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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Okay, So What Are We?" The Reproduction of Monogamy in Tinder Couples

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Abstract

The formation of monogamous relationships between individuals who met through dating apps represents a growing phenomenon. Monogamy is the dominant relational model in the Western world, but in the context of dating apps, which foster a plurality of romantic and/or sexual encounters, it cannot be taken for granted. This study aimed to explore how monogamous relationships are constructed among individuals residing in Italy who met their partners via the global dating app Tinder. A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted. We carried out an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis, progressing iteratively from familiarisation with the data to initial coding and, subsequently, to the development and refinement of themes. Researcher reflexivity informed the entire process through the explicit articulation of our feminist and critical positioning, which guided our interpretation of the data. The analysis identifies four core themes which are situated and context-bound: (1) "Constructing a Monogamous Self" shows how monogamous desire is essentialised and individualised, effectively obscuring its normative roots; (2) "Defining the Couple as a Closed Unit" highlights the active boundary monitoring and hierarchization required to maintain exclusivity; (3) "Being a Couple for Everyone to See" emphasises the necessity of external validation in legitimising the bond; (4) "Reconciling the Stigmatised Image of Tinder" explores how participants leverage traditional romantic tropes to counteract the perceived illegitimacy of meeting on Tinder. Collectively, these findings provide a framework for understanding mononormativity as a lived relational logic that shapes self-understanding, expectations, and behaviours in contemporary dating contexts.

Keywords Mononormativity · Reflexive thematic analysis · Feminist critique · Tinder · Dating apps

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Introduction

The formation of monogamous relationships between individuals who met through dating apps represents a growing phenomenon (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). Monogamy constitutes the hegemonic relational model in Western societies (Conley et al., 2012). It is commonly portrayed as the only moral, normal, natural, and healthy form of romantic relationship (Rothschild, 2018). Consequently, monogamous experiences and practices are rarely subjected to critical analysis, as they are often perceived as self-evident and unproblematic.

In a review of psychosocial studies on dating apps published between 2016 and 2020, Castro and Barrada (2020) categorised existing research into three phases: before use (e.g., profiling), during use (e.g., use patterns), and after use (e.g., offline behaviour), finding that the vast majority of studies focus on the *during* phase, that is, on how apps are used. Most studies have focused on user characteristics (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Castro et al., 2020; Chan, 2017; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019), individual motivations (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), sexual behaviours (Anzani et al., 2018; Sawyer et al., 2018; Shapiro et al., 2017), relationship outcomes (Erevik et al., 2020; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018), and risks associated with dating app use (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2024; Phan et al., 2021).

Studies in the field tend to rely on quantitative methods (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Existing qualitative research on online dating practices has addressed the meaning of leaving dating apps once a romantic relationship is established (Vares, 2023), the negotiation between app-initiated relationships and traditional romantic masterplots (Portolan & McAlister, 2022; Sharabi, 2025), and the persistence of gendered and heterosexual scripts (Christensen, 2021; Comunello et al., 2021). However, to our knowledge, no studies have specifically focused on the construction of monogamy itself in couples who met through dating apps, particularly from a feminist perspective.

Moreover, existing research is largely concentrated in English-speaking countries (Castro & Barrada, 2020), leaving significant gaps in understanding how relational dynamics related to dating apps unfold in other cultural contexts, such as Italy, where monogamy retains strong social legitimacy and dating app use is rapidly expanding (Comunello et al., 2021; Montali et al., 2023).

This study therefore aims to investigate the process by which monogamous relationships are constructed among couples who met through Tinder, one of the world's most widely used dating apps (Barrada & Castro, 2020; Wu & Trottier, 2022). Such a context allows for the suspension of taken-for-granted relational assumptions, a process known as *bracketing* (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021; Schutz, 1966), thereby facilitating the analytical visibility of monogamy's construction.

Indeed, the use of dating apps destabilises common assumptions about the initiation of romantic connections. In many offline contexts, meeting a potential partner often occurs incidentally, within settings where the primary purpose is not romantic pursuit. Such encounters may therefore be experienced as contingent, relatively rare, and imbued with a sense of uniqueness or serendipity. By contrast, dating apps are organised around the explicit aim of meeting potential partners, framing romantic

encounters as expected and potentially repeatable outcomes of an intentional search process (Berkowitz et al., 2021).

Tinder constitutes a relational environment in which users may pursue a wide range of intentions along a continuum, from seeking attention or conversation to casual or short-term encounters to more serious romantic relationships (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). However, regardless of users' individual intentions, the platform is designed to facilitate multiple, potentially overlapping romantic and/or sexual interactions (David & Cambre, 2016).

Within this context, particularly in the early stages of interaction, exclusivity cannot be easily presumed as a default, since app-mediated dating renders the presence of parallel connections structurally plausible, more so than in many offline meeting contexts (Castro & Barrada, 2020). For these reasons, Tinder foregrounds monogamy as a relational possibility rather than an implicit norm, making it more visible as something that may need to be clarified, negotiated, or actively reaffirmed as relationships evolve.

Grounded in a feminist perspective that critiques relational hierarchies and mononormativity (Vasallo, 2019; Wilkinson, 2012), this study investigates how monogamy is constructed within this context through a reflexive thematic analysis of data from twenty-four semi-structured interviews with individuals who established monogamous relationships with partners met via Tinder.

Background

The Monogamous System

In both academic literature and mainstream discourse, monogamy is commonly understood as a relational practice centred on romantic and sexual exclusivity (Conley et al., 2012). Instead, this study adopts a conceptualisation of monogamy as a hegemonic system that organises intimacy and relational legitimacy (Vasallo, 2019).

The monogamous system operates on both the individual and societal levels, organising private and public life. In this perspective, monogamy is not merely defined by the number of individuals involved in a relationship. Instead, it operates as a broader system of socially embedded meanings, values and norms that structure how intimate relationships are imagined and enacted (Budgeon, 2008). Within intimate life, it positions the romantic partner as the primary and indispensable relationship, relegating all other forms of connection, such as friendships, to a secondary status (Wilkinson, 2012). Within this framework, sexual exclusivity is not what defines monogamy, but rather "functions as a hierarchical marker" (Vasallo, 2024). In fact, sex is constructed as a special activity that signals the uniqueness of the couple bond, serving as the glue that binds the two partners together (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

In the monogamous imaginary, exclusivity is constructed as a marker of authentic love: to love someone 'truly' is to experience no desire for others. This understanding relies on a competitive and substitutive logic, in which the partner must be seen as 'the best', thereby eliminating the need or possibility of emotional or sexual interest in others (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Therefore, desire for someone else is posi-

tioned not as additive or expansive, but as incompatible with desire for one's partner, since it threatens the exclusivity that underpins the perceived legitimacy and value of the original bond (Vasallo, 2024).

Taken together, these individual-level dynamics illustrate how monogamy shapes intimate life through internalised norms of exclusivity, competition, and hierarchisation. However, these personal dynamics do not exist in isolation. They are sustained and reinforced by wider institutional and societal structures.

