

How the Instant Gratification Design of Dating Apps in Korea Creates False Expectations of Romantic Communication

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Abstract

This paper explores how the instant gratification design of dating apps in South Korea shapes false expectations of romantic communication. Through analysis of app mechanics, user behaviors, and cultural context, the study demonstrates how swiping interfaces, gamified feedback systems, and hyper-responsive messaging environments accelerate emotional engagement while undermining sustainable connection. Drawing from contemporary Korean social norms, the paper examines how platform logic clashes with traditional expectations of pacing, discretion, and gender roles in romantic initiation. It argues that the resulting cultural friction not only fosters ghosting and communication fatigue but also reframes intimacy as a performance governed by algorithmic tempo rather than relational depth. The study concludes by proposing a reimagined model of digital intimacy that prioritizes emotional continuity, intentional design, and hybrid relational literacy.

Keywords: dating apps, instant gratification, South Korea, emotional acceleration, ghosting, digital intimacy, gamification, romantic communication, platform culture, hybrid courtship norms

1. Introduction

In recent years, South Korea has witnessed a rapid and widespread adoption of mobile dating applications, fundamentally altering how young adults initiate and negotiate romantic relationships. Fueled by the proliferation of smartphones, high-speed internet infrastructure, and a tech-savvy millennial and Gen Z population, the dating app industry in Korea has grown into a normalized social space for meeting potential partners. As of 2022, over 60% of single adults in their twenties and thirties reported having used at least one dating app, according to a survey by Gallup Korea (2022), highlighting how online-mediated intimacy is no longer peripheral but central to contemporary romantic culture.

This shift is not occurring in a cultural vacuum. South Korea's demographic landscape—marked by delayed marriage, declining birth rates, and high youth unemployment—has complicated traditional paths to partnership and family formation. In this context, dating apps emerge not just as a convenience, but as a compensatory tool amid reduced offline social opportunities. Young people face long work hours, academic pressures, and a shrinking number of institutional spaces (such as universities or workplaces) that once facilitated organic encounters. Digital platforms offer a low-effort, high-efficiency solution for initiating contact in a society where public expressions of romantic interest are often restrained by etiquette, hierarchy, and gendered expectations.

Unlike Western markets, where Tinder-style casual dating dominates the narrative, the Korean dating app ecosystem is characterized by platform specialization and sociocultural sensitivity. Apps such as *Amanda*, *NoonDate*, and *DangYeonSi* market themselves not merely as matchmaking services but as personality-based, serious dating spaces, often incorporating filters such as education level, income bracket, and even astrological compatibility. While some global apps like Tinder and Bumble have established footholds, they are often perceived—especially by older users—as more aligned with casual or sexual encounters and thus culturally

ambiguous.

Despite the growing normalization of app-based dating, social stigma still lingers. Many users, particularly women, express discomfort in publicly disclosing their use of such platforms, citing fears of being perceived as desperate or morally lax. This creates a paradox where dating apps are both ubiquitous and discreetly used—high in functional visibility, but low in social legitimacy. This tension between usage and acceptance contributes to an unstable communicative space in which users oscillate between digital openness and emotional caution.

As dating apps become a dominant site of romantic initiation in South Korea, they bring with them new temporalities, emotional logics, and communicative expectations. These changes are not just technical; they are deeply cultural, reshaping how intimacy is imagined, performed, and experienced. The subsequent sections of this paper examine how the instant gratification design of these platforms interacts with local cultural norms to create false expectations of romantic communication—expectations that often lead to misalignment, disappointment, and disillusionment in app-based relational dynamics.

2. Instant Gratification Logic in App Interface Design

2.1 Design for Speed: Match, Chat, Exit

Dating apps in South Korea are deliberately structured around the principle of minimal friction and maximal immediacy. From the moment a user logs in, the architecture of most platforms is designed to reduce decision time and accelerate interaction. A standard user journey—profile swipe, match confirmation, and chat initiation—can be completed in under 30 seconds. This streamlined process is not merely technical but ideological: it constructs romantic connection as something quickly accessible and low-risk, eroding the notion that relationship-building requires sustained effort or contextual nuance.

