

How Digital Services Are Reshaping the Dating Practice: An Institutional Theory Perspective on the Digital Dating Service Ecosystem

Purpose: In this study we build upon Institutional Theory and Service-Dominant logic in order to highlight how the broader societal dating culture is currently shaped by market actors operating within the digital dating service ecosystem. With the aim to advance our understanding of the ways in which service market actors engage with their institutional environments, we adopt an institutional work perspective to explore how relationships and routines have been recently profoundly challenged by powerful digital dating services.

Study design/methodology/approach: In this study we draw upon twenty-one institutional biographies via semi-structured interviews with male and female online dating services users. We engage with consumer narratives of their online dating experiences in order to understand how they create, maintain, or disrupt dating practices massively impacted by the online service ecosystem.

Findings: A series of normative and regulative structures have already been accepted by users and non-users of dating services concurring to their legitimation. The same legitimation is now recognized on the web dating market, but the acceleration of the exchanges assured by the digital component together with the multiplication of choices negatively impacts singular actors' well-being.

Originality/value: we use the institutional work perspective to observe how the practice of dating has recently been profoundly disrupted by the digital dating service ecosystem.

Social implications: The operational efficiency and growth of worldwide dating services is not disputed. Nevertheless, an institutional work perspective on the human-centered outcomes reveals important social, existential, psychological and physical well-being issues for the actors.

Keywords: Service Dominant Logic; Institutional Work; Digital Dating; Institutional Theory; Human well-being

Introduction

Recent studies in marketing theory ask for a dramatic change of perspective in the analysis of the formation and composition of the markets, from a micro to a macro level. An emphasis on macro-levels of analysis makes possible the observation of the ideologies, myths, institutions involved in the development of markets (Dholakia, 2012). In this context, the institutional theory widely used in the analysis of organizations is finding wide application in recent marketing studies. While remaining economic structures, markets are also institutions formed by formal and informal rules linked to a specific space-time context (Ocasio et al., 2018), and a network of actors that are shaped by the market, but they shape at their time (Dobbin, 2010; T. Lawrence et al., 2011; T. B. Lawrence et al., 2013; T. B. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The interest in analyzing markets through the lenses of institutional theory is specifically due to the relevance that this theory reserves to the interaction of actors in their consumption practices (T. B. Lawrence et al., 2009; T. B. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Continuous interactions of the actors that make up a given market stratify over time, becoming shared, therefore institutionalized practices (Chaney & Slimane, 2019).

More specifically, we will apply the two major approaches to Institutional Theory, Institutional Logics and Institutional Work to deepen our understanding of dating practices at micro, meso, and macro level of analysis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Ocasio et al., 2018). While the Institutional Work lens will help in understanding the micro level of analysis - or the way actors participating in the dating ecosystem affect the “creation, maintenance, and transformation” of the dating markets (T. B. Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1) the Institutional Logics will deepen our understanding of the meso level of analysis, or the way digital dating services strategically influence the behavior of individual actors operating in this ecosystem. The analysis of works and logics allows the observation of the Institutional Arrangements or “the interrelated sets of institutions that together constitute a relatively coherent assemblage that facilitates coordination of activity in value co-creating service ecosystems” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 18).

We choose to focus on digital dating because this market is not new, a series of normative and regulative structures have already been accepted by users and non-users of these services concurring to their legitimization (Humphreys, 2010). Digital dating is a service ecosystem which is interconnected to other combined ecosystems part of the business of romance as for example speed dating (Patterson & Hodgson, 2006). These service ecosystems are quite successful, and gains a different level of legitimization from participating actors, and the society at large. We choose to focus our analysis on the digital dating market as the most successful service ecosystem in the business of romance. From a niche market, this service has become the starting point of dating for young professionals (Patterson & Hodgson, 2006). We examine how the acceleration of the exchanges assured by the digital component together with the multiplication of choices at the basis of the logics of service providers strongly impact the romantic life of our time, for actors participating or not in these transactions (Rosa, H., & Trejo-Mathys, 2013).

The importance of combining the examination of micro, meso, and macro perspectives in the service ecosystem has been frequently highlighted in Institutional studies, as “we need to better understand how macro-level states at one point in time influence individuals” orientations to their actions, preferences, beliefs; how these orientations to actions influence how individuals act; and how the actions of individuals constitute the macro-level outcomes that we seek to explain (Ocasio, *et al.*, 2018, p. 100).

For Institutional theory, consumers can be either passive or active in the creation of consumption meanings (Ben Slimane et al., 2019). Active consumers shape markets and are defined as institutional entrepreneurs (Ocasio, *et al.*, 2018). Sometimes these actors change markets via resistance behavior and they can be defined rebels if the resistance is internal to the

market (as in boycott actions) or entrists for consumers that are out of the market, trying to apply strategies to be part of it (Chaney & Ben Slimane, 2014).

