

PERSONAL EDITORIAL | HUMAN BEHAVIOUR DECODER SERIES

Has Romance Died?

Liquid love, throwaway culture, the swipe economy -- and what we have lost in the space between a screen and a heart.

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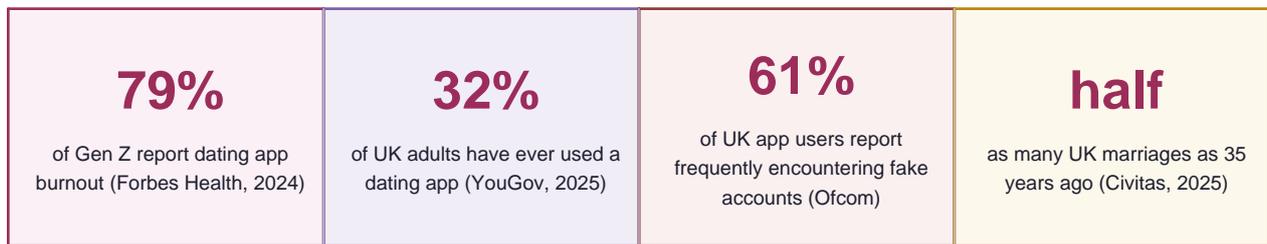
Somewhere between the first swipe and the fourth situationship, something happened to the way we love. This is not a lament. It is an attempt to understand -- from inside the culture, and through the lens of psychology -- what exactly we traded away, what we think we gained, and whether we can find our way back to something real.

I want to begin with a phone screen.

Not because it is poetic -- though there is something in the image -- but because it is honest. The phone screen is where most of modern romantic life now begins, progresses, stalls, and quietly ends. It is where we present ourselves, where we judge others, where we wait to be found worthy, where we absorb the particular silence of being seen and not chosen. It is the primary theatre of contemporary longing.

And it is making us lonely in a way that is genuinely new.

The WHO declared loneliness a global public health crisis in 2023. It did not name the phone. But it could have.



Layer 01	The Philosopher's Warning	THEORY & CONTEXT
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Zygmunt Bauman wrote about liquid love in 2003 -- before the first iPhone, before Tinder, before ghosting had a name. He was already watching. He saw a society in which human connections were becoming increasingly fluid, provisional and disposable -- shaped by a consumer culture that had extended its logic of choice, convenience and replacement into the most intimate corners of human life.

Bauman's insight, drawing on Giddens' earlier work on the transformation of intimacy, was not that people had become less capable of love. It was that the conditions in which love is formed had changed so fundamentally that commitment itself had become psychologically risky in a new way -- not the ancient risk of heartbreak, but the risk of foreclosure. Of choosing one thing and thereby losing access to all the others. In a world of infinite options, choice itself becomes a kind of loss.

Giddens called the modern relationship the 'pure relationship' -- entered into for its own sake, continued only as long as it delivers sufficient satisfaction to both parties, and terminable at will. What sounded like liberation has produced its own particular cage.

The cage is not commitment. It is the inability to commit without the nagging suspicion that something better is one swipe away.

Layer 02	The Swipe Economy	CULTURE & BEHAVIOUR
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Dating apps did not invent the throwaway mentality. They industrialised it.

The architecture of a swiping app is, at its core, a sorting machine. It presents human beings as objects to be rapidly evaluated on the thinnest possible slice of information -- a photograph, a headline, a height. It rewards speed over consideration, instinct over knowledge, and superficial compatibility over the patient accumulation of genuine understanding that actual relationships require.

The gamification of dating -- the variable reward schedules, the dopamine hit of a match, the compulsive checking -- is not accidental. It is designed. Researcher Carolina Bandinelli at the University of Warwick has described this as a libidinal economy: one that monetises desire rather than resolving it. Keeping you searching is more profitable than helping you find.

On Valentine's Day 2024, nearly 1.9 million UK adults opened a dating app. They spent an average of 19 minutes there. Most left alone.

The results are measurable. UK dating app usage fell sharply in late 2024 -- Tinder lost 594,000 users in a single year, Bumble lost 368,000, Hinge 131,000. The apps are not simply failing to deliver love. They are actively generating the exhaustion that follows the pursuit of it. A 2024 Forbes Health survey of 1,000 dating app users found 78% felt emotionally exhausted by online dating at least sometimes -- 79% among Gen Z and Millennials.

The throwaway culture extends beyond the apps themselves into the language and rituals of modern dating. Ghosting -- disappearing without explanation after weeks of communication -- has become so normalised that a generation has grown up for whom it requires no justification. Situationships -- relationships that carry the emotional weight of commitment without any of its definition or protection -- have replaced the conversation about what two people actually want from each other.

What we have lost is not romance exactly. It is the willingness to be specific. To say: I want this person, in this way, with this intention. The apps have made specificity feel dangerous -- because specificity means closing the door on everything else.

A throwaway mentality crept into dating -- daters focus on superficial qualities like height and looks rather than qualities that make a relationship work: communication, kindness, willingness to show up.

