



# The Algorithm Eats Love

AUGUST 2025

8 min read • 1,717 words

**Themes:** Mental Health Recursive

---

Dating apps have fundamentally broken how humans connect romantically. The same algorithmic systems explored throughout the [Algorithm Eats series](#) have also commodified love itself. We've transformed the most beautiful, messy, inefficient human experience into an optimization problem.

"It's a numbers game." This phrase reveals everything wrong with modern romance. Love isn't a numbers game—it's not about optimizing match rates or A/B testing opening lines

Yes, people actually A/B test their dating app messages now. There are entire forums dedicated to optimizing "opener success rates" as if romance were email marketing.

. But Silicon Valley has successfully transformed courtship into a conversion funnel, complete with engagement metrics and retention optimization.

## Shopping for Humans

Swipe left, swipe right—like browsing Amazon for a human being. These platforms literally assign secret attractiveness scores that determine whose profile appears in whose feed

Tinder uses an ELO rating system borrowed from chess rankings. Your "desirability score" goes up when attractive people swipe right on you, down when they swipe left. It's literally gamifying human worth.

. If your algorithmic rating is too low, you become functionally invisible. If it's too high, you only see other "premium" users.

Consider the implications: algorithms are determining who's worthy of whose romantic attention based on aggregated swipe patterns. You might be perfectly compatible with someone, but you'll never even appear in their queue because the system has categorized you into different "leagues."

The result is systematic loneliness disguised as infinite choice.

## The Choice Overload Paradox

The fundamental contradiction is clear: these apps promise infinite choice but systematically create decision paralysis

Barry Schwartz's "The Paradox of Choice" explains how too many options actually decrease satisfaction and increase anxiety. Dating apps are a perfect case study in this psychological phenomenon.

. When every interaction exists within a context of endless alternatives, commitment becomes psychologically difficult. Why invest in developing a connection with today's match when tomorrow might bring someone marginally better?

People report being on these apps for years. Thousands of matches. Hundreds of conversations. Dozens of dates. Zero relationships. Because there's always one more swipe. Always someone potentially better in the queue.

The apps know this. They want this. Tinder makes almost two billion dollars a year keeping you swiping, not from helping you find love

Match Group, which owns Tinder, Hinge, OkCupid, and others, literally tells investors that decreased "churn rate" (people leaving the platform) is a key metric. They're financially incentivized to keep you single and scrolling.

. A user who finds love and deletes the app is a failed user to them. Their entire business model depends on you not finding what you're looking for.

But it gets worse. The free version deliberately creates frustration to drive premium subscriptions. Limited swipes per day. Hidden likes that require payment to see. Algorithmic suppression of your profile unless you pay for "boosts." They're literally holding your romantic connections hostage

Tinder Gold (\$30/month) lets you see who liked you. Tinder Platinum (\$40/month) adds "priority likes" and message-before-matching. Bumble charges \$25/month for unlimited swipes. Super Likes cost \$5 each. They've turned basic human connection into a subscription service with microtransactions.

.  
The algorithm learns your desperation patterns. Struggling to get matches? Perfect time to show you a "boost" option. Haven't gotten any likes recently? Time for a notification about "people who might have swiped right" if you upgrade. It's psychological manipulation designed to extract money from loneliness.

## The Performance of Intimacy

Social media has fundamentally transformed romantic relationships into performance art. Modern courtship increasingly centers around optimizing for social media documentation

There are literally "Instagram boyfriend" tutorials teaching men how to take the perfect shots of their girlfriends for social media. The relationship becomes secondary to its documentation.

. The authentic experience of connection becomes secondary to its visual representation for algorithmic consumption.

Stories circulate of couples having fights about which anniversary photo to post—the actual celebration becomes secondary to its documentation. Relationships end but the perfect Instagram posts remain, monuments to performed happiness that never existed.

Every moment has to be documented. Every milestone needs public validation. Privacy—that sacred space where intimacy actually grows—is dead. If you don't post about your relationship, did it even happen?

# The Death of Third Spaces

Before dating apps dominated romance, people met organically in what sociologists call "third spaces"—places that aren't home or work where community naturally forms

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined this term in "The Great Good Place." Third spaces are crucial for democracy and community formation—they're where strangers become neighbors and neighbors become friends.

. Bookstores, coffee shops, community centers, religious institutions, hobby clubs, neighborhood bars. Places where repeated exposure allowed attraction to develop gradually, where personality mattered more than profile optimization.

We've systematically destroyed these spaces. Independent bookstores become Amazon warehouses. Coffee shops become WiFi offices where everyone stares at screens. Community centers close for lack of funding. Religious attendance plummets. Social clubs die as people retreat into digital entertainment.

The result is that most people under 30 have never experienced organic relationship formation

This creates a generational divide in relationship formation. People over 35 often met their partners through friends, work, or shared activities. People under 25 increasingly meet only through apps—creating fundamentally different relationship patterns.

