

S2 Ep 2

Dating apps with Jessica Pidoux

This transcript was made with Good Tape and edited by Judith Zoe Blijden

Judith Zoë

[00:15] Hi, I'm Judith Zoe. Welcome to The Digital Period. The Digital Period is a public philosophy project where I explore our relationship with technology. Last season we looked at menstruation apps and autonomy. This season we're taking a closer look at dating apps and vulnerability. I thought it

[00:33] would be a good place to start by trying to understand what dating apps actually are. Are they a place, a tool, just another form of social media? Over the past year and a half I've asked many people what they think dating apps are. People I've

[00:47] dated, strangers, friends and colleagues. And with every new perspective I've learned that they're a difficult thing to wrap your head around. The diversity of experiences is huge and the role dating apps play in people's lives and their

[01:01] impact is so different for everyone. I realized role dating apps play in people's lives and their impact is so different for everyone. I realize that dating apps aren't a one-dimensional space, but something highly dynamic. That's why you'll hear a variety of personal experiences with dating apps throughout this season.

[01:14] In this episode, you will hear the story of a dating app user who reluctantly used dating apps, but with a very surprising result. In my search to understanding dating apps better, a colleague recommended I look into the work of Jessica Pidoux,

[01:34] who has examined dating apps from a sociological perspective. And as with most of the conversations you hear on this podcast, I met her by chance in Rotterdam and found myself speaking at an event where Jessica was also presenting.

[01:46] It was the Symposium Feelings Inc. that happened on Valentine's Day in 2025. I brought my favorite Zoom recorder with me just in case, hoping she'd be willing to talk about her research right there on the spot, and she was. Jessica currently works

[02:03] as a researcher at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. She holds a master's in sociology from the University of Lausanne and a Swiss NGO specializing in data rights

[02:22] and privacy protection. In this episode, Jessica explains what dating apps are, their dynamic nature, and how people create strategies and new conventions to navigate the online dating space.

[02:35] We recorded this conversation impromptu in between sessions on a symposium, so you might hear a bit of background noise now and then. I love this conversation and I hope you enjoy it too.

[02:48] How would you explain what is a dating app?

Jessica Pidoux

[02:51] It's a good question because according to the discipline, you can say it's a medium because you communicate through it, right? You message, you now can have also video calls, audio messages.

[03:08] And the device itself contains a message that you want to pass through or exchange but actually you can also see that as a place it can be a place where you meet people and this has changed also

[03:23] for sociologists in couple formation saying well actually before we used to meet on bars or on the neighborhood, on balls with others.

[03:36] Now we have these places that are geolocated, but they are at the tip of our hands, our fingers. Okay, go here and you will find other people that are supposedly also single like you

[03:51] or also looking for something like you. But if we can see it from a more economic perspective, it is a market where you have an offer and a demand. Finally, also from computer science, we can say these are techniques.

[04:05] These are new techniques, computing systems with matching algorithms that can help you process information, right? We have so many profiles now available in this market

[04:18] that we need new techniques that allow us to filter these, to eliminate, that's why we have to declare preferences and so yeah i think that's a great

[04:28] way of looking at what they are or i think it's also great to understand that they are multiple

[04:34] things at the same time depending on your perspective yeah which means it involves many actors it's not only users and apps the companies behind they have a business department

[04:51] the apps are already in the stock chain so they are part of financial life they have developers that are designing interfaces for us the profile you see in the interface

[05:04] it has behind it some techniques to be able to connect you with somebody else so it's humans, users, developers managers it's an economic market and it's also just a way a place to experience

Dating apps user

[05:26] new social interactions and then covid happened and suddenly for some reason people started feeling uncomfortable with approaching others in person and i realized it's not only myself noticing this but also my friend's circle and everyone just started turning to dating apps

[05:46] also during covid a lot of my friends were just swiping away and I was very skeptical about it and I thought no I'm never gonna do that yeah and then I arrived here in Brussels and I thought well

[06:00] you know what I'm just gonna try it see how it is what experience I'm gonna get out of it and it was a weird experience I have to say.

Judith Zoë

[06:11] Did you use, you don't

[06:14] need to answer, but did you use dating apps as well?

