

## America Is Sick of Swiping (abridged)

Lora Kelley, *The Atlantic*, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Modern dating can be severed into two eras: before the swipe, and after. When Tinder and other dating apps took off in the early 2010s, they unleashed a way to more easily access potential love interests than ever before. By 2017, about five years after Tinder introduced the swipe, more than a quarter of different-sex couples were meeting on apps and dating websites, according to a study led by the Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld.

But these days, the mood around dating apps has soured. As the apps seek to woo a new generation of daters, TikTok abounds with complaints about how hard it is to find a date on Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, Grindr, and all the rest. The novelty of swiping has worn off. As they push more paid features, the platforms themselves are facing rocky finances and stalling growth.

In part, what has changed is the world around the apps, Rosenfeld said. The massive disruptions of the pandemic meant that young people missed out on a key period to flirt and date, and “they’re still suffering from that,” he told me. Compared with previous generations, young people today also have “a greater comfort with singleness,” Kathryn Coduto, a professor of media science at Boston University, told me. But if the apps feel different lately, it’s because they *are* different. People got used to swiping their hearts out for free. Now the apps are further turning to subscriptions and other paid features.

On Hinge, for example, you can signal special interest in someone’s profile by sending them a “rose,” which then puts you at the top of their feed. Everyone gets one free rose a week, but you can pay for more.

It’s the same process that has afflicted Amazon, Uber, and so many other platforms in recent years: First, an app achieves scale by providing a service lots of people want to use, and then it does whatever is needed to make money off you. But monetization is especially tricky for dating apps, with which “you’re basically paying for a chance,” Coduto told me. And there has always been a paradox at the core of the apps: They promise to help you meet people, but they make money if you keep swiping.

Over the past few years, the big dating companies have faltered as businesses. Bumble and Match Group have seen their stock prices plummet as investors grow frustrated.

So far, the big apps’ efforts to avoid this doom loop have involved the same basic feature that has been around since the beginning: swiping. “We’re essentially at a tipping point for at least this version of the technology,” Coduto said.

For Gen Z, the future may hold a grab bag of sliding into DMs, reluctant swiping, and generally doing what humans have always done—seek companionship and love through any means they can muster. With all the time spent online now, people are finding love on Strava, Discord, and Snapchat, among many other sites. In a sense, any app can be a dating app.

Traditional dating apps might be most useful not to young people but to those middle-aged and older, with money to spare. In this way, the future of dating apps may look more like their past: a place for older daters to go after exhausting other options. In the 2000s, the heyday of OkCupid, eHarmony, and desktop dating, middle-aged people were the power users, Thomas said. Millennials had their fun on Tinder in the 2010s; many found lasting relationships. But as a top choice for young people looking for love, dating apps may have been a blip.