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Balls, Dating Apps, and the Perception of Self and Others

No doubt you saw the entire pretty picture in detail. The young Prince, bowing to the assembly. Suddenly, he stops. He looks up, for lo, there she stands, the girl of his dreams. Who she is, or whence she came, he knows not, nor does he care. But his heart warns him that here... here is the maid predestined to be his bride. A pretty thoughtful fairy tale, Sire. But in real life… Oh, dear... no. It was foredoomed to failure

–the Grand Duke, Cinderella (1950)

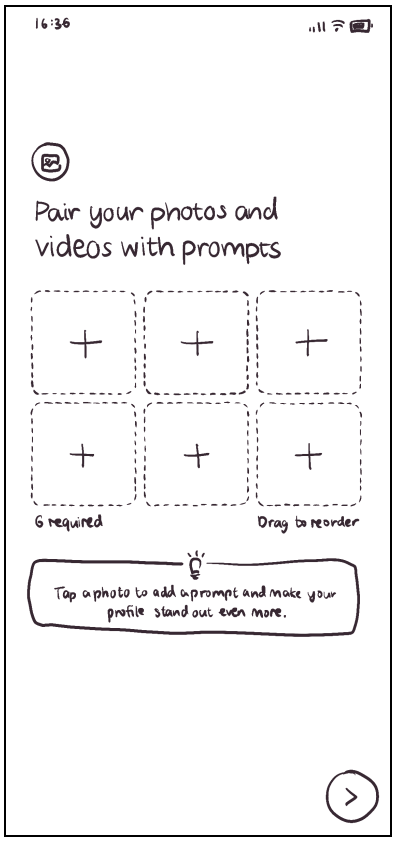
Some of the first stories I remember from my childhood were often about princes and princesses, featuring grandiose displays of wealth and beauty in the form of large balls. Cinderella dances with the prince at a ball, set up to introduce him to eligible women for him to marry. The movie Anastasia opens up with a woman dressing up to attend a ball at the palace, and the music box that is central to the movie's storyline depicts the late king and queen dancing together as though they were at a ball together. The fantasy has been imparted to young girls: balls are a way to meet the prince of your dreams once you come of age, a place to dress up and be admired as the princess that you are. To young boys, they also buy into the idea of finding their beautiful princess who is made for them and is happy to leave her previous life of hardship behind to be with him. The fantasy of a ball, and the social graces associated with it, becomes an ingrained way of believing in love.

This has ramifications in society, not only because children who engage with fantasies about princes and princesses eventually grow up, but because while we can see balls as relatively outdated and remnants of

an older society, the same societal structures that balls facilitated can be found ingrained in one of the most popular methods of finding life partners in modern society: dating apps. Your dating app of choice pushes you down a certain path of how to depict yourself and what values are communicated between potential matched partners because all of the social interactions involved in finding a partner are mediated by specific choices that are part of the design of the app itself. Studying the implications of the social structures surrounding both actual balls and the fantasy of balls in children's stories can not only shine a spotlight on the ways modern dating apps succeed in facilitating partnerships between people, but also on the ways they fail.

Reflecting on Your Image to Society

A debut came with a lot of preparation—the dresses for the season needed to be designed, made, and fitted, while social graces needed to be practiced to present a perfect picture to society (Richardson 32-33). There were social expectations of what a ‘good’ debut looked like, with women having to understand the latest styles, have socially acceptable achievements or a notable family, and their social graces were reinforced throughout their entire life. Social gestures such as the Texas dip, taught to debutantes—and to me by my friend who learned it growing up while in training for their own debut—required heavy practice to present yourself as appropriately submissive (Southern Living). Depictions of these social norms in television shows, such as the highly popular Bridgerton (Netflix), expand on the fictitious role of a women in this type of society: that they are important decision makers in their own life with their access to these social spaces, but are ultimately in control of their family, who can often be restrictive or cruel. Both the depictions in history and in fictitious worlds necessitate a great deal of reflection on the women’s parts around how they want to appear and what depiction of themself is most advantageous for their goals in order to get their ideal match.



