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The Commodification of Intimacy Goes High Tech: Dating Applications and Matchmaking Agencies in Seoul

Edward Glayzer

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH 45469, USA; eglayzer1@udayton.edu

Abstract

Online dating applications appear to offer the potential to disrupt inequalities in romantic partner selection by expanding access beyond existing social networks. Yet despite South Korea's extensive digital infrastructure and widespread internet use, mainstream adoption has remained surprisingly limited. This article examines why dating applications failed to transform courtship within one of the world's most digitally connected societies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul, including participant observation, digital ethnography using Tinder, 41 semi structured interviews, 9 focus groups, three online surveys totaling 1247 responses, and observations of 274 couples in public dating spaces, this study examines the uneven adoption of dating applications and commercial matchmaking agencies. Dating applications remained unpopular among mainstream informants, who generally preferred vetted introductions through existing social networks, while individuals with fewer such opportunities for meeting partners were more likely to adopt what was perceived as risky. Commercial matchmaking agencies, by contrast, attracted clients by evaluating education, occupation, income, appearance, and family background. Rather than transforming South Korea's intimate marketplace, digital technologies became incorporated into an already commodified landscape of courtship in which existing inequalities continued to shape partner selection. These findings suggest that new technologies become embedded within existing political economic systems rather than disrupting the commodification of intimacy.

Keywords: commodification of intimacy; online dating; South Korea; matchmaking agencies; digital anthropology; courtship; political economy; intimate relationships; ethnography; dating applications

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1. Introduction: The Commodification of Intimacy and Online Dating

Online dating applications have become an increasingly common means of meeting romantic partners throughout much of the world (Illouz 2013; Broeker 2023). By expanding individuals' access to potential dating partners beyond existing stratified social networks, these technologies appear to have the potential to reshape intimate relationships and weaken many of the social constraints associated with traditional methods of courtship (Watson 2006). Scholars have argued that emerging communication technologies create new possibilities for intimacy while potentially subverting older forms of social control, including existing inequalities embedded within family, class, and gender relations (Agustin 2007; Bernstein 2010; Kim and Choe 2014).

South Korea provides an especially compelling setting in which to examine these possibilities. South Korea has famously been described as the "most wired" nation in the

world, with fast, inexpensive internet available to 99.2% of households (Herz 2002; Illouz 2019). It is among the most technologically advanced societies with exceptionally high rates of internet connectivity, smartphone ownership, and digital engagement (Yoon 2018). Economic development, female participation within the labor force, and the adoption of new technologies are often assumed to contribute to greater gender egalitarianism (Duflo 2012; Goldin 2006; Ferguson 2015). Likewise, the decline of arranged marriages and the rise of "love marriages" over the last century would seem to indicate greater female agency in the selection of intimate partners (Kendall 1996). The gendered expectations surrounding education, occupation, and marriage illustrated in Figure 1 provide a visible example of the inequalities that continue to structure the South Korean marriage market. If dating applications truly reduce barriers to meeting potential partners outside of one's existing social network, South Korea should be among the places where these changes are most evident.



Figure 1. Notebook Covers. Two notebook covers found at Kyobo, a popular chain of bookstores. (**Left**): "If I study for ten more minutes, my [future] wife's face will change." (**Right**): "If I study for ten more minutes, my [future] husband's job will change.".

Yet this expectation is not borne out by my ethnographic research. Despite South Korea's extensive technological infrastructure, many of my South Korean participants continued to shun dating applications as a primary means of finding romantic partners. Only 8.5% of my survey respondents said they used dating applications "often," while 81% reported never or rarely using them. Instead, they often preferred introductions through existing social networks while commercial matchmaking agencies continued to thrive despite charging substantial fees for their services.

This article asks why online dating has failed to become widely adopted within one of the world's most digitally connected societies despite its apparent technological advantages. If internet technologies have the potential to subvert existing inequalities and democratize access to romantic partners, why have they failed to substantially disrupt South Korea's existing dating market? By examining dating applications alongside commercial matchmaking agencies, I ask whether the commodification of intimacy is actually increas-

ing through new technologies or whether these technologies simply make existing forms of commodification more explicit and visible. I argue that the internet's potential to democratize partner selection is constrained by the commodification of intimacy itself. Rather than displacing existing market inequalities, online dating has largely become incorporated into the same capitalist and neoliberal market logics that already organize South Korean courtship (Hong 2020). Those most likely to adopt dating applications are often individuals marginalized within the dominant dating field, while commercial matchmaking agencies explicitly commodify desirable partner characteristics through systems of screening and ranking. Together, these findings demonstrate that digital technologies alone are insufficient to transform intimate markets when the underlying logics of commodification remain intact.

Scholars have long argued that economic development, new communication technologies, and the expansion of consumer capitalism have transformed intimate relationships (Bailey 1989; Illouz 1997). Eva Illouz argues that the historical transition from courtship within the domestic sphere to courtship in the public sphere commodified courtship rituals by necessitating expenditures on dining, entertainment, and transportation while simultaneously moving romantic encounters into the practical and symbolic boundaries of an emerging mass market of goods.

> Dating appeared alongside the rise in real income of the early twentieth century and was defined within the practical and symbolic boundaries of an emerging mass market of goods. These developments moved the romantic encounter from the familiar confines of the home to new locales that were both public and anonymous. At the same time, these circumstances made consumption an inherent element of any romantic encounter. (Illouz 1997, p. 54)

As economic development advanced, the marketization of romantic love through advertising, magazines, self help and advice columns, and other forms of commodification increasingly embedded consumption within intimate relationships (Illouz 1997). More recently, Illouz has argued that mobile dating applications and other new technologies of intimate consumption have further transformed romantic relationships by decoupling sexuality from kinship and contributing to new forms of intimate uncertainty (Illouz 2019).

Viviana Zelizer likewise challenges the longstanding assumption that love and intimacy exist within a sphere separate from the profane world of the market. In her critique of this dichotomy, which she describes as "hostile worlds" or "separate spheres," Zelizer argues that this framework is no longer productive (Zelizer 2005). Rather than treating intimacy and economic activity as incompatible, she proposes a framework of "connected lives" that examines how people navigate intimate relationships by matching them with appropriate forms of economic exchange. As she argues, "to label a payment as a gift, tip, bribe, charity, expression of esteem, wages, or compensation is to make claims about the relationship between payer and payee" (Zelizer 2005, p. 28). This perspective suggests that commodification does not necessarily undermine intimacy. Instead, individuals continually use economic exchange to create, maintain, and renegotiate intimate relationships. It is this framework that guides the present study's examination of dating applications and commercial matchmaking agencies in South Korea.

Nicole Constable likewise argues that "internet technology plays a central role in the commodification of intimacy and in shaping new movements and geographic and electronic landscapes of intimacy" (Constable 2009, p. 53). At the same time, globalization and new communication technologies also offer opportunities for defining new forms of intimacy capable of transforming and transgressing conventional gendered spaces and norms. Globalization does not simply result in greater commodification of intimate sexual, marital, and reproductive relationships; it also offers opportunities for defining new sorts of

relationships and for redefining spaces, meanings, and expressions of intimacy that can transform and transgress conventional gendered spaces and norms (Constable 2009, p. 58).

These perspectives suggest that new technologies possess both emancipatory potential and the capacity to reshape existing intimate relationships. If online dating applications reduce the costs of meeting potential partners while allowing individuals to search beyond existing stratified social networks, they would appear to offer an important means of subverting older forms of social control and inequality. It is precisely this expectation that the present study examines.

The analysis that follows examines why South Koreans shun the use of the internet to find a dating partner despite its potentially liberating benefits. I first examine why the majority of my informants avoided dating applications despite living in one of the world's most technologically connected societies. I then show how the online South Korean sexual field is occupied disproportionately by individuals attempting to escape or circumvent the broader dating and marriage marketplace. Finally, I examine how commercial matchmaking agencies have adopted internet technologies while simultaneously intensifying the commodification of intimacy through increasingly explicit systems of screening, ranking, and economic evaluation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the rise of online dating in South Korea has not subverted existing gender norms and inequalities as might be expected. Rather than replacing older forms of intimate commodification, internet technologies often make existing processes of commodification more explicit and visible. South Koreans exploit the internet to discover new social groups and extend the reach of their existing social networks through hobbies and meetup groups rather than deploying dating applications more directly to find a dating partner. The internet therefore changes the medium through which intimacy is negotiated without fundamentally escaping the market logics that continue to organize South Korean courtship. This recognizes that there are risks and benefits associated with the commodification of intimacy and these tradeoffs are the subject of this article.

This study contributes to broader discussions concerning the commodification of intimacy, digital technologies, and contemporary courtship by questioning the assumption that new communication technologies necessarily produce more egalitarian intimate relationships. Rather than demonstrating a simple expansion of commodification through the internet, my findings suggest that internet technologies often make existing forms of commodification more explicit and visible while simultaneously creating new strategies through which individuals attempt to resist them. By examining online dating within South Korea, I show both the extent of and limits to neoliberal commodification. Rather than viewing the internet as either liberating or inherently commodifying, this article demonstrates how new technologies become embedded within existing social relationships, inequalities, and cultural expectations that continue to shape the search for intimacy, redistributing both the opportunities for autonomy and the risks associated with meeting potential partners.