Jessica Pidoux

[06:18] Yeah I did, I did. First when I was doing my master's I did participatory observation so I registered and I met people and I would say look

[06:31] I'm doing this research so do you want to, but I'm also single so it's okay for you to be part of this experience um so whoever accepted i would go on a date and write down after everything that happened

[06:49] and then i interviewed um users that allowed me to contrast my personal experiences with I dated, I found a person there on Bumble, like really was just first shot.

[07:09] It worked because I had one picture, nothing, no bio. And I just wrote, hey, do you want to go out? And the person said yes, and it worked. So it was magical. And I think that's what can happen also on dating apps.

[07:25] We can have a lot of constraint problems, but it can be a good surprise also out there and that's why people like

Dating apps user

[07:35] it i guess yeah for me it was actually the whole i always wanted to find love you know i grew up with disney movies and even though like i told myself oh well this this big love it maybe may

[07:51] not exist but you know you can still search for it and And I guess in the end, we all are on those dating apps for the reason because we do want to have, we don't want to give up the hope that maybe there's one of those movie fairy tale loves.

[08:08] And yeah, I heard from two of my friends actually got married last year and both of them met their husbands on Tinder and Bumble.

Judith Zoë

[08:19] So going towards more your doctoral thesis, your PhD, with what kind of questions did you approach that research after you already finished your master thesis on the same topic?

Jessica Pidoux

[08:32] Yeah, the main question there was how are humans and non-humans or machines if you want, or techniques, are communicating with each other

[08:44] to understand how the online dating phenomena was created or what was made out of. So I was looking at the interactions between graphical interfaces, algorithms, users and

[08:58] developers.

Judith Zoë

[08:59] And can you maybe explain what each of those are?

Jessica Pidoux

[09:03] Yes. So graphical interfaces there, I was analyzing how users create their profiles. But really based on the structure that the app is pre-defining. Because when you

[09:19] enter and register to a dating app, you first declare who you are and then declare who is the person you would like to meet. And this is all pre-defined. It's a specific structure that the

[09:32] app is giving you. So this is already pre-defining how or with whom you can interact. So if you go to an app like Bumble and then in an app like Grindr or Meetic,

[09:49] you will describe yourself very differently. You can, yes, have the basics of your name, age, but you will see, for example, in partship, what is most important at the top of the profile or almost in the first line is the salary.

[10:04] So it means your socioeconomic status is more important here. And then if you go to on Tinder, it's the profile. It's common on many apps, but then you always see, for example, the university you attended.

[10:19] So it means that your education level is important there on Tinder more than other apps. So all these characteristics, I was analyzing them. This is what I understand as the from the interface how users were

[10:36] constrained to describe themselves and and then the other perspective I was analyzing is the users perspective how by through interviews how do they fill

[10:52] in this profile they sometimes they ignore some fields sometimes they ignore some fields, sometimes they privilege others, sometimes they work around these fields or they just add a description with emojis.

[11:06] So these are all practices that they create by themselves, on their own. And then the final perspective, it was developers and algorithms. I interviewed developers and I looked at their practices.

[11:26] Okay, how, what is an algorithm on this, on your activity, what you're doing on daily life? How do you define a match? How do you collect data for making this match?

[11:43] And finally, where it was difficult to understand these algorithmic systems because it's an abstract object and sometimes it's implicitly or is everywhere on the code or on the practices right so this when i couldn't grasp from

[12:02] the interviews or when companies were very opaque then i analyzed more technical documentation and these three four perspective algorithms developers users and interfaces allowed me to see that online dating is

[12:20] it's quite complex it's interactions between all these techniques profiles data types it's it's really interactions that are evolving constantly people are testing what happens if i

[12:34] do this and we are creating new social conventions we are we are learning learning how to interact with these automated systems. We know they're there, we have an idea of how they work, we try sometimes to overcome their limits, we sometimes use it in

[12:54] our favor. It creates practices like now we are, I think, more eliminating profiles than selecting. What the sociology of couple has shown is that when we are building relationships, we take the time.

[13:10] It's a long process. It involves reviewing, re-dealing, coping. It's about negotiating. It's about discussing, communicating. We re-evaluate our preferences.

