

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, establish social relationships and organise their intimate lives. Over the past two decades, online dating platforms have become important social spaces for initiating romantic relationships, reshaping traditional patterns of partner selection and introducing new forms of interaction, self-presentation and relationship formation. These developments are not merely technological innovations but reflect broader social changes associated with individualisation, the diversification of intimate relationships and the reconfiguration of family life in contemporary societies.

In Romania, the growing use of online dating platforms has taken place within a social context characterised by the coexistence of traditional family values and the increasing digitalisation of everyday life. Although meeting a partner through online platforms has become increasingly common, the origin of the relationship continues to represent an important criterion of social evaluation. Relationships initiated online are frequently subjected to processes of social judgement, labelling and symbolic validation, while users often anticipate the reactions of family members, friends and wider social networks before publicly acknowledging their relationships. Consequently, online dating platforms cannot be understood merely as technological tools facilitating interpersonal contact; they should also be regarded as social environments in which individuals negotiate relational identity, social respectability and the legitimacy of intimate relationships.

Against this background, the present doctoral thesis examines the ways in which users of online dating platforms construct, negotiate and legitimise intimate relationships within contemporary Romanian society. Rather than assuming that digital technologies replace existing social norms, the study argues that online dating creates new contexts of interaction in which traditional cultural expectations continue to shape relationship formation and public recognition. The research therefore focuses on the interaction between technological change and enduring social norms regulating intimacy, family life and couple relationships.

The central research question investigates how users of online dating platforms perceive and negotiate the legitimacy of relationships formed in digital environments in relation to the prevailing social norms of contemporary Romania. This overarching question is complemented by two secondary research directions: the ways in which users manage self-presentation, social embarrassment and reciprocal labelling during the transition from online interaction to offline relationships, and the influence of family expectations and broader cultural norms on the process through which relationships initiated online become publicly acknowledged and socially accepted.

The theoretical framework integrates perspectives drawn from the sociology of intimate relationships, the sociology of emotions, symbolic interactionism and research on digitally mediated social interaction. Particular attention is devoted to the concepts of relational legitimacy, self-presentation, symbolic capital, labelling, stigma and social embarrassment, which provide the analytical framework for understanding how intimate relationships formed online are socially constructed and recognised. The study adopts the premise that couple relationships are not exclusively private experiences but socially embedded processes continuously influenced by the expectations, evaluations and symbolic recognition provided by significant others.

The theoretical discussion traces the historical transformation of intimate relationships from traditional forms of partner selection towards contemporary digitally mediated relationships. It examines the impact of individualisation, urbanisation, social mobility and technological innovation on changing relationship patterns and conceptualises online dating platforms as socio-technical environments that not only facilitate encounters between potential partners but also structure self-presentation, communication practices and criteria of partner selection. From this perspective, technology is understood not as a neutral medium but as an active component of contemporary social interaction, shaping opportunities for intimacy while simultaneously reflecting broader cultural norms and social inequalities.

To investigate these processes, the study employs a qualitative interpretative research design based on in-depth interviews with users of Romanian online dating platforms, complemented by extensive field notes recorded throughout the research process. Combining these sources of empirical evidence allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both participants' narratives and the interactional contexts in which these narratives were produced. This

methodological approach made it possible to explore the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences and to identify the mechanisms through which intimate relationships initiated online are negotiated and socially legitimised.

The empirical findings demonstrate that experiences associated with online dating are strongly influenced by users' continuous orientation towards prevailing social norms. Participants generally describe online dating platforms as valuable opportunities for meeting compatible partners; however, they also report that publicly acknowledging these relationships is frequently accompanied by uncertainty and anticipation of social evaluation. Relationship formation therefore extends well beyond the initial online encounter and evolves into a continuous process of negotiation involving family members, friendship networks and other significant social actors. The findings indicate that relational legitimacy is achieved progressively through social recognition rather than being established solely through the existence of the relationship itself.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that the legitimacy of relationships initiated through online dating platforms is not determined solely by the compatibility of partners or by the stability of the relationship itself. Rather, legitimacy is progressively constructed through continuous interaction with significant social actors, including family members, friends, colleagues and the wider community. Participants consistently describe public acceptance as a crucial stage in the consolidation of their relationships, indicating that recognition by others represents an essential component of relational stability. Consequently, the transition from a digitally initiated relationship to a socially acknowledged partnership involves complex processes of negotiation, adaptation and symbolic validation.

