

Sex, Romance, and Technology: Efficiency, Predictability, and Standardization in College Dating Cultures

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.1.01>

Keywords:

Sexual Behavior;
Relationships; Social
Media; Technology

Abstract: This article considers the extent that new forms of communication technologies developed in the last half century have contributed to new forms of sexual and romantic relationships flourishing among early adults in the United States. This project pays particular attention to the implications of that during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns and the increased dependency on technology that followed. This empirical work uses the theoretical framework provided by the scholarship of George Ritzer (2004), which focuses on the social narratives that drive labor into increasingly rational and functionalist operations, which he terms McDonaldization. This project uses interview data collected from college students to explore attitudes and social forms related to casual sex and the development of serious romantic relationships among participants. In an analysis of the data, three key trends have emerged that can be understood within Ritzer's theoretical frame. Research participants utilize and value technologies within their intimate relationships as information filters that provide efficiency in creating relationships. They also demonstrate the use of technological, organizational, and connective tools as means to control relationships. Finally, technological tools and symbols signal a kind of semi-standardized symbol of commitment to the relationship, though the meaning of these signs is still contested.

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In 2020, the global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns instituted to control the spread of the virus forcefully reshaped the fundamental nature of human interaction in ways that were unimaginable for many people. Human interaction, communication, and connection became restricted and life-threatening. In this moment of collective social trauma, the need for intimacy, connection, and relationship support was perhaps as profound as it had ever been, and yet, it was profoundly dangerous as well. Into this gap stepped communication technologies and a new way of thinking about relationships, from co-workers to families and romantic partners.

The impact of lockdowns on intimate relationships will no doubt be an area of emerging research in the coming months and years. However, before the emergence of Covid 19, there already existed an emerging social framework rooted in the integration of communication technologies into daily life, and especially into intimate relationships. The role of social media, in particular in hookup culture, dating, and romance among college-aged adults is an area of rapid and, at times, erratic social change. The end of the 20th century and the start of the new millennium saw a coming together of two paradigmatic social trends that have profoundly impacted social and cultural development. Specifically, the development and emergence of individually accessible information and communication technologies and a growing set of cultural norms that focus on a form of rationalism that sets an extremely high value on efficiency, control, and predictability/standardization (Ritzer 2004).

The norms and expectations that exist within college culture are increasingly influenced by the

power of such technologies and other emerging cultural norms. Both the short- and long-term implications of this transformation are still emerging and not fully understood by young adults themselves, let alone by researchers. Still, relationship norms and frameworks formed in early adulthood have the potential for long-term and widespread social impacts in the future. While Covid has perhaps accelerated the spread of new norms, our need to understand such changes goes beyond the current moment. Ritzer's work provides one framework for this understanding, allowing us to consider rapid social change, the role of technology, and the broader implications of both on human relationships.

To contribute to this research, the article considers the extent that new forms of communication technologies have contributed to new forms of interpersonal, sexual, and romantic relationships development among early adults in the United States. This project uses qualitative research and in-depth interviews with college students in the United States. This work considers specifically how young adults use Internet technologies to maintain intimate and casual sexual relationships and examines the symbolic meanings that they attach to the use of such technologies.

Through an analysis of the data, three key trends have emerged. Research participants utilize and value technologies within their intimate relationships as a) information filters that are understood to enhance efficiency, which is seen as desirable in relationship management, and b) the widespread use of connective tools that enhance the control that participants have over their relationships, c) finally, the much more contested use of technology as a standardized signal of commitment to relation-

ship partners. I analyze these findings through the lens of McDonaldization theory (Ritzer 2004), which allows me to better understand the emergence and implications of these patterns. This work is framed within the theoretical scholarship of sociologist George Ritzer, who argues that one of the key cultural transformations of the 20th century is the rise of what he terms McDonaldization. This term refers to social practices, attitudes, and behaviors that initially emerged in the workplace. These practices are rooted in the valuation of practices that focus on minimalization of time spent on a task, a focus on quantifiability over subjective quality, predictability, and controllable and uniform production (Ritzer 2004).