[13:25] We establish a relationship that is in the long term, even during the dating. You learn how to present yourself, you learn how to select others based on your preferences.

[13:39] And I mean, economic markets are based on individual preferences, individual choices. And now we have it on these apps for everyone.

Judith Zoë

[13:47] Yeah.

Dating apps user

[13:50] Well, you have to put yourself out there. You have to put pictures out there. And you know that random people see your profile and you don't know who those people are. So I was very hesitant about that at first.

[14:04] And you also have to chat to those people that you didn't know. And sometimes conversations would derail into something uncomfortable. Sometimes they were super amazing. Then you would meet the person and it's not a match at all.

[14:20] It's like you made a picture up in your mind and the person doesn't really match that.

Judith Zoë

[14:30] Did you see people adapt their profile based on the knowledge they were gathering about how this market functions?

Jessica Pidoux

[14:37] Yeah, definitely. Also, another main result of my thesis is like how we're constantly adapting to the way. So these are what I call social conventions it's like okay we

[14:51] know that people present their self themselves like these on tinder and you have to be with a selfie with a sporty picture outside with friends so you see

[15:04] that you're a social person and when you learn these convert conventions that are proper to the design of the app if If Tinder doesn't create this frame where it's mainly a picture, where it's

[15:17] mainly your attractiveness that is evaluated by a swipe left or right, then you, you will date otherwise. But in this frame, you learn that these are the conventions you want to be either

[15:31] on the norm or a bit original, but always original according to the norm. And then sometimes you say, say well this is not working so i test another thing i'm gonna change my picture i'm gonna hide i'm gonna pay a future and i'm gonna hide my

[15:49] geolocation or my age and and see how it works so it's a new arena where we can test uh what works or not in the market and um which is it doesn't have to be always rational and sometimes you just know oh the algorithms are

[16:11] showing me learning from patterns that are showing me always i don't know whatever designers and i don't want designers so then you say i'm gonna change maybe my

[16:24] occupation yeah so i start to see other kind of people yeah and it's just you understand that's why I see it more as a learning process.

[16:36] We learn how to adapt or shape or change how these algorithms are giving us results. We learn to adapt to how others present themselves because we want to be part of this space or

[16:51] that this because you want to meet somebody, right?

Judith Zoë

[16:56] Yeah. Yeah, one of the things that I found super fascinating and sometimes sad and sometimes heartwarming is people on Reddit, I don't know if you've seen, who post their profile on Reddit,

[17:09] because for instance, they haven't had matches in a while and they want to gather feedback from other people to improve their profile so that their profile does better within the dating app space or market.

[17:20] And often people respond super kindly like there are always some trolls saying mean things but like the majority of people respond to these things with a lot of empathy and they give like tips about all of these factors like oh no add a photo

[17:33] where you're outside or lose the photo where you're holding a baby if you're not if it's not

Jessica Pidoux

[17:38] your baby you know yes exactly and this is something also um to consider because it depends on the location where you are. And some people I interviewed on non-urban areas, they have less chances because there are not too many people registered there.

[17:58] And so they feel frustrated. Also, for example, I interviewed a man that was a truck driver. when you see statistics on the usage of Tinder, the majority of people are between 18 to 35 and they are students and they are in university.

[18:19] You know, it's a very specific group that Tinder is gathering. And when you're outside this group, then you have less chances or you can be negatively discriminated from the others.

[18:36] Yeah. Because, ah, well, discriminated from the others yeah because ah well i see a lot of people starting with a diploma then the truck driver because of its uh also occupation socially valued differently

[18:51] then we're gonna discriminate this person and if the person doesn't understand that he has to hide his occupation then he's out of the market that's also why I come back always to these conventions,

[19:06] because the frame, the structure of the app has been designed in this way. We need to understand how it works if you want to play the game.

Judith Zoë

[19:13] Yeah.

