

SUMMARY

MODERN ROMANCE

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Summary of «Modern Romance» by Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg

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An analysis of dating in the digital age and how online dating has changed the way younger people approach love and romance.



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Introduction

Decades ago, people found love based on proximity, but now, we have the freedom to find love anywhere in the world with apps like Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. Today we place more emphasis on love, passion, and genuine connections which means younger people view marriage much differently than previous generations. While research shows that our emphasis on love and passion makes for happier lives, it also makes for a more stressful dating life. Through online dating, we have the potential of meeting hundreds or thousands of people that we would have never met in person; however, this also means that we idolize the “perfect” person, so we become picky and disregard potential dates for seemingly small reasons.

Throughout *Modern Romance*, Aziz Ansari and sociologist Eric Klinenberg tackle the issue of modern dating in the digital age. They seek to discover how dating has changed over the decades and determine if those changes have affected daters positively or negatively.

Searching For Your Soul Mate

How did you meet your significant other? How did your parents meet? The way your parents met likely is far different from how you met your spouse, or how you seek to meet your new spouse. New technology has changed both how romance is done as well as the very meaning of romance itself. To investigate how romance was done and understood by an older generation, Aziz Ansari interviewed people in a retirement home in New York.

Persuaded by coffee and donuts, the seniors were set on sharing their romantic stories. Except for a man named Alfredo who managed to scam several donuts without sharing any information about his dating history.

Ansari noticed a few common threads throughout his interviews, one of which was that over a third of them had met their future spouses within a block or two of their childhood home. Research from 1932 showed that one-third of couples married in Philadelphia lived within a five-block radius of one another. Nowadays, with advancements in cars, planes, trains, and smartphones, you can literally meet anyone in the world, so people are far less likely to be marrying people from their hometowns. But why?

Well, one major factor is that people are now marrying, on average, about five years older than the generation that married in the 1950s. There's even a term to describe this period of independent life between adult life and married life called "emerging adulthood." This stage of life was largely missing from the lives of senior women at the retirement home. They lived in a generation where they lived under the rule of their parents until they were released to the mercy of a husband. Despite this lack of independence, many of these women expressed they would have done things differently if they had the opportunity and they encouraged their daughters to do so.

Not only do we now experience emerging adulthood, but we also marry for a completely different reason than previous generations. When seniors were asked what they saw in their partner, they would say things like "he had a good job" or "she was a nice girl." Back then, that was enough as

marriage was understood as more of a “companionship” according to sociologist Andrew Cherlin. This simply meant that marriages had clearly defined roles with clear bars for success. This was more true for women who had fewer opportunities for success and viewed marriage as a means to success later in life. For instance, 76 percent of women and only 35 percent of men in an early 1960s poll admitted they would marry someone they did not love.

Younger generations today are far more likely to marry for love, a relatively new phenomenon. This phenomenon emerged due to industrialization and the women’s movement. In fact, by the 1980s 86 percent of men and 91 percent of women would not marry without love. In other words, the idea of the soul mate had arrived.

Most younger people today would never entertain the idea of marriage without passion, so now the hunt for the perfect soul mate is both ongoing and stressful. However, nowadays people approach dating and social events far different than previous generations. Younger people approach dating through the use of their phones. With several apps at their disposal, younger people can filter potential soul mates through location, age-range, and interests. These tools and apps now make the range of available singles exorbitantly high for those looking to date someone in a specific area at any given moment.

The Initial Ask

So how have the expectations for communication changed over the years? Well, according to data from 2012, men are still largely expected to initiate romance; however, with the introduction of online dating apps and the increase in texting, many other expectations have changed as well.