Moving from the individual to the structural level, monogamy is deeply embedded in the social structure, functioning as a system that organises affective ties and allocates legal, economic, and cultural privileges according to their hierarchical status, at the top of which lie reproductive ties, specifically the heterosexual nuclear couple (Vasallo, 2019). No other form of relationship is granted the same level of institutional recognition or privilege (Roseneil et al., 2020). Social conventions further reinforce this model, for example through the widespread assumption that one's partner is, and should be, automatically included in both formal and informal social gatherings (Jackson & Scott, 2004). As Budgeon (2008, p.302) notes, "the ideological force of couple culture is such that its privileged status is rarely recognised or questioned". The concept of *mononormativity* captures this social phenomenon, referring to the taken-for-granted desirability of romantic coupledom as a normative life accomplishment for every healthy adult, and to the structural marginalisation of those whose relational lives fall outside this conventional dyadic ideal (Wilkinson, 2012).

The cultural force of mononormativity is not limited to institutional structures and societal conventions; it is also perpetuated through pervasive romantic narratives that shape personal aspirations and relational imaginaries (Illouz, 2003). In contemporary Western culture, the romantic love story remains one of the dominant frameworks through which individuals make sense of their lives (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Media products are saturated with idealised depictions of monogamy (Aguilar, 2012), reinforcing the idea that everyone should aspire to find their perfect partner, marry, and "live happily ever after" (Budgeon, 2008). This romantic masterplot includes normative stages in which time plays an essential, often anxiety-inducing role: meeting, falling in love, having sex, marrying, having children, and staying together for life (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Amy Gahran (2017) terms this rigid sequence the "relationship escalator", describing a normative trajectory for romantic involvement. While minor deviations from this trajectory may be socially tolerated, it remains the dominant relational script.

Finally, it is important to highlight that monogamy is historically rooted in a traditional division of gender roles and in a heteronormative logic of complementarity (Emens, 2004). Although a variety of explanations have been proposed to account for the predominance of monogamy over other relational and familial systems (e.g., polygamy), no single account has been universally accepted. Despite this diversity of perspectives, there is broad agreement that monogamy has functioned as a mechanism for regulating female sexuality and ensuring paternal certainty, thereby securing men's investment of resources and care in their offspring (Barash, 2016).

Within this framework, elements such as possessiveness, jealousy, the expectation that one partner should fulfil all emotional and relational needs, and enduring gendered power asymmetries within couples have long been the target of feminist

critique, dating back to the second wave of the feminist movement (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

Yet monogamy is not only a gendered practice; this system is deeply entangled with race, class, and sexuality, shaping who is granted access to relational respectability and whose intimacies are marginalised (Rothschild, 2018; Vasallo, 2024). As Kean (2019) shows, monogamous nuclear family ideals are racialised and classed, positioning middle-class white couples as normative while casting single mothers, racialised groups, and working-class families as morally suspect. This insight highlights how monogamy acts as a mechanism of intimate regulation that upholds broader social hierarchies, reinforcing moral judgments and structural inequalities around who is considered a "proper" relational subject.

Even as same-sex couples have increasingly been incorporated into the monogamous ideal, this inclusion often reproduces forms of "homonormativity" that privilege assimilation to heteronormative couple culture over structural transformation (Wilkinson, 2010). In this sense, LGBTQ+ movements have, to a significant extent, gained social legitimacy by aligning their political agendas with traditional monogamous respectability politics, seeking access to the dominant romantic imaginary rather than challenging the normative ideals that underpin it (Beam, 2018).

From a feminist and intersectional perspective, these dynamics underscore that monogamy operates not merely as a personal relationship model and a neutral relational choice, but as a system of power that regulates intimacy along multiple axes of power, a perspective that is crucial for interpreting how participants construct legitimacy and respectability in the context of Tinder.

Traditional Imaginary, Modern Platforms: Monogamy and Tinder

Despite the persistent and deeply rooted nature of the traditional monogamous imaginary, relational practices have undergone significant transformations over the past decades, opening up a plurality of possible relational trajectories beyond the linear progression toward long-term monogamous couplehood and family life (Budgeon, 2008; Giddens, 1992). Although living outside a couple relationship continues to be socially interpreted as a problem, particularly for women, singlehood is nevertheless increasing across most Western countries. (Roseneil et al., 2020; United Nations, 2022). However, it is important to distinguish between forms of voluntary singlehood, in which individuals actively choose to remain single, and involuntary singlehood, in which being single is experienced as a temporary or undesired state while seeking a romantic relationship (DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

Within this changing landscape of relational practices and possibilities, so-called "hookups", defined as uncommitted sexual encounters between individuals who are not in a romantic relationship, have become increasingly common among adolescents and young adults in Western societies (Claxton & Van Dulmen, 2013). Such experiences are often framed in popular culture as a normal and even healthy way of exploring sexuality and intimacy prior to, or independently from, commitment to a long-term romantic relationship (Garcia et al., 2012). The diffusion of new relational labels reflects these shifts in sexual and relational practices, articulating a broad spectrum of possibilities situated between one-night stands and long-term partnerships.

For instance, terms such as "booty calls" or "friends with benefits" refer to relationships that involve sexual activity without romantic commitment, yet are characterised by repeated interactions over time (Jonason et al., 2011).

One relevant manifestation of these changes in dating and relational practices concerns how people meet potential partners. The emergence and widespread diffusion of dating apps have significantly reshaped how romantic connections are initiated, rendering partner search more intentional, technologised, and embedded in platform-mediated interaction (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Castro & Barrada, 2020). Tinder is the most popular worldwide among them and can be considered prototypical of the category (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022; Sumter et al., 2017); it provides users with effortless access to a vast pool of potential partners (Miller, 2015). Tinder's primary purpose is to facilitate contact and interaction with a wide variety of strangers, aiming to enable many encounters through a quantitative criterion that connects users and maximises the potential for satisfying matches (David & Cambre, 2016).

Some scholars have suggested that the novelty introduced by platforms such as Tinder may create opportunities to question traditional heterosexual relational scripts and open up space for less normative and potentially less oppressive forms of intimacy (Lundquist & Currington, 2019). From this perspective, dating apps can serve as sites of experimentation where conventional expectations around gender, commitment, and exclusivity may be temporarily destabilised. Importantly, the very act of joining a dating app entails a higher degree of proactivity and agency for women compared to what is typically afforded by normative heterosexual dating scripts, as it represents an active expression of interest in romantic and/or sexual connection and enables women to potentially assume a more active role in partner selection (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

However, other research points to a more ambivalent dynamic. Berkowitz et al. (2021) argue that the relational and communicative ambiguities produced by app-mediated dating environments may ultimately incentivise conformity to traditional heterogender norms, as these norms provide a familiar framework through which uncertainty can be reduced and interactional predictability restored. Consistent with this view, empirical studies show that dating apps often reproduce conventional gendered interaction patterns, such as the widespread expectation that men initiate contact by sending the first message after a match, while women are positioned in more passive and selective roles, acting as gatekeepers to male advances (Comunello et al., 2021).

In *Liquid Love* (2003), Zygmunt Bauman argues that online dating fosters a materialistic, transactional view of human relationships. According to Bauman, this dynamic encourages individuals to perceive commitment as optional, facilitating the avoidance of long-term investment in relationships, the swift termination of unsatisfying connections and the continuous pursuit of new partners, all enabled by the abundance of potential matches on digital platforms.