Dating apps user

[19:16] Yeah, I had quite a few dates because, you know, when I do something, I also want to commit to it and see how it goes so I can give my honest opinion about it. So I didn't want it to be one of those people

[19:28] who just judges it without having tried it. So I didn't want it to be one of those people who just judges it without having tried it. I had two people that I was very impressed with, with the algorithm. It matched

[19:40] very, very well, just not the time of stay in the city. That just didn't match. And the rest was, let's say experimental. There were people that didn't look like their profile pictures. There were people that looked exactly like the pictures but were completely different in person. You know

[20:04] like when you text with someone you are usually more comfortable and more open about certain things because you can think about your reply. You have two or three hours, but if you meet in person, you can't think,

[20:19] you can't pause the person in front of you to think about your answer, to think about how you want to present yourself.

Judith Zoë

[20:29] But how to play the game is also a question that users don't know the answer to, right? Because, which is why sometimes also these Reddit threads I found a little sad because I realized that they

[20:43] might not understand how the dating app works. And sometimes you can see on how they describe their question to Reddit that they started to doubt themselves or they're like, oh, maybe something is wrong with me that I'm not doing

[20:56] well on these spaces, which has also a lot to do with how these apps work and they're not in everyone's favor.

Jessica Pidoux

[21:02] Yeah, definitely. I mean, as a basis of entering dating apps, you have to know that you're in a vulnerable position where you put yourself to others to evaluate you just from your physicality because the app has put forward your picture.

[21:22] The photo is very prominent. Yeah, exactly. you're in a dominated position because the app is, we are under information and power asymmetry. They have the data about you, about the others, how the dynamics are working there, but you don't have, you don't have anything.

[21:45] You just have your profile and the profiles that are suggested to you. You don't even know who likes you really, because you only know when you get a match, right? You know who is liking on you.

[21:58] The app knows it. And they can, so they can, they can make the matches as they think it's better for you without you giving an opinion on what is best.

[22:10] Another problem is like the information asymmetry, you know, everything they're using for making the matches for you. Well that's part of what I show. If we see the structure of the profiles

[22:22] and the data flows of the apps, we can understand a bit more what is influencing that you get a match or not. Right. But if you don't have the techniques, if you don't have, if you

[22:35] don't research a bit on it as a user, you will not know it. So, and this is also another thing when you talk about more the psychological aspect it's not my

[22:47] expertise but I read an article saying that those that are for example more shy than others can be more vulnerable there or that have depression and sometimes

[23:03] it's actually is counterproductive because they go there because they think it's gonna be easier for them to find somebody but actually they are confronted to all these things we have been discussing that makes them even uh it worsens their

[23:18] psychological state already yeah yeah i believe that yeah so i had this rule at one point

Dating apps user

[23:28] because it was very exhausting for myself so three uh three months of dating up and then three months of dating app and then three months of non-dating app. So I deleted my profile on, I think I used Tinder and Bumble and I deleted the profiles every three months just to have some

[23:45] mental health break. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you found there? Because they're

Jessica Pidoux

[23:52] quite decisive also in what people get to see when they're on a dating app. First of all, what I show is like there's a lot of data that can influence who you get.

[24:08] And this depends exactly what is in the profile. As I said, sometimes you see some fields that are mandatory or on OkCupid it's a bit more transparent or they say what is the weight, what is the the importance of one specific question than another one.

[24:28] I think OKCube is a good start to see how algorithms work because you have questions, right, in your profile. These are variables that you will find in any form on any app.

[24:41] And then these variables have a different weight. If they are more important, they're going to match you based on that criterion that is more important than others but there are scores that

[24:57] are computed also that we don't see for example on tinder's patents i i saw that they create a desirability score an intelligence score nervousness score and all these scores are

[25:14] then put together to see okay which is your score? And we're going to find somebody that matches that score. So it's not as we think, it's not only the age range and the geolocation

[25:27] as we see on Tinder, they are weighting which variables are more important. And at the end, what's the score that you get to match you with another person. So for example, for the nervousness score,

[25:42] I saw on Tinder that they are analyzing your messages and how many grammatical mistakes you make if you get positive answers or not if you write

[25:57] short or long sentences if they're complex or not the desirability score is more based on on your age sex socioeconomic, and the number of likes you received.

[26:13] And what they say actually in the pattern is like, if we consider that this score is high enough with somebody else that represents a good match, we're going to introduce the person, although

[26:28] your preference didn't declare that you like this person. It is written there. And actually now, this is a new feature on Tinder. If you go to the parameters, you can consent or not that they overcome your declared preferences.