. They've never felt the slow burn of attraction that develops through repeated encounters in shared spaces. They don't understand how love can emerge from friendship, proximity, and time—because all their romantic interactions have been algorithmically mediated from the first moment.

# The Elimination of Mystery

Before you even meet someone from an app, you've seen all their photos, read their whole profile, stalked their Instagram, LinkedIn, probably found their mom on Facebook. There's nothing left to discover. No mystery. No gradual revelation. No "holy shit, you like that too?" moments.

We've confused having someone's data with knowing someone. You can know someone's height, job, college, and astrological sign and know absolutely nothing about who they actually are. But we make split-second decisions based on these data points like we're hiring an employee instead of potentially falling in love.

## The Texting Minefield

Digital communication killed courtship. Every text becomes a strategic calculation

There are entire articles about "optimal text response times" and what different response speeds supposedly signal. We've turned natural conversation rhythms into a game of psychological chess.

. Reply too fast? You're desperate. Too slow? You're not interested. Use periods? You're angry. Too many emojis? You're immature. Not enough? You're cold.

People literally google "optimal response time for dating texts" because we've destroyed natural communication rhythms. We've turned human interaction into a game where authenticity is punished and strategy is rewarded.

I've seen relationships die over misinterpreted texts that one phone call could have fixed. But phone calls are "weird" now. Voice notes are "too much." We prefer the safety of crafted messages over the messiness of real-time connection.

## What We Lost

We lost serendipity—bumping into someone at a bookstore and everything changing

Studies show that couples who met through "chance encounters" report higher relationship satisfaction than those who met through dating apps. Serendipity creates a sense of destiny that algorithmic matching can't replicate.

. We lost patience—letting attraction build slowly through repeated exposure. We lost the ability to just be with someone without optimizing or documenting the experience.

Most people under 30 have never experienced falling in love without algorithmic mediation. They've never felt attraction develop organically through proximity and time. They think love is something you optimize for, not something that happens to you when you're not looking.

## My Own Mess

Look, I [dated a narcissist](#) who gaslit me about my mental health and extracted everything she could from me. But you know what? At least we met in person. At least our dysfunction was human dysfunction, not algorithmic manipulation.

There's something deeply troubling about preferring organic narcissistic abuse to algorithmic romance. But at least organic dysfunction is genuinely human—it happens between real people in physical space. Dating apps represent narcissism at unprecedented scale, automated and optimized for maximum psychological exploitation.

## The Real Cost

This isn't just making people sad (though it is). It's breaking society. Birth rates are collapsing not because people don't want families but because algorithms have made stable pair bonding increasingly difficult. We've become so obsessed with optimization that we've lost the ability to do the most basic human thing: finding someone and building something together.

We're creating a generation that knows how to curate a profile but not how to be vulnerable. That can calculate message timing but can't hold eye contact. That has hundreds of matches but zero ability to actually connect.

---

## Alternative Pathways to Connection

The systematic failures of algorithmic romance suggest a need to return to pre-digital relationship formation patterns. Organic connection through shared activities, interests, and repeated exposure allows attraction to develop naturally without optimization pressure.

This approach necessarily involves inefficiency—investing time in connections that may not develop romantically, prioritizing mystery and gradual discovery over immediate information access, choosing presence over metrics.

While this path may be slower and yield fewer initial contacts, research suggests it produces more stable, satisfying long-term relationships. Authentic connection—messy, inefficient, and unoptimized—demonstrates greater resilience than algorithmically mediated encounters.

Love is not a numbers game. As I explored in [my reflections on 1 Corinthians 13](#), love is patient, kind, and endures all things. It doesn't insist on its own way—unlike algorithmic systems designed to maximize engagement at any cost. The fact that we need to be reminded of love's true nature shows how profoundly these systems have distorted our understanding of human connection.

---

This essay explores how algorithmic systems have commodified romantic connection, transforming love into an optimization problem. It's part of the algorithm's broader consumption of [virtue](#)—undermining human character, [language](#)—degrading communication, [democracy](#)—destroying discourse, [reality](#)—fracturing shared understanding, and [time](#)—colonizing temporal experience and destroying organic relationship formation. The recursive patterns conclude in [The Algorithm Eats Itself](#), while [On Love](#) offers reflections on love's true nature and [The Unexpected Negative: a Narcissistic Partner](#) provides personal experience with these manipulative patterns. The complete [Algorithmic Critique](#) series examines all costs of engagement optimization.

For external perspectives, see *Modern Romance* by Aziz Ansari on sociological research into dating's transformation, *The All-or-Nothing Marriage* by Eli Finkel on evolving marriage expectations, *Attached* by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller on attachment theory in relationships, and *Why We Love* by Helen Fisher on the neuroscience of romantic attraction.

---

"Dating apps are shopping for humans with a return policy."

"The opposite of love isn't hate—it's algorithms."