2. Materials and Methods

This article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South Korea to examine the commodification of intimacy within contemporary dating culture. While fears of economic disaster due to one of the world's lowest birthrates and a rapidly aging population have led the South Korean state, NGOs, and advocacy groups to conduct large-scale quantitative studies concerning marriage and childrearing, these studies have largely focused on the economically quantifiable aspects of relationship formation (J. Y. Kim 2024; Wolff [2025] 2026). While economic hardship likely plays a key role in contributing to South Ko-

rea's advancing birthrate woes, my research suggests that declining marriage and fertility are downstream symptoms of broader processes of economic and gender inequality that unfold during courtship. To examine these less quantifiable processes, I adopted a largely qualitative ethnographic methodology. Although the broader project examined multiple forms of courtship and the commodification of intimacy across a variety of dating rituals, the present article focuses specifically on ethnographic data concerning online dating applications and commercial matchmaking agencies.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Seoul between 2016 and 2017. I lived in the Gangnam district of Seoul for approximately ten months before moving to a low-cost boarding house (*goshiwon*) in Sinchon for the remaining two months of my initial fieldwork. I returned to Seoul the following year for approximately three additional months of data collection. During this return trip, I worked collaboratively with anthropologist Alex Nelson to conduct observations of couples in public dating spaces. Bars and restaurants were selected based on locations that informants and survey participants had identified as popular places for dates. Detailed observational notes were collected on 274 couples, including their interactions and body language, public displays of affection, meals and estimated expenditures, and whether one partner paid the final bill, the bill was divided, or payment was negotiated between the couple. Similar observations were also conducted at movie theaters in the same areas. Data collected through this collaborative observational research subsequently contributed to our analysis of contemporary South Korean courtship rituals (Glayzer and Nelson 2024).

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods, including speed dating events, online dating applications, meetup groups for activities such as hiking, language exchange, and book clubs, online university message boards, and participant observation at clubs, bars, and other social settings in Seoul. Surveys also served as an important recruitment tool, with respondents given the opportunity to volunteer for a subsequent interview. At these events I always identified myself as a researcher in a committed relationship, and at times my research assistant participated in speed dating and other dating events while likewise identifying herself as a researcher.

My previous experience teaching English in South Korea also provided access to English language learning and language exchange communities. I had taught English in South Korea for approximately three years prior to conducting this research and maintained connections to the ESL community. Some participants were interested in discussing dating and relationships while simultaneously gaining an opportunity for English conversation practice. Approximately one third of my interviews were conducted entirely in English, one third entirely in Korean, and one third using a mixture of English and Korean depending on the subject and participant preference. This recruitment strategy created an important limitation. The use of English during some interviews and recruitment through English language learning groups likely produced a sample that was more educated, internationally oriented, and wealthier than the general population of South Korean singles. The findings should therefore be understood as ethnographic findings concerning the participants and social settings examined rather than as a representative sample of all South Korean singles.

Tinder served as both a recruitment tool and a site of participant observation. I frequently used Tinder to locate informants, conduct participant observation, and collect data. Although I attempted to use other dating applications and websites, many required a South Korean citizenship number that I did not have. Instead, I collected data on other dating applications through interviews and surveys while focusing my digital ethnography on Tinder, which, according to my informants and survey results, was the most popular dating application among my participants. On my Tinder profile, I used three photographs of

myself and my then fiancée together with profile information identifying myself as a happily engaged anthropological researcher who was not looking for a date. I explained that I was interested only in meeting Korean informants willing to discuss my research, and I wrote my profile in both English and Korean. I frequently changed both my listed gender and the gender of those I was attempting to match with in order to recruit straight men, straight women, and LGBTQ participants, while clearly identifying myself as an engaged researcher so as not to misrepresent myself. The informants I met online were often quick to agree to face to face interviews, although my account was eventually banned after a user complained about my profile. My repeated attempts to regain access to the account were unsuccessful. Individuals recruited through Tinder who subsequently participated in interviews were subject to the same informed consent procedures as participants recruited through other methods.

In total, I conducted 41 semi structured interviews with 19 men and 22 women, ranging in age from 18 to 39 years old, although the majority were in their mid-twenties to early thirties. Interviews typically lasted at least one hour, and several informants participated in multiple interviews. Although the study focused primarily on heterosexual informants, three participants identified as members of the LGBTQ community, and five heterosexual women discussed an interest in dating women if South Korean society had been more accepting. In addition to interviews, I conducted nine focus groups involving 34 participants. Three online surveys were administered through Qualtrics and together received 1247 responses. The first was an exploratory survey distributed through a snowball sample and received 73 responses. It primarily used open ended questions concerning dating practices, expenditures, and cost sharing. Responses to this survey informed the development of a second, more structured survey containing multiple choice, ranking, and Likert scale questions. This survey was distributed more widely through social media, university related networks, previous informants, and other online networks and received 888 responses. A third, more targeted survey received 286 responses and examined dating locations, clothing, payment expectations, and expectations associated with different dating methods. The surveys supplemented the qualitative ethnographic data and also served as an important method of recruiting interview participants. The final question on each survey asked whether respondents would be willing to participate in an interview, and many interview participants were recruited in this manner.

Interview and focus group transcripts were coded using MAXQDA 2018 qualitative analysis software. The coding framework included major thematic categories associated with the semi structured lines of questioning, which were themselves developed in conjunction with the survey instruments and refined throughout the research process. For the present article, analysis focused particularly on participants' methods of searching for dating partners, their experiences with and perceptions of online dating applications and commercial matchmaking agencies, and related discussions of gender inequality, trust, risk, and the commodification of intimacy. Additional themes also emerged organically during the less structured portions of interviews and participant observation. As themes emerged, they were incorporated into the coding process and compared across interviews, focus groups, field notes, and survey responses. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, this ethnographic approach allowed participants to identify issues they considered significant while recurring patterns could be compared across interviews, focus groups, field notes, and survey responses. The analysis presented here therefore draws on multiple forms of evidence to examine online dating applications, commercial matchmaking agencies, and the commodification of intimacy within contemporary South Korean courtship.

This study received approval from the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent before partic-

ipating in interviews, focus groups, or surveys. All participant names presented in this article are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality. Most Korean participants introduced themselves to me using Western names, particularly in English language and language exchange settings. To preserve this feature of the ethnographic interactions while protecting participants' identities, I assigned different Western pseudonyms rather than replacing these names with Korean pseudonyms. Throughout the research process, I remained attentive to how my position as an American researcher, my Korean language ability, and my previous experience living and teaching in South Korea might shape participant recruitment, interactions, and interpretations, particularly when discussing sensitive topics related to dating, gender, and intimate relationships.

2.1. South Koreans Largely Reject Dating Applications

I chose to focus on Tinder because it is both free and popular among the minority of singles who had tried online dating. Tinder was by far the most common dating application used by single South Koreans in both my interviews and surveys. "Tinder now constitutes such a large part of the dating world that, for many young people, it is the dating world: an always-available, pocket-sized method for finding the person of your dreams—or, at the very least, a regret-free hookup" (Illouz 2019, p. 78). Despite its ubiquity in other advanced economies and its relative popularity compared to other dating apps in South Korea, Tinder was not a large part of the dating world in Seoul.

While using Tinder, I swiped right on every single profile I saw randomly shown until I reached my 50-swipe limit for the day. I did this every day for about six months. When someone else swiped right after viewing my profile, I would get a message saying that we "liked" each other and that we could then begin sending each other private messages. When my account settings were gender as a man, I had a match ratio of about 1 in 20 or perhaps even lower. Alternatively, when my account setting was female, my match ratio skyrocketed to at least 1 in 2 and often higher. This illustrates men's and women's differing strategies on the platform to find dates. Women informants told me that they had to be cautious with whom they swiped right on because they had large numbers of matches and did not want to be inundated with conversations or perhaps sexually suggestive language or unsolicited photos, as I was occasionally when posing as a female. Meanwhile, it seems that most men were using a similar strategy as me, swiping right far more frequently in the search for a potential match. Further, the majority of men who swiped right on my profile did not read a single word of my profile explaining that I was a happily engaged man looking for people to interview. This was evidenced by my inbox that would be full of messages from straight men saying "yo, what's up gorgeous?" "what are you up to tonight baby?" "you look fun, want to meetup?" or any innumerable variation on this same theme. This was all apparently in reference to my fiancé who was with me in all my photos whom these men thought was the owner of the profile. I responded to each and every one of their messages simply cut/pasting my profile information into the private message that was sent to me, giving them an additional chance to actually read it. Virtually all men stop responding to further messages or simply unmatched with me. The cruder or more sexually explicitly the original message to me, the less likely the man was to respond to my request to meet for an interview. On one occasion, after sending me a particularly lurid first message and responding with a cut/paste of my profile information, a man became upset with me for what he felt was an apparent deception. I was polite and pointed out that if he had read any of my profile he would not have been misinformed. The following day my account was banned citing Tinder's user agreement, but I am unsure of what specific policy I am supposed to have violated. I emailed Tinder on many occasions for clarification and to get my account reinstated but I never received any replies.