Review of the Literature

Relationships in Early Adulthood

One recent transformation in social behavior and interpersonal relationships of interest to researchers occurs in the realm of sexual and dating behavior. Young people, aged 18-29, generally have active sex lives, often with multiple partners. Taken together with research that identifies sexual relationships as central to college culture (Bogle 2008), this information suggests that sex, romance, and sexuality are important parts of understanding college student culture. Understanding the variations in meanings attached to sexuality, both by individuals and by couples (Christopher and Sprecher 2000), demonstrates the limitations of attempting to universalize cultural perceptions of love, sex, and relational intimacy. The complexity and diversity of meaning attached to this interdependent set of concepts help us to better understand the role of relationships, both sexual and otherwise, in contemporary culture.

The hookup, booty calls, casual sex, one-night stands, whatever you call it, college students are doing it, and researchers are interested in it. Casual sex and sexual exploration on college campuses is not a new phenomenon; but the explicit and public nature of the conversation around this topic is perhaps a bit more recent and deeply controversial, even among researchers. Research indicates that casual sex in a variety of forms is common to college culture and may even be replacing more traditional 'dating' arrangements as the primary means for the establishment of romantic relationships among college students in the United States. This is the case for both opposite-sex (Bogle 2008) and same-sex partners, though LGBTQIA+ students articulate significant critiques of hookup as a heteronormative practice (Lamont, Roach, and Kahn 2018). While heavily researched, hookup culture is not the only way in which relationships progress among US college students, simply one of the most common. Among certain subgroups, other practices may occur, one of which is the "friends with benefits" model, often organized by texting and related tools (Hoffman 2018). About half of all college students report "hooking up," though this was less common with students of color (Owen et al. 2010; Helm, Gondra, and McBride 2015). For some college students, hookups are a pathway to deeper relationships (Kettrey and Johnson 2021). While for others, especially heterosexuals, it reinforces gendered notions of male sexual dominance in relationships (Wade 2018). While some recent scholars, instead, focus on the strategies and management of such relationships, which are often deeply techno-mediated (Lundquist and Curington 2019). The nature of hookups and dating in general among college students varies based on identity, most notably sexuality (Kettrey and Johnson 2021) and race (Allison and Risman 2014).

Understanding Technology

The impact of technologically enabled communication on human social interaction during the pandemic was profound, but it did not emerge from that historical moment. Rather, the rise of information technology and specifically, interpersonal communication technologies in recent years, especially among young adults, allowed for the rapid dissemination of social norms into a broader social context. There is ample research available on the impact of interpersonal communication technologies, specifically social media, on individuals across the life course (Nathanson 2018; Wang et al. 2018; Hutmanová and Dorčák 2021; Procentese, Gatti, and Di Napoli 2019). However, it is teens and young adults, and specifically, college-age adults, where some of the most dramatic social transformations have emerged (David and Cambre 2016; Rosewarne 2016; Schwartz and Velotta 2018; Cassar 2019). To understand contemporary society, it is increasingly important to understand the role of social media and other forms of interpersonal communication among college-age adults in the US.

In recent years, research conducted with college students regarding dating and sex has become focused on a few important areas. First, the rise and spread of hookup culture among college students have been of interest to many scholars (Bogle 2008; Owen et al. 2010; Helm et al. 2015). Second, scholars have also focused on safety and sexual assault prevention, especially as these issues are related to drug and alcohol consumption as a central issue related to college social life (Sutton and Simons 2014; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016; Hirsch 2020). Finally, as social norms around the role of technology have been transformed, a growing number of scholars have focused on the role of technology in the

college sex and dating world. Some of these works have focused on the implications of hookup culture or dating and sexual violence, but utilized a technology-based lens (Reed et al. 2016; Hoffman 2018). Other scholars have identified the technology itself as the focus of research, considering the implications of technological intervention in the formation and persistence of romantic, sexual, and dating relationships among college students (Hoffman 2018; Cassar 2019). Increasingly these scholars have identified both the practices that have emerged, as well as the growing social logic that underpins the use and normalization of techno-mediated intimacy, specifically within the realm of hookup culture and dating within college culture.

Less research has been conducted on long-term serious romantic relationships among this age group; however, there, too, innovative and technologically mediated social practices have occurred. Still, a growing body of work has begun to explore the shifts in other types of interpersonal relationships linked to the use of social media and related technologies (Hjorth and Lim 2012). Such shifts include the emergence of new behavioral norms and dating expectations, especially those connected to the use of smartphones and hyper-connection in intimate relationships (Hoffman 2018). Some contemporary research suggests that the processes of establishing, maintaining, and often ending romantic and sexual relationships among young adults are deeply techno-mediated (Kwok and Wescott 2020).