However, other scholars challenge the notion that online dating is eroding monogamous, lifelong relationships in favour of short-term sexual encounters. In a mixed-methods study involving online surveys and in-depth interviews, Hobbs et al. (2016) found that traditional views on relationships and monogamy remain dominant: only

14% of participants reported being less inclined to pursue monogamous relationships since using dating apps, while 72% remained equally inclined. The authors conclude that, contrary to Bauman's (2003) assertion, dating apps do not undermine ideals of romantic love or commitment; in fact, most users continue to value and seek long-term committed relationships, using technology merely as a tool to facilitate meaningful connections. Indeed, Tinder users report utilising the app for both long-term relationships and casual encounters (van Hooff, 2019).

Moreover, unsubscribing from dating apps once a relationship has been formed is perceived as a normative behaviour that signals sexual exclusivity and commitment (LeFebvre, 2018). In a recent research, Vares (2023) found that participants regarded deleting dating apps as a natural and expected sign of commitment once a romantic relationship had begun. If a partner failed to do so, it was interpreted as a lack of seriousness and emotional investment. Vares concludes that, rather than being challenged, traditional romantic discourses are being incorporated into dating app practices (Vares, 2023).

Portolan and McAlister (2022) highlight that dating app users continue to aspire to traditional romantic *masterplots,* despite recognising that these platforms cannot fully replicate the idealised romantic narrative arc. In fact, unlike conventional narratives, where initial encounters are accidental and spontaneous, dating app interactions are inherently intentional and proactive.

A recent study by Sharabi et al. (2025) shows how the cultural salience attributed to a couple's origin story, the narrative of how partners first met, can pose challenges for those who meet through dating apps. These platforms, while increasingly common, are still perceived as non-traditional and are often stigmatised or stereotyped as spaces primarily associated with casual or sexual encounters (LeFebvre, 2018). Despite this, the study found that participants largely drew on traditional romantic and monogamous frameworks to interpret and narrate their experiences. The authors explain this tendency as an attempt to "legitimise their own relationship and fit their story into the master narrative that society tells about dating and courtship" (Sharabi et al., 2025, p.1359). At the same time, participants' storytelling partially diverged from the traditional romantic arc in specific ways, for example by challenging the idea that meaningful relationships must begin in conventional offline contexts.

In light of the topics discussed so far, Tinder introduces important complexities into the process of forming monogamous relationships. Users do not share prior social ties or mutual acquaintances and often engage with multiple others simultaneously (Miller, 2015). Moreover, Tinder is widely perceived as primarily oriented toward casual encounters (LeFebvre, 2018), making it challenging to assume shared monogamous intentions among users (Castro & Barrada, 2020). However, existing literature indicates that many dating app users actively seek monogamous romantic relationships (Hobbs et al., 2016) and that many contemporary monogamous relationships are initiated through such platforms (Cacioppo et al., 2013).

Research Aims

Given the limited international research on this topic, particularly in the qualitative domain, this research aims to explore how monogamous romantic relationships are constructed among individuals who first met on Tinder.

The research adopts a critical stance toward the assumed naturalness of monogamy (Aguilar, 2012), aiming to problematise it as a hegemonic model of relationality by investigating how it is reproduced, negotiated, or challenged within participants' experiences.

Thus, Tinder functions in this study both as a subject of inquiry in itself and as a tool for conducting a form of *phenomenological reduction* (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021): bracketing the apparent obviousness of monogamy to critically examine how it is constructed and maintained in participants' lived experiences.

To support this analytical stance, the study draws on the notion of *phenomenological reduction*, understood as a methodological move that allows researchers to set aside pre-existing theoretical or cultural assumptions in order to examine how participants themselves produce meanings around monogamy (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Within this methodological orientation, *bracketing* refers specifically to the deliberate suspension of taken-for-granted beliefs that typically render monogamy self-evident or unquestioned. By temporarily setting these assumptions aside, the analysis can attend more closely to how monogamy is actively constructed rather than treated as an a priori category.

Operationally, these concepts inform our use of reflexive thematic analysis: by bracketing normative assumptions about coupledom, the analysis focuses on how practices, meanings, and expectations surrounding monogamy are constructed within participants' accounts of relationships initiated on Tinder. Thus, Tinder functions both as a subject of inquiry and as an analytical device that enables a critical examination of the processes through which monogamy is constructed and maintained in lived experience.

Methods

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Evaluation Committee of the Department of Psychology of the University of Milan-Bicocca. All participants received the consent form approved by the Research Evaluation Committee via email, and they returned it signed. All the forms and the participants' data were stored on a computer accessible only to a researcher. No financial compensation was provided to participants for taking part in the interviews.

Participants: Recruitment and Characteristics

Recruitment followed a purposive sampling strategy targeting young adults aged 18–35, who represent the primary users of dating applications (Castro & Barrada,

2020). Eligibility criteria included having met a partner on Tinder and having established a monogamous romantic relationship with that partner, whether ongoing or concluded at the time of the interview. No minimum relationship duration was specified as an inclusion criterion. This choice was based on the assumption that the subjective relevance of the relationship, rather than its length, would motivate individuals to participate and meaningfully reflect on their experiences during the interview.

Participants were recruited through text messages circulated in WhatsApp and Telegram groups associated with university student communities. To promote diversity in sexual orientations, the invitation was also shared within LGBTQIA+ university-affiliated collectives. The recruitment message outlined the study's aims and invited eligible individuals to participate in a semi-structured interview. Similar to other studies on the topic (Portolan & McAlister, 2022; Vares, 2023), twenty-four participants were recruited. Participants are identified by pseudonyms (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 34, with an average age of approximately 25. Most participants identified as female (19 out of 24). The participant group reflected a diverse range of sexual orientations: half of the participants identified as heterosexual, while the remaining half described themselves using diverse labels, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer. A high level of education characterised the participant group: all participants had completed at least secondary school education, nine

Table 1 Participants' sociodemographic characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Education	Work or school status
Aurora	24	F	Lesbian	Bachelor's degree	Student
Sofia	23	F	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Student
Giulia	27	F	Heterosexual	Master's degree	Professional
Clara	24	F	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Student
Alice	19	F	No specific label	High school degree	Student
Livia	23	F	Heterosexual	High school degree	Student
Vera	21	F	Queer	High school degree	Student
Elena	26	F	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree	Student
Maya	20	F	Heterosexual	High school degree	Student
Luna	25	F	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Employee
Lisa	22	F	Lesbian	High school degree	Student
Mia	27	F	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree	Professional
Eva	24	F	Bi-curious	High school degree	Employee
Leonardo	28	M	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree	Professional
Luca	24	M	Heterosexual	High school degree	Working student
Nora	31	F	Heterosexual	Master's degree	Employee
Zoe	25	F	Heterosexual	High school degree	Student
Marco	21	M	Bi-curious	High school degree	Student
Alex	28	M	Gay	Bachelor's degree	Student
Daniel	34	M	Heterosexual	PhD	Employee
Lea	29	F	Lesbian	Master's degree	Employee
Stella	23	F	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree	Student
Camilla	23	F	No specific label	High school degree	Working student
Bianca	27	F	Heterosexual	Master's degree	Professional

held a bachelor's degree, four had completed a master's degree, and one held a doctoral degree. At the time of data collection, most participants were students (13 out of 24), and two described themselves as student-workers. The remaining nine were engaged in full-time professional activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected for its ability to ensure methodological rigour by systematically covering the key areas of interest in the study and by guaranteeing that the same core questions were asked of all participants. At the same time, it provides flexibility, thus enabling the exploration of novel insights and unanticipated but relevant elements that emerged spontaneously from participants' narratives.