Unlike traditional social introductions, which often involve layered cues, social vetting, or in-person chemistry, app-based matching substitutes these with binary gestures: swipe right or left, tap to like, send a pre-written icebreaker. These actions are optimized for reaction over reflection, encouraging users to prioritize first-glance judgments over relational depth. In platforms like *Amanda*, speed is gamified through ranking systems and visual ratings, pushing users to act quickly and competitively. The logic is not “get to know someone,” but rather “match now, decide later”—a deferral of intimacy masked as immediacy.

Moreover, many apps deploy algorithmic suggestions based on activity frequency, meaning that users who swipe more often or respond more quickly are rewarded with increased visibility. This creates a feedback loop in which fast responses are perceived not only as socially rewarding but algorithmically necessary, reinforcing a culture of urgency that privileges instant engagement over thoughtful interaction.

2.2 Interface Cues that Prioritize Response Over Reflection

Interface elements—colors, alerts, message previews, and push notifications—are central to how users experience and interpret romantic interactions. In Korean dating apps, visual cues are carefully designed to stimulate immediate emotional attention. For example, matches are typically highlighted in bright, urgent colors (red or yellow), and unread messages are marked with blinking icons or countdown timers that subtly signal a “window of opportunity” is closing. These design elements nudge users toward reactive behavior, embedding the idea that failing to respond promptly may result in the loss of a potential partner.

In apps like *NoonDate*, users are shown only a limited number of matches per day, but those matches expire if not acted upon quickly. This artificial scarcity induces anticipatory anxiety, leading users to engage even when they may not be fully interested. Other apps, such as *DangYeonSi*, notify users of profile views or “likes received” in real time, fostering a sense of continuous audience presence that pressures users to remain responsive and available.

These mechanisms mirror broader trends in attention economy platforms, where immediacy becomes both a norm and a metric of value. In the context of dating, however, this logic distorts communicative expectations. Users begin to equate romantic interest with speed and volume of messaging, rather than content, consistency, or shared values. When a potential match does not respond within hours—or even minutes—this is often read not as a product of daily life rhythms, but as a sign of disinterest, rejection, or disrespect.

Ultimately, these interface cues promote a form of “communication urgency bias,” where users come to expect that meaningful romantic gestures will occur in real-time or not at all. This shortens the attention span for emotional development and fosters premature disappointment, setting the stage for the cycles of ghosting and rapid disconnection that characterize much of app-based dating in Korea.

3. Gamification, Swiping, and the Psychology of Quick Reward

3.1 Swipe Culture and the Illusion of Infinite Choice

The swipe mechanic—now synonymous with mobile dating—functions as a deceptively simple interface gesture that conceals a deep psychological architecture. In Korean dating apps, as in many global platforms, users are presented with an endless scroll of profiles, each requiring a split-second decision. The act of swiping becomes less about deliberate selection and more about reflexive engagement, producing a behavior pattern akin to slot-machine gambling.

This illusion of infinite choice is particularly potent in South Korea’s hyper-connected, image-conscious dating culture. Users are inundated with carefully curated profile pictures, edited bios, and aesthetic indicators of status (such as educational background or job titles). The abundance of options creates a paradox of desirability: the more one swipes, the more one assumes there is always someone “better” just one scroll away. This fosters a transactional mindset in which potential partners are evaluated rapidly and discarded with equal speed.

To better understand how users engage with these platforms, recent data from Korean user behavior studies offers valuable insight:

Table 1. User Engagement Patterns on Korean Dating Apps

Engagement Metric	Observed Behavior
Average Daily App Sessions	Users open dating apps approximately 6–8 times per day.
Average Session Duration	Each session lasts about 5–10 minutes.
Response Time Expectation	70% of users expect replies within 30 minutes of sending a message.
Match-to-Conversation Rate	Only 25% of matches lead to a conversation beyond initial greetings.
Conversation Continuation	Less than 10% of conversations persist beyond three exchanges.

Source: Adapted from user behavior studies in South Korea, 2022.

These figures reveal a clear pattern of high-frequency, low-investment engagement. The majority of interactions are short-lived, and users expect almost real-time feedback, reinforcing the notion that romantic communication should be as instant and frictionless as the match itself. In this setting, a match becomes a dopamine hit, not a commitment to dialogue.