Given South Korea's reputation as one of the world's most technologically advanced societies, widespread adoption of online dating applications might be expected. Instead, my fieldwork found that the majority of informants had little interest in using dating applications to meet romantic partners. Although dozens of South Korean and foreign dating applications were available, Tinder was by far the most commonly recognized platform among participants. Nevertheless, few informants admitted to having tried, or even wanting to try, online dating. Only 8.5% of survey respondents reported using dating applications "often," while 81% reported that they had never or rarely used them. Considering South Korea's early adoption of smartphones, widespread internet access, and long history of utilizing third party matchmakers, this lack of interest in online dating was striking.

This finding contrasted sharply with participants' preferences for meeting a partner through existing social networks. Many informants described wanting to meet someone "naturally" (*jayeonseuleobge baljeon*), developing an intimate relationship through school, work, hobbies, or mutual acquaintances rather than through the internet. Individuals who had exhausted these existing social networks often turned to blind dates (*sogaeting*), group dates (*meeting*), or introductions arranged through friends before considering dating applications. While dating applications represented a relatively new method of meeting potential partners, they occupied a marginal position within the broader landscape of South Korean courtship.

Participant observation produced similar findings. Although internet technologies had become deeply integrated into everyday life in South Korea, participants rarely viewed dating applications as an acceptable means of initiating romantic relationships. Instead, many characterized the online dating environment as dangerous or risky and expressed a strong preference for partners who had been socially vetted through existing relationships. The anonymity that made the internet valuable for many other purposes simultaneously made it undesirable as a means of finding an intimate partner.

2.2. Why Mainstream South Koreans Reject Dating Applications

Some South Korean singles enjoyed the free or low cost of apps such as Tinder while decrying the high cost of others such as I-um which charges membership fees starting around 80,000 won ($80). However, free dating applications with little ritualism or formal structure such as Tinder were highly suspect by my informants who felt that these apps did not provide systems of checks and balances or screening in order to make them feel *pyeonhada*, or "comfortable." Still some other applications charge per message sent to other users that you want to chat with.

Besides their cost structures, dating applications also varied in the ways in which they matched and screened potential dating partners such as by match score based on questionnaire, geographic distance, criminal history, or filtered search results based on demographic questions like age, sexual orientation, occupation, height, or even astrological sign.

Heterosexual South Korean informants looking to meet other South Korean singles felt more *pyeonhada* (comfortable) using internet-based dating applications and services with more stringent screening, which were often the more expensive online matchmaking companies. However, due to these costs, these services were also suspected of not having the customer's best interests because of the intrusion of the marketplace. I argue that the South Korean online sexual field is extensively commodified and that this commodification is related to my informants' strong preference for prescreened dating candidates. However, while many of my informants expressed fears of being duped by unscreened dating partners on free applications such as Tinder, many also distrusted pay-to-play dating applications due to the financial incentive these companies had to find them a match.

The extensive commodification of intimacy and commodification of dating rituals limited my informants' ability to use the internet as an emancipatory technology. Further, the commodification of online dating applications recreates and contributes to gender inequality.

Like many of my informants who preferred meeting dating partners via *sogaeting*, participants expressed concerns about the dangers involved in using dating apps. Jane, a 28-year-old female university professor's assistant explained that she stopped using dating applications because of worries of being lied to by men whose backgrounds have not been vetted by her friends and who could be economically, physically or sexually abusive saying, "I do not know exactly who I am meeting. I do not want to be fooled by my dating partner. I do not think I will use it anymore. I think it is dangerous in Korean society." Many informants strongly preferred dating other singles within their immediate social networks in order to avoid these types of abuse. These fears were amplified considerably when discussing with my informants the prospect of using dating applications to find dating partners. However, they also feared another type of manipulation: the distortion or exaggeration of "specs" (스펙), demographic information such as income, education, and family background.

Women in my study expressed discomfort about using online dating because it is easy for men to lie about their "specs" such as academic or employment history. As Karen, the same 23-year-old woman from above explained when I asked her about using free apps such as Tinder:

> Most of my friends are university students and… do you know about (South) Korean university hierarchy? In (South) Korea, there's a lot of college rankings, so my friends don't really want to meet someone from a lower academic background. But there are many different kinds of applications for that. Universities vary a lot. So, ought to… so. But my friends want to meet (people) from higher universities. So they don't use that kind (Tinder) of app.

Karen is afraid that men on Tinder can easily lie about their educational background while also illustrating many South Korean women's desires for hypergamy, one of the few routes of social mobility available to them (Abelmann 2003; Abelmann and Kim 2005).

There are dating apps specific to students and graduates from all of the elite SKY (Seoul, Korea, Yonsei) universities. In fact, the importance of educational background in finding a partner is so critical that in 2011 a dating website called snulove.net was created that is strictly for graduates of Seoul National University, largely considered one of the elite universities (Löbman 2021). As one 28-year-old woman explained, "SNULOVE is a really casual, laid-back place where you can set yourself up for a blind date. And since everyone is from SNU, I can focus on the person's personality, not having to worry about educational background." The creator of the website, a 30-year-old male SNU computer programmer explained that he wanted to create a way for people *sogaeting* online "with fewer acquaintances and less money involved" and where the only criteria for joining is being a student of SNU or a graduate from there. A nice thought, with the supposed intention of decommodifying the search for a dating partner. However, the exclusion of non SNU graduates from the site serves as a classist screening process in itself and ultimately does not help to emancipate women from economic domination within a commodified dating market.

Alvin is a 31-year-old graduate student at one of these elite universities and majoring in the humanities. His experience using a South Korea specific dating application highlights the importance he feels that South Korean society places on looks, status, and "specs," especially in the dating marketplace. During one of our interviews, he pulled out his phone in frustration.

> I'll show you. Ok, so this is Amanda and this is what I got. 88% or 3.66666. That's me. That's my grade! I passed. Amanda is like that. Everything is appearances. Appearances are everything! So, I uploaded three pictures with Photoshop. Just a little bit of Photoshop because everybody Photoshops. Then the women, they rate me.

By receiving a "passing" grade from other Amanda users, this man was able to join the pool of attractive daters. In fact, the South Korean catchphrase that translate to "because you don't meet just anyone" (아무나 만나지 않는 당신을 위한 소개팅) is an acronym for the applications name, Amanda (아만다). A few Caucasian friends of mine who had stayed long enough in South Korea to gain a national ID number and join Amanda were then rejected by the administrators for not looking South Korean. This demonstrates how potential users of the Amanda app are policed and screened by both its users and its makers. However, screening potential users based on their appearances is only one of the many ways in which their user base is screened. The Amanda app is also highly commodified. This commodification, combined with its screening of users' appearances, essentially commodifies beauty itself.

The Amanda app also imposes significant transactional costs in order to message other users and there are no other criteria for being able to join other than the grading of Photoshopped images by other users.

> I mean I can't believe it. I think I just was like, wasting my money … Well if you want to start a conversation with the girls then it costs about 500 won. It's quite cheap but she can ignore (me) so … oh my god! Do you want to talk to this guy? Then (she) rejects (my message) and my 500 won disappears.

Like other dating applications such as Tinder, Amanda users such as my informant worry about fake profiles and information online. He told me that after spending a significant amount of money, too embarrassed to give me an exact figure, sending various women 500 won ($0.50) messages he came to believe that many of the profiles were fakes. He, and other Amanda users, worry that the app developers have an incentive to create fake profiles of beautiful women that many men will pay to send messages to but never receive replies from. My informant also complained bitterly after I had asked him if his elite education at Seoul National University helped him find dates. He laughed, "Not school. School is quite meaningless. Not meaningless but SNU doesn't guarantee your quality of life anymore in a changing society. So yeah money or appearances." I asked which one was the most important and he said, "Money for men. Appearances for women."

Peter, a low income 37-year-old man living in an international youth hostel with eight other men in room full of bunkbeds near my *goshiwon* and whom I met at an English language exchange event had a similar experience when using NoonDate (정오의 데이트). However, his experience using the app further highlights the extent to which dating in South Korea has become commodified, disenchanting many low-income South Korean men. After telling the story of his foray into South Korean dating applications he explained that he paid money on NoonDate twice in order to send messages to women he was interested in but did not receive a return message in either case. He felt that if you wanted to be successful in the dating marketplace on the NoonDate platform, you had to spend significantly more money. I asked Peter how much he thought he would have to spend to get a response and he replied,

> "Uh … it depends what kind of message I use. I mean if you, if the message, message template. If the message template looks very luxurious, then it's more expensive. I didn't use a luxurious template. I just plain, I just send the message. 'Nice to meet you'"

Peter felt that if you really wanted to have a chance at getting a return message, you had to invest in a luxurious looking message template and that women would take you more seriously the more money you spent. "If you pay more money and use a more luxurious template, you think you would be more likely to get a return (message)?" I asked. "I think so because women, they feel … it's more … I mean, sincere. That I am more devoted," he replied. "Because you're spending more money?" I asked. "Yeah. Spend money! Money can make sincerity" he responded. In this way, Peter is doubly penalized. Firstly, for his occupation description on his profile which states that he is a part-timer, and secondly, for having to send less expensive looking messages to potential dating partners. These examples also mirror informants' comments about the ways in which gifts during couples' holiday dating events come to symbolize the extent and depth of feelings of the dating couple (Glayzer 2021; Glayzer and Nelson 2024).

