

Love without Falling in Love: Mediated Intimate Relationships in the Digital Age

Tianyun Chen

The University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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Abstract: The digital lifestyle of the Z generation has transformed modern people's romantic relationships and the ways they practice romance. More and more intimate relationships have merely developed into "dating" and "situation ship" expectations; young people no longer view love and commitment as a responsibility or an important part of life, and they are increasingly cautious about long-term, serious romantic relationships. Therefore, some flexible, phased, and socially interactive forms of social interaction are particularly prominent among urban youth. In a series of case interviews conducted with young people from different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations, a common theme emerged: Long-term love is generally considered increasingly difficult to maintain, even exhausting, and for many young people, this matter has become insignificant - including a heterosexual female living and studying in Tokyo, a homosexual Chinese person, and male participants from different sexual orientations and cultural backgrounds such as Ghana and Turkey. Among these respondents, Yangyang proposed that this "relationship without commitment" is "a stage of life, not a necessity", and another respondent, San San, believed that "dating" and "situation ship" is a "screening process". However, both of them reached similar conclusions: serious romantic relationships are no longer regarded as the inevitable result or necessary product of an intimate relationship.

1. Introduction

This interview focuses on the mediating role of social media in intimate relationships. Dating apps, social media, and online discourse have provided new channels for establishing and dissolving intimate relationships. However, these platforms have given rise to tendencies such as distrust and commodification in the establishment and dissolution of relationships. People meticulously create their identity symbols on social media, thereby re-structuring love as a consumer logic. The author mentioned that many people online are not real, just as she said. Many online users shape and exaggerate their images and define the "rules" of love and other cultural information based on their personal opinions, transforming intimate relationships into trading commodities. These behaviors indicate that "the crisis of intimate relationships" is not only a sociological issue but also a media and communication phenomenon. Therefore, this article places this informal intimate relationship within media and communication studies, providing a framework for young people on how to navigate intimate relationships in the media age.

The involvement of the media and communication fields has led to a change in the nature of contemporary social intimate relationships, and this transformation has attracted a great deal of academic attention. Jamieson (1999) argued that intimate relationships have shifted from private face-to-face connections to being conducted through communication technologies and cultural channels[1]; Andreassen et al. (2018) emphasized that digital platforms have created many new possibilities for intimate relationships and have shaken people's expectations of traditional love, making intimate relationships more unstable and fragmented[2]. These ideas are called "mediated intimate relationships," highlighting how communication technologies have reshaped intimate relationships. Secondly, as digital platforms monetize user interactions, the capitalization of such platforms (Srnicek, 2017) has also made intimate behaviors themselves commodified, such as dating application software[3]. Dating application software exemplifies the "capitalization of platforms" operation, first by digitizing personal data and ranking them, and then by algorithmically matching based on attractiveness. Such an operation treats love as a "marketized" concept, which aligns closely with (Srnicek, 2017)'s concept of emotional capitalism, where the cultural industry commodifies emotions and turns them into consumption objects. In the interviews, participant Three-Three also pointed out that using dating application software is like screening products, and criticized this phenomenon, which is in line with Illouz's (2007) concept[4].

Furthermore, the role of non-social interactions also contributed to the nature of contemporary social intimate relationships, which emerged as a result of the capitalization of platforms. Under the operation of dating application software, there would be such a phenomenon: Users connect the false personas they created online with their real-life connections, but this connection often collapses during offline interactions due to the disparity. Just as San San and Yang Yang said, the gap between the online characters and the real-life reality directly leads to the de-romanticization of love and erodes mutual trust. Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed a similar concept, which explains how viewers form one-sided emotional attachments to characters in the media[5].

Finally, there is the concept of the "emotional public" (Berlant, 2008), which also explains how emotions are jointly shaped and disseminated in digital culture[6]. This concept is very common in the network, such as "the major characteristics of positive affection" and "how to recognize whether this person is worth dating in the early stages of a relationship?" These online discussions are examples of emotional publicization; and these discussions have certain suggestive, guiding, and moral narrative transmissions. These narrative transmissions not only affect personal dating and intimate behaviors, but also reinforce the cultural transformation of contemporary online youth towards hesitation and caution in intimate relationships.