The interview topic guide was developed based on the research objective and previous literature. The interview guide explored four main areas: (1) participants' usage history of Tinder and their motivations (e.g., "Could you tell me a bit about your experience with Tinder and the reasons why you decided to use it?"); (2) how the relationship with a partner met on Tinder evolved and how the couple arrived at defining the relationship as "exclusive" or "monogamous" (e.g., "How did you realise that you wanted to start a romantic relationship with your partner?"); (3) the relational agreements and assumptions that, whether explicitly or implicitly, defined the boundaries of the couple (e.g., "Have you and your partner ever talked about what would constitute a betrayal in your relationship, or more generally about what you are and are not comfortable with the other doing?"); (4) the sharing of the couple's origin story with significant others, including friends and family (e.g., "What did you tell your friends and family about your relationship?").

The interview guide was pilot-tested through a test interview and several adjustments were made as a result. For example, the question "Help me understand if and how your life has changed since you have/had that relationship" proved to be too vague during the pilot interview. It was therefore revised and broken down into more specific questions addressing potential changes in daily routines and social relationships (e.g., "Do you think anything has changed in your friendships since you started this relationship?").

All interviews were conducted by the same author (ES), a Master's student trained in qualitative interviewing techniques and in managing the emotional aspects of discussing personal relationships, who had no prior relationship with the participants. Interviews were conducted online via Google Meet over a four-month period and lasted, on average, 66 min (range: 40–120 min). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcripts were anonymised during transcription by removing any identifying information and were stored in separate files accessible only to the research team.

The study followed ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants. Prior to participation, individuals received detailed information about the study and provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could pause the interview, skip questions, or

withdraw at any time without providing a reason. These options were reiterated at the beginning of each interview and before addressing potentially sensitive topics.

Although no participant showed signs of emotional distress during the interviews, a protocol was in place to provide referrals to free university-based or local psychological support services if needed. Several participants reported appreciating the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in a supportive and non-judgmental setting.

Interviewer reflexivity was integral to the research process. The interviewer shared some relevant social characteristics with most participants (e.g., gender, age range, and student status), which contributed to an atmosphere of mutual understanding, while remaining attentive to the power dynamics inherent in the research relationship.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). The analysis was carried out using an inductive or "bottom-up" approach, meaning that the data coding process was not guided by a pre-existing coding frame. Instead, the codes were generated directly from the dataset. However, as Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) emphasise, it is important to acknowledge that data are never coded in an epistemological vacuum: the researcher's analytical gaze is inevitably shaped by their values, background, culture, and theoretical positioning. The reflexive thematic analysis approach emphasises the importance of making researchers' assumptions explicit and transparent, positioning subjectivity as a resource rather than a threat or obstacle to the process of knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analytic process is therefore understood as reflexive, interpretative, and creative, not as the mere discovery of an objective reality independent of the researcher. The knowledge generated is situated and contextually grounded.

In this study, reflexive thematic analysis was guided by a feminist approach and a critical perspective on monogamy, not merely as a relational practice but as a normative system that hierarchises human relationships. From this standpoint, the analysis did not aim solely to reflect participants' experiences but also sought to deconstruct or "unveil" the surface of the narrated "reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analytic process began with a phase of familiarisation and immersion in the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. From the outset, both authors engaged in note-taking to identify recurring patterns and points of analytic interest in participants' narratives. These initial notes and reflections informed the development of preliminary codes inductively from the dataset.

Coding and theme development were conducted collaboratively by the two authors through an iterative and dialogical process. Initial codes were continuously discussed, compared, and refined through regular analytic meetings, during which emerging interpretations were critically examined in relation to the data. This recursive movement between the coded material and the full dataset supported the refinement of the coding framework and ensured sustained engagement with the entire corpus.

As the analysis progressed, the most salient and recurrent codes were organised into broader themes, understood as "central organising concepts" (Braun & Clarke, 2019) that capture shared patterns of meaning across the dataset. These themes

were further reviewed and refined through ongoing reflexive dialogue among the authors, leading to the definition and naming of the final themes that offer a coherent, theoretically informed interpretation of the complexities and nuances conveyed by participants.

Results

Themes

We identified four main themes that articulate the process of constructing and reproducing monogamy within couples who met on Tinder (Table 2). Each quotation is accompanied by the participant's pseudonym and age, indicated in parentheses.

1 Constructing a Monogamous Self: Desire and Identity

1.1 I Could Only Think About Him

Participants position monogamy within themselves. The recognition of their desire for a monogamous relationship is attributed to specific internal signals. One such signal is the absence of romantic interest in others: "From the moment I started going out with him, I didn't feel the need to talk to or meet other people at all" (Giulia, 27). The participant thus offers a subjective and intimate account to explain her relational choices. In some cases, the lack of romantic interest in others is described as a discovery emerging from a specific situation:

"Shortly after, I started working as an entertainer on a trip and on these trips female entertainers are like the top girls to catch. So, I mean, I was surrounded by guys, but despite that I could only think about him. That's when I realised that I truly cared." (Alice, 19).

The discourse used to account for the choice of entering a romantic relationship portrays the person as *governed* by their emotions and feelings, as demonstrated by expressions such as "I could only think about him." The choice of a partner is thus framed as an uncontrollable desire, which only grows stronger in situations of *competition* and *temptation.*

The growing interest in a potential partner is presented as obviously eliminating the possibility of attraction to others, following a cause-and-effect logic: "Then I didn't really go out with other people because, well, I was already head over heels, so it didn't make sense" (Livia, 23). Romantic desire is framed as intrinsically exclusive: once directed at one person, it entirely centres on them, leaving no room for others. This representation implies a finite amount of desire and emotional needs, fulfillable by only one person at a time. Affection and romantic interest are thus represented as subtractive and competitive: if limited, any new desire for someone else reduces what is available for the primary partner (Vasallo, 2019). In this sense, exclusivity also operates as a regulatory principle that actively directs desire toward a single subject. By doing so, it reduces the risk that alternative encounters might destabilise the romantic frame through which participants interpret their feelings, namely the belief that "true" love can only be monogamous (Roseneil et al., 2020).

The distinction between feelings for a potential partner and feelings for a friend was another type of internal cue that participants referred to when recognising

Table 2 Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotations
(1) **Constructing a Monogamous Self: Desire and Identity** Participants describe monogamy as an inner and essential aspect of the self, framed as instinct, need, desire, or choice, and as a core element of their identity	(1.1) *I Could Only Think About Him* Participants describe internal cues that helped them recognise their desire for a monogamous romantic relationship, such as a lack of interest in others and the perceived difference between the emerging relationship and friendships	"Then I didn't really go out with other people because, well, I was already head over heels, so it didn't make sense."
	(1.2) *I Am a Monogamous Person* Participants frame monogamy as an intrinsic part of who they are; this identity frame is not grounded in moral or normative claims, but is narrated as something personally necessary and intrinsic	"I am very monogamous and therefore I wanted to be sure that she had no interest in seeking out other people. If that had been the case I would have told her 'Okay, that's not what I'm looking for, so let's go our separate ways'."
(2) **Defining the Couple as a Closed Unit** Participants define being a couple through exclusivity, mutual confirmation, and the protection of clear boundaries. The relationship is framed as a closed and prioritised unit, within which intimacy, emotional closeness, and commitment are reserved exclusively for the partner	(2.1) *Being Together Means Not Seeing Other People* The couple is defined through exclusivity, signalled via different practices: mutual confirmations and not leaving doors open	"She told me 'I like you, I don't want to see other people' and I told her 'Yeah, same for me'. Calling it 'dating exclusively' rather than saying 'we're together' was the same thing."
	(2.2) *The Things I Reserve Only for My Partner* Intimacy and priority are reserved for the partner, reinforcing the couple as the only legitimate site of deep emotional and relational investment	"Even having a really close relationship, one that feels like they are in a relationship with someone else, even if nothing explicit happens, like a kiss. Even if it's with someone you have absolutely no romantic or sexual interest in, just because that kind of closeness is something I reserve only for this person."
(3) **Being a Couple for Everyone to See** Public visibility and labels are used to validate and officialise the relationship, transforming the couple into a socially recognised and legitimate unit		"For me, a serious relationship is one where, at some point, it is clearly stated that we are a couple. That doesn't mean that right after I'll introduce you to my parents, but it does imply the intention that one day I'll introduce you to them and bring you along when I go out with my friends."

Table 2 (continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotations
(4) Reconciling the Stigmatised Image of Tinder with the Legitimacy of One's Own Monogamous Relationship Participants resolve the tension between Tinder's stigmatised reputation and their own monogamous relationships by framing their stories as exceptional, lucky, or destined, thereby re-legitimising their couple within the traditional romantic imaginary		"With peers I didn't have any issues mentioning that I met my partner on Tinder. I was even proud of it, because since it's an app for casual things, for people who just want one thing, I found someone who wanted more."

romantic attraction. This, too, is described as a discovery: an awareness of wanting more than friendship, experiencing emotions beyond platonic bonds, and ultimately realising they cannot remain just friends (Wilkinson, 2012): "It was the mix of emotions that made me say 'Okay, I wouldn't be able to see you just as a friend, I would see you as something more'" (Lisa, 22). Romantic interest thus emerges as a distinct type of interest from that experienced in any other relationship, and it is precisely this difference that makes it recognisable.

1.2 I Am a Monogamous Person

Participants describe themselves as monogamous, thus configuring monogamy as an identity rather than a relational choice:

"I am very monogamous and therefore I wanted to be sure that she had no interest in seeking out other people. If that had been the case I would have told her 'Okay, that's not what I'm looking for, so let's go our separate ways'." (Aurora, 24).

Monogamy is framed as a personal necessity instead of a normative or moral stance. Positioning monogamy as a personal identity trait makes it a *conditio sine qua non* in a relationship, in fact the only alternative to a monogamous relationship would have been no relationship at all—that is, "going our separate ways." To support this stance, some participants reinterpret their personal history to identify traits that have consistently demonstrated or shaped their preference for monogamous choices (Montali et al., 2023):

"[Without exclusivity] I probably wouldn't even have the foundation to form a meaningful bond. I'm an only child. I don't share my food, so I could never imagine sharing a person. Of course I don't judge anyone, but it's not in my nature." (Bianca, 27).

Biographical reinterpretation reinforces monogamy as an instinctive, unchangeable trait, with the participant linking her only-child status to a reluctance to share across different areas of life. Another example of this identity reconstruction appears in the following excerpt:

"Both of us had only had monogamous relationships. I mean, even though some of them were more or less serious, more or less long-lasting, more or less defined, some weren't even real relationships, but still, whenever there was one person, there was only that person." (Elena, 26).

Here, the participant describes historical continuity in her relational approach, showing consistency in her experiences. Notably, she frames her account to mirror herself and her partner, seeking reassurance about their future intentions.

However, participants do not present monogamy as inevitable. Indeed, the existence of alternative relationship models reinforces their need to define themselves as monogamous. While acknowledging different relationship models, they consistently reaffirm their monogamy and occasionally express admiration for these alternative relationships:

"The way I am, I really admire people who have open relationships. I mean, I don't have that in me. It's a limitation I have, and I don't even think I want to push myself beyond it, it would be like hurting myself." (Mia, 27).

Monogamy is thus *essentialised*: portrayed as a personal, intrinsic, instinctive, and natural trait that is pointless to resist because doing so would mean going against one's true self. This "true self" becomes the only legitimate point of reference, privileged within an individualistic framework in which the relationship with the other is oriented toward the fulfilment of pre-existing personal goals, themselves shaped within socially legitimised relational scripts. In this way, the prescriptive character of mononormativity reframes the encounter with the other not as an open relational process, but as a problem of compatibility: the central question becomes whether the other person shares the same relational logic, or whether the match is therefore impossible (Illouz, 2003).

2 Defining the Couple as a Closed Unit

2.1 Being Together Means Not Seeing Other People

Participants reported defining "being together" through dialogues with their partner to establish a shared understanding of their relationship and intentions. These definitions imply an association between being a couple and exclusivity: "She told me 'I like you, I don't want to see other people' and I told her 'Yeah, same for me'. Calling it 'dating exclusively' rather than saying 'we're together' was the same thing" (Aurora, 24).

This definition of "being together" as *not seeing other people* is expressed in participants' narratives through two key practices: *mutual confirmations* and *not leaving doors open.* When *being together* had not yet been explicitly stated, mutual confirmations were sometimes conveyed through humour, as in the following excerpt:

"In those early stages of the relationship, we joked about it to make it clear that it was just the two of us. It even felt like too much to expect or declare it outright in the first few weeks of the relationship, so we just made it clear in other ways. We were giving each other mutual confirmations that this was a monogamous relationship, without actually saying it." (Luna, 25).

Once again, exclusivity is positioned as an indicator of the *seriousness* of the relationship, to the extent that stating it explicitly from the very beginning would have felt premature.

Another way of *offering mutual confirmation* in the early stages of a relationship concerns Tinder. One participant explains: "If things start getting serious, you delete the app or at least stop using it. But if it gets really serious, you uninstall it" (Lisa, 22). Communicating that one has deleted Tinder is thus used by participants to signal to their partners their willingness to commit. Participants interpret their partners' com-

munications regarding the app likewise: "He told me he had deleted Tinder. And that, usually, is a signal" (Alice, 19).

The final way of offering mutual confirmation involves explicitly stating that the *search* for a romantic partner has ended:

"Pretty quickly, it became clear that there was this whole set of things that aligned between us, and we both explicitly had the same idea. I was on Tinder for this purpose and since you said you were on it for the same reason and matched what I was looking for, as far as I'm concerned, the search is over." (Elena, 26).

Here, too, the definition of the relationship as exclusive is presented as the *obvious* consequence of a set of aligning factors. The formation of a monogamous relationship is also narrated as an *explicit goal* shared by both partners. The words used by the participant evoke the imagery of a *selection process* for a vacant position, a role left open, awaiting the right person to fill it: the right *match*.

Another practice through which "being together" is defined as *not seeing other people* is "not leaving any doors open": "When things get serious, there's no point in leaving doors open everywhere, right? And then he took his phone, deleted [Tinder] too, and that was it" (Sofia, 23). Participants therefore describe *leaving doors open* as a *threat* to the couple, as it could allow other people to 'infiltrate' the relationship, thus violating its fundamental premise of exclusivity. The couple is consequently narrated as a closed unit that needs to be protected. At the same time, as the quotation suggests, an equivalence is again established between a "serious" relationship and a monogamous one, in which exclusivity acquires a positive moral value, while relational multiplicity is framed as undesirable or risky (Beck, 2024; Vasallo, 2024). In this way, monogamy takes on not only a natural but also a moral connotation.