Every dating application is different, but most have this same structure built in to maximize profits. For example, one respondent reported that the dating application, IM8, charged couples who had matched on their site 250,000 ($250) won to be able to contact each other. The maximization of profits, or the market incentive placed on the search for intimate partners, creates and recreates both gender and economic inequalities that exist within South Korean society more broadly.

Online dating presents significant challenges for low-income men but also for upper- and middle-class men as well. While many of my female informants worried about the risks of sexual or physical violence when meeting people through dating applications, having not been vetted by their social circles, men had no such fears. However, they did fear the "beautiful snake" (꽃 Flower, 뱀 Snake) Tyson, the 36-year-old pharmacist explained in interview:

> Glayzer: What about when you date online? Is that risky or dangerous?
>
> Tyson: It's … it's … I cannot. I cannot (know) who she is … yeah. She can … She can … Lie (about her) university or major, the job. You cannot know it. And you know, online meetings are too dangerous. Do you know Beautiful Snake?
>
> Glayzer: What is it?
>
> Tyson: After having sex and she sue.
>
> Glayzer: So, she claims that you raped her or something like that? Is that common?
>
> Tyson: Sometimes. Sometimes. And even in Taxi, even in taxi and the taxi … the taxi … she … she proposed to her the taxi driver, "let's go to a hotel". And …
>
> Glayzer: And then sues…
>
> Tyson: And then let's talk … Flower and then snake. Yeah, Beautiful snake."

Men like Tyson fear meeting someone who is unvetted because they may take advantage of them economically while worrying about being taken advantage of physically and emotionally for the same reasons. At the time of my interviews, many men brought up the "Pence rule." The Pence rule is in reference to the Vice President of the United States who had stated that he does not eat alone with women or attend events where there was alcohol and his wife was not present. While it is unclear exactly why Pence himself follows this rule, some South Korean men in my study praised it as a "good idea" in South Korea because they feared being falsely accused of sexual misconduct. Hence, these men expressed a preference for dating partners who were within their social network or vetted by a dating agency.

2.3. Uneven Adoption and the Limits of Digital Courtship

Eighteen different dating applications and websites were identified by my informants and survey respondents including: Amanda, Angtalk, Couple.net, Cyber Lover, Ddeullim, Glam, Gold Spoon, I-um, I.M, Noondate, OkCupid, Pairs, Romance, Sky People, Tinder, WIPPY, and 1km. Despite this abundance of platforms, very few participants described dating applications as their preferred method of meeting a romantic partner. Instead, those who regularly used dating applications tended to occupy more marginal positions within the dominant South Korean dating field. LGBTQ participants frequently described dating applications as one of the few available means of meeting other sexual minorities. Likewise, several participants used Tinder specifically to meet foreigners or South Koreans who had lived abroad because they believed these individuals held more egalitarian views regarding dating and gender relations. Rather than replacing conventional pathways into romantic relationships, dating applications primarily expanded opportunities for individuals who had limited access to traditional social networks or who sought partners outside mainstream expectations.

The internet has proven to be emancipatory for some of my South Korean informants, especially members of the LGBTQ community and those who used apps to find foreign dating partners or spouses. Despite the perceived dangers of meeting people from online dating applications, individuals who did use them valued the ability to meet various kinds of people, including native English speakers and other LGBTQ members. Gender nonconforming participants and those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender relied much more heavily on the use of online dating apps to find romantic partners than heterosexual cisgender individuals. For these same reasons, they also tended to prefer dating outside of their existing social networks due to the stigmatization of sexual minorities and the stigma associated with dating non-Koreans. Rather than democratizing courtship for the broader population, online dating applications primarily expanded opportunities for those who had limited access to more conventional pathways of relationship formation.

Other South Korean informants specifically sought opportunities to meet foreign dating partners through Tinder, English language exchange groups, ESL learning sessions, and other social spaces organized around English language learning. Some used these spaces specifically to find foreign dating partners or spouses, and for some participants, an international relationship or marriage also offered the possibility of moving abroad and escaping the South Korean dating market or sexual field entirely. However, dating foreigners could itself carry social stigma, particularly for women. South Korean women who had dated foreigners, lived abroad, or used Tinder sometimes described keeping these experiences from future dating partners because of the stigma associated with dating non-Koreans (Broeker 2023; Glayzer and Nelson 2024). These findings suggest that while new technologies such as the internet and dating applications could provide an emancipatory technology for some participants, especially those in the LGBTQ community and those seeking partners outside of South Korea, these benefits did not extend equally to the broader population.

2.4. Commercial Matchmaking and the Commodification of Intimacy

Rather than replacing traditional forms of courtship, online dating applications coexisted alongside a thriving commercial matchmaking industry. While most informants distrusted anonymous dating applications, many viewed professional matchmaking agencies as a legitimate means of meeting a marriage partner because they reduced uncertainty through extensive background screening and social vetting. Unlike dating applications, matchmaking agencies verified clients' identities, education, occupations, income, fam-

ily backgrounds, and other characteristics before introducing potential partners. In effect, these companies transformed trust itself into a commercial service.

Many participants described these agencies as offering a level of security that dating applications could not provide. Because clients underwent extensive screening, informants believed there was less opportunity for deception and a greater likelihood that prospective partners accurately represented themselves. Although the process remained highly commercialized, participants often viewed matchmaking agencies as more trustworthy than free or inexpensive dating applications. Several informants explained that they would rather pay a professional matchmaker than risk meeting complete strangers through anonymous online platforms.

Matchmakers have a long history in South Korea (Kendall 1996). Similarly, the fear of being duped by a matchmaker that is motivated more by profit than by initiating the best matches also has a long history. Professional matchmakers and matchmaking companies are big business in South Korea. Duo, one of the largest such companies, claims a membership of around 29,000 subscribers with subscription fees ranging from 1 million to 4 million won ($1000 to $4000) with additional add-on fees for other services (K.-R. Kim 2016). Like other matchmaking companies, Duo takes a systematic approach to dating partner selection where each subscriber completes a 150-question survey asking about their character, family, education, income, debt, height, weight, smoking and drinking habits, occupation, hobbies, and desired characteristics of their future partner (K.-R. Kim 2016). Family background is also critical. This survey asks about the subscriber's parents' occupations and education, requiring documentary proof to back up their claims. Afterwards, subscribers are introduced to three to five "suitable" dating partners.

"Suitable" dating partners require some explanation and have become the object of criticism among South Korean social commentators. Images like these have made the rounds among news outlets and social media where individuals who subscribe to various matchmaking companies are ranked or given grades such as an "A" person or a "B" or "C" person, for example. The variables upon which each individual is ranked vary from company to company but also by gender. These ranking systems make explicit how matchmaking companies assign value to characteristics such as education, occupation, income, family background, and appearance.

Duo advertising was everywhere in Seoul during my field research. Along with advertisements for couples' rings, plastic surgery, and the latest fashion trends in image-sensitive South Korea, Duo advertisements were especially prominent in my trendy Gangnam neighborhood. Duo was also at the forefront of many of my informants' minds when discussing the economic costs of dating and marriage. As shown in Figure 2, with the copy reading "married Duo," Duo advertises itself as a marriage service rather than a dating service.

While Duo USA is somewhat upfront about the costs of their service, $200 nonrefundable initial registration fee, the Duo South Korea page has no information about fees or cost structure requiring you to first login. This opacity of costs fueled speculation among my informants about the unequal cost structure of the service. As Turnbull (2020) points out in an online article about Duo,

> Women dominate the clientele at (South) Korean marriage agencies, which is often used to justify extra costs for joining. But this differential pricing goes well beyond just sex, both reflecting and shaping consumers' notions of the "perfect" wife too. And it seems she's neither highly-educated, highly-earning, nor even over 32. (Turnbull 2020)

Online marriage agencies and matchmakers have significantly more women than men subscribed to their services (Turnbull 2020). Large companies like DUO and Gayeon report

a 6:4 ratio but some smaller agencies have been reported to be as high as 9:1. In a 2018 interview with Na Jin-Hee at the news outlet Segye Ilbo, an anonymous former agency employee was quoted saying:

> As there are fewer men, they naturally receive preferential service. "Professional" men [e.g., lawyers, doctors, and Samsung employees] receive discounts on membership fees, or may have them waived altogether. They get many more dates arranged [than women do] too. (Na 2018)



Figure 2. Duo Subway Advertisements.