Compare this to the first time you download Hinge: after the first steps that ask straightforward biographic data about you—your name, birthdate, gender preferences, etc.—you are immediately asked to fill out your profile (App Fuel). Knowing that most people are terrible at talking about themselves (Lewis), they streamline this process by providing you prompts to attach to your photos and prompts to answer (Hinge Dating App: Match & Meet). These prompts serve the same function as preparation for a debutante ball: to reflect on what you want out of the app, what makes you a good match, and how to push you towards showing yourself in the best light. These prompts, however, are laden with societal values around what the app itself thinks is important in facilitating connections, much like the social structures involved in a woman getting ready for her debut. There are culturally-specific prompts (“My best blue steel”, “As seen on my Mom's fridge”) and implications around what things are important (“Self care” being a whole category of prompts—a very individualistic value). Prompts also focus a lot about current presentation of self, rather than about deeper core values or about the future that they aspire to with their partner, which are important for not only the needs similar to matches made at balls—future financial survival—but also important to modern-day values around partnering with someone who is compatible with your lifestyle. Most of the prompts are also attached to images, which focuses the attention on aesthetics rather than on values. Even with text prompts, there is a large focus on the present self rather than discussing future goals, which is almost entirely taken over by a single category: are you looking for something short term, long term, or hook-up oriented? There is less room for nuance and specificity in providing context around these relationship aspirations. The heavy focus on aesthetics and the individual’s present self or past experiences does not help envision the potential couple’s future, in direct contrast to the aims of balls which were almost entirely about future potential.

Both the preparation for a ball and the creation of your dating app profile lead to one thing: an introduction into a space where the point is to see and be seen once a person comes of age. However, even with all the preparation, there is no guarantee of the welcome they will receive, apart from what they can expect from the social norms that surround them.

Social Norms and Matching

The ball begins. Acceptable single men and escorted ladies are in one of the only acceptable venues to meet people of the opposite sex who may not have been already formally introduced to them, although etiquette books suggested a lady refrain from dancing with a man who had not already been introduced to her by her family or friends. Once a man finds interest in a lady, he asks the host to be introduced to her. The host then gains the approval of her chaperone on the pairing, before the man is then able to ask the lady to dance. A lady adds the man to a free space on her dance card, expected to accept or find a polite way to decline. (Frazier 54-55).

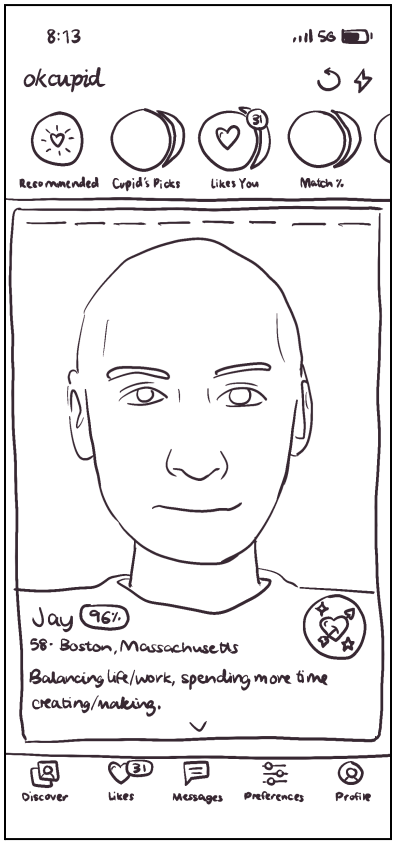
The fantasy of the ball is that a lady can find her Prince Charming—that she will be asked to dance by her prince, that they will socialize, and that they will eventually marry so she can live a better life. However, the realities of a ball were very different. Women were given the most agency in their lives during their season, attending balls and being able to socialize with men in a socially acceptable venue. However, this still came with the backdrop of strict social expectations: there were specific steps to follow for more formal interactions to be socially acceptable. Men were also expected to dance with as many women as possible, regardless of whether or not he found them attractive—making the pairing more equitable out of politeness (Frazier 56).