Over time, habitual swiping cultivates a form of romantic detachment, where users become more focused on the process of matching than the outcome of connection. A 2021 Korean behavioral survey found that less than one in ten matches results in sustained interaction beyond three exchanges, reflecting how the swiping interface encourages superficial accumulation over emotional investment.

3.2 Variable Reward Systems and Digital Craving Loops

Central to the addictive pull of dating apps is the use of variable reward schedules, a psychological strategy drawn from behavioral conditioning theory. Unlike fixed feedback systems, variable schedules offer intermittent, unpredictable rewards—sometimes a match, sometimes a message, often nothing. This unpredictability creates a feedback loop that keeps users engaged: each swipe or app login holds the possibility of a gratifying interaction, but never guarantees it.

Apps like *Amanda* amplify this mechanism by gamifying social validation. Users receive scores based on how attractive they are rated by other users, and this score affects their visibility within the app. The more one is liked, the more one is shown to others, incentivizing both strategic photo curation and frequent engagement. Similarly, *NoonDate* uses randomized daily matches delivered at set times, creating a ritualized anticipation effect that mimics the suspense of lottery draws.

The psychological effect is what scholars describe as “compulsive checking behavior”—users return to the app not because they are seeking meaningful connection, but because they are chasing the next emotional spike. The reward, in many cases, is not conversation or relationship, but the internal validation of being seen, liked, or chosen. This can result in emotional burnout, attention fragmentation, and a distorted sense of one’s relational value, as affirmation becomes numerically quantified and externally dependent.

The gamification of digital dating thus reorients the romantic experience from exploration and reciprocity to performance and reward-seeking. Users begin to prioritize metrics—match counts, scores, responses—over emotional resonance or shared intention, contributing to the very misalignment in communication and expectation this paper seeks to interrogate.

4. Temporal Compression and Emotional Acceleration in Digital Romance

4.1 Fast-Track Intimacy: From Match to Oversharing

In app-based dating environments, particularly within South Korea's high-speed digital ecosystem, romantic communication is increasingly shaped by compressed timelines. The transition from "match" to emotionally intimate exchange often occurs within hours, not weeks. Users are encouraged—implicitly through interface design and explicitly through social norms—to initiate conversations quickly, disclose personal preferences early, and demonstrate emotional investment with minimal delay.

This phenomenon, often described as "fast-track intimacy," refers to the rapid escalation of disclosure and sentiment typically spread across longer courtship stages in traditional offline dating. In platforms like *DangYeonSi* and *NoonDate*, where curated matches are delivered with time limits, users frequently exchange emotionally charged messages—such as trauma references, family expectations, or ideal relationship goals—within the first day of contact. Such early vulnerability can foster a false sense of closeness, bypassing the gradual trust-building processes that form the foundation of durable intimacy.

A qualitative study conducted by the Korea Institute of Social Communication (2021) found that over 58% of respondents felt "uncomfortably close" to matches after just a few days of chatting, with many citing pressure to escalate the tone of emotional engagement to sustain interest. This acceleration, while stimulating, often leaves users vulnerable to emotional whiplash when communication abruptly halts—resulting in cycles of rapid attachment followed by disengagement.

4.2 Emotional Intensity Without Relational Foundation

The illusion of emotional closeness fostered by digital immediacy often lacks the relational infrastructure necessary to sustain real connection. While users may feel seen, heard, or desired through intense early exchanges, such intensity is frequently untethered from shared experiences, mutual obligations, or embodied presence. This produces a form of disembodied intimacy—emotionally vivid but structurally hollow.

In Korean dating culture, where historically courtship has involved formal stages, family vetting, and respectful pacing, this new form of emotional velocity introduces cognitive dissonance. Users are simultaneously drawn to the thrill of digital closeness and skeptical of its authenticity. A participant in a Seoul-based interview series described this paradox: "We talked every night for a week like we were in love, then he disappeared. It felt real, but also... like nothing."

The app environment amplifies this volatility. Matches are easy to obtain but hard to sustain. Emotional exchanges often occur in parallel with others—users chat with multiple matches simultaneously, unconsciously diluting the perceived uniqueness of any single connection. When intimacy arises in this saturated, competitive field, it is more likely to be experienced as transactional performance than relational development.