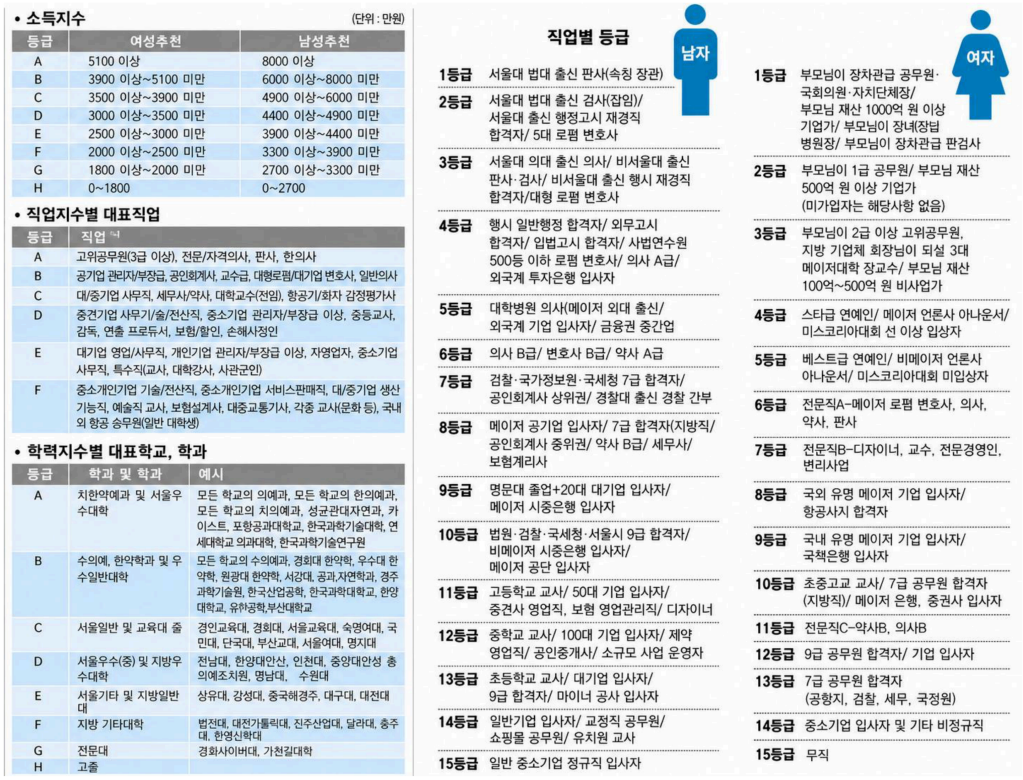
In another article by the same author, the anonymous source reported that their agency employed fake customer profiles in order to lure in more clients and even out their sex ratios. One of the consequences of these unequal sex ratios among marriage agencies and online matchmakers is that women must pay higher fees in order to use their services, disadvantaging them in the sexual field. This is especially true of lower-income women but also women whose "specs" do not conform to South Korean traditional standards of what makes a "good wife." For example, it was recently disclosed that Duo charges 1.5 million won ($1500) for five arranged meetings but other packages they offer can cost as much as 10 million won ($10,000) (Turnbull 2020). Concrete numbers and averages are hard to come by but stories of men who negotiate much lower prices or who pay nothing at all due to their excellent "specs" are numerous.

Alternatively, women with "good specs" such as extensive education and higher income may be required to pay more in order to join the dating service because marriage agencies believe that men prefer women with "worse specs" than themselves. Older women may also pay more than younger women with prices rising steeply after the age of 35 (Turnbull 2020). As of 2017 the average marriage age for South Korean women was 30.2, and for men 32.9 (Statistics Korea 2018). Whether or not these agencies are responding to or completely shaping the South Korean dating market is an open question beyond the scope of this research. However, I have gone into some depth in order to show that the commodification of intimacy creates and reinforces existing inequalities. New technologies of intimate consumption, in this case online marriage agencies, make these inequalities more explicit.

Outside of the relatively Westernized Tinder and its particular clientele, South Korean online dating and matchmaking services are highly commodified. This commodification is both a major strength and weakness of these services according to my informants, who expressed suspicion of their profit motives while also being wary of free services that could be potentially more egalitarian, like Tinder which lets "just anyone" use them. The largest matchmaking agencies, including Duo and Gayeon, employed professional couple managers who interviewed clients, verified personal information, and attempted to identify

compatible matches (K.-R. Kim 2016). Rather than allowing individuals to browse hundreds of anonymous profiles, couple managers acted as intermediaries, selecting introductions they believed would result in successful marriages. It is the addition of a couple manager who screens potential dating partners and forms a bond of trust in order to connect socially disconnected singles that helps customers feel comfortable but also adds to their considerable expense.

One of the ways that online marriage agencies have made the unequal South Korean sexual field more explicit is the use of dating and marriage rating charts to divide their clients into groups, sometimes using a letter grade. Many of the "specs" on these charts are focused on income, job title, education, and parental class background. However, while one of the purposes of the charts is to match South Korean singles with others who are from similar class backgrounds, they are also highly gendered. Figure 3 shows two of these leaked ranking charts that have circulated on the internet from unnamed matchmaking companies.



• 소득지수 (단위 : 만원)

등급	여성추천	남성추천
A	5100 이상	8000 이상
B	3900 이상~5100 미만	6000 이상~8000 미만
C	3500 이상~3900 미만	4900 이상~6000 미만
D	3000 이상~3500 미만	4400 이상~4900 미만
E	2500 이상~3000 미만	3900 이상~4400 미만
F	2000 이상~2500 미만	3300 이상~3900 미만
G	1800 이상~2000 미만	2700 이상~3300 미만
H	0~1800	0~2700

• 직업지수별 대표직업

등급	직업
A	고위공무원(3급 이상), 전문/자격의사, 판사, 한의사
B	공기업 관리자/부장급, 공인회계사, 교수급, 대형로펌/대기업 변호사, 일반의사
C	대/중기업 사무직, 세무사/약사, 대학교수(전임), 항공기/화차 감정평가사
D	중견기업 사무기/술/전산직, 중소기업 관리자/부장급 이상, 중등교사, 감독, 연출 프로듀서, 보험/할인, 손해사정인
E	대기업 영업/사무직, 개인기업 관리자/부장급 이상, 자영업자, 중소기업 사무직, 특수직(교사, 대학강사, 사관군인)
F	중소개인기업 기술/전산직, 중소개인기업 서비스판매직, 대/중기업 생산기능직, 예술직 교사, 보험설계사, 대중교통기사, 각종 교사(문화 등), 국내외 항공 승무원(일반 대학생)

• 학력지수별 대표학교, 학과

등급	학과 및 학과	예시
A	치한약예과 및 서울우수대학	모든 학교의 의예과, 모든 학교의 한의예과, 모든 학교의 치의예과, 성균관대자연과, 카이스트, 포항공과대학교, 한국과학기술대학, 연세대학교 의과대학, 한국과학기술연구원
B	수의예, 한약학과 및 우수일반대학	모든 학교의 수의예과, 경희대 한약학, 우수대 한약학, 원광대 한약학, 서강대, 공과,자연학과, 경주과학기술원, 한국산업공학, 한국과학대학교, 한양대학교, 유한공학,부산대학교
C	서울일반 및 교육대 줄	경인교육대, 경희대, 서울교육대, 숙명여대, 국민대, 단국대, 부산교대, 서울여대, 명지대
D	서울우수(중) 및 지방우수대학	전남대, 한양대안산, 인천대, 중앙대안성 총의예조처원, 명남대, 수원대
E	서울기타 및 지방일반대	상유대, 강성대, 중국해경주, 대구대, 대전대
F	지방 기타대학	법전대, 대전가톨릭대, 진주산업대, 달라대, 충주대, 한영신학대
G	전문대	경화사이버대, 가천길대학
H	고졸	

직업별 등급

남자

1등급	서울대 법대 출신 판사(속칭 장관)
2등급	서울대 법대 출신 검사(잡임)/ 서울대 출신 행정고시 재경직 합격자/ 5대 로펌 변호사
3등급	서울대 의대 출신 의사/ 비서울대 출신 판사·검사/ 비서울대 출신 행시 재경직 합격자/대형 로펌 변호사
4등급	행시 일반행정 합격자/ 외무고시 합격자/ 입법고시 합격자/ 사법연수원 500등 이하 로펌 변호사/ 의사 A급/ 외국계 투자은행 입사자
5등급	대학병원 의사(메이저 외대 출신/ 외국계 기업 입사자/ 금융권 중간업
6등급	의사 B급/ 변호사 B급/ 악사 A급
7등급	검찰·국가정보원·국세청 7급 합격자/ 공인회계사 상위권/ 경찰대 출신 경찰 간부
8등급	메이저 공기업 입사자/ 7급 합격자(지방직/ 공인회계사 중위권/ 약사 B급/ 세무사/ 보험계리사
9등급	명문대 졸업+20대 대기업 입사자/ 메이저 시중은행 입사자
10등급	법원·검찰·국세청·서울시 9급 합격자/ 비메이저 시중은행 입사자/ 메이저 공단 입사자
11등급	고등학교 교사/ 50대 기업 입사자/ 중견사 영업직, 보험 영업관리직/ 디자이너
12등급	중학교 교사/ 100대 기업 입사자/ 제약 영업직/ 공인중개사/ 소규모 사업 운영자
13등급	초등학교 교사/ 대기업 입사자/ 9급 합격자/ 마이너 공사 입사자
14등급	일반기업 입사자/ 교정직 공무원/ 쇼핑몰 공무원/ 유치원 교사
15등급	일반 중소기업 정규직 입사자