There is still the dream fantasy contained within dating apps, though. Success stories are fairly common nowadays, and dating app companies have jumped onto those stories as part of their marketing (Bumble). These social expectations have been flattened down in most dating apps to a quick appraisal of an individual, then an active action—to swipe right to try to connect, or to swipe left to disregard them. This active action of swiping gives people a feeling of agency, a feeling that the control over the app—and of their love life—is at their literal fingertips. While this is sometimes outsourced to friends or loved ones, each person in charge of the phone feels a certain power over the situation. You are there to signal your interest, in the hopes that the interest is acted upon by the other person, much like filling up your dance card. There is, however, a lack of social graces attached to that: instead of being part of an event that encourages introductions that are contextualized within your community, every interaction on a dating app is down to the unknown possibility of a future match with an individual who you know nothing about other than what they present to you on their profile. This is, however, mitigated by no longer being beholden to some of a ball's other social graces either—you are able to reject someone without them even knowing that they have been rejected because, to them, your profile is just another one in the stack of profiles to swipe with no indicator of your lack of interest.

And how do you even know which people you would like to interact or match with? Socializing at balls were often targeted towards family business goals, rather than for love: women being traded amongst families in order to maintain status or wealth. This business transaction has now turned into transactions surrounding sex, or based on relationship values of compatibility and agreement. These judgments about compatibility on dating apps are often nearly always about aesthetics—nearly all modern dating apps heavily prioritize large profile photos over any other information, such as descriptions about themselves, demographic data, or any discussion about values. Additional effort, such as scrolling, is needed to see those details. Even when that effort is taken, many apps have very short maximum text limits that restrict the amount of information you can even insert into a profile. Hook ups through dating apps are more common (Stodart) and the people you meet are not always within your community with similar

expectations of social engagement. Peacocking and showing yourself off in the best light becomes important—the proliferation of certain tropes like men holding up large fishes in photos (Ryder), or people taking ‘thirst traps’ (Isador) comes out of this need.

There is also the additional problem of even encountering people in the first place—how do you even see people’s profiles in the first place to be able to indicate your interest, or lack of? Dating apps provide you with the stack of people that you may be able to interact with if you match—taking on the role of a ball’s host who issues invites based on individuals’ social acceptability. This outsourcing of the ‘party list’ to a dating app seems more equitable, as anyone can sign up for a profile and be displayed to others, but it is still inequitable because dating apps maintain power over which profiles are shown to more users more than others—it is just much less visible or transparent to the people who are utilizing their services.



The algorithms that determine which profiles get displayed to you and how are proprietary knowledge of dating app companies. These platforms collect all sorts of data about the people on their apps (users having willingly provided all their information to make their profiles more attractive to others) and we know that they use this data to inform how people behave on their app. When Facebook was being criticized for conducting social experiments on their users to explore how to change their emotions, OkCupid came out and admitted that they experiment on their users too. They conducted experiments where they changed their provided match percentage between users (a core feature of their service that indicated how compatible they considered two individuals on the app) illegitimately. They discovered that two users with a real 90% compatibility were less likely to keep chatting if they were told they only had a 30% match, compared to two users who were actually a 30% match

but were told they had a 90% match—even the myth of compatibility created by their own interface was enough to alter their users' behaviors (Hern). Tinder gives each profile an "ELO" —a term taken from chess as a way of indicating ranking—that is based not only off of attractiveness, but also on how successfully they engage with other people on the app. This, in turn, informs how they experience the app in terms of what profiles are shown to them and who their profile gets shown to, keeping in mind that both those pools need to overlap in order to even have a chance at matching (Carr). The interface may present itself as opaque—showing match likelihoods, offering up seemingly infinite numbers of possible dates, and making the unspoken society rules of how to engage more concrete and visible—but it has control over your very perception of other people using the app.