Ultimately, emotional acceleration in app-based dating generates expectations of instant emotional reciprocity, which—when unmet—lead to disappointment disproportionate to the actual relationship stage. In this way, temporal compression not only reshapes how intimacy begins but also how it fails, destabilizing the emotional equilibrium of app users and reinforcing the cycles of hope and disillusionment embedded in platform-based romance.

5. Constructing Expectations: Perceived Availability and Effortless Connection

5.1 24/7 Access and the Myth of Instant Emotional Availability

One of the most powerful illusions embedded in dating apps—especially within South Korea's hyper-connected society—is the perception that potential partners are constantly available, both physically and emotionally. The combination of push notifications, real-time status indicators (such as "online now" or "last seen"), and message previews constructs a social environment in which romantic attention is imagined as instantly retrievable—a resource one can summon on demand.

This 24/7 presence illusion is particularly potent in a country where mobile penetration exceeds 95% and messaging response times are socially monitored, not just by friends but by romantic partners. In such contexts, the failure to respond promptly to a match's message—even by a few hours—can be interpreted not as circumstantial unavailability but as emotional disinterest or disrespect. As one user from Daegu put it in an online forum: "If someone doesn't reply within the day, it's over. You assume they've moved on to someone else."

This dynamic is further complicated by read receipts, typing indicators, and delivery confirmations, which collectively transform romantic communication into a space of microsurveillance. Users not only expect quick replies, they expect evidence of attentiveness. Any deviation from this norm—delayed messaging, slower tone, lack of emotive punctuation—can generate confusion or anxiety, especially in the early stages of a fragile digital connection.

The result is a profound shift in emotional expectations. App users begin to conflate availability with affection, speed with sincerity, and presence with priority. A person who replies quickly is deemed more invested; one who

replies late is assumed to be “half-interested” or “playing games.” Over time, these expectations erode the patience and resilience traditionally associated with relationship-building, replacing them with a “now or never” mentality.

Yet ironically, this constant connection does not foster greater intimacy—it often leads to burnout, emotional misalignment, and premature disengagement. In an effort to be perpetually reachable, users become less emotionally grounded, more performative in their interactions, and ultimately more prone to disappear when expectations—shaped not by relational development but by platform rhythm—are inevitably unmet.

Thus, what begins as technological accessibility transforms into a false emotional contract, one where every response—or lack thereof—is read through a lens of hyper-availability and distorted commitment. This system primes users to expect too much, too soon, and to disengage too quickly when those expectations are not fulfilled.

6. Communication Disillusionment: From Rapid Match to Emotional Drop-Off

6.1 High-Frequency Messaging, Low-Stakes Engagement

In the initial hours or days following a match, dating app users often engage in rapid-fire exchanges that simulate relational momentum. Emojis, playful banter, inside jokes, and even late-night text threads can unfold in a matter of hours. This high-frequency messaging creates an atmosphere of simulated intimacy, giving the impression that emotional reciprocity is developing naturally. However, in most cases, the stakes of such communication remain remarkably low.

Unlike offline dating, where time, effort, and environment moderate the pacing of emotional involvement, app-based exchanges offer instant, mobile, and uninterrupted access to the other person. These exchanges often occur while multitasking—during a commute, between work meetings, or late at night—resulting in fragmented attention and performative dialogue. The low cost of engagement means that users can effortlessly initiate, maintain, or abandon conversations without significant emotional consequence.

This leads to a disconnect between emotional rhythm and relational substance. For example, two users might share detailed personal anecdotes within 24 hours of matching—about childhood, trauma, or even romantic preferences—yet neither party feels compelled to follow through with in-person plans or longer-term interaction. As the initial high wears off, the reality sets in: little context has been built, and little obligation exists to continue.

A study by Choi & Kim (2022) on app-based dating behavior in Seoul revealed that over 55% of users had “deep conversations” with a match in the first three days, but fewer than 18% met those matches offline. This hypertextual overinvestment followed by behavioral withdrawal underscores a key pattern: emotional openness has become decoupled from commitment. What appears as early bonding is often a form of low-resistance disclosure, enabled and encouraged by digital space.

Eventually, many users begin to anticipate abandonment, even as they engage enthusiastically. This creates a fragile communication style: fast, flattering, and emotionally vivid—but ultimately cautious and replaceable.