[26:46] So they are trying to be more transparent. Wow, I didn't see that yet. I won't look into it. But this was in the patents that I analyzed already like in 2019. And so it's these design choices that we don't see that are made by the company.

[27:11] They want to introduce you to matches that they consider that are good. Good for you. But this good is according to these scores that they have decided themselves. And it's problematic in the sense that it creates a hierarchical dynamic,

[27:26] a competition dynamic, the best ones with the best ones. It also creates problems when the people criteria doesn't fit what they're actually looking for.

[27:39] If you don't respond to the norm that they have embedded in the apps, then you're also discriminated, right? If you, they are asking the university level, come on, not everyone goes to university.

[27:55] So it means that they are framing their app for this kind of population saying, this is the good population here. So if you go there thinking, oh, I'm going to find, but actually you don't go to university. Well, you have less chances

[28:09] because the majority of people there are showing this because Tinder is a good criteria to put at the top of the profile.

Judith Zoë

[28:17] Yeah, yeah. It can be negative two ways like it can be negative one because maybe you don't feel aligned with how they rate you and two maybe you don't feel that what they are surfing you fits

[28:30] what you're looking for so I guess it has two aspects because even you might be I don't know someone with a university degree who really likes blue-collar job man you know but the the app won't really allow you to have that preference

Jessica Pidoux

[28:47] yeah exactly because every question has also pre-defined answers so you have to really pay attention to these categories and say does this correspond to the kind of profile i want to

[29:03] project to the kind of dates i want to find and so yeah yeah I have very mixed feelings about it because I did

Dating apps user

[29:13] in the end find the love of my life there so and we're very happy together and we probably wouldn't have met without the algorithm which matched two very tall people I guess I was very

[29:30] close to not going on the date because he was he was really just being himself which was so unusual he was just very unhinged texting funny things the conversation went so well the whole time

[29:45] we texted for two days and then then we went on a date so it was also very fast which I liked because usually you text for two or three weeks and then someone gets bored and and it's very annoying. And yeah, my literal thought and his thought as well

[30:02] was a tall person. Let's do that for once. Let's look at that. And yeah, we looked at each other, went on the date and actually we decided first, no, let's be friends

[30:14] because we understand like we got along so well that we didn't want to mess things up. And yeah, after a week we decided can't be friends that needs to be more that needs to be

[30:29] a relationship

Judith Zoë

[30:30] we are meeting here today because we are at a symposium that's organized by privacy salon and earlier during your presentation you also talked a little bit about heteronormativity which i found very interesting can you explain a bit more about what it is and why it is what

[30:45] kind of role plays also within the dating app space?

Jessica Pidoux

[30:48] Yeah, I found this first on the interfaces with a colleague, Pascal Kunz. We analyzed 14 dating apps and how they describe a woman's body.

[31:00] And what we found is that it was a very reduced representation of women's body focused on the upper body. So most of the apps had between one and eight variables to describe it.

[31:13] Hair, eyes, bra size, weight, height, and so on. And it was very different what you can answer from one app to another one. So for example, on Passion's dating app

[31:27] for people over 50, the weight scale was from 40 kilos to 200 kilos. Well, when you go to another app like Adopt-a-Mech for younger users, the scale was between 30 kilos, which is very,

[31:44] very low weight. It's near death. Yeah. To 115 kilos. We're talking young users here

[31:59] more than 18 years old. So these scales were impressive and it had some social norms that were defined by the

[32:12] developers, the business, the managers behind these apps. Sometimes what I saw on the developer side, they copy paste these values from other apps.

[32:26] But in that case, it's also problematic because they are reproducing the norms that they see in other apps So on the interfaces we saw this that the upper body and especially the hair was used to describe women's body and

[32:43] Historically the hair has been used seen as an element of to eroticize women's body and so and this is from the So, and this is from the heterosexual model in society. So that's why we talk about heteronormativity on dating apps and in a process called digital morphosis,

[33:09] that we take what we see on social life and we put it in a very reduced way in a graphical interface interface that is coded with numerical inputs or categories that are going to represent this body.