Given that they have sole control over these powerful levers through their algorithm that can dictate exactly which people interact with each other, dating apps have enormous social power in terms of who to connect and when—something that used to rest in the hands of the elite who hosted balls. However, the scale on which they operate is significantly larger: not only are they accessible to everyone, making the fantasy of finding a dreamy prince or princess theoretically more accessible, they also have significantly more costs associated with their existence in the form of server upkeep costs for their millions of users and the vast amount of people that they employ. This provides competing interests: users of their app want to be paired up successfully which usually results in both individuals leaving the pool of users using the dating app, yet the companies also need subscribing users to generate recurring and regular revenue to pay their staff. This means that there is an incentive towards providing you with only somewhat successful matches: good enough matches that you have good experiences so you continue to trust in the app, but not good enough that you find your perfect person and leave the app since you no longer need it. That results in only about 1 in 10 adults indicating that they have found success and found a long-term partner through dating apps—a lot less than the 3 in 10 who indicate that they've used one (Vogels and McClain).

This financial requirement that dictates the way they have to approach building their algorithm goes even further. While balls were often held to show off opulence and for social status, dating apps are beholden to shareholders and boards that are judged nearly entirely by financial performance indicators. They have to focus their energies on increasing their profit, which means convincing more users to pay for features, but different users may have very disparate motivations. Because of this, dating apps heavily control the experience for different types of users and use their algorithm to convince them that a purchase of their premium product would be beneficial for them. There can result in huge disparities in an individual's experience of dating apps, entirely based on things like their provided demographic details.

One of these disparities is that men and women have very distinctly different experiences on the app because of disparity in supply and in quality of users. This lack of quality amongst men that women encounter on dating apps can be illustrated by the large internet debate on whether a woman would rather run into a bear or an unknown man in the woods. Men were shocked that women's responses leaned heavily towards wanting to encounter a bear (Pritchett). A Pew Research Center Study indicated that 56% of women under 50 who have used dating sites or apps say that they received a sexually explicit message or image without their consent, 43% had someone continue to contact them after telling them they weren't interested, 37% have been called an offensive name and 11% have received threats of physical harm—all things that are less common than men of any age (Vogels and McClain). The other large issue is the difference in supply: 84% of Tinder users and 61% of Bumble users are men. On the other hand, half of women are overwhelmed by the number of messages they receive (*The Economist*). This makes men prime targets to sell subscriptions to, relying on their hopes of beating a manufactured system that the app itself has created, in order to generate more revenue. Instead of the individuals in a possible marriage match meeting at a ball and basing their compatibility off of business goals, people engaged in online dating become the customers of the business.

The social norms around how people show up in a space, as well as how they are able to encounter potential matches, dictate a lot about the eventual outcomes of both balls and dating apps. But there is still a lot of work after an initial match that can affect the outcome.

Escalating Matches

Once someone has been formally presented and they have declared their interest in another individual, there is the fantasy of the chase. When the clock strikes midnight, Cinderella runs and her Prince chases her, even after only knowing her for less than a night. Bumble, long known for being the app that required women to reach out first, changed their interaction design and now allows men to reach out first as well (Elsesser).

However, this is where balls and dating apps differ the most: while there are rituals around what to do after a ball to engage with someone of interest, there are no expectations or rituals around what to do after you match with someone on a dating app. Instead of formalized structures of calling on a lady at her residence or chaperoned outings for activities outlined prior to meeting, nearly all dating apps hit you with an empty chat interface.

I will admit that I have had decent success on dating apps—I found a partner on there, as well as a number of professional contacts and close friends—and I attribute that a lot to the way I have learned to engage with people through a chat interface. I find comfort in the text-based interface because that was my main form of engaging with people growing up, even outside of dating, and I do not feel the disconnect many others do when chatting with people. But how do you learn how to engage with others better? That can be the role of the interface. There could be nudges, prompts, or suggestions that can spark inspiration for a first message. Highlighting things that both people have in common, starting off with a question prompt that is synthesized from their profiles, or mini activities and games to do

together—all of these ideas can populate a chat to encourage better conversations between people, much like the expected shared activities at a ball.