Overall, these theories all indicate a phenomenon: the de-romanticization of love is not merely a result of changes in social values, but is closely linked to the characteristics of digital media and social platforms. Mediated intimate relationships highlight the changes in intimacy levels, while platform capitalism commodifies intimate relationships; non-social interactions deepen the instability of mediated information, and emotional work demonstrates the skepticism towards intimate relationships caused by digitalization. Therefore, these theoretical works provide a theoretical framework for analyzing interview data and attempting to understand how young people handle intimate relationships in an era of highly pure and increasingly complex information. However, these theories still have academic gaps. Most studies focus on the efficiency or risks of romantic social platforms, and pay less attention to the combination of "de-romanticization" and communication logic, which is also the research direction that this article lacks.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore how digital media has led to the de-romanticization of modern intimate relationships. The empirical basis is derived from in-depth interviews titled "How Easy Is Love?", which recorded the diverse viewpoints of young people from different cultures and sexual orientations during the dating process. The participants included:

Yangyang, a heterosexual female studying in Tokyo, who prioritized studies and careers over dating; San San, a lesbian living in inland China, who regarded dating on social media as a "filter" for screening potential partners; and male respondents from Ghana and Turkey, who provided cross-cultural insights into the challenges faced by resumes in intimate relationships. The diversity of the participants' backgrounds was also intended to analyze the second part's focus on how the respondents interpret dating applications, the internet, and the mediated expectations of intimate relationships, reflecting their general skepticism towards romantic commitments. This study does not view the interviewees' narratives as independent experiences, but rather as part of a more official social technological transformation in the field of intimate relationships. This research method based on in-depth interview cases helps to gain a deeper understanding of the direct interaction between individual experiences and the structural logic of mediated intimacy, platform capitalism, and emotional commodification.

2. Research Findings and Analysis

2.1 The Phased Decentralisation of Intimate Relationships

A prevalent view among respondents is that romantic relationships are viewed as an ancillary aspect of their current life stage rather than an essential requirement. For instance, Yangyang, residing in Tokyo, emphasised that 'romance is neither here nor there for me at present' as she prioritises academic pursuits and career planning. Romance is no longer perceived as an indispensable, lifelong journey but rather as a phased, tentative social activity. A similar perspective was expressed by a Turkish male respondent residing in Sydney; he noted that living abroad prioritises personal stability and cultural adaptation, with romantic relationships often perceived as distractions. He even characterised romance as a 'luxury' to be seriously considered only after achieving financial and identity security. From a communication studies perspective, this attitude reflects the decentralising trend of 'mediatised intimacy'. Compared to traditional media discourses where 'emotion is life's central theme' such narratives are gradually losing their dominant position in media culture. Instead, themes like 'personal development' and 'self-realisation' are increasingly emphasised by the media. This also indicates that love is being redefined in the digital age as a substitutable lifestyle.

2.2 Filtering Logic and the Capitalization of Love

Another respondent, San San, emphasized that he would view dating as a "screening mechanism" to determine whether the other person is worthy of moving on to a "serious relationship", such as first screening for suitable partners based on appearance, age, and location, then proceeding with the date, and next screening for those who have consistent future plans and compatible personalities. This social mindset aligns closely with the operational logic of dating apps: algorithms match, score, and recommend, transforming potential relationships between people into an efficient and streamlined process. This utilitarian approach is also what San San implemented through dating apps. A Ghanaian male homosexual respondent living in Shanghai also admitted that when he first arrived in China, he adhered to the belief that love should be a long-term commitment. However, after integrating into the open city of Shanghai and using social media apps, he gradually accepted a casual dating style and even stated that dating is more about finding companionship rather than entering a formal relationship.

This logic is essentially a "marketization of love". Love is understood as a capitalistic behavior - an investment behavior, requiring the assessment of "return rate" and "risk", which is also the "emotional capitalism" theory proposed by Illouz (2007): In modern society, love is permeated by

consumption logic, and people are accustomed to understanding intimate relationships using market language. This social attitude has led to the gradual replacement of the romantic nature of love with utilitarianism.

San San's interview also revealed the negative effects of this utilitarian logic: Capitalized love through screening and calculation weakens the inherent randomness and passion in love. Individuals in romantic relationships become more rational and calm rather than emotionally engaged, which thereby promotes the "de-romanticization" trend.