By 2007, sending texts suddenly became the most popular form of communication, and apps like WhatsApp, iMessage and Facebook Messenger suddenly increased texting options for many people. So what does this mean for dating? Ansari discussed texting versus calling people to initiate contact and young men, in particular, expressed fear at the thought of calling a woman versus texting them. Similarly, many women agreed that texting was a more appropriate way to make the first contact. While they may agree that texting is a much better form of communication, researcher Sherry Turkle argues that texting has decreased a young person's ability to engage in spontaneous conversation. For instance, Ansari noted how when they split up their focus groups, the adults easily talked to one another while the younger generation avoided small talk by focusing on their phones.

While younger generations prefer texting over calling, there are many drawbacks to such communication. For instance, texting allows people to present themselves in ways that do not match who they are. For instance, men tend to move quickly to sexually aggressive and offensive text messages that they would never say in person. Furthermore, texting can lead to judgment and miscommunication if the texter uses bad grammar and spelling. Many people also have their own pet peeves when it comes to texting behavior. For example, a popular conversation starter men use is a generic message like "Hey!" However, women view such generic messages as a lack of creativity and effort and would prefer a conversation starter that takes more time and effort to send.

Daters in today's younger generation also stress over seeming too eager and available. They largely fear coming off as desperate and worry about how long they should wait before making the next contact. One participant even admitted to making note of the time it took her date to respond, and then doubled it before replying. However, this participant wasn't the only person to admit to using similar strategies. On the other hand, many others expressed their frustration in playing such games and preferred prompt communication from their date.

Lastly, younger people tend to put a large portion of their lives on the internet and social media. So what do they do before going on a date? They do some research! A simple Google search can lead to critical information that can go either way, it can be good or bad. Some admitted that they become overly judgmental of what they find on the internet. They find it hard to keep an open mind during the date if they find unfavorable information from their research. However, some people believe they learned valuable safety information after doing a simple Google search before a date. At the end of the day, it's best to keep an open mind and remember that a person's life online can be far different from their real one.

Online Dating

In today's world, we have an unlimited amount of information and resources right at our fingertips. This holds true for dating as well. With the number of apps available, you have more options than ever to seek the type of relationship you want. With niche apps like Sweatt which matches fitness fans based on their favorite workouts, Tall Friends which matches those that are over 6ft 4in, and even Woo Plus for those seeking an overweight lover, there are endless amounts of niche apps to find whoever you are looking for. While some of these apps seem a bit ridiculous, they are gaining popularity and a full one-third of marriages come from online dating services. In fact, more people are finding their partners online versus finding someone through work, school and friends combined.

Even with all the options for online dating available, there are downsides as well. Many people find themselves becoming more and more picky about their prospective dates. For instance, a participant named Derek once rejected a potential date because of the baseball team the woman supported. Furthermore, participants expressed feeling burnt out from online dating. They spend so much time examining all their available options and meeting prospective dates that they have become frustrated with not finding a connection. However, Ansari suggests that this feeling of burnout comes from online daters not doing it well. For instance, research suggests that 90 percent of traffic is actually driven by looks, not the filters that people are encouraged to set on their profiles. So while someone may be looking for someone with particular interests, they will forego those interests for someone they find attractive.

When it comes to looks, Christian Rudder, the author of *Dataclysm*, proves that females see the most success when they make eye contact, have a coy look, and are looking up in their photos. Men see success when they are looking away in their photos and are engaging in an activity. Additionally, message length is important and Rudder suggests that a message between

40 and 60 characters is the “sweet spot” and is the most successful in soliciting a response.

However, even with all the available tips and tricks, simply getting to know a person based on their dating profile is no substitute for meeting them in person. It’s important to avoid online courtship for too long and Ansari suggests that you meet in person as soon as possible. While many women avoid such meetups for safety reasons, the reality is that meeting face-to-face is the only way you can learn if a person is the right fit or not. Our online personas can be far different from our real ones, so to avoid drawing out a doomed relationship, it’s best to meet in person as quickly as possible.