Resistance behaviors are important for the delineation and transformation of markets, just as much as the interaction behaviors of the actors who freely choose to participate in the market exchange navigating its conflicting logics. “The causal mechanisms for institutional change reside not in competition per se, but on a combination of the effects of market selection pressures, power of institutional actors, and changes in the relative prevalence of societal-level institutional logics” (Ocasio, *et al.*, 2018: 118).

In this study we draw upon twenty-one semi-structured interviews with male and female online dating services users, engaging with consumer narratives of their online dating experiences in order to understand how institutions are continuously shaped by interacting actors at micro-, meso-, and macro- level of analysis. In the next sections we will introduce the conceptual foundations of our study before proceeding to research methodology and findings. In the discussion section we will detail our contributions to the existing literature and outline the main theoretical implications of our study.

Social construction in service markets

Service analysis has evolved over the last 50 years as an area of analysis independent from physical goods. Vargo and Lush (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) initiated a shift of perspective giving even more importance to immaterial services in their seminal articles founding the Service-Dominant Logic paradigm. S-D Logic shed light on the dyadic relationship between the customer and the enterprise, without denying the importance of other fundamental stakeholders participating in the exchange (Lusch *et al.*, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The main novelty introduced by Vargo and Lush to service analysis is the shift from value exchanged to a value that is created in use by the customer. Recent contributions in the S-D Logic research highlight the role of the customer who is co-creator of value (previously co-producer), a value that “is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary (as) idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning laden” (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, p. 7; Vargo, Akaka and Vaughan, 2017). Other authors also highlights how markets are a bundle of resources and different actors operating at different levels in the marketplace (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006; Venkatesh & Peñaloza, 2014). Over the last fifteen years the S-D logic paradigm stimulated fruitful discussions in service research, with multiple authors engaging in dialogue about strengths and points of development of this new research perspective (Vargo and Lush 2004, 2008).

Methodology

Our methodological approach has been inspired by the principles of the Extended Case Method (Burawoy, 2009) that has been widely used by consumer researchers in order to connect the micro level data, that is, people’s stories of their consumption, with the macro social, cultural and contextual forces that play a role in shaping their consumption experiences (Burawoy, 1998; Holt, 2002). One of the important applications of the ECM is the extension of existing theory by selecting anomalous cases that cannot be properly understood by existing models.

From November 2018 to June 2019 we have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) with 21 male and female users of online dating apps within the 23-56 age range, different sexual orientations, levels of educations, and usage frequency of digital dating services. Participants were recruited via online calls for participation on Tinder, Bumble, The League and Facebook. The interviews lasted on average 40-60 minutes and were conducted face to face or through Skype, depending on the preference of interview respondents. The

interview guide focused on individuals' personal experiences online dating, on their personal success strategies in online dating context, as well as on their expectations, values and beliefs about relationships in online and offline contexts. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. In several cases, the follow up interviews were conducted after the first interview in order to gain further insights into participants' consumption stories.

We coded and categorized the interview transcripts (Holt, 2002; Figueiredo 2012) and continued through a second round of coding focused on the dialogue between the micro-level of consumers' personal stories of looking for and interacting with potential romantic partners on dating apps, the meso-level of service offerings, surrounding with their logics the online dating scene and the macro-foundations of the broader societal beliefs about love and relationships (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997, 2012) that shaped their online dating experiences. We ended our analysis mapping the main interactions between the micro-, meso-, and macro- levels of analysis on institutions, or institutional work, institutional logics, and institutional arrangements.

Institutions shaping contemporary romanticism, and its business

Data analysis revealed that in their interactions with each other in the online dating marketplace, our informants were navigating the space of different institutions related to love and relationships. Table 2 sum up the strategies singular actors in the service ecosystem are applying to deal with major themes relating to romance that are threaten by the logic of digital dating services providers.

Table 2. Actors to actors' strategies from an institutional work perspective

<i>Feelings</i>	Satisfaction	Frustration
<i>Temporal considerations</i>	Instant satisfaction	Long term
<i>Ethical orientation</i>	Moral self-regulation	Moral ambiguity
<i>Subjective experiences</i>	Vulnerability	Safety

Feelings

Satisfaction	Frustration
<i>I think it's good when you move abroad to use things like Tinder</i>	<i>sometimes I just find it a bit draining and exhausting</i>
<i>I started using Tinder because it was the most pleasant to use</i>	<i>I hope I finish using the dating apps and meet someone right.</i>
<i>This is a huge city (...) it would have been impossible to meet without this digital space</i>	<i>the matches can make you feel depressed in a way</i>

Temporal considerations

Instant satisfaction	Long-term considerations
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Most of the people are on this app for easy relationships

They're looking for sex, and you know, at least they're being honest

At the beginning I was not really searching for anything very serious

In a long-term relationship, I think that being friends with that person is really important

I would like someone who was loyal

I am looking for a long-term relationship

I'm far more will go for quality rather than quantity

Ethical orientation

Moral Self-regulation	Moral Ambiguity
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I want to be asking questions about them.