The use of cell phones, texting, and Facebook profiles as tools to organize and connect individuals for sex, and to a lesser degree, dating relationships, is mentioned repeatedly in the research of sexual behavior scholars, but has not been fully theorized. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of contempo-

rary sexual and romantic behavior is its dependence on communication technologies to function. The use of cell phones, particularly texting, to arrange sexual encounters, as well as engage in friendship work, demonstrates the integration of technology into interpersonal relationships. Further, discussions surrounding casual sex and the symbolic legitimation of serious romantic relationships are common on social media. The specific body of literature that explores the idea of communication technologies as both aids and challenges to the work of long-term serious intimate and casual sexual relationships will be the focus of my contributions.

McDonaldization Theory

Over 20 years ago, sociologist George Ritzer (1998; 2004) identified an emerging trend in US culture, which he termed “McDonaldization.” Based primarily on his observation of US workplaces in the late 1990s, Ritzer argued for the growth of a cultural norm that focused on four key ideas in both the US labor industry, as well as among consumers. Ritzer argued that the four concepts (efficiency, calculability, predictability/standardization, and control) were evidence of a form of rationality that was rooted in the work of an earlier theorist—Karl Mannheim. This form of rationality was defined by Mannheim (1936:101) as “consisting of settled and routinized procedures in dealing with situations that recur in an orderly fashion.” Arguments about the cause of this growth in rationality are complex and long-standing. The work of early sociological theorist, Weber, articulates a historical example of how labor and ideology reinforce one another (Weber, Baehr, and Wells 2002) to create an increased focus on the value of work. In contrast, scholar, Anthony Giddens (1991), examines the impact of “modernity,” which he defines as an era somewhat

disconnected from the traditionalist past that requires more complex thought in decision-making on contemporary social life. Ritzers’ work provides a theoretical middle ground to this argument, laying out how the forces of economic history may be impacting contemporary life today and creating an environment that constrains and limits the risk of individual decision-making, perhaps as a social response to the reflexive and relative freedom that Giddens identifies. In his more recent book, Ritzer takes the McDonaldization thesis and its specific goals of efficiency, calculability, predictability/standardization, and control and extends it beyond the working world. He addresses how such ideas have infiltrated daily life, appearing in education, leisure, consumer behavior, and even sociological thought (Ritzer 1998). In response to his theorizing, some scholars have focused on resisting the spread of this hyper-focus on rationality, having identified it as a component of interpersonal communication, citizenship, sport, and art (Smart 1999). This paper contributes to the ongoing empirical and theoretical discussion around the impact of contemporary technology and the growing normalization of rational McDonaldization within the social world. I argue that this value framework now also extends to interpersonal relationships.

Method and Sample

This project includes data from two primary field sites, a private university in the northeast and a public college in the southeast of the U.S. I have conducted 68 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate college students. Data for this paper were largely collected before 2020, but data collection is ongoing. This project primarily focuses on the collection of behavioral and attitudinal data about online practices, but also includes a discus-

sion of attitudes and beliefs about media consumption more broadly. To some degree, the interviews focus on the integration of Internet communication technologies into social life, as well as discussions about privacy, information consumption, and identity formation.

Participants are recruited through announcements made in classes and via campus listservs at the two institutions. Once participants volunteer, interview times and dates are finalized. Interviewees were asked for recommendations of persons who might participate, at the end of the interviews, to create a “snowball” of potential interviewees. The current sample includes 59% women, 37% men, and 4% nonbinary persons. The participants identified as 72% white and 28% non-white. All participants were between the ages of 18-22. While formal data about sexuality were not collected, some participants identified with a wide variety of sexualities, including but not limited to: gay, queer, pansexual, demisexual, straight, heteroflexible, and questioning. Most students did not elect to self-identify.