Then there is also the role of etiquette. Historically, both men and women had to learn appropriate etiquette in order to be able to present themselves well in society. Manners and etiquette still exist within the modern world, yet in interactions via dating apps, people tend to do away with them (Vogels and McClain). There is again opportunity for the interface to intervene: with improvements in natural language processing and sentiment analysis, anti-social behavior may be identified by the app, flagged to the user, and requesting that they opt in to knowing the effect of their messaging on the other person. That does impart, however, very specific moral values to every user on the platform. But this would not necessarily be anything new—there has always been consequences to actions, especially for behavior that harms others, to serve as a deterrent towards crimes that were believed were just—and can be mitigated by both creating a set of moral guidelines that may serve as design pillars to direct designers towards making prosocial design decisions, and by being transparent and explicit about those values.

The biggest opportunity for development of future dating apps is to increase their ability to connect people in meaningful ways. A lot of that will rely on a designer's ability to push people towards acting prosocially and the successfulness of teaching users emotional intelligence skills that they feel comfortable using digitally.

Outside of the Fantasy

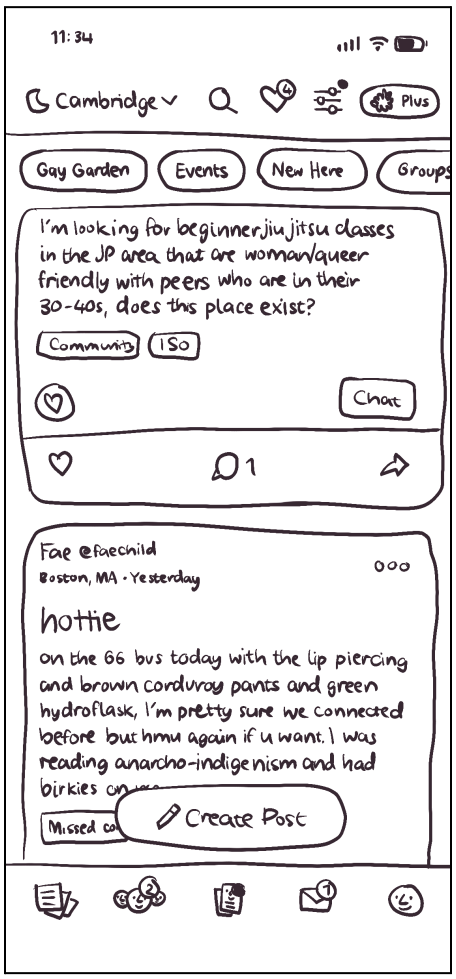
When we are talking about balls, we envision a very stereotypical type of romance between a prince and a soon-to-be princess. But what about the people for whom this is not a possibility? What happens when someone does not buy into the typical gendered roles of the ball? What happens when a prince wants another prince, or a princess another princess?

This love for the fantasy of the ball drove the creation of queer ballroom culture in America as places of self-expression and joyful celebration. Instead of being simply places for brides to find advantageous matches, they were instead a place where the idealized view of a ball—the focus on aesthetics and of displaying your talents to your community for validation—formed deep communities of support through celebration. They served as structures for people to find their role in society, as an alternative to a wider world that often rejected them. This was especially true when it came to talking about the origins of modern day ballroom culture: Crystal LaBeija responding to the racist results of a pageant by founding the House of LaBeija to host her own balls (Criales-Unzueta). The love of the ball in queer culture comes from origins of empowerment through the ritual and structure provided by these balls as a rejection of traditional concepts of gender and societal expectations. The fantasy of love and support coming as a result of attending balls becomes realized within the structure of this shared community space.

It is interesting to contrast that to the design of dating apps that target queer people. While balls have been transformed into places of empowerment due to community needs, that is not always the case for the approach queer dating apps have chosen to take when it comes to helping queer people connect with each other.