2.2 The Things I Reserve Only for My Partner

Participants' narratives revealed two domains that are positioned as exclusive and inviolable within the couple. The first of these domains is intimacy. While it includes sexual intimacy, it extends beyond this, encompassing various aspects of daily life and shared experiences:

"Thinking about a friend I had once gone on vacation alone with, I don't think that's something I would do again. I don't know… Maybe it's a type of intimacy that I didn't know before [being in my first relationship]. It would feel strange to spend so much time alone with someone who isn't the person I want to be with. I don't know why, it just feels strange to me to even think about it…" (Vera, 21).

Sharing living spaces is thus presented as a prerogative of the couple, to the extent that doing so with someone else engenders a sense of discomfort. Additionally, friendship-based intimacy is framed as a transient phase, destined to be superseded by a more definitive and more "adult" form of intimacy: that of a romantic relationship.

Another participant provides an analysis of the relationship between two hypothetical best friends, defining the boundaries between acceptable intimacy and suspicious physical closeness, which she terms "unnecessary physical contact":

"I sometimes see girls who have male best friends and they sit on their lap. That, to me, is excessive and unnecessary physical contact, okay? If you ask me why, I don't really know, but maybe it has that, you know, more sexual aspect to it, which maybe shouldn't be there between best friends. Or even the idea of being cuddled up on the couch while watching a movie, that's something more intimate, something

you do with a partner, not a best friend, unless you're interested in your best friend." (Stella, 23).

Notably, the participant concedes a degree of uncertainty regarding the rationale behind her perception of this physical contact as "unnecessary". She suggests this contact is inherently sexual or sexualizable, yet her explanation seems a post hoc rationalisation of something that appears self-evident to her, intuitively understood before being explained. This excerpt also shows that the participant characterises deep intimacy and physical closeness between best friends as only possible if romantic interest is involved, as its mere presence contradicts the idea of a non-romantic or non-sexual bond.

Beyond physical contact and the sharing of private spaces, frequent contact is perceived as a sign of excessive emotional closeness, something that should be reserved only for one's partner:

"Even having a really close relationship, one that feels like they are in a relationship with someone else, even if nothing explicit happens, like a kiss. Even if it's with someone you have absolutely no romantic or sexual interest in, just because that kind of closeness is something I reserve only for this person." (Vera, 21).

Crossing the couple's boundaries does not require explicit physical acts nor does it depend on having a romantic interest in someone else. A violation is not only triggered when an external person represents a potential threat or a substitute for the partner, but also when a close bond with someone else challenges the belief that deep emotional connection and daily attentiveness should exist only within the couple.

Complementary to intimacy, *priority* is narrated as non-negotiable within the context of the relationship. It is characterised by reciprocity: on one hand, participants describe the need and expectation of being their partner's foremost priority in terms of resource allocation, including time, energy, attention, and financial investment. On the other hand, they express their desire and willingness to do the same for their partner: "My priority will always be the person I'm in a relationship with, because that's just how it feels to me. I naturally want to spend more time with that person, which means inevitably deprioritising other relationships" (Bianca, 27).

This hierarchy prioritises the romantic partner and is characterised as spontaneous, natural, and self-evident; rather than a deliberate choice among alternatives, it is regarded as the default expectation. This notion is further substantiated by profound implications of perceived violations of the couple's *priority status.* Such violations are often experienced as deeply problematic and, in some cases, considered infidelity, akin to sexual betrayal: "To me, cheating is investing in someone else in any way, whether it's attention, words, glances" (Sofia, 23). Participants thus describe romantic relationships as *demanding near-total dedication*, both in what they give to their partner and in what they expect in return.

Together, these practices are characterised by a dimension of control that operates both inwardly and outwardly: toward the self, through reflexive monitoring of one's own behaviour and the active limitation of alternative relational possibilities; and toward the partner, through heightened attention to their actions and vigilance for potential "warning signs." While this logic of control is most explicitly articulated in relation to sexual exclusivity, it extends to a wide range of relational domains, such as intimacy, care, time, and emotional investment, that are not inherently exclusive

to romantic relationships but are rendered so within a mononormative framework (Wilkinson, 2012).

3. Being a Couple for Everyone to See

Participants describe how their relationship became publicly recognised through both actions and explicit declarations, which served to affirm its legitimacy. Visibility plays a key role: partners observe themselves through the gaze of an 'other', whether real, hypothetical, or implicit, whose perception validates the couple. For many, behaving as a couple in public, such as frequent outings and physical affection, serves as an implicit confirmation of the relationship's commitment: "Going out in public means it's serious, that it's official, that others might see us" (Maya, 20).

In addition to these implicit signs, participants recount moments of explicit confirmation, often framed as 'officialising' the relationship. The act of labelling the relationship is described as necessary, even when it is framed as merely acknowledging something already established:

"She literally said 'Okay, so what are we?' Kind of jokingly. We already knew we felt the same way. I admit, I probably would have waited a little longer, just to be extra sure. But in the end, it was just a label, so I said, 'Yeah, of course, we already are [a couple].'" (Aurora, 24).

This may suggest that declaring oneself a couple is fundamentally an *outward-facing* action, since participants themselves state that the act of *making things official* or *putting a label on it* does not change the quality of the relationship. Nonetheless, this step is described as *necessary,* motivated by a need for *clarity*. Officialising the relationship also carried broader social implications that align with the concept of the *relationship escalator* (Gahran, 2017). Many participants linked it to the expectation of introducing their partner to family and integrating them into social circles:

"For me, a serious relationship is one where, at some point, it is clearly stated that we are a couple. That doesn't mean that right after I'll introduce you to my parents, but it does imply the intention that one day I'll introduce you to them and bring you along when I go out with my friends". (Bianca, 27).

This process also established milestones, such as anniversaries, reinforcing the couple's narrative and stability. Notably, the word anniversary evokes marriage as the ultimate relationship officialisation, even in its absence: "For me, making it official means saying 'Okay, I'm officially in a relationship, I have a boyfriend'. And then there's the anniversary, I love those things" (Stella, 23). Taken together, these practices and discursive markers—being introduced to parents, appearing regularly together in social settings, and identifying a founding moment of the couple to be celebrated through an anniversary—constitute a readily available cultural repertoire through which participants make sense of their relationship and position it within a monogamous framework. In doing so, they render their relationship socially intelligible and symbolically legitimate (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

Another key aspect of officialisation is its role in shaping self-identity. By formalising the relationship, individuals redefine themselves as being in a couple, making this status a central part of both their internal self-perception and external social identity.

4. Reconciling the Stigmatised Image of Tinder with the Legitimacy of One's Own Monogamous Relationship

Participants described Tinder as a space where "the rule is everything except a serious relationship" (Eva, 24), demonstrating a clear awareness of the app's dominant social representation as a site primarily associated with casual encounters. In many cases, this representation was not only recognised but also partially endorsed. At the same time, it stood in contrast with participants' own use of the app, which was oriented toward the hope of forming a monogamous relationship.

This apparent contradiction was often resolved by positioning oneself as an exceptional case, thereby reconciling the stigmatised image of Tinder with the legitimacy of one's own relational outcome. Success was framed as the result of luck, personal qualities, or moral distinction, rather than as something that could be expected from the platform itself. As one participant explained: "Finding deep people on Tinder is difficult. In fact, I consider myself really lucky" (Vera, 21). By framing their relationships as anomalies, participants were thus able to align their experiences with Tinder's broader reputation while simultaneously taking pride in having "subverted" it. As Maya (20) noted:

> "With peers I didn't have any issues mentioning that I met my partner on Tinder. I was even proud of it, because since it's an app for casual things, for people who just want one thing, I found someone who wanted more."

This narration reflects the value system of monogamy, which positions exclusive, long-term relationships as superior and socially desirable (Vasallo, 2024). It also shapes self-image, as being in a committed relationship is presented as a marker of success, something to be proud of.

The perceived exceptionality of their stories is also evident in how participants frame them in relation to dominant romantic narratives (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). They often reflect on the contrast between the socially idealised beginning of a love story and their own experience of meeting on Tinder:

"I have these two friends who got together after meeting at a party and I think "wow, what a romantic way to meet!" They spent the whole evening talking. And then I think about how I met my partner: on Tinder. It's not even a nice story to tell your kids." (Vera, 21).

The ideal characteristics of a romantic first meeting are described with strong aspirational connotations. The narration of this first encounter plays a crucial social role in the myth-making of a couple (Vasallo, 2019), shaping not only its story but also its legitimacy as a new family unit. Another participant discusses this topic with her partner, again imagining hypothetical future children:

"We've thought about it together [with my partner], kind of laughing about it like, 'Can you imagine? If one day we have kids and we have to tell them how mom and dad met: on Tinder. How embarrassing.' It feels like something is missing, like that romantic story of how we met, it was somehow orchestrated and intentional because we were already hypothetically looking for a relationship, right?" (Elena, 26).

In this story, the element of chance is absent, and in the romantic imaginary, chance is often interpreted as a "sign of destiny" (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Thus, the intentional use of dating apps to find a relationship is framed as incompatible with the traditional romantic myth, which portrays love as something that happens unex-

pectedly, without deliberate pursuit. This tension is echoed by another participant, who says that meeting on Tinder "isn't that interesting of a story. When I talk about how we met, I wish it were something a bit crazier, more engaging, more dramatic." (Alice, 19).

To reconcile their Tinder-originating relationships with the traditional monogamic romantic imaginary, some participants reframe their stories through the lens of fate and coincidence: "My ex and I used to say 'Can you believe it? We met completely by chance, on Tinder!' I mean, it was a miracle. But somehow, it's like we were meant to meet, you know?" (Lea, 29). The participant expresses amazement at having connected with her ex-partner on Tinder, where matches are determined by algorithms. Since users have no direct control over this process, their meeting can be framed as purely "random." This reframing shifts the narrative away from the idea of actively seeking a relationship on Tinder, an act that implies intentionality, and instead highlights the unexpected nature of finding "the right person" against all odds. In doing so, some participants reclaim the element of chance in their Tinder love story, making it more compatible with traditional monogamic ideals and thus granting it greater legitimacy within that framework.

Taken as a whole, this theme shows how the salience and cultural availability of the monogamous romantic frame facilitate the attribution of traditional meanings to non-conventional contexts and practices. In this sense, individuals can situate their behaviours within this framework not only by conforming to mononormative prescriptions, but also by constructing narratives that render potentially divergent practices compatible with its underlying norms (Portolan & McAlister, 2022).

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the formation of monogamous relationships among individuals who met their partner on Tinder. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was conducted, guided by a feminist approach and a critical perspective on monogamy. The analysis identified four themes.

The first theme illustrates that participants position monogamy as an intrinsic need and a personal trait. Romantic attraction and desire are narrated as inherently exclusive, with the desire to form a monogamous relationship presented as a natural and automatic outcome of such feelings. This finding is noteworthy because it does not rely on a discourse of individual choice but draws on notions of emotional inevitability, consistent with dominant cultural myths of romantic love (Vasallo, 2024).

Moreover, monogamy is framed as a core aspect of one's identity, rooted in its essentialisation. The fact that participants actively identify as monogamous, despite monogamy being the normative system, signals both its internalisation and the recognition of different identifications as possible. Acknowledging non-monogamous alternatives without delegitimising them, participants strategically reaffirm their monogamous identity: monogamous and non-monogamous people are framed as distinct categories following parallel, non-conflicting paths (Vasallo, 2024). This portrayal suggests a conceptualisation of monogamy as a relational orientation, mirroring Robinson's (2013) findings related to polyamory. Consistent with this concep-

tualisation, monogamy is individualised, detached from its social and institutional roots. As a personal need, it becomes non-negotiable, perceived as a "natural fact", and, as Weeks (2007) notes, natural factsare often seen as unquestionable or beyond dispute.

The second theme elucidates the significance participants attach to a monogamous couple relationship. Specifically, it is represented as a relationship that holds priority over all others, characterised by an exclusive level of intimacy. Importantly, intimacy here is not confined to sexuality but extends to the daily sharing of space, experiences, and emotions. This produces a relational hierarchy where the romantic couple occupies the top position, while friendships and other ties are assigned secondary roles (Wilkinson, 2012). Any deviation from this relational order, even in the absence of sexual contact, is perceived as betrayal, supporting Vasallo's (2024) theorisation of monogamy as a normative structure regulating emotional exclusivity. From an evolutionary perspective, emotional monopolisation—that is, positioning deep friendships or confidant relationships outside the dyad as inappropriate or dangerous—can be considered one of several compensatory practices that function to regulate biologically driven tendencies within a socially monogamous framework (Barash, 2016). This encapsulation reduces exposure to alternative attachment opportunities, thereby lowering the likelihood of polyandrous or polygynous drift without requiring constant overt enforcement. Other strategies include sexual exclusivity, romanticisation of jealousy, moralization of fidelity, and social encapsulation (Barash, 2016).

In the case of couples that met through Tinder, this conceptualisation of the couple relationship requires specific practices to clarify the mutual monogamous intentions between the two partners. Given the context of their initial acquaintance, such intentions cannot be assumed. One notable practice is the mutual deactivation of Tinder, used as a performative signal of commitment. This confirms Vares' (2023) results that relationships initiated on a dating app often require deliberate boundary-setting and the negotiation of exclusivity. What is framed as "obvious" or "natural" at the individual level must still be actively constructed and maintained at the relational level.

The third theme highlights the importance of public recognition and external validation in constructing the couple as a social reality. Participants emphasise the significance of behaving "as a couple" in public and across social networks. Officialisation answers the question "What are we?" by establishing a shared identity with ontological and social effects (Jackson & Scott, 2004). The couple thus exists not only through its internal dynamics but also through its recognition as a legitimate social unit, without which it cannot be fully enacted.