Traditional face-to-face interviews are the primary data source for this project and are generally between 45 and 90 minutes and one hour on average. Interview questions are open-ended and encourage participants to tell their stories and express their meanings. Examples of topics include daily Internet use, the value of online technologies, and the importance of technologies and common practices among peers. To maintain privacy, all names used in this work are pseudonyms. This project follows ethical guidelines for human subjects’ research and qualitative interviews, including obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, the opportunity for withdrawal, and the ability to request emotional support post-interview.

The final interviews are transcribed and coded, allowing trends and themes to emerge from the transcribed documents. The analysis is largely inductive, with findings and theories being developed after a comprehensive coding for emergent themes. It is worth noting that while the author was able to collect rich, in-depth data, it is not randomized, nor is it generalizable. The student experiences highlighted reflected overall trends within the data, but as with any non-randomized qualitative data, this work reflects only the contextual and located experiences of individuals.

Findings and Discussion

The degree to which techno-social communication is implicated in recent transformations in the social and romantic practices of young adults is complex and emerging. However, the process of establishing, maintaining, and even ending romantic and sexual relationships is deeply techno-mediated, like much of contemporary life (Kwok and Wescott 2020). This project seeks to identify how participants understand this techno-mediation and what value they ascribe to it. My findings suggest that participants see technology increasing the efficiency of connection with relationships, predicting the likely success of relationships, and giving participants a sense of control and shared meaning within the romantic world. Participants specifically state that for them, efficiency, control, and standardized meanings are desirable within relationships.

Relationships are embedded in the organizational and connective practices of participants in this study. This techno-mediation allows for an increased level of knowledge about intimate life that can further reinforce the sense of connection and intimacy experienced by participants in romantic relationships. Technologies are also used strategically as tools to

manage interpersonal, sexual, and intimate relationships in ways that maximize speed and efficiency in relationship formation and maintenance. Finally, the symbolic meanings attached to social media connections can act to indicate commitment among participants. The long-term implications of such patterns are still being studied by researchers, but current scholarship indicates that such significant transformations in interpersonal relationship norms may have profound consequences, not only on individuals but on society as a whole (Vrangalova 2015; Casar 2019; Kwok and Wescott 2020).

To understand these phenomena, this project employs the work of Ritzer and his theory of McDonaldization. This theory suggests that increasingly culture, organizations, and institutions have normalized and valorized the core concepts that are often found in fast food chains, specifically efficiency, calculability, predictability and standardization, and control (Ritzer 1998; 2004). More recent applications of this theory suggest that in part due to the rise of digital communication technologies, these core concepts have not only become normalized within institutions such as economics, science, education, and consumer markets (Ritzer and Miles 2019) but also into more intimate parts of human life (Bakardjieva 2014). These findings suggest that dating, romantic and sexual relationships have come to be characterized by such values as efficiency, predictability, and control. Further, predictability, control, and efficiency in most areas of social life are seen as positive in many segments of US culture (Ritzer 2004), and certainly among participants in this study.

The Efficiency of Information Filters

One way in which communication technology and social networking play a role in the establishment

of serious and casual romantic relationships is by acting as information filters to enhance the speed and efficiency of relationship building. Participants largely consider enhancing the efficiency of relationships as desirable in this study, though some participants did indicate hesitation about the value of such efficiency in interpersonal relationships. Several elements of social interaction described by participants demonstrate a focus on, and desirability for, romantic relationships that are efficient and speedy. Participants in this study often note that relationships could be sped up by using social media profiles to both sort prospective romantic partners into categories of desirability and by moving through the “getting to know you” phase of the relationship quickly and efficiently.

Ritzer identifies efficiency in the workplace as increasingly seen as a kind of moral good. Effectively, working efficiently is viewed as, in and of itself, a positive, rather than indicative of high skill or quality (Ritzer 2004). The participants in this study also, with a few exceptions, consider efficiency in romantic and/or sexual relationships to be good in and of itself. Below the participants explain how technological shortcuts in romantic relationships provide an efficient dating life. Interestingly, only one participant in this study even questioned the idea that efficiency was a desirable aspect of dating and hookups. The data collected in this project suggest that this narrative of ease and efficiency has moved beyond hookup culture and is now a central component of narratives around more serious and/or long-term romantic relationship development.