여자

1등급	부모님이 장차관급 공무원·국회의원·자치단체장/ 부모님 재산 1000억 원 이상 기업가/ 부모님이 장녀(장남 병원장/ 부모님이 장차관급 판검사
2등급	부모님이 1급 공무원/ 부모님 재산 500억 원 이상 기업가 (미가입자는 해당사항 없음)
3등급	부모님이 2급 이상 고위공무원, 지방 기업체 회장님이 되설 3대 메이저대학 장교수/ 부모님 재산 100억~500억 원 비사업가
4등급	스타급 연예인/ 메이저 언론사 아나운서/ 미스코리아대회 선 이상 입상자
5등급	베스트급 연예인/ 비메이저 언론사 아나운서/ 미스코리아대회 미입상자
6등급	전문직A-메이저 로펌 변호사, 의사, 약사, 판사
7등급	전문직B-디자이너, 교수, 전문경영인, 변리사업
8등급	국외 유명 메이저 기업 입사자/ 항공사지 합격자
9등급	국내 유명 메이저 기업 입사자/ 국책은행 입사자
10등급	초중고교 교사/ 7급 공무원 합격자 (지방직)/ 메이저 은행, 중권사 입사자
11등급	전문직C-약사B, 의사B
12등급	9급 공무원 합격자/ 기업 입사자
13등급	7급 공무원 합격자 (공항지, 검찰, 세무, 국정원)
14등급	중소기업 입사자 및 기타 비정규직
15등급	무직

Figure 3. Matchmaking Company Ranking Charts. (**Left Chart**), Top Section, Parent Income Index, Left Side: Women, Right Side: Men, Middle Section, Job Index. (**Left Chart**), Bottom Section, Education Index. (**Right Chart**), Left Section, Man's job, Right Section, Women's Job.

In these charts, men are ranked highly for their own achievements such as their income and job titles while women are ranked higher for their parents' achievements, usually the father's income. The charts are a reflection of the South Korean marriage marketplace where men are judged by their ability to achieve high incomes and women are judged based on their ability to adhere to what a "good wife" means, with their parents' class background and their educational achievements being used as a proxy. As illustrated in Figure 3, men's scores were weighted based 30% on their job, 25% on their education, 20% on their parents' income, 20% on how much money the man has in savings, and 5% on their appearance. Alternatively, women's scores were based 40% on their appearance, 20% on their parents' income, 20% on their job, 10% on their education, and 10% on how much money the woman has in savings (Park 2016). These ranking systems vary from

one matchmaking company to another and the charts are often kept a secret. However, the explicit nature of the existence of such ranking systems lays bare the discriminatory nature of the dating and marriage marketplace in South Korea. This inequality takes place not just between men and women but also between men and women of different classes and ranks.

The discriminatory nature of these ranking systems was well known among my informants. Although many participants were aware that these ranking systems partly reflected actual preferences within the South Korean sexual field, many shunned the system entirely. Heidy, a 30-year-old freelance writer and travel enthusiast, explained her reasons for shunning online marriage agencies:

> Glayzer: Have you ever used an online matchmaking agency, like Duo? Heidy: No, no, no, no, no, no, no.
>
> Glayzer: You've never used it?
>
> Heidy: Usually those companies have grades for customers, and I knew that I was not going to get a good price (because I would not be graded high), so okay.
>
> Glayzer: I'm really curious about the grading. I want to join one, just to see what grade I would get … But why do you think your grade would be low?
>
> Heidy: Because, in case of a man, the grades can be … it's about their job and then their parents. But in the case of a woman, their parents are the most important and then their job and then their like, specialties, for what they studied and what is their job. So basically, in the case of a woman, it's gathered by family status. And my family is like … middle class, teachers and so … I kind of knew that like the first grade is like … if their father or mother was a government officer, like chief of the government officer or like enterprise or company owners, that's kind of how rich they are. And I know that I'm in the middle class, so those companies will not be the greatest option for me.
>
> Glayzer: Do you think those companies only get high-class people? Or are you afraid of being matched with another middle-class person? Do you want to be matched with a high-class person and you think the application won't do that?
>
> Heidy: Well, since I, in case of the application, I kind of do not like it, because I don't know."

Heidy's example illustrates how some singles are effectively excluded from certain sexual fields due to their pay-to-play commodification combined with gender and class inequality. These ranking systems not only reproduce gender inequality but also demonstrate how inequality between classes is reproduced. As illustrated in Figure 4, the weighted "spec" ranking system assigns different values to men and women based on gendered measures of occupation, education, income, family background, and appearance.

Eleanor, a 30-year-old graduate student majoring in literature had recently used a couples' matching service called GaYeon (가연), the second most popular after Duo, or "Good Match" to help her find a suitable partner for dating or marriage. However, she stopped using their services shortly after her counseling appointment because she felt their service was "too commercial." Eleanor reported that the matching company charged women a higher fee than men in order to make a date.

> Eleanor: And they said women should pay more money because women are expecting social status. So, like upgrading.
>
> Glayzer: You have to pay more money to be in the company?

Eleanor: Yea. To get matched with guys. Because women are expecting more, uh, higher like… upgrade social status.

Glayzer: Oh. What do men want?

Eleanor: They want only pretty women. That's it. It sucks!



Figure 4. Weighted Spec Ranking Chart.

Additionally, Joan found out that her ranking within the dating company, despite her excellent education, would be middling due to her having spent significant time abroad. She felt that the reason for this was South Korean cultural conservatism, that if a man were to report significant time spent abroad that it would actually raise his ranking within the matchmaking company, not lower it. I asked Joan, a 30-year-old woman software developer currently living in the US why her time spent abroad would lower her ranking with the matchmaking agencies.

Joan: Because they didn't live with their parents for a while. That means they didn't get to take care of their parents, or being like, pure? How do you say that?

Glayzer: So, they are worried about virginity? Joan: Exactly!

However, this is not the only reason as Grace, the 31-year-old ICU Nurse with experience living abroad describes her experience when meeting with a Duo counselor.

Grace: Yes, I went to a counseling meeting with Duo and they wanted to match me with some guys but they wanted money. (laughing) They asked me for a lot of money!

Glayzer: Oh, was the counseling free? Grace: Yes, that was free.

Glayzer: And then how much did they want you to pay? Grace: 5,000,000 won ($5000)!

Glayzer: 5,000,000 won! (laughing) So, it's a bit like a sales pitch?

Grace: Yeah but it depends on how many men you want to be matched with. It would give me a chance to meet several men depending on how much I paid. But I have enough friends that can introduce me to guys for dating for free. Duo is more for people who really want to get married.

Glayzer: 5,000,000 is really expensive! If you pay more do you get to meet higher quality people. Grace: Yeah, I think so. I also heard that they charge women double, double (what they charge men)!

…

> Glayzer: Do you know how you were rated? Do you know what your score, like… if you were an A person or a B person?
>
> Grace; I think they said I was average. I think at that time they said I was average or a little bit low because of my parents. Because they tell me that if my parents were lawyers or doctors, I would have had a high score.

As with dating applications, there are also widespread fears of being duped by couple matching companies. Eleanor explained one iteration of this fear, being tricked into paying for dates with actors in a scam organized by the matchmaking service.

> I heard what they do is when a girl, when a woman gets, um, application and pay, they employ some random guys to be dating with the girl, a few times, and just they just count it as the first date, second, third… They just hire people for just dating, and they get paid just… because, because people, a woman pays for like… such as three additional dates, and the company hires like one or two guys for counting dating."

Eleanor's account illustrates another form of distrust surrounding commercial matchmaking services. In this case, her concern was that women could pay substantial fees for arranged dates without knowing whether the men they met were genuine clients or actors employed by the matchmaking company.

While the majority of people in my surveys and interviews said that they had never used Duo or any other couples' matching service, many expressed either an interest in them or an interest in using them later in life when getting married might become a priority. Ara, a 27-year-old woman working in finance explained flatly that she had never used Duo, "But I'll do [it] when I get old, and get aged, but not married yet, I would apply." I ask Joan about the cost of using such services in South Korea for finding a dating partner.

> Glayzer: Do you think it's mostly older people serious about getting married that pay these companies for their matching service or do you think there are casual daters too?
>
> Joan: Definitely not, because it's not cheap. It's pretty pricey apparently, so yeah but they work I just heard but what they work is like you're paying a lot actually like thousand dollars something for once and then date yes, they are assigning you three times good background level guys something like that so it's for serious marriage, I guess.