6.2 The Normalization of Ghosting and Narrative Breakage

Ghosting is often treated in dating discourse as a personal slight or moral failure. Yet in the context of Korean dating apps, it is better understood as an algorithmic and structural phenomenon, deeply tied to the logic of platform design. When matches are made frequently and attention is limited, users come to accept silence as a built-in feature, not a disruption.

Platform mechanics reinforce this normalization. Apps provide no friction to exit, no social feedback mechanisms for disengagement, and no reputational consequences for disappearing. Unlike in real-life interactions—where awkwardness, mutual acquaintances, or social norms require some form of closure—digital environments erase the need for accountability. In fact, the very design of “swipe and forget” interfaces makes ghosting feel procedural, almost polite compared to confrontation.

In user interviews conducted in Busan (2021), many participants expressed the view that ghosting is “better than awkward honesty” or “just how things are.” For younger users, particularly in their early 20s, ghosting had become not only acceptable but expected—a natural endpoint to conversations that no longer felt exciting or promising.

This normalization has broader psychological implications. When ghosting becomes routine, users develop narrative fatigue—the sense that every romantic storyline will end before it truly begins. This can produce emotional numbness, over-self-protection, or defensive disinterest. Instead of building toward continuity, each new conversation is implicitly temporary, often treated like a “mini-episode” in a wider series of trial interactions.

Worse, the lack of closure inhibits emotional learning. When a user is ghosted, they are left with no interpretive material—no feedback, no debriefing, no way to understand what went wrong or whether anything did. This leads to internalized ambiguity, where users second-guess their tone, timing, or even desirability.

Over time, ghosting doesn't just end conversations—it reconfigures the way users approach communication itself. Many begin to withhold emotional investment, use generic templates when chatting, or develop “ghost before being ghosted” strategies. This produces a system of mutually anticipated withdrawal, in which emotional sincerity is rare, guarded, or delayed past the point of potential connection.

In sum, communication disillusionment on Korean dating apps is not the result of poor etiquette or generational immaturity alone—it is the logical outcome of immediacy-driven platforms, gamified attention, and a scarcity of social accountability mechanisms. As matches become moments, and moments are forgotten without explanation, digital romantic life becomes characterized less by heartbreak than by fatigue—less by rejection than by persistent emotional ambiguity.

7. Cultural Friction: Traditional Courtship Norms vs. App-Based Interaction

7.1 Respect, Ambiguity, and Hierarchy in Korean Romantic Scripts

South Korean romantic culture has historically emphasized relational ambiguity, slow escalation, and social harmony—values that stand in contrast to the blunt immediacy of dating apps. Traditional courtship often unfolds within semi-formal contexts such as university clubs, workplaces, or blind dates (*소개팅*), where interactions are moderated by shared networks, etiquette expectations, and a mutually understood rhythm of emotional pacing.

In these settings, hierarchical positioning and face-saving are crucial. Younger individuals often defer to older partners, and expressions of interest are tempered by subtle cues and ambiguity to avoid direct rejection or social awkwardness. This contrasts starkly with app-based dating, which encourages directness, profile-based self-promotion, and rapid signaling of intent.

The cultural friction arises when app users import these traditional expectations—such as waiting for the other to initiate, avoiding forwardness, or reading emotional nuance—into a platform designed for speed, clarity, and self-disclosure. For example, a user who delays response out of modesty or indecision may be perceived as disinterested or dismissive. Conversely, one who communicates with Western-style assertiveness may be seen as “too much” or lacking subtlety.

This misalignment leads to frequent misreadings of tone and intent. Emotional codes that are valid offline (e.g., playing hard to get, deferring direct emotional language) lose their effectiveness or are misunderstood entirely online, where brevity and speed dominate the communicative register.

7.2 Gendered Misinterpretations in Hyper-Responsive Contexts

App-based dating in South Korea does not occur in a gender-neutral space. Rather, it is embedded within deeply encoded expectations around male initiative and female selectivity—expectations that are both challenged and reinforced by app environments.

On one hand, dating apps offer women more control over selection and visibility, allowing them to curate profiles and choose when and with whom to engage. This shift undermines older norms in which women were expected to wait passively for male attention. On the other hand, these same platforms can amplify gendered anxieties. For instance, when women do initiate contact or express strong interest early on, they are sometimes perceived—especially by more traditionally minded male users—as overly assertive or even morally ambiguous.