Utilizing both social media and texting to “get to know” a prospective romantic partner quickly is seen as very desirable. For example, the use of techno-mediated communication is central to the pro-

cess of creating information profiles on prospective partners, often referred to as “background checks” (Standlee 2019), allowing for just such an experience, if it is desired. As Oscar, aged 22, states, “dating or sex, whatever, it’s all about getting things moving, I’m a busy guy, and I don’t have time to mess around. Life moves fast, you gotta keep up.” The cultural normalization of speed and efficiency in broader US culture is evident here and is increasingly a component of relationship building among this population (Bakardjieva 2014).

Other participants discuss how once a potential romantic partner has been identified, the “getting to know you” stage takes on new dimensions. One participant, 19-year-old Misty, walks us through the process, explaining step-by-step how you go from meeting someone to establishing a serious relationship.

Well, it first starts when you first meet someone; a big thing is to follow them on Instagram or whatever. And they don’t always have to accept... you to follow you back. So, it makes you think, “OK, well, they don’t want to connect with me,” or whatever, and people can reject you. Or they start liking things; they do things to get your attention. So, then, you’ll do that back to them. Then you’ll hang out or whatever, and then, I would say, typically, from what I’ve seen, it’s serious after about three weeks.

Misty’s description of the process by which she and her peers move into romantic relationships is quick and efficient. The speed at which the process moves from introduction to a serious relationship is intense. These forms of social efficiencies within romantic relationships are closely tied to the perceived intensity of relationships. Erin, aged 20, agrees with Misty regarding speed as she shares her experiences and analysis of the situation.

Relationships are sped up a lot because you’re constantly in contact with people. You’re always texting, and you’re always talking to somebody, so you get to know them a lot quicker; and so, things you would have learned over time, with people, you know so much sooner, I think I learned that a lot by [my] own experiences. I had a relationship with a guy that was long distance for a while, so we relied on chat and text, video chatting to keep in touch and get to know each other, and we got to know each other pretty quickly that way.

The phenomena of background checks and the frequency of texting allow relatively recent acquaintances to know a great deal about one another. As Kass, aged 18, notes, “I guess that kind of helped me see, okay, who I’m looking at. Like, I guess, it’s kind of stalkerish, but I just kinda wanted to see, like, what people are posting. I can figure out people and move on, you know, if they aren’t right.” Getting to know people online via social media, and especially Instagram and TikTok, are essential starting places for many new relationships, and both sexual and dating relationships are implicated in this pattern of behavior. Many students note that while such knowledge is shallow and limited, it still provided an effective way to sort prospective romantic partners, thus making the entire process of dating and even serious relationship building less time-consuming and more efficient. Participants rely on these data to predict the outcome of potential relationships before they even begin, and in doing so, increase the efficiency of moving through the relationship process. Efficiency and predictability within a relationship are highly desirable outcomes for most of my participants.

Connection and Control

The organizational and connective role of technology is demonstrated in both casual and serious rela-

tionships. This pattern of behavior allows for a degree of control over a complex and often difficult element of human interaction, sexual and romantic relationships. Effectively, the use of social media that creates the efficiencies noted above, combined with the practice of social media and text-based flirting and relationship building, allows for the introduction of non-human technologies as a means of control. Ritzer (2004) identifies the growing incidences of individual experiences of labor being controlled by non-human technologies as part of the normalization of valuing control over creativity. My research suggests that the desire for control, and the use of technology to get it, has become normalized within college hookup culture and, to some degree, within dating culture as well.

Chloe, aged 22, explains that, for her, texting is about the pursuit of casual sex. She considers herself an independent queer woman for whom the traditional dating and romance aspects of college culture are uninteresting. Rejecting traditional gendered expectations of sexual behavior, Chloe believes that technology allows her to be more open and strategic about her pursuit of casual sex. As part of the growing number of women who consider casual sex during and after college as desirable (Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; Bogle 2008; Wilhite and Fromme 2019), Chloe is a proponent and participant in hookup culture, and her phone is her most effective tool in the pursuit of casual sex.

I like to think that I've perfected the art of the coy text message. It just makes everything so easy. Not to say that I still don't value talking on the phone to the people I'm getting with...Actually though, one of my go-to moves was that when I was at a party, or wherever I was with someone, I would text the person from across the room and tell them that

I wanted to make out with them [laughing]. It always worked!