Choice and Options

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are countless choices and options for a potential mate nowadays. But is this necessarily a good thing? Aziz Ansari discusses his parent's successful 25-year relationship and points out that they didn't have countless options when they were dating. In fact, their marriage was arranged. Today, we literally have a world of options at our fingertips, but with these possibilities comes a sense of missing out on something better. Professor of psychology, Barry Schwartz, argues that more choices lead to less satisfaction.

Think about the way you choose a restaurant. You might go through great lengths to find the "perfect brunch spot" but then end up going to the closest place anyway. Or even when you go grocery shopping, are you likely to look at and analyze every single bottle of wine before you choose? When we have endless options, we become overwhelmed. One study found that people were far more likely to buy jam after being offered to taste just six different varieties. When offered to taste twenty-four varieties, people were far less likely to make a decision and buy a jar of jam. There were too many choices! Too many choices can lead to paralysis in decision making of all kinds, not just when buying jam or wine.

To prove this theory further, Ansari researched dating trends in smaller geographic locations where people have less access to options. In such areas, research suggests that people get married younger than the national average. However, these studies also revealed that people were generally disappointed in the lack of options. Between knowing everything about everyone in town and seeing your ex everywhere, dating in a small town has its own set of obstacles.

Ansari then explores what he calls "non-boring-ass dates." Boring dates might be the standard meet-up for drinks or coffee, but he instead wanted to see how people fared when the first date forced one or both parties to step outside their comfort zone. Doing something adventurous or a once-

in-a-lifetime experience showed there would be a higher chance for a second date. No matter the type of first date, Ansari's best piece of advice is to take time to get to know another person. A person's best qualities are usually revealed over time, so be patient and allow a connection to grow throughout several dates.

International Investigations of Love

Much of the research provided so far only covers dating trends in the United States, so what about dating trends in other countries? Ansari took his research across borders to the cities of Buenos Aires, Tokyo, and Paris. Starting in Tokyo, Japan, where the city sees plenty of night clubs, love hotels that rent by the hour, and several adult-themed retail stores, hookup culture generally dominates the city. In fact, a full third of people under thirty have never even been on a date.

The government has become so concerned about a lack of population growth that they have started subsidizing families per child. Additionally, the government provides funding for couples events, internet tools, and other dating options for young couples. But why is Tokyo seeing such a rise in hookups over relationships? Japanese sociologist, Kumiko Endo, suggests that one obstacle is the rise of so-called “herbivore men” who have no interest in dating women who have successful careers. Additionally, men feel no rush to find a lifelong partner, they enjoy living with their parents until their thirties, and may even feel insecure due to the lack of stable, high paying work available in Japan. Online dating has also produced a stigma of being too forward among Japanese modern daters. For instance, many believe that posting selfies is egotistical and selfish, so many post pictures of their pets to show off their personalities in other ways.

On the other hand, the dating scene in Buenos Aires is far different from that of Tokyo. While men in Tokyo are criticized for being too forward, the men of Argentina are expected to be aggressive and go after who and what they want. For instance, catcalling on the street and high-pressure tactics are the norm for Argentinan males; behavior that is seen as predatory in other countries, like America, is widely accepted and even encouraged in Buenos Aires. Whereas men are aggressive, women are encouraged to appear disinterested and reject dating proposals even if they are interested, which simply creates confusion. Furthermore, online dating is seen as desperate and has not taken off as it has in other countries. Perhaps one of

the major differences in Buenos Aires is the norm for dating more than one person at once, even those in committed relationships have a backup plan with someone else.

So while daters in America have their own obstacles, it seems that every country has its dating scene that is equally frustrating for both men and women trying to find a lifelong partner.

Old Issues, New Forms: Sexting, Cheating, Snooping, and Breaking Up

The phenomenon of sexting has been on the rise since sharing pictures became easily available through text messages and other online platforms. Sexting doesn't have to be sending sexually explicit photos though, it can simply be sending sexy text messages as well. The popularity of this phenomenon suggests that 50 percent of people aged 18-24 have received sext messages and it's becoming more popular in other age groups as well. And it's not just for singles, sexting happens just as much between those in committed relationships. But why is it so popular? There are certainly many advantages including easily initiating intimacy, declaring sexual turn-ons, and it's a great way for those in long-distance relationships to maintain intimacy.

