuring you don't miss out on potential connections. Consider using filters and search tools to refine your search for compatible partners. Specify your preferences, such as age, location, and shared interests, to increase your chances of finding a meaningful connection.

## **Enjoy the little things**

It's essential to adapt your approach and redefine what "value" means to you in this unique context. Instead of judging success by a single measure, consider redefining it to include other aspects—for example, meaningful conversations or shared interests. This flexibility enables you to recalibrate your expectations and discover value in your app experience, even if it doesn't align with your initial goals. Love is built on shared emotions.

## **Talk, but also listen**

Don't be afraid to discuss your expectations with potential partners. Most importantly, when a person says that he or she is not looking for a committed [relationship](#), believe them, rather than trying to change them or hoping that they will reconsider. Show them that you're listening and not just broadcasting a set of preconceived ideas.

## **Keep exploring, yet know when to stop**

Last but not least, don't give up. As online dating becomes more and more accepted, a greater number of people are finding real relationships online. Despite all the hurdles, [more than 12% of marriages](#) start online, according to a Pew Research Center study. Consider dating apps not as an unending search, but as a means to an end—and potentially a happy

one.

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