While women often had strong opinions about using couple matching companies to find a suitable marriage partner, if not necessarily a dating partner, men were far less likely to admit considering their use. In most of my interviews with South Korean men, the question of whether or not they would use a couple matching company such as Duo was dismissed out of hand. I have the same response entered multiple times in my notes, "No. Never." When pressed, only a few men would elaborate on their reasoning for not considering this type of dating. These reasons tracked well with how women responded to the same question, with answers having to do with not being ready for marriage, high costs of membership, and a distaste for being classified into a graded dating system. However, after many such interviews I began to understand men's curt responses to the question as a rejection of desperation to find love and a lack of desire to rush into marriage. Most of my male informants were in their early to late 20s and the national average age of first marriage in South Korea is currently hovering around 32 years old for men and 29 years old for women. As Joe, a 23-year-old man put it:

> Joe: (laughing) NO! (laughing) That's for elders! Glayzer: How old are those people usually?

> Joe: Like, at least late 20s or early 30s because like that kind of thing usually is used by someone who is seriously seeking for marriage prospects, so yeah.

Only two of my male informants expressed any interest in using a matchmaking service such as Duo. One of them was Peter, the low-income male who I guessed to be in his late 30s but would not disclose his exact age. Peter expressed a kind of curious bemusement about the prospect though he admitted that he would never pay for such a service and that he would likely be ranked rather lowly, if allowed to join such a service at all. The other informant was Elliot, the elite male in his early 30s actively looking to get married. He said that was probably because the service was free for him since he was a highly ranked male his fees would be waived. He went on dates with two different women that he was matched to by Duo. In each case he did not have to pay any fees, but the women paid about 300,000 won ($300) for the privilege. He also explained that in order to meet even higher-ranking men, with an A+ rating, women would have to pay 500,000 won ($500) per match. While neither meeting developed into long term commitments at the time when he was in his late 20s, he was considering using the service again because a friend of his had recently gotten married to a woman that they had met via Duo and he thought that his friend seemed very happy in his new marriage.

For Elliot, the use of Duo was not a sign of desperation to get married or a failure on his part to attract women he was interested in. In fact, he often bragged during the interview that it was extremely easy for him to have a relationship, for casual sex or committed and long-term, with many of the airline stewardesses that he worked with, all of which had been preselected for their jobs based partly on their physical attractiveness. In fact, he claimed that he used to do just that for a long time before becoming tired of being desired by the stewardesses just for his income and job title. However, he found that this same pattern was repeated while using Duo, with him even being allowed to meet and date women using the company and its resources for free. He complained further that one reason he stopped using the service was because his dates felt more like job interviews where his dating partner focused more on learning about his income and career goals more than on his personality, interests, or hobbies.

Elliot's experience demonstrates how existing gender and economic inequalities can be reproduced through commercial matchmaking. His ability to use the service without paying fees contrasted sharply with the fees paid by the women he met, while Peter believed that his lower income would leave him poorly ranked or potentially excluded from the service altogether. These examples show how economic inequality can translate into inequality in the search for intimacy, not only between men and women but also between individuals of different socioeconomic means. This is similar to other accounts where high status men are able to extract significantly more money from the bride's family during wedding payment negotiations because the higher status male feels entitled (Kendall 1996).

The development of new technologies of intimate consumption such as dating applications and online marriage agencies could conceivably help to decrease gender inequality by lowering the costs of entry and expanding an individual's reach into the South Korean sexual field, dating marketplace, and marriage marketplace. However, my informants' strong preference for dating partners who had been socially vetted, combined with concerns about sexual and physical violence, South Korea's long history of using matchmakers to screen potential matches, and fears of being taken advantage of economically, limited the emancipatory effects of free dating applications. Commercial matchmaking services offered screening and reduced uncertainty, but access to these services came at a considerable economic cost and reproduced many of the gender and class inequalities already present in the South Korean dating and labor markets. Despite this discrimination within matchmaking companies (Song 2014), women remained overrepresented among

their clientele and therefore were "in excess." The commodification of screening and trust therefore did not eliminate existing inequalities within the South Korean sexual field but provided another mechanism through which these inequalities could be reproduced.

3. Discussion

3.1. Why Online Dating Failed to Democratize Courtship

The overwhelming majority of informants did not reject dating applications because they disliked technology. Rather, they viewed the anonymity of online dating as creating unacceptable levels of uncertainty when compared to meeting through existing social networks. Across interviews, women and men described different risks associated with dating strangers online, but both groups expressed a preference for partners who had already been socially vetted through friends, family, coworkers, or shared social circles. As a result, dating applications occupied a marginal role within mainstream South Korean courtship despite their widespread availability.

The rapid expansion of online dating applications created the expectation that technology would democratize romantic courtship by allowing individuals to bypass existing social networks and connect directly with a much larger pool of potential partners (Broeker 2023; Glayzer 2021; Watson 2006; Constable 2009). This expectation was particularly plausible in South Korea, one of the world's most technologically advanced societies and an early adopter of smartphones, high speed internet, and digital communication technologies. Yet my findings suggest that dating applications did not substantially transform mainstream patterns of relationship formation. Instead, the overwhelming majority of informants continued to prefer meeting partners through existing social networks, blind dates (*sogaeting*), group dates (*meeting*), or professionally arranged introductions.

These findings also demonstrate that dating applications did not replace earlier forms of courtship but instead became incorporated into an already diverse landscape of partner selection. South Korean singles continued to move between meeting naturally, *sogaeting*, *meeting*, *hunting* (Glayzer 2021), matchmaking agencies, *matson*, and dating applications depending upon their stage of life, available social networks, and relationship goals. Rather than a linear progression from traditional to digital courtship, online dating emerged as one option among many, with each method carrying its own expectations, risks, and symbolic meanings (Glayzer and Nelson 2024).

The findings presented here suggest that technological innovation alone was insufficient to overcome the importance of trust and social vetting in South Korean courtship. Rather than eliminating intermediaries, most informants preferred methods of partner selection that reduced uncertainty by relying upon existing social relationships or carefully screened introductions. Anonymous dating applications offered access to a larger pool of potential partners, but this increased choice also increased uncertainty concerning a potential partner's intentions, identity, and trustworthiness. For many participants, these risks outweighed the potential benefits of meeting someone outside their existing social networks.

More recent research suggests that the relationship between social vetting and dating applications may be changing among some younger South Koreans. Based on research conducted with South Korean Tinder users in 2020 and 2021, S.-K. Kim (2025) argues that some members of Generation MZ valued Tinder precisely because it allowed them to separate their dating lives from their existing social networks. Drawing on Bergström (2021), Kim describes this process as the "privatization" of dating. Unlike sogaeting, where an introduction through a mutual acquaintance provides a degree of social vetting and accountability while also creating social obligations and the possibility that information about the date will circulate within an existing social network, Tinder allowed users to meet partners

without these forms of social mediation. This finding initially appears to contrast with my earlier fieldwork, in which many participants regarded the absence of social connections and vetting as one of the primary disadvantages of dating applications. However, these findings are not necessarily contradictory. Kim specifically examined Tinder users rather than South Korean singles generally and cautions that these participants should not be understood as representative of Generation MZ as a whole. Instead, the comparison suggests that the separation of dating from existing social networks can function simultaneously as a source of risk and a source of autonomy. The same anonymity that made dating applications undesirable to many of my participants provided some of Kim's later Tinder users with greater freedom from the social obligations and expectations associated with more conventional forms of South Korean courtship.

The limited adoption of dating applications by mainstream South Korean singles therefore reflects not a rejection of technology itself, but the persistence of social institutions and cultural expectations surrounding intimate relationships. While digital platforms expanded the number of possible romantic connections, they did not fundamentally alter the importance of trust, reputation, and social accountability in the formation of intimate relationships. These findings suggest that technological innovation alone is insufficient to democratize intimate markets when existing social inequalities and mechanisms of trust continue to shape partner selection.

3.2. The Commodification of Intimacy in the Digital Age

The findings presented here suggest that online dating applications did not eliminate the commodification of intimacy in South Korea but instead altered the ways in which it was experienced. Dating applications such as Tinder have the potential to disrupt and subvert existing hegemonic male power structures by providing their matching services for free or little cost (Broeker 2023; Constable 2009). The high costs of maintaining a relationship through near constant gift giving (Glayzer 2021; Glayzer and Nelson 2024), the expense of dating outside of the home, and the costs associated with searching for a dating partner could all be reduced through free dating applications. However, South Korean singles rarely utilized these applications because of deeply held fears of meeting someone from outside their existing social networks. The emancipatory potential of new technologies of intimate consumption was interrupted by the desire to screen potential partners before entering an intimate relationship.

Rather than reducing commodification, many South Korean singles embraced online matchmaking agencies that intensified it. Extensive screening procedures, couple managers, and the verification of education, occupation, income, family background, and other demographic characteristics provided a degree of trust that free dating applications could not. These services were expensive, however, reintroducing economic inequalities into the process of partner selection. As a result, technologies that appeared capable of expanding intimate choice often reinforced existing inequalities by making professionally screened introductions available primarily to those who could afford them.

