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TITLE: Liquid love? Social media, sex and the digital transformation of intimacy

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Abstract

Social media and communication technologies are augmenting social relationships, leading Sherry Turkle to conclude that “[t]hese days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and to protect us from them at the same time”. Borrowing from Zygmunt Bauman’s various “liquid” metaphors and extending Anthony Giddens’ work on “plastic sexuality”, this paper considers whether love and sex—as a socially and historically contingent concepts and actions—are susceptible to becoming “liquefied” as emotion and action become intertwined with an ensemble of communicative technologies and digital cultures. Specifically, this project investigates the role that new media apps—for example, “Grindr”, “Tinder”, “Blindr”, and “Happn”—play in people’s romantic and sexual practices. The data is drawn from a mixed-method research investigation consisting of online surveys, indepth interviews and textual analysis. This data shows that the ‘digital transformation of intimacy’ brings new freedoms, opportunities and pleasures, as well as old and new anxieties about risk, self-image and love. As ‘networked individuals’, we continue to reflexively negotiate the life-course much as before, albeit with the new challenges and opportunities that come with living in ‘liquid times’.