

**Liking Your Way to Love, Swiping Your Way to Sex:
Sexual Fields and Capital Exchange on Dating Apps
Dissertation Abstract
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How are dating applications (apps) shaping today's sexual and romantic partnership? As increasing numbers of young people use – and find long-term partners on – dating apps, it is important to study how they are reshaping expectations around sex and dating. To explore this, I conducted fifty in-depth interviews with participants between the ages of 18 and 35, of a variety of genders, race/ethnicities, and sexual orientations. I supplement these interviews with data collected via the app walkthrough method, a form of digital ethnography that takes detailed field notes on the construction of and experience with a particular app. I take a social psychological perspective to these data, using sexual fields theory (Green 2011) and exchange theory (Blau 1964) to analyze the role of apps in modern society. Using sexual fields theory, I lay out how the apps create settings and allow users to create fronts within their platforms, as well as how erotic capital and my expanded definition of romantic capital function on the apps. These two intersecting forms of capital shape the tiers of desirability on the app, and these tiers help shape the exchange processes within the apps. Applications represent a form of generalized exchange, in which multiple participants feed into a common pool of resources, without a clear agreement on what they will receive in return. My participants describe the primary costs in terms of their time and effort in constructing profiles, swiping through other users, and sending messages. The main benefits they receive are in the form of ego boosts and matches, rather than sex, dates, or relationships. Once they begin regular messaging with another user, then they enter into a modified form of reciprocal exchange, where they expect a response to every message, and eventually an interaction which could be sex or a date, which may in turn become a longer term sexual or romantic relationship. My study also provides insight into the evolution of gendered expectations within sex and dating, particularly to what extent gender norms are still in play for heterosexual couples, how those norms are being challenged, and how LGBTQ+ individuals are navigating digital spaces created with cisgender/heterosexual users in mind. These changes in how young adults approach partner-seeking and the expectations which accompany this process have implications for social structures which rely on “traditional” family structures and mating processes.