A central finding of the study concerns the role of social embarrassment as one of the most significant social emotions shaping users' experiences. The analysis shows that embarrassment emerges before, during and after the establishment of the relationship, influencing both individual behaviour and the ways participants communicate about their relationships. Rather than representing an exclusively psychological reaction, embarrassment functions as a socially produced emotion resulting from the anticipation of external evaluation. Participants frequently reported concerns regarding the possible reactions of family members, friends and colleagues if the digital origin of their relationship became publicly known. These concerns often influenced

decisions regarding disclosure, public presentation and the timing of introducing partners to significant others.

The findings further demonstrate that users develop a variety of strategies to manage potential social judgement. One of the most common practices involves selectively controlling information about how the relationship began. Some participants deliberately postpone revealing that they met through an online dating platform, while others reconstruct alternative narratives that present the relationship as originating in more socially accepted contexts. These practices should not be interpreted as expressions of dissatisfaction with the relationship itself. Instead, they represent adaptive responses to anticipated social labelling and reflect individuals' efforts to protect both their partners and their shared relational identity from negative symbolic evaluations.

Processes of labelling and stigma emerge as another major analytical dimension. Although online dating has become increasingly widespread in Romania, many participants continue to encounter stereotypes associated with the use of dating platforms. These stereotypes frequently portray users as socially unsuccessful, emotionally desperate, insufficiently serious or primarily interested in casual sexual encounters. The study demonstrates that such representations continue to influence interpersonal interactions even when they are not explicitly expressed. Participants often anticipate negative judgements in advance and regulate their own behaviour accordingly, illustrating how symbolic forms of social control operate through expectations rather than direct sanctions.

The research also reveals substantial differences between the reactions of various social groups. Friends generally perceive online dating as a legitimate and ordinary way of meeting potential partners, particularly among younger generations. Family members, however, often evaluate digitally initiated relationships through more traditional cultural frameworks centred on marriage, family reputation and socially accepted pathways to couple formation. Older generations are more likely to question the seriousness, safety or authenticity of relationships formed online, whereas younger participants tend to normalise digital partner selection as an ordinary aspect of contemporary social life. These findings illustrate that technological change progresses more rapidly than cultural change, producing situations in which innovative relationship practices coexist with long-established normative expectations.

Another important finding concerns the construction of self-presentation within digital environments. User profiles function as considerably more than technical descriptions; they constitute carefully organised representations through which individuals communicate personal values, educational background, occupational status, lifestyle and future expectations. Participants describe investing substantial effort in selecting photographs, writing personal descriptions and determining which aspects of their biographies should be highlighted or omitted. Self-presentation therefore becomes a strategic social practice through which users attempt to maximise compatibility while simultaneously projecting credibility, seriousness and relational commitment. In this respect, digital profiles can be interpreted as contemporary extensions of impression management processes described within symbolic interactionist sociology.

The study further demonstrates that experiences on online dating platforms are structured by gendered expectations and broader social inequalities. Female participants report concerns primarily related to sexualisation, personal safety, unwanted interactions and moral evaluation. Male participants, by contrast, more frequently describe pressures associated with occupational status, financial stability and the fulfilment of culturally defined masculine roles. Beyond gender, educational attainment, socioeconomic position, place of residence and occupational prestige significantly influence opportunities for interaction and partner selection. Rather than eliminating existing inequalities, online dating platforms frequently reproduce social hierarchies through mechanisms of selection, visibility and symbolic evaluation.

The empirical material also highlights the importance of digital temporality in shaping contemporary intimate relationships. Participants describe distinctive rhythms of communication characterised by periods of intense interaction followed by silence, hesitation or abrupt interruption. Practices such as ghosting, prolonged online communication without offline meetings and repeated interruptions of contact have become recognised elements of digitally mediated relationship formation. Within this context, the first face-to-face meeting represents a decisive stage at which expectations developed through online communication are tested against offline interaction. Participants consistently describe this transition as a critical moment in determining whether digital compatibility can develop into a stable intimate relationship.