

Dating sites, SkinnyTok, and New Conservatism: A map of contemporary relationships and online dating

Terézia Ferjančeková, Petr Bittner

interview

In another IF interview, Petr Bittner spoke with Terezie Ferjančeková, one of the protagonists of the popular podcast about relationships and intimacy, Vyhonit ďábla (Wanking the Devil Away)...

What does love mean today in a world that's moving toward individualism and the liberation of the individual from external constraints? Is there still room for it in a world like this? Or is it missing?

I don't want to sound too lofty, but I think love has a transformative potential. When others don't act the way we might imagine they should, love compels us to change things within ourselves. We want to be better for others.

I feel that when I'm surrounded by loving people, they hold up a mirror to me in a way that allows me to grow as a person. They do this with an understanding of my background, and their only motive is to help me. They let me know that they're there for me and that they're giving me the space to express my needs. Then, as a person, I feel that I'm growing. Then I'm able to give the same love to other people. Of course, not every relationship is like this, but in healthy ones, love shows us its power to change people and, with them, society as a whole for the better.

Let's stick with love in romantic relationships for now. One of the emblematic themes of the podcast Vyhonit ďábla (Wanking the Devil Away) is sexuality and physicality. How do you think physical intimacy has changed in recent years – in terms of how people view their bodies, how they approach their desires, and where and how they set their personal boundaries?

Our podcast has been running for 6 years. I remember well that the situation was more liberal back then, more inclusive policies were being put in place, and we felt a desire to liberate our bodies – we felt that from now on it would be more acceptable to be fat, to have smaller (or larger) breasts, and all kinds of support campaigns were popping up. I remember the atmosphere when I assumed that from now on, that would simply be the case, that we had freed ourselves from the Kate Moss "heroine chic" patterns.

Unfortunately, with the advent of new conservatism, the original, traditional perception is returning: women should be beautiful, and this beauty is determined by the male gaze.

So you feel that liberalization was just a wave, and that you'll now have to defend your achievements again?

I don't think it's just a feeling. I'm not a political scientist, but I sense and understand changing political trends. And it bothers me how this affects female and queer bodies. Suddenly, there's greater oversight over them again. It

reinforces the belief that if we have weight-loss drugs, why should we be fat? The belief that no one wants to look at that. The popularity of fitness centers, gyms, and weight rooms has grown rapidly among Gen Z. There's nothing wrong with that in principle, and I also like to exercise, but I'm talking about illustrating a broader trend of renewed pressure to be fit—perhaps with the difference that, unlike previous waves of pressure to have the ideal body, this time I'm seeing a much greater impact on boys and men as well.

It reminds me of an earlier era when photos of girls with fat bellies were circulating on Tumblr and girls were sharing tips on how to lose weight radically: don't eat too much, only take two bites, run. Today, TikTok has taken over this function through trends. It's called "SkinnyTok."

I noticed this transformation most clearly in the case of tennis player Serena Williams or Sugar Denny in the Czech Republic, who have always been two different icons of the body positivity movement. Both have now done a 180 and publicly embarked on a weight loss journey with the help of weight loss drugs...

But I'll list some differences between these two examples. First of all, it must be said that if Sugar Denny and other girls decide to take Mounjaro or Ozempic, I can't blame them for it. Despite a certain movement, despite their personal efforts to carry their bodies with pride, they still had to face people staring at them, accusing them of not doing enough, