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Swiping Left on the Quantified Relationship: Exploring the Potential Soft Impacts

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John Danaher, Sven Nyholm, and Brian D. Earp's (2018) fascinating articleon potential ethical objections to the use of quantified relationship technologies contends that "there is no blanket objection to or knockdown argument against" their use (17). Although we agree with this conclusion and with their plea for further empirical study of these technologies, we argue that their discussion of the quantified relationship does not adequately consider potential soft impacts of quantified relationship technologies (QRT).

Relationship, dating, and "hookup" technologies, such as online dating applications and social media, are already in widespread use and they serve as a source of insight about these impacts. Dating applications are a particularly suitable example for comparison because of their role in mediating intimate relationships and because objections to QRT that the authors' consider significantly overlap with the kinds of objections that have been raised against widespread use of dating apps. We focus on a heterosexual use of Tinder, but similar comparisons can be made for other apps that target other sexual orientations. Conclusions based on our comparisons challenge the authors' cautious optimism about QRT. Instead, these conclusions suggest that QRT are likely to have negative social and moral consequences that reverberate far beyond any individual relationship that they involve or facilitate. These impacts merit consideration even if one remains neutral, as Danaher and colleagues do, on the goals, value, and limits of romantic relationships in general. Three types of concerns are discussed next: (1) opaque algorithms; (2) unintended and unanticipated uses; and (3) reification of harmful gender norms.

Tinder is an example of the way in which relationship technologies are far from being neutral about the quality of relationships that they promote. Tinder's algorithms favor novelty (the so-called "newbie boost"), facilitating short-term relationships over long-term ones, thus securing its continued use by its customers. Other apps do things slightly differently, depending on their business model. When the structure of the app is apparent this is not necessarily problematic, but the business models that typically inform the apps' algorithms are almost always obscure to users. Tinder even creates a secret "Elo score" for each user, a measure of their desirability. The same is true of QRT, which would inevitably come with their own algorithms, business models, and structures. These structures will be designed to secure continued customer engagement or purchase of upgrades, among other things. Danaher and colleagues acknowledge that the marketing and methods of behavior change that QRT employ may take advantage of users' "relationship" insecurities, but, the authors claim, this is not unique to QRT. We agree that this is not a unique problem, but it is a problem nevertheless. In this case, some of the features of QRT that may matter most to their users would remain obscure to them. Consequently, even if users consent to the use of QRT, their hidden structure may change users' behaviors in ways that they do not intend or approve. As with Tinder, one may sign up to use a QRT with one thing in mind and end up doing another, without being aware of it. This is, at best, disrespectful paternalism. At worst, it is an unwelcomed manipulation, for largely commercial purposes, into what is central to our conception of ourselves, namely, our social relationships and our moral characteristics (Strohminger and Nichols 2013).

Online relationship, dating, and "hookup" apps are often repurposed for other uses. This can take place as a result of the affordances that are put in the app intentionally, such as those that result in gamification in Tinder (Hakala 2013). Happn, a global positioning system (GPS)-based dating app that intentionally uses of gamification to increase user engagement, asks users to guess which one of four users that they were spatially near during the day is their special crush. Some apps allow users to "collect" their matches as if they were virtual playing cards. It

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remains to be seen whether gamification of dating facilitates dehumanization and light-hearted cruelty or merely facilitates flirtatious play that is already a part of dating.

There are also cases of unintended repurposing. Tinder can be used as a dating app and as a means for professional networking and self-promotion—for example, using brief conversations with Tinder matches to promote a party or to find investors for their small businesses (Froelich 2014). We can imagine an analogous repurposing given the affordances in QRT. A positively perceived profile of one's quantified relationship may be used to communicate an ability to maintain a desirable sort of relationship, put bedroom achievements on display, or advertise one's personal style, among many other possibilities. What is troubling about these afforded possibilities is that a potential employer, colleague, insurance specialist, partner, friend, bureaucrat, marketer, or extortionist could gain access to what can be sensitive information and do with it as they choose. With widespread use of QRT, these affordances would eventually lead to users being pressured to disclose their performance on the various dimensions that Danaher and colleagues discuss. Similar pressure is now applied to owners of social media accounts to verify their identities, showcase their ability to network, or advertise their "safe" off-work activities. QRT will similarly contain information that a variety of stakeholders would find useful and may at some point ask for—you have nothing to hide, right?

Another likely troubling soft impact of QRT is the reification of harmful gender roles. There are two ways in which QRT is likely to result in this. On the one hand, the previous two likely soft impacts of QRT—obscure algorithms and repurposing—will provide new avenues for bringing harmful gender norms to bear on private behavior. On the other hand, there are distinct ways in which QRT would further entrench some of the most harmful gender norms, which systematically cause women in particular be harmed. In the world of dating apps women regularly receive unwelcome photos of male genitalia and face intimidation through messages after they reject a potential match. When it comes to QRT, Danaher and colleagues acknowledge the "gendered relationship" objection, but argue that whether or not bad consequences are created for women "depend[s] more on the general social context in which the apps are developed, as well as on the particulars of the relationships in which they are used" (16). The problem with this answer is that we already have extensive information on the context in which these and other technologies will be used, as well as on the different ways in which men and women use relationship apps like Tinder (Tyson et al. 2016), and the picture is not good. Evidence shows that apps are often a vehicle for systematic and institutionalized gender-based discrimination, disadvantage, and violence that is insulated from the larger community where such behaviors can be sanctioned. We do not have the luxury of being able to claim ignorance as to these matters, especially in light of the #metoo campaign and revelations of endemic (largely) gender-based harassment. Additionally, there is significant evidence that technologies, especially algorithms, can embody gender, racial, and even metaethical biases of their designers (Hajian et al. 2016; Frank and Klincewicz 2016). QRT are likely to be informed by stereotypical and gendered "scripts" of romantic and sexual behavior that are demonstrably detrimental to both partners' sexual and personal fulfillment (Verbeek 2006). Two of the examples given in Danaher and colleagues' article illustrate these scripts: One sex app measures number and g-force of thrusts, while another, Kouply, codes taking out the garbage as a romantic gesture. Of course, QRT could be intentionally designed to combat these gendered scripts, but this seems unlikely, given the extent to which they are currently ingrained in cultural attitudes, institutions, and other technologies.

While Danaher and colleagues are cautiously optimistic about the value and implementation of QRT, given what we already know about the consequences of dating and hookup apps, we remain cautiously pessimistic. ■

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