The uneven adoption of dating applications suggests that digital technologies alter the distribution of risk rather than eliminating it. While online platforms reduce the costs of searching for potential partners, they simultaneously shift the burden of evaluating strangers onto individual users. Those with robust social networks can reduce these risks by relying on socially vetted introductions, while those excluded from conventional dating networks are more likely to accept the uncertainty associated with meeting strangers online. Commercial matchmaking agencies offer another solution by transforming screening into a purchasable service, allowing clients to exchange economic capital for reduced uncertainty in partner selection. Trust therefore becomes intertwined with both social and eco-

nomic resources. Individuals with access to robust social networks can draw upon those relationships to establish trust, while those with sufficient economic resources can purchase professional screening. Those with access to neither form of screening bear more of the risk associated with evaluating strangers themselves. The commodification occurring here is therefore not simply the charging of money for romantic introductions, but the transformation of trust, screening, and reduced uncertainty into services that can be purchased.

The "privatization" of dating described by Bergström (2021) and S.-K. Kim (2025) is therefore closely connected to the commodification of intimacy examined here. Privatization and commodification are not the same process, but dating applications such as Tinder demonstrate how they can occur simultaneously. Tinder allows individuals to remove the search for intimate partners from their existing social networks while relocating that search to a commercial digital platform. In doing so, some of the screening, accountability, and social mediation provided through practices such as *sogaeting* are removed, and individual users assume greater responsibility for evaluating potential partners and managing the risks of meeting strangers. The privatization of dating can therefore provide greater autonomy from existing social networks while simultaneously increasing the role of the marketplace in mediating intimate relationships. This relationship becomes particularly visible when comparing *sogaeting*, dating applications, and commercial matchmaking agencies. *Sogaeting* relies largely upon social relationships to provide screening and accountability, dating applications allow individuals to bypass those relationships while assuming more of the risks of screening themselves, and commercial matchmaking agencies transform many of these same screening functions into services that can be purchased. Privatization can therefore increase individual autonomy without necessarily reducing the commodification of intimacy.

My data suggest that the commodification of intimacy is not on the rise due to new technologies of intimate consumption such as the internet but that it is instead related to inequalities in other parts of society such as the labor and housing markets (Constable 2009; Moon 2005; Song 2014). Implicit in the literature on the role of new technologies of intimate consumption is the assumption that their use will be taken up most forcefully by those who would exploit it to relieve their own discrimination. In other words, new technologies are often adopted by those with less power in society to subvert the existing power structure. The examples I have given in this chapter allow me to call this assumption into question. The power of the internet to subvert, disrupt, or even upend existing inequalities in society can also strengthen, reinforce, and reflect those same dynamics. In this case, I argue that these new technologies have, as of yet, not increased the commodification of intimacy in South Korea but made existing inequalities barer and more visible for scrutiny.

These findings support Zelizer's argument that economic activity and intimacy should not be understood as inhabiting separate spheres (Zelizer 2005). Rather than markets simply intruding upon or corrupting an otherwise noncommercial intimate sphere, participants used different combinations of social and economic resources to create, maintain, and evaluate intimate relationships. Dating applications lowered the monetary costs of searching for partners but provided relatively little social information with which to establish trust. Socially mediated introductions relied instead on existing relationships to provide screening and accountability, while commercial matchmaking agencies explicitly assigned economic value to screening, verification, and reduced uncertainty. From this perspective, the internet did not create the commodification of intimacy. It provided new mechanisms through which the relationship between intimacy and economic exchange could be negotiated and made visible. The central question is therefore not simply whether intimacy has become more commodified, but how digital technologies redistribute the costs, risks, and resources involved in establishing intimate relationships. Online dating

did not fail in South Korea. It succeeded, but primarily for people excluded from the dominant dating system. Most of my other informants continued to rely on increasingly commodified forms of social screening.

3.3. Implications for Digital Intimacy

Although this study focuses on South Korea, the findings have broader implications for understanding the relationship between digital technologies and intimate life. Much of the popular and academic discourse surrounding online dating assumes that new technologies fundamentally transform romantic relationships by expanding individual choice and reducing the importance of traditional social structures (Watson 2006). The findings presented here suggest a more complicated process. Rather than replacing existing institutions of courtship, digital technologies become incorporated into local cultural expectations, economic inequalities, and systems of social trust that continue to shape intimate relationships. As a result, the adoption and meaning of dating applications cannot be understood apart from the broader social and economic contexts in which they are embedded.

These findings also contribute to anthropological understandings of intimacy by demonstrating that technological innovation does not necessarily weaken the relationship between markets and personal relationships. Instead, new technologies may reinforce existing social boundaries while creating new opportunities for markets to mediate intimate life (Zelizer 2005). The continued importance of blind dates, professionally arranged introductions, and commercial matchmaking agencies alongside dating applications illustrates that digital technologies rarely replace earlier forms of courtship. Rather, they become incorporated into an already diverse repertoire of dating practices through which individuals negotiate intimacy, trust, social inequality, and increasingly the terms and expectations of intimate relationships themselves.

The increased autonomy provided by dating applications can also be understood as part of the broader individualization of intimacy in South Korea. Glayzer and Nelson (2024) document this process through changing cultural scripts surrounding commodified dating rituals, particularly the gendered expectations governing who pays the costs of dating. While South Korean courtship has traditionally placed greater financial responsibility on men, couples increasingly negotiated these expenses themselves, including more individualized arrangements for sharing the costs of dates. These changing practices provided greater flexibility to negotiate the economic terms of intimate relationships but did not necessarily eliminate the gender and economic inequalities in which those relationships were embedded. S.-K. Kim's (2025) later research with Tinder users suggests that dating applications can extend this process of individualization by allowing some younger South Koreans to separate dating and sexual relationships from their ordinary social lives and experiment with different "sexual scripts." Rather than following a single expected progression toward an exclusive and potentially marriage-oriented relationship, Tinder users could pursue different combinations of dating, sex, companionship, emotional intimacy, and commitment according to their own circumstances and desires. This autonomy, however, does not eliminate existing inequalities. Kim found that the risks associated with these individualized relationships remained strongly gendered, with women particularly concerned about sexual violence, reputational consequences, and the difficulty of evaluating partners who had not been socially vetted. Dating applications can therefore provide greater freedom to negotiate the form and progression of intimate relationships while simultaneously transferring more responsibility for managing the risks of those relationships onto individuals. In this sense, the individualization of courtship does not necessarily produce more equal intimate relationships but can create new opportunities for autonomy alongside new forms of uncertainty and risk.

Finally, this study demonstrates the value of ethnographic approaches for understanding digital technologies. Large-scale surveys can measure patterns of dating application use, marriage, and fertility, but they are less well suited to explaining why individuals embrace or reject particular technologies or how those technologies are experienced in everyday life. By combining participant observation with interviews and surveys, this study shows that the limited adoption of dating applications among the participants examined here cannot be explained by technology alone. Instead, dating applications became meaningful through the cultural expectations, social relationships, and political economic conditions that shaped their experiences of South Korean courtship. Because the primary fieldwork was conducted in 2016 and 2017, these findings should be understood within that historical context rather than as a description of current dating application use among all South Korean singles. Nevertheless, the findings provide a basis for examining how trust, social vetting, gender inequality, and economic resources shaped the incorporation of dating technologies into South Korean courtship during this period.

4. Conclusions

This study began with an apparent contradiction. Despite living in one of the world's most technologically advanced societies, the overwhelming majority of South Korean informants rarely used online dating applications to initiate romantic relationships. Rather than embracing anonymous digital platforms, participants continued to prefer meeting partners through existing social networks, blind dates (*sogaeting*), group dates (*meeting*), or commercial matchmaking agencies. While dating applications expanded opportunities for some individuals, particularly those with limited access to conventional dating networks, they did not fundamentally alter patterns of courtship among most of the participants examined here.

The findings presented here suggest that the limited adoption of dating applications cannot be understood as a rejection of technology itself. Dating applications offered the potential to reduce the costs of searching for a partner and expand access beyond existing social networks, but these benefits were unevenly distributed. Individuals marginalized within the dominant dating field were more likely to adopt these technologies, while the majority of informants continued to rely on existing social networks and other established forms of courtship. At the same time, commercial matchmaking agencies remained attractive despite their considerable financial cost, explicitly organizing partner selection through the screening and evaluation of education, occupation, income, appearance, family background, and other characteristics.

More broadly, this study suggests that digital technologies have not eliminated the commodification of intimacy but have instead reshaped how it is experienced and understood. Rather than replacing existing dating practices, online dating applications became incorporated into an already diverse landscape of courtship in which intimate relationships and economic activity remain deeply intertwined. Dating applications reduced the economic and social barriers to searching for potential partners but transferred much of the burden of screening strangers onto individual users. Existing social networks provided one means of reducing this uncertainty, while commercial matchmaking agencies transformed screening and trust into services that could be purchased. The internet did not create these processes of commodification. Instead, it provided new mechanisms through which existing inequalities could be reproduced, negotiated, resisted, and made more visible.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the impact of digital technologies on romantic relationships cannot be understood apart from the cultural, social, and economic contexts in which they are embedded. New technologies may expand opportunities

for meeting potential partners, particularly for individuals with limited access to conventional dating networks, but they do not necessarily democratize intimate relationships or diminish existing social inequalities. Rather than viewing the internet as either inherently liberating or inherently commodifying, this study demonstrates how new technologies become embedded within the broader political economic systems through which intimacy continues to be created, negotiated, and maintained in contemporary South Korea.

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