Men, conversely, may feel pressured to perform as confident, financially stable, and emotionally available, even when these expectations are misaligned with their own life circumstances. The gap between presentation and capacity can lead to defensive behavior, withdrawal, or resentment when women do not reciprocate attention in the ways expected.

A study by Cho (2021) on gender signaling in Korean dating apps found that men were significantly more likely to report frustration about being “left on read,” interpreting silence as disrespect, while women more frequently reported discomfort with aggressive or repetitive messaging. These differing interpretations stem from a clash between platform norms (instant engagement) and cultural scripts (reserved, role-based interaction).

This dissonance produces a communicative space that is overcoded with expectation and undercoded with empathy, where gender performances often reinforce miscommunication and emotional misalignment.

7.3 Familial and Social Anxiety Around “Casual” Platforms

Despite their mainstream usage, dating apps in South Korea remain partially stigmatized—especially among older generations. Romantic relationships are still closely tied to marriage prospects and family honor, and the idea of meeting a serious partner “through an app” is often viewed with suspicion, or even disdain, by parents

and elders.

This intergenerational anxiety exerts psychological pressure on young adults navigating digital intimacy. Many users experience a double consciousness: one identity that is experimental and expressive within the app space, and another that is conservative and approval-seeking offline. This duality creates internal conflict—especially for women—who must negotiate between digital autonomy and social respectability.

To mitigate stigma, users often downplay their app usage in family or peer settings, refer to app matches ambiguously (“a friend I met through a study group”), or resist emotionally committing to someone perceived as incompatible with parental expectations. This filtering, however, often occurs after emotional investment has already begun, contributing to cycles of attachment followed by abrupt withdrawal—fueled not by lack of affection, but by social constraints.

In extreme cases, the social illegitimacy of app-originating relationships may deter users from pursuing them seriously at all. The result is a cultural logic where dating apps are seen as places for “experience” rather than “real relationships,” reinforcing the very instability and disillusionment the platforms seek to resolve.

8. Reimagining Digital Intimacy in a Hyper-Responsive Ecosystem

The rise of dating apps in South Korea has not only altered the mechanics of romantic connection—it has reshaped the tempo, tone, and terrain of intimacy itself. Within the hyper-responsive, gamified architecture of these platforms, romantic communication has become faster, more volatile, and more fragile. What once unfolded gradually through mutual acquaintances, social vetting, and embodied interaction now occurs through frictionless swipes, immediate notifications, and highly compressed emotional timelines.

Yet as this paper has shown, such transformation comes at a cost. Users are drawn into cycles of accelerated engagement and abrupt detachment, guided more by platform logics than personal rhythms. Ghosting becomes common not due to cruelty, but due to communicative fatigue. Emotional vulnerability is expressed early but not always received with reciprocity. The boundary between accessibility and expectation collapses, creating a climate of constant partial connection and persistent disillusionment.

If intimacy is to survive—and thrive—in such an environment, it must be reimagined beyond immediacy. Digital design must shift from rewarding mere interaction volume toward facilitating emotional depth, pacing, and narrative continuity. App interfaces could introduce gentle friction: delayed messaging options, reflective prompts, or systems that reward conversational consistency over swiping frequency. Rather than treating human connection as a product to be optimized, platforms could recalibrate to treat it as a relational process to be supported.

At a cultural level, South Korea’s romantic ecosystem is at a crossroads. Younger generations are increasingly comfortable expressing affection and desire through digital means, yet they remain tethered to traditional relational scripts—scripts that value discretion, emotional ambiguity, and family legitimacy. Bridging this divide requires not simply abandoning tradition or resisting technology, but developing hybrid relational literacies that combine digital fluency with emotional intentionality.

Such literacies would help users recognize that the affordances of dating apps—speed, availability, convenience—are tools, not truths. A message sent quickly is not inherently sincere; a delayed reply is not necessarily disinterest. Intimacy in the digital age must be read generously, allowing room for imperfection, pacing, and difference.

Ultimately, the question is not whether dating apps can produce meaningful connection, but whether we can collectively design, interpret, and inhabit these spaces in ways that resist their most extractive tendencies. Romantic communication in Korea—like elsewhere—is being rewritten by code. The task now is to ensure that the scripts we write through our thumbs still leave space for the heart.

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