Grindr is a common dating app for gay men. The interface you are hit with on first install is to see a photo database of individuals in close proximity to you. These photos are often highly sexualized—the headless torso pic, the muscle flex in the gym mirror, the butts in tight underwear—and usernames often explicitly state what individuals are looking for—‘Right Now’, ‘Top’. The filter systems have the usual culprits of age and proximity, but they also go further with categories

like ‘tribes’ that allow users to filter by gay stereotypes like twinks or bears, ‘position’ which allows users to find sexually compatible partners, or ‘body type’ to filter people by how their body looks (Grindr). While there may be parallels to ballroom culture, like the focus on aesthetics, much like any dating app it suffers from the disconnection of community as all interactions happen on a very individual basis. The apps’ filters’ focus on connecting sexually compatible partners based on stereotypes results in a fracturing of the community along those lines, rather than a celebration of those categories like competing in the same category at a ball would be. This results in many interactions through this app remaining superficial or shallow—arguably more so than typical dating apps. And it resultantly has a reputation for being solely a hook-up app (Doherty).



In contrast to this: Lex is a much smaller queer dating app, geared more towards the general queer community than solely gay men. It takes the form of written posts in a reverse chronological feed, and images are not allowed to be posted apart from a profile image on your personal profile. Posts looking for dates are interwoven with posts about community events, political commentary, and humor. Users can filter posts, but the filters are solely about the type of post and there is a heavy emphasis on community within the selection (Lex: Queer Social LGBT Friends). This makes the dating experience more connected to your community: you can find date ideas in the community events people are hosting, you can encounter others naturally without the pressure of dating, and even hookups are understood to be in the context of being part of a larger community that both of you have to navigate. This focus on community and embedding relationships within the

context of the people around you is similar to the way ballroom culture requires an engagement with the wider community and culture to be successful. The design of Lex reminds people that they're broadcasting their intentions and social self to the wider world, with comments and reactions keeping them accountable to social norms—instead of isolating dating from community feedback, like most apps do.

Queer dating apps have much more variety in design that is informed by the different social structures that often surround queer dating, such as a focus on cruising or a focus on embedding relationships within their community—something that also translated into the different approach to balls where the queer community took aspects that appealed to them, then built their own social structures around the balls to support their individual needs. They remain an example of ways to rethink dating apps to take into account a wider context of interactions, and as a way to reimagine what could be possible if different priorities were taken into account.

Conclusions

Dating apps push people towards the same principles of social engagement that balls fostered: the focus on displaying yourself correctly for potential partners, the empowerment of engagement, and the thrill of the experience. They, however, make you view the world around you through their specific lens because the information you are exposed to about people and the people you are suggested are mediated through the app and by the company that designs it. Control over your experience and your perception of others, instead of remaining within your community, is handed over to companies who have financial gain as their primary goal.

With the current state of dating apps, that means there could be a role in modern life for the fantasy of balls as places of romance to inspire new technology to help people connect. A ball's focus on creating

relationships within a community, along with clear expectations and rules of engagement, meet many needs that current dating apps currently lack. Designing dating apps that are inspired by this more heavy social structure to interactions may be a path forward towards dating apps that tackle loneliness and disconnection.

However, it would also be important to patch the holes that focusing on balls as inspiration for design would cause. Balls never had to grapple with concepts around making matches based on love and interpersonal compatibility—many relationships were purely transactional and based on advantage gained—yet this is a core part of what people crave in modern relationships, especially when entranced by the idea of a ball to meet their prince or princess. This craving is currently often met by impersonal or outright offensive messages because of the lack of community expectations. That means there is also a need for focusing on encouraging, but also teaching, emotional intimacy in the design of the apps.

Social technology should always be inspired by values and by the communities that we already exist within. Balls worked for society—at least for some women—and their enduring legacy, even until today, shows that there are benefits to more structured dating settings. Beyond their historical nature, the fantasy and awe that has built up around them already influences the way we contextualize our relationships, with or without dating apps. Designers might as well be inspired by the things that they already love and design things that can create that awe for the wider world.

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