Ghosting? It has happened to be but I never do it someone else.

I think that if you don't feel the same, then it's always going to hurt. But, you can make it hurt less

It's like the idea of being in jail, being in a relationship, it's hard, people are afraid of that.

You can just unmatched them, you don't even know each other's surnames, so yeah that's easy

You go to the toilet, and you go on Tinder and you start swiping right, even if the girl you are dating is waiting for you in the restaurant

Subjective experiences

Vulnerability	Safety
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You always hear horror stories of people who meet someone from an app and you know, get murdered or whatever

Some people feel really weirded out by giving someone their Facebook before they met them.

The first meeting with that person would firstly be making sure that they're not a weirdo.

Sometimes it's just easier to go on WhatsApp. But then I feel like that is a big step because (..) if you have someone's number, you can find them through Facebook, or Instagram.

I added a girl on Facebook and she was (..) calling me, and I was like "We don't know each other, stop doing this, you are not my girlfriend", so I was like "Okay let's stay on the app"

Micro- and Meso-level of analysis: strategies and logics

In order to navigate their online dating experiences, consumers engaged in a range of practices, or routinised types of behavior (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005) that were refined along the course of their use of online dating apps, with past experiences helping to shape future strategies for maximizing consumption value and for dealing with undesired behaviors by their online dating counterparts that diminished the value for them.

The experience of using the dating apps was described by interviewees as a “steep learning curve”. Throughout the process of online dating, the users developed their own sets of rules and strategies for playing the dating game. Someone chose to have a paid subscription in order to increase his chances for a match.

The users also developed their rules of thumb that allowed them to know whether a potential partner was interested in them or not, like in a case of saying “goodbye” (we’re not to see each other anymore), or “see you tomorrow” (a second meeting is in the air).

The strategies developed by the users came up most prominently in the matters of self-presentation, that is, creating the online dating profile, as well as in defining their criteria for evaluating potential matches. Some interviewees preferred to fill their dating profile with the pictures of themselves surrounded by friends in order to appear as a social person, while other created multiple profiles in order to look for men and women. In their evaluations of potential matches, the informants tended to focus on physical attraction and the potential display of different habits.

The range of maladaptive behaviors displayed or encountered by the users of online dating apps included creating false profiles, verbal aggression, sexual abuse, prostitution, and ghosting, or abruptly cutting communications at any point in the dating process.

Intrusive behaviors crossing the boundaries of what was considered appropriate arose as an issue especially among female users. An interviewee had a bad experience of meeting a man from the app who didn’t look at all like his profile, while another was expressing her frustration over receiving inappropriate photos from male users. The verbal aggression encountered by app users was also represented by invasive questions of a sexual nature.

Dating multiple partners and breaking up with someone were also problematic issues for many of the informants. The issues of uncertainty and transparency in disclosing true intentions was most complicated in the case of multiple dating, while the practice of “ghosting”, or abruptly cutting communications when wanting to end relationship with someone, was encountered by the informants in one or another way throughout their dating experience. On a level of subject to subject relationships, as value was being negotiated by multiple actors in the marketplace (Peñaloza & Mish, 2011; Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006), the simultaneous occurrence of value-increasing and value-diminishing practices in online dating context led to a number of conflicting outcomes for the app users (Minina, et al., 2020).

In their reflections on their service experiences, consumers would vary between moral self-regulation, assuming a personal code of conduct with consistency, at one end of the spectrum, to applying higher standards to others than themselves, at the other. The conflicting nature of consumer meanings in the ethical domain manifested as moral ambiguity and the blurring of ethical boundaries, as the users rationalized their mistreatment of others by treating the digital context where they allowed themselves to behave unethically as an opposite to “real life”, where they would be more likely to stick to a more traditional code of conduct.

Macro-level of analysis: people as partners vs people as products

In their interactions with each other in the online dating marketplace our informants matched the social value systems guiding their strategies we analyzed at Micro-level perspective via the institutional work lens, with the logic of the online dating experience embedded in the Meso-level institutional logic of casual sexual encounters maximized by the online environment.