Chloe goes on to explain that without her phone, she would "never get laid." The use of technologies in the pursuit of casual sex among my participants is substantial, particularly text messaging. Several male participants also discussed using texting as a means to hookup; however, neither they nor Chloe suggested that hooking up using texting or apps such as Tinder (David and Cambre 2016) was more common among men than women, and they agreed that for college hookup culture, the text message was the primary tool for controlling one's sex life. Participants of all genders identified technology as means to make casual sex easier and more easily managed. For the contemporary college student in this study, phones, apps, and social media are central management tools in arranging the hookup. As one participant, Rich, aged 20, explains that, for him, texting is about planning and control,

...it's important to look at the way people use it, to kind of interact with other people, obviously, how they get what they want out of it. It takes on many different uses. Like... for me... I am using my phone to communicate with a female to try to get that shit going...

Rich and Chloe both use cell phones to plan for hooking up, which may or may not include casual sex. However, for some of their peers, techno-mediation in intimate relationships is less about fun and/or sex and more about romance.

Serious romantic couples also text one another to decide whether to meet up or just to keep in touch. As Ruth, aged 18, explains, the need for regular contact via text is also an important component in the relationship process.

...if you are dating someone, you normally keep in contact over the phone. Like, oh, what time... are you out of class, now? OK, cool. I'm gonna go eat. You want to come and eat? You know, small things like that... and texting is literally, like, talking with someone, so they'll text throughout the day. It makes it easier to manage the relationship, right?

The expectation of this frequent contact is deeply familiar to participants. Like other relationships, the need to be present and the perception of being always available for interaction play an important role in the techno-social world. Keeping connected and keeping in regular contact with a romantic partner or friend is made possible by the structural aspects of technology that allow participants to control and manage their lived experiences, through the use of these technologies. Intimacy is increasingly occurring in multiple communication mediums; connection only online or only offline may not be enough to sustain a relationship. One participant, Lin, who identifies as a lesbian in a serious relationship, aged 20, explains that she texts her girlfriend "about just... random stuff and nothing in particular. But then, it's just, keeping in touch all day... then I feel like I'm always in contact with her." These experiences of "just being in touch all day" form a new kind of intimacy, technologically driven, but still a necessary part of the relationship.

Still, the potential for tensions or difficulties due to technological issues is substantial. The phone is, in some ways, the third party in many romantic relationships. As such, it should come as no surprise that problems and tensions can arise based on technological issues. William, who identifies as straight, aged 22, outlines one example for us.

...back in the day. A guy would call a girl, or a girl call... it's like, "Should I call? Should I call her?" I don't know if [I should] call them... you know what I mean? It's changed now. I dropped her a text. You know, she didn't respond. She didn't read it, or I see that she read it—she didn't respond. What did I say? Do I send her a text now? Or is that going to send the wrong message? You know what I mean? It's completely different...

While not fundamentally new to interpersonal relationships, anxiety over social expectations for romance takes on new dimensions with the integration of technology into relationships. Part of that issue is about the visibility of such tensions. William explains how his smartphone allows him to see if his recipient has read the text he sent her or not. He is also fully aware that if she has seen it and has not responded it may be because she has consulted her friends by showing them exactly what he said and getting advice on how to respond. This allows a level of control and management of interaction that can be both empowering and intimidating. Further, for some, it may decrease the spontaneity and creativity of communication. Imparting more control of the interaction, but creating a whole new set of social challenges. As William goes on to explain,

You send it early in the day to try to see if they're going out, I don't know, maybe it seems like you care too much... and you don't want to seem like you care too much, 'cause then you're losing control.

Despite the changes in how romance is conducted, the fears and tensions associated with the experience are just as relevant as ever, in part because texting and social media make messages more widely visible and more permanent than oral communication.

Contested Commitment

One of the most difficult issues that my participants identified is related to standardization. According to Ritzer and other scholars, the desire for standardization is a key component of modern life (Ritzer 1998). We see evidence of standardization in the workforce, education, science, and research (Kenney, Hermens, and Clarke 2004; Gregg 2018), yet standardization among these participants exists at a cultural crossroads that is not so easily accepted as efficiency and predictability. The individualist desire for difference, for a uniqueness that is central to Western culture, plays an important role in resistance to standardization. Among participants in this study, the creation of a standardized interpretation of emerging social trends comes out as an area of significant contestation. A rejection of standardization, perhaps combined with the contestation of emerging shared meaning, demonstrates how some young adults are resisting the McDonaldization of their intimate lives.