Layer
03

The Loneliness Underneath

PSYCHOLOGY

Behind the data on app fatigue and declining marriages is something quieter and more painful: an epidemic of loneliness that the tools designed to solve it are, in some cases, making worse.

Research into dating app use and loneliness consistently finds a troubling paradox. Users who do not find matches spend nearly an hour a day on apps -- and find themselves feeling increasingly lonely. The act of searching for connection in an environment designed to produce rejection the majority of the time is, neurologically, an act of repeated social exclusion. And Eisenberger's foundational research established that social rejection activates the same neural pathways as physical pain.

There is a gender dimension that rarely receives honest attention. Men and women experience the app ecosystem differently -- not because their capacity for love differs, but because the algorithms distribute attention unequally. Women report higher levels of unwanted contact, harassment and objectification. Men -- particularly heterosexual men under 40 -- report a cycle of low match rates, chronic rejection and the particular despair of an 'unlucky-in-love man in 2025' who, as one research institute put it, cannot rely on the chance encounters at a pub or a friend's party that previous generations used to find each other.

Young people are having less sex than any previous generation. They are also, surveys suggest, lonelier. The two facts are connected.

Gen Z presents a particular paradox. Surveys suggest they are more interested in monogamy than millennials -- more likely to fantasise about stability and less likely to pursue ethical non-monogamy. They want the traditional thing. And yet they keep finding themselves in situationships -- not because they chose ambiguity, but because asking for clarity has come to feel like a risk too large to take in a culture where the other person can always, always, choose differently.

Layer 04	What Real Love Actually Requires	THE HUMAN ARGUMENT
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Erich Fromm argued in 1956 -- in a book that has sold twenty million copies and remains urgently relevant -- that love is not a feeling. It is an activity. A practice. Something one does, with intention and discipline, rather than something that happens to you.

The Art of Loving proposed that the cultural obsession with finding the right person, rather than developing the capacity to love, was the fundamental error of modern romantic life. Fromm could not have imagined the swipe. But he diagnosed its psychology seventy years in advance.

Genuine intimacy -- the kind that sustains, that holds, that produces the deep recognition of another person as fully real and irreplaceable -- cannot be built on the architecture of the app. It requires time, vulnerability, and the willingness to remain present when the options feel infinite. It requires the psychological courage to choose someone fully, knowing that in doing so you are also choosing loss.

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby and later extended by Ainsworth, tells us that the human capacity for secure attachment is built in early experience but remains developable throughout adult life. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles -- both of which produce the kind of ambivalence, fear of commitment and emotional unavailability that defines the modern dating landscape -- are not permanent character defects. They are relational patterns learned in conditions of inconsistent care. They can be unlearned. But not through an app.

The craving for real connection has not diminished. It has intensified. What has diminished is our collective tolerance for the discomfort required to build it.

Layer 05	The Signs of Return	HOPE & POSSIBILITY
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It would be dishonest to end here -- in the data about loneliness and app fatigue -- without naming what is also visible in the culture. Because something is shifting.

App usage is falling not because people have given up on love but because they are exhausted by a particular method of pursuing it. Speed dating, singles events, activity-based dating and the simple act of meeting someone through a friend are all seeing renewed interest. Bumble launched in-person events. Hinge committed a million dollars to funding social gatherings for young people in London. The

apps themselves are conceding that their product cannot do what human beings actually need.

Gen Z -- the most digitally native generation in history -- is leading the retreat from the screen. Social media posts from late 2024 and early 2025 show a generation that is tired, funny and earnest all at once about its desire to meet someone in a forest, in a bookshop, at a running club, anywhere that is not a grid of photographs and a chat window that fades after seven messages.

This is not nostalgia. It is something more interesting: a generation that grew up entirely inside the digital world discovering, through its own experience, the limits of what that world can provide. They are not rejecting technology. They are recognising, in the most personal domain of their lives, that some things cannot be mediated.

Perhaps the most hopeful data point in all of this is the simplest: people still want love. Fiercely, stubbornly, persistently. Despite every disappointment the apps have delivered, nearly 1.9 million people in the UK still opened one on Valentine's Day.

So -- has romance died?

No. But it has been badly injured by a culture that commodified it, an industry that monetised the longing for it without ever intending to resolve it, and a collective fear of vulnerability that found its perfect expression in the swipe -- intimate enough to feel like connection, disposable enough to feel safe.

Bauman was right that love in liquid modernity requires something harder than it used to: the ability to build something durable in conditions designed for impermanence. Fromm was right that love is a practice -- one that the culture has stopped teaching and the apps were never designed to facilitate.

But people -- young people especially -- are beginning to name what they actually want. They want to be known. Fully, specifically, over time. They want the slightly terrifying experience of mattering to someone who had other options and chose them anyway.

That is not dead. That is just waiting -- not in the app, but in the room, if we are brave enough to be there.

Romance has not died. But we built an entire industry on the premise that it could be found in thirty seconds -- and are only now reckoning with the cost.

This is a personal editorial. It represents the analytical and personal perspective of the author and draws on published research, psychological theory and documented cultural trends.

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