The fourth theme focuses on the reconciliation between the stigmatised representation of Tinder and the legitimacy of participants' own monogamous relationships. Indeed, they describe the app as incongruent with the values associated with traditional, monogamous, long-term relationships. The fact that their relationships emerged from such a context is narrated as anomalous, making them feel like fortunate exceptions. The stigmatised representation of Tinder is further emphasised in participants' comparison between the ideal beginning of a love story, as depicted in romantic narratives, and their personal incipit, represented by a Tinder chat. This dissonance confirms the findings of Portolan and McAlister (2022), who argue that dating app users engage with traditional narratives of romantic love, its beginnings,

progression, and key stages. Despite the constraints of the dating app context, these traditional stories retain an aspirational role, even though the app environment inhibits the full reproduction of the idealised romantic arc. Our study thus extends the work of Portolan and McAlister (2022) by highlighting that some users actively "reclaim" the narrative element of chance in their Tinder-based stories, thereby potentially enabling their relationships to gain legitimacy within the traditional romantic ideal. This complements recent findings by Sharabi and colleagues (2025), who highlight that digital matching does not necessarily de-romanticise the origin story but can instead be folded into existing romantic ideologies. In line with Vares (2023), who argues that traditional discourses of romantic love are incorporated into dating app practices rather than eroded by them, our findings suggest that monogamous values may be re-legitimised through their active reaffirmation in relational contexts where they cannot be automatically presumed. Participants' narratives indicate that traditional monogamy may acquire additional symbolic value precisely because it is not guaranteed in the context of dating apps, but must be actively chosen among alternative relational possibilities that are positioned as less desirable.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation of mononormativity (Wilkinson, 2012) by advancing a processual understanding of monogamy among couples who met on a dating app. Rather than conceptualising monogamy as a mere agreement of romantic and sexual exclusivity, our results suggest that exclusivity operates as a *conditio sine qua non* for the ontological existence of the couple. At the same time, exclusivity is enacted through a broader constellation of desires, practices, meanings, and boundary-making processes through which monogamous relationships are actively produced and maintained.

Specifically, monogamous relationships are constructed as relational systems characterised by the exclusive allocation of intimacy and priority to the partner, by boundaries that are produced and sustained through socially shared practices of signalling exclusivity, both explicitly and implicitly, and by a reliance on external recognition for the relationship to be rendered socially intelligible and legitimate.

In this sense, the study provides a concrete analytical framework for understanding how mononormativity is enacted in contemporary dating contexts, showing how it operates not only as an abstract norm but as a lived relational logic that structures expectations, behaviours, and self-understandings.

This framework may also have practical implications for psychotherapeutic and educational contexts. In clinical settings, it can support the critical examination of implicit and often unarticulated assumptions about relational norms, desires, and boundaries that may shape clients' experiences and distress. In educational contexts, it can inform feminist-oriented interventions aimed at deconstructing and relativising what is commonly framed as "natural" or inevitable in intimate life, and at unpacking its implications for individual, relational, and social well-being.

More broadly, articulating a clearer, more process-oriented definition of monogamous relationships may help identify specific points of tension or vulnerability (e.g., jealousy, possessiveness, boundary regulation), while simultaneously creating conceptual space to legitimise alternative relational forms.

Limitations and Future Research

The first limitation of our study is that it involved a limited number of participants in a single national context. Whether these results can be observed in different contexts remains to be determined through future research conducted in different cultural and demographic settings.

A second limitation concerns the gender composition of the sample, which consisted predominantly of women. Consequently, the analysis primarily captures women's narratives and meaning-making processes around the construction of monogamous relationships. This imbalance may have shaped the findings in substantive ways, given that monogamy is a deeply gendered relational system (Emens, 2004; Jackson & Scott, 2004). Women and men are socialised into different expectations regarding desire, commitment, emotional labour, and relational responsibility, and they occupy different positions within gendered power structures (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995; Müller, 2019). These differences may influence how monogamy is narrated, negotiated, and justified, as well as which aspects of the relationship are rendered salient or problematic. The prominence of themes related to emotional reflexivity, boundary management, and relational vigilance in our findings may therefore reflect, at least in part, the gendered standpoint from which participants spoke. Future research would benefit from explicitly focusing on male narratives, in order to examine how gendered socialisation and power relations shape the construction and lived experience of monogamy in potentially divergent ways.

It is also important to highlight that our sample included participants with diverse sexual orientations. Across the dataset, we did not identify substantial differences in how participants narrated the construction and meaning of monogamous relationships along this dimension. This finding is consistent with our theoretical framework, which conceptualises monogamy as a hegemonic relational system operating at a structural and cultural level, shaping intimate practices across both heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Vasallo, 2024; Wilkinson, 2010). From this perspective, monogamy functions as an organising logic that cuts across social positions, even while intersecting with them in complex and uneven ways. This does not imply that differences and specificities do not exist in how people from different social groups experience and construct monogamy. Rather, given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited size of the sample, we chose to focus analytically on the shared processes through which monogamy is constructed and reproduced, rather than on subgroup variations that could not be meaningfully theorised within the scope of this dataset. Future studies could extend this work by exploring how mononormativity is negotiated at the intersections not only of gender, but also of sexual orientation, class, and other social positionings, in order to more fully account for both shared patterns and divergent forms of relational meaning-making.

A third limitation relates to the potential self-selection bias inherent in the recruitment process. Given the time-intensive nature of semi-structured interviews, it is plausible that participants were those who felt a certain degree of satisfaction with, or identification in, monogamous relationships. Conversely, those who were more ambivalent or reluctant about monogamy may have opted not to participate. This may have contributed to the lack of relational diversity in the sample and should be

considered when interpreting the findings. Future research could address this limitation by including participants with more diverse orientations toward monogamy.

Moreover, building on the present findings, future research could extend the analytical focus beyond relationship formation to include processes of relationship maintenance and dissolution. Although the interview protocol in this study was intentionally centred on the early stages of monogamous relationship formation, some participants were no longer in a monogamous relationship at the time of the interview. Investigating how identity-related processes, social dynamics, and platform-specific features (e.g., dating app affordances) shape the continuity or termination of intimate relationships over time would represent a valuable direction for further research.

Conclusion

New digital platforms such as dating apps are changing how a growing number of people meet potential partners (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). This transformation raises important questions about the role of these technologies in shaping intimate life (Bauman, 2003; Hobbs et al., 2016; Palmer, 2020). Moreover, the destabilisation of culturally sedimented assumptions brought about by these digital platforms creates a unique opportunity to observe and critically interrogate relational norms that often remain invisible precisely because they are taken for granted.

How intimate relationships are organised have profound individual and collective implications (Budgeon, 2008; Roseneil et al., 2020). For this reason, monogamy cannot remain confined to the realm of personal preference, but must be recognised as a social institution worthy of critical analysis (Vasallo, 2024). Feminist movements and scholars have long emphasised that the personal is political, demonstrating that intimacy, desire, and relational practices are shaped by broader cultural norms and power relations (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

By examining how monogamous relationships are actively constructed, negotiated, and legitimised between partners who met through Tinder, this study contributes to making visible the social processes through which mononormativity is reproduced in contemporary life contexts. Rather than remaining static, traditional ideals of monogamy appear to undergo processes of reinterpretation and adaptation in order to accommodate emerging relational practices. By showing how monogamous relationships are formed and identifying their defining characteristics, this study creates the possibility for critical reflection on intimate life from a situated and experience-grounded perspective. In doing so, it invites further critical engagement with relational norms that are often experienced as natural or inevitable, opening conceptual space for greater awareness, reflexivity, and relational plurality.

Author Contributions Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. Data collection was performed by Elena Sinigaglia, under the supervision of Lorenzo Montali. Both authors contributed to data analysis and to the writing of the manuscript.

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Data Availability The data of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Evaluation Committee of the Department of Psychology at University of Milano-Bicocca.

Consent to Participate Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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