We see this resistance most significantly around meanings attached to techno-facilitated communication and as a signal for commitment within this data set. For some participants, the use of Internet technologies has become a necessary and important symbolic indicator of commitment to the intimate relationship. For these participants, the act of acknowledging one's status as a couple on social media and trading frequent texts are viewed as expressions of intimacy and commitment. As Mark, aged 21, explains, "It's all about being public, being serious. We are too young to get married or engaged, that would be crazy, but if you want to be serious, everybody has to know." The process of public acknowledgment has deep symbolic meaning, and posting couple photos on Instagram, for example,

has serious implications for many participants because, as one student in this study, Andy, aged 19, notes, "Instagram is basically the number one dating app for college students."

Visible indicators, like couple selfies, and romantic hashtags such as #love, #relationship, and #romance are a deliberate and strategic investment in the romantic relationship that signals a desire for permanence. For many participants, public acknowledgment also serves to gauge the value the relationship holds to those involved. Visibility is not the only factor here however, the speed and frequency of contact, especially via texting, in the relationship is normalized to the point that rejection of such practices sends a clear message that denotes a lack of commitment. As Molly points out,

Look, if he won't sneak a text in class or text during the day, takes forever to get back to you, or stops liking you [on Instagram], it's time to end it. He doesn't care, and you do not need that.

For many participants, failing to integrate these technologies into their relationships is often experienced as an overt rejection of the commitment to said relationship. Even infrequent technological inaccessibility, such as not responding to a text during class, sends a powerful message of rejection of the intimate relationship, regardless of intention, according to these participants. As Jolene, who is queer-identified, aged 18, notes, her previous serious relationship was damaged by her partner's inability to engage in what Jolene perceives as intimacy-building activities, like texting.

My last relationship, we didn't text at all. Like, I never... it was always phone calls. Which I hated 'cause I hated talking on the phone and I wanted... I was,

like, “Can we please text?” And she was, like, “No, we’re not. That’s... absolutely not, like, I don’t text.” Which in that one was really frustrating for me, because I love texting and I hate talking on the phone. So... it didn’t work out.

The ability to stay in contact, to know what is going on without seeing someone is one of the ways in which technological communication provides participants with a means of establishing intimacy and has come to symbolize commitment for many participants, as Jolene notes above. Jolene and other participants discuss the degree to which this form of behavior is normalized within their social world. Karina says, “regular texting, couples tags on Instagram, that’s how it’s done, if they won’t, then probably they just aren’t into you or just want to hook up, everybody knows it.” Still, for most participants, techno-social mediums are just one part of the set of social practices that result in establishing and maintaining a sense of emotional intimacy. For these participants, intimacy is developed through multiple forms of interpersonal communication, both techno-mediated and face-to-face. For some participants, the meaning of techno-facilitated symbols of commitment is clear, standardized, and can be perceived as universal.

Still, despite Karina’s claim that “everybody knows it,” not everyone is convinced that the use of online tools in romantic relationships means the same thing, indicating a failure of standardization. One participant in this study, Kacy, aged 21, explains she is not a very “techy person” and prefers more traditional and intimate communication, which made recent lockdowns a struggle for her.

I like to hear your voice. It’s just that I’d rather do it in person... their bodies [are] in my world during the

daytime, so when I have the opportunity to actually interact with someone, in person, physically, in front of me, or talk to them, verbally, it’s an opportunity for me to get to know them.

Kacy claims that she is unique among her friends in that regard. Rather than frequent but shallow contact to build intimacy and social media to symbolize connection, Kacy prefers rare but intense communication. She goes on to acknowledge that, for her, this is because she dislikes casual communication in general, noting, “I really am not the type of person to ask, ‘How was your week?’ or ‘What’s new in your life?’ Or just to tell them some random anecdote about me.” For her peers, Kacy explains, texting and social media are ways to easily maintain intimacy with acquaintances. This is something that she is personally uninterested in because it is “too shallow, too casual.” While Kacy considers herself unique, in her rejection of the standardized notion of technology as a meaningful means and symbol of intimacy and commitment, she is not entirely alone.