2.3 Virtuality of Social Media and Identity Construction

Both Yangyang and San San expressed significant dissatisfaction with the "unreal" information found on social media platforms. Yangyang pointed out that many people create "false personas" on social platforms, claiming to be "elite", while San San even admitted that "the people on social media are a mixed bag". These views indicate that digital platforms have become a "performance stage" for presenting one's image and persona. Users construct virtual identities through self-presentation.

However, this virtuality exacerbates the falseness of intimate relationships. When respondents discover a significant gap between the person they meet in reality and their online persona, trust is greatly undermined. This disillusionment not only leads to social failure but also further weakens the respondents' expectations and confidence in love, as well as their belief in the authenticity of social media. From a communication studies perspective, this is similar to the "pseudo-social interaction" mechanism proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956). When emotions generated and invested in media images are proven to be false, they quickly turn into disappointment and suspicion. This is precisely one of the important reasons for the "de-romanticization" of romantic relationships in the digital age.

2.4 The infiltration of mediated concepts of love

Apart from their personal social experiences, these respondents also mentioned that the popularity of the media has exacerbated the difficulties in love, such as "definition-based love". San San mentioned that he often saw different viewpoints about love on social platforms like "If a man fails to do the following points, then he doesn't love you." This standardized concept of love has been continuously replicated and disseminated through social media, eventually gradually confining love to a set of visual, quantifiable, and verifiable indicators. Male respondents from Turkey also felt similar pressure. He mentioned that in Turkey, men are usually expected to be more proactive, while in Australia, he found that women tend to be more positive. He also mentioned that the religious background has shaped a more conservative emotional attitude.

This pattern is referred to in academia as "emotional public": When emotions are mediated and expressed and widely spread in the public space, they will form a collective emotional atmosphere. This pattern leads love to be transformed into an emotional relationship that is forced to be measured according to the standards given by the masses, losing its unique, private, and exclusive experience. This atmosphere also makes love lose its romantic contingency, uniqueness, and irreplaceability, further promoting the process of de-romanticization.

These research results indicate that the de-romanticization of intimate relationships is not confined to specific cultures or sexual orientations, but reflects the transformation triggered by digital media, being a multi-dimensional phenomenon. In all the interviews, the participants positioned love as decentralized, capitalized, even negative, burdensome. This aligns well with the theories of "mediated intimate relationships" and "emotional capitalism". Although the respondents viewed dating from different perspectives, they all emphasized their distrust of online social

software interactions and their skepticism towards romantic culture. This shows that the platform logic and media narratives have a structural influence that transcends geographical boundaries. From a communication studies perspective, the de-romanticization of intimate relationships can be regarded as a mediated phenomenon: social platforms do not merely facilitate connections but redefine the meaning of intimate relationships through various algorithms, practices, and normative narratives. Importantly, this definition can be recognized in different social and cultural contexts, indicating that digital platforms have promoted the convergence of the scope of global intimate relationships while allowing for certain cultural differences in individuals.

3. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the "de-romanticization" of contemporary young people's intimate relationships is not only a change in social values but also a communication process shaped by digital platforms, media discourse, and cultural background in communication studies. Through the analysis of 4-5 respondents from Tokyo, Sydney, Shanghai, and Ghana, this article summarizes several common topics: the decentralization of love, the utilitarian and instrumentalization of broken promises, the authenticity of social platforms, and the differences in global and local cultures in practical activities. These findings collectively explain the reconfiguration of the meaning of love in the digital age.

From a communication studies perspective, intimate relationships increasingly rely on technological functions and public discourse communication. Love is no longer a milestone in life but is constantly restructured through algorithms, self-presentation, and capitalization narratives. At the same time, different cultural contexts remind us that although global social platforms have promoted the convergence of interaction patterns, local values and identity recognition still influence individuals' understanding.

Overall, young people are redefining traditional intimate relationships as various more flexible, temporary, and negotiable relationship models. But this does not mean the disappearance of love; rather, this relationship is re-integrated into the process of platform capitalization and mediaized intimacy. Future research can further focus on emerging technologies, such as AI companions and virtual relationships, on how they continue to change the form of intimate relationships, and how individuals in different cultures resist the second adaptation to this change.

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