However, like most things, there are certainly downsides as well. For instance, many experience betrayal by their partner when he or she engages in sexting with another person. Women also experience "slut-shaming" when they engage in such types of texting; however, younger women are beginning to change their perspectives and believe that sexting is an empowering act.

People engage in sexting more often nowadays due to the ease of privacy. You can simply be in the same room as others and still engage in sexting with someone else; however, this privacy doesn't just make sexting easier, it also makes cheating easier. With the advancement of many privacy apps, people can easily hide conversations from their partners and easily engage in relationships with others.

This ease of privacy also increases the amount of snooping and has become a part of many modern relationships. Some openly allow their partners to snoop through their phones while others sneakily snoop through their partner's phone without the other knowing. Snooping can certainly help a

person find out about infidelity in their relationship, but it can also lead to a breakdown of trust.

Speaking of infidelity, different countries share different perspectives on the subject. While 88 percent of Americans find infidelity to be morally wrong, only 47 percent of those in France share the same perspective. Perhaps this is because French people believe being attracted to others is a natural part of life, and sometimes people follow through with those attractions. Basically, major politicians in France will not have their careers ruined over an affair like they would in America.

Settling Down

So how do you know when you find someone that is just right? With so many available options, it can be quite confusing to know when someone can easily fit into your life and become your lifelong partner. Not only is it confusing, but it can also become quite frightening to think about settling down. Many aren't sure if they are ready for such a commitment, and maybe monogamy simply isn't how humans are wired.

Say you do find someone that you are ready to settle down with, there are several more problems that you will face throughout your relationship. The first being the end of the "honeymoon phase." During the honeymoon phase, the hormones produced during that time equate to a feeling of euphoria and can last anywhere from one year to 18 months. Once the passionate phase of the relationship ends, "companionate love" follows. Many find themselves ending relationships during this phase simply because they didn't give enough time for that companionship to blossom. Perhaps this decline in companionate relationships is the reason why marriage rates are steadily declining in the developed world, specifically in places like Japan and Europe.

But maybe those that decide not to engage in marriage have the right idea. Some evolutionary psychologists argue that people are simply not wired for monogamy. Sex columnist Dan Savage states that monogamy was once viewed as men being expected to have extramarital affairs whereas women were not. This expectation shifted during the women's movement when society largely believed this idea was unfair. Rather than just getting rid of monogamy altogether, society evolved towards stricter monogamy expectations for both women and men. Savage suggests that those who engage in open relationships are happier and their relationship has a better chance at surviving in the long run. The key, however, is to negotiate arrangements that respect both parties and cater to their comfort level.

To see how people felt about open relationships, Ansari took to a subreddit to ask respondents about their own experiences. While many expressed a great deal of satisfaction, others shared that jealousy was far too big an obstacle to overcome or that a partner had violated the rules of the arrangement. Additionally, many of the participants in Ansari's focus group expressed doubt about the viability of open relationships and just raising the idea would make them doubt their partner's sincerity and commitment. Other experts share similar sentiments and also question whether such relationships work long-term.

Final Summary

Modern dating is complex. We seek romance through technology and our relationships face more challenges as we struggle to navigate dating in a technological world. Remember that even though our interactions may be digital, the messages on your phone come from a real person with real needs and feelings. Think about the impression you are making before you hit send, and try to act as genuine as possible. Remember that no one wants to play games, strike a balance between seeming too eager and too disinterested, and utilize the golden rule. It's also important to stress that online dating is simply about being introduced to other people, not about getting to know someone. You'll need to spend time with someone to truly get to know them. Lastly, don't let the sea of options keep you from taking the plunge and getting to know someone. Make dating fun and plan novel experiences over grabbing a drink to jump-start getting to know someone.



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