[33:26] Yeah. So what I saw then, and this is the last part is on the developers, I was asking like, how do, where do they get this data, variables, inputs to say, okay, this is the profile we want

[33:45] to make. So they copy paste it from other apps or they connect with tools of other type of apps to say, oh, this is a typical list of values on a profile

[34:00] and they copy paste it. And then they adapt it to their own market saying, well, no, we are targeting lesbian women. We are targeting gay men on Grindr, for example. So they adapted and sometimes

[34:15] they counter imitate. Oh, they do it this way. We want to make it differently. So I don't know. We add on Grindr in a lot of gay men apps, you find penis size, but then the

[34:31] shapes are so can be added, detail it and so. the developers, and it's not to say it's their fault, I'm not trying to be moralistic here, is that the design of the apps depends on the methods

[34:49] that these developers are using. And sometimes these developers are just recopying, it's a common practice on developing. You copy code from other apps, which you reuse, it's apps we use is an efficiency technique and these are not specialists of sociology or of couples or

[35:08] dating psychologists and um and what is always these developers are disconnected from what's what's the user's perspective because these developers are working under the pressure of business goals that are created by the owner, by the industry itself.

[35:35] I mean, when you're on Tinder, a developer there, you just apply the guidelines also that it's on top of you or that the match group, which is agglomerating different apps, is creating assets, standard or value or so. So we have to see this more as a yeah a whole change of agents that are influencing shaping each other yeah what can

[35:59] people do because you also have your own organization that you give people also more agency and more tools in relation to data in general but also on dating apps yeah one of the

[36:11] first actions we took on ads personal data is to create tools that help people know their rights. Everyone has the right to get a copy of their data

[36:22] and then we develop tools to after you exercise these rights to analyze the data you received

[36:29] from the companies. Thank you so much. What is the website link again? Yeah, so all these tools

[36:37] are now free open access at digipower.academy and you will find a bunch of tools also for other social media platforms

[36:47] chat gpt meta instagram and

Judith Zoë

[36:50] so yeah thank you so much i will also link your research when i publish the episode on my website so people can read more if they want to

[37:01] and it was very cool to have you

Jessica Pidoux

[37:04] thank you yeah same,

Judith Zoë

[37:06] what are dating apps?

[37:10] Dating apps are many things. They are a medium that can enable you to communicate with others. They are a place where you can go to meet people. They are a market, part of our economy. And they consist of techniques, often including an algorithm.

[37:25] They involve many different actors, including users, developers, companies, that all function in a wider context. A social group, an economy, or the society. What a dating app is and how we interact with it is highly dynamic.

[37:40] The values and norms that are dominant change and can be changed by both users and developers. So if we want to understand how we can be vulnerable online, we need to take all of these aspects into account.

[37:56] Just to be on a dating app is a vulnerable act in itself, because we expose ourselves to possibilities of harm by other users but also by the company behind the app thank you so much for listening a huge thanks to Jessica please go read

[38:11] her research linked on online on the digital period.com and a big thanks to the dating app user who shared her personal experience with dating apps the next episode will be published next week we will focus on the role of vulnerability and love when using dating apps. This series is created by me, Judith Zoë. The

[38:30] jingle and all Musical.ly bits are made by Kristel Scholtens and me. If you want to support this project by becoming a sponsor, or in any other way, please check out the website, thedigitalperiod.com,

[38:43] and go follow us on Instagram. Talk to you next week!

[38:48] Next week, I will talk to Gianclaudio Malgieri about data protection and vulnerability.

Dating apps user

[38:55] I guess it comes down to, I personally don't really believe in the algorithm. Maybe if there's more filters or something, but yeah, I still think the dating apps are

[39:07] quite toxic and I did get lucky. And my two friends that got married last year also got lucky. And that's really nice. but I always felt very unwell with having my pictures out there because all of my social media otherwise is private also on LinkedIn I don't post pictures of myself of all

[39:29] the events that I attend I just post pictures of pictures of the events and not myself and sometimes which sounds very weird but when I would walk through the streets I would sometimes think that people

[39:45] would look at me because they would recognize me from my dating profile which is insane to even think about but you never know and I didn't feel well having two or three pictures of myself out there that's why I deleted them every once in a while