Social value systems represent the cultural conceptions of desirability translating to individual consumers' conceptions of judgements and choice (Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014), providing consumers a reference point for their own experiences, and shaping their subjective value judgements.

Individual motivations and expectations of consumers from online dating experiences were on one hand reflecting the culturally embedded perceptions of relationship appropriateness, on the other hand they were guided by the perceived use-value of the online dating experience, facilitated by the elements of service design reinforcing the logic of instant satisfaction. When asked about their expectations from an ideal relationship, the informants emphasized trust, care, friendship, loyalty and intellectual compatibility as desired relationship characteristics, however, when discussing relationships in the context of dating apps, a different picture emerged.

While authors from the field of sociology have previously noted the transition of contemporary society to more "liquid" notions of love, characterized by non-attachment and abundance of choice (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012), in the context of online dating the traditional notions of social appropriateness and the desire to maximize individual use value inhibited the linear processes of value creation, as value was simultaneously created and destroyed as participants pursued their online dating journey. As consumers of online dating apps engaged in immaterial labor in order to maximise value for themselves as well as, occasionally, for their counterparts, (Cova & Dalli, 2009), due to the networked nature of the service offering, the risk of treating people as products (Hirschman, 1987; Lusch et al., 2006) ran high, contributing to further transforming the perception of romantic dating in the society at large.

Extending the notion of social structures beyond institutions to incorporate the social value systems we show how the sociocultural discourses related to collective norms and beliefs originating from networks of friends, family and the broader society become a macro environmental influence, profoundly affecting all aspects of user experiences - their motivations, expectations from using the service and their rules and strategies of interacting with potential romantic partners. Despite the positive outcomes achieved by those people who succeed in obtaining what they really want from this service exchange – living an instant pleasure, or finding the partner of their lives – we must state that the emotional outcomes of service experience manifested numerous feelings of frustration, depression, stress and disappointment, as the service experience did not live up to their initial expectations.

Conclusion and Future Research

The findings in this online dating study uncover moral ambiguity and moral reasoning as both a perception and an experience. The case is strong for the moral component of Ethics as value consumption (or indeed value destruction) to be a factor and it has received little attention from researchers (Holbrook, 1994).

Digital dating provides ever more real-time and ever more abundant choices to consumers, raising moral ambiguities and new ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, individuals self-impose codes of conduct, self-regulating behavior and consistency. On the other hand, even the same individuals who impose self-constraint may also apply higher standards to others than themselves. Ethical egoism, the valid moral obligation to promote one's own well-being above

everyone else's (Beauchamp, 1982) takes on a new dimension. These blurred ethical boundaries, whether on self-imposed or projected reasoning appear to have adverse side effects on the users.

Caspi and Gorsky (2006) suggested that online deception generally circumvented the negative emotions typical in face to face communication, citing guilt, shame and fear. While we found evidence that this is true, we also identified a darker side, whereby online deception troubled both the givers and the receivers. Research has focused on why deception occurs in online dating (Ellison et al., 2012; Toma et al., 2008), but not the consequences for givers and receivers of deception. Notably the female tinder users were troubled by the many facets of deception, but men too would complain of exhaustion and depression as they tried to project themselves and others with online identities.

To conclude, from the service provider perspective, we cannot blame the operational efficiency of online dating considered the enormous success this business is having worldwide; but we want to consider their impact on human-centered issues such as social, existential, and the psychological and physical well-being (Anderson et al., 2018).

As most of the attention of researches in service design is given to the goal of improving employees' and consumers' experiences (Anderson et al., 2018) we question what happens when these experiences are very successful for the business provider, but doesn't assure a positive impact on the well-being of their users.

One possible limitation of our study is that our insights about individual users and their service practices are based on the verbal accounts of our informants. We have used long semi-structured interviews in order to collect data from our users related to a sensitive issue of their romantic lives in the online dating context. In some instances, we were able to observe the contents of informants' profiles or their exchanges of messages with potential romantic partners; however, this was not possible in most of the cases. Thus, our results will inevitably reflect what the study participants believe they do, rather than their actions on the dating app. Due to a sensitive issue of the topic that is embedded in cultural rules and norms, there is also a possibility of a social desirability effect in our interviews - that is, the informants adjusting their answers to what they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. We encourage future research using observational methods and prolonged engagement with mobile app users that would allow following their consumption habits in real time.

The second potential limitation of this study is that we have only conducted interviews with the users of dating apps, therefore accounting of the service design elements, such as the applications' interface, promotional communications and functions can be beneficial for the development of this study. Investigating the service providers could also enhance our understanding of what is driving the moral ambiguities users are experiencing and the anguish (ill-being) that it generates.

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