As Robin, who identifies as pansexual, aged 21, explains, something is missing in such relationships.

There’s never been a way to make relationships easy, but it’s like the EasyMac of relationship building. And that’s creepy because if you’ve ever had EasyMac, it’s not the same as the box. It’s not as yummy! It is the EasyMac of relationship building, and there’s a lot left to be desired there.

Robin reminds us that relationships are, indeed, difficult and require trust, effort, and time to become meaningful. From this perspective, the ease of relationship building using technology robs relationships of some of their meaning, rejecting the standardized notion among peers that technology

is necessary and meaningful. Modern technological integration into friendships and romances is, indeed, different from the past. The perception of “realness” in relationships based significantly on technology may leave some participants wanting more. Or perhaps, as Robin suggests, the loss is about effort and ease. For Robin and Kacy, the experience is less satisfying, and “there’s a lot left to be desired there.” While not all participants agree with Robin’s assessment, many do find themselves struggling to engage with the fast-moving and ever-changing techno-social practices of their world. Indeed, as one participant, Scott, aged 20, says,

Honestly, I don’t really know what it all means, what I am supposed to do, it’s just too much sometimes. I am so tired of living on screens and trying to figure out what it all means, but what else is there?

Scott and others struggle to make sense of changing social expectations within relationships, as with other parts of life. The rapid change of technology, built on a narrative of increased efficiency and productivity, functions in modern society as a paradigmatic shift in culture. Within this context, control and, to some degree, standardization may be experienced as a counter to the disorientation that comes with rapid change. Still, while the pace of change may be rapid, it is not instantaneous and leaves some individuals in a liminal space of social change, struggling to make sense of the symbolic meanings attached to technology. Thus, it is no surprise that as social expectations shift, meanings become contested, and not yet standardized for everyone.

Conclusions

This work suggests that Internet technologies have become deeply integrated within the most intimate

elements of young adults’ social relationships. Due to these radical social shifts in the norms and expectations surrounding relationships, we understand very little about how this techno-mediated intimacy is contributing to changing sociality among young adults, let alone long-term implications. Exploring such transformations allows us to better understand the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of the interdependence between intimate relationships and technology. Further, this work argues that while the development of information and communication technologies has, indeed, changed the romantic and sexual landscape of social interactions among my participants, the emergence of the technology alone is not enough to explain the changes. Rather, technological development is deeply entwined with cultural transformations surrounding the increasing desirability of efficiency, control, and standardization within US culture in recent decades. Ritzer first observed these practices in the realm of labor and work, but such cultural attitudes have moved beyond the working world, into education, entertainment, and even into our romantic and sexual lives.

This project is limited in scope, as is the nature of qualitative research, and as such, can only raise questions about some of the emerging trends in human and social behavior. Further study is needed, both regarding the role and impact of information and communication technologies on social life, as well as concerning implications of the potential normalization of perspectives and attitudes of McDonaldization so thoroughly outlined by Ritzer in our intimate lives. Issues of sexual identity, gender, race, and relationship status cannot be generalized based on these data. Instead, we should cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity, as shifting norms emerge from a rapidly changing techno-social environment. Still,

the data collected in this project suggest that for this population, the use of technologies as information filters, organization, and connective tools and the frequent but contested use of technology to signal relationship commitment are common, though not universal. The limited sample and regionally located nature of the data collected makes it impossible to generalize these findings.

One of Ritzers' key ideas is that McDonaldization devalues labor and in doing so, devalues the worker (Ritzer 1998; Ritzer and Miles 2019). For some participants, this idea holds within the realm of relationships. Does a focus on efficiency, control, and even

the contested arena of standardization create a kind of "EasyMac" of relationships? On the other hand, there is perhaps value in using tools to create a better and more meaningful relationship experience. This work allows us to theorize about the degree to which technology has become a powerful force in the shaping of the most intimate aspects of human relationships. While more work is necessary to fully understand the implications of this, it opens some directions for future research. Examining the role of technology in sexual and romantic relationships among adults has the potential to help us better understand the impact of social media and technology on the broader human experience.

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Citation

Standlee, Alecea. 2023. "Sex, Romance, and Technology: Efficiency, Predictability, and Standardization in College Dating Cultures." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 19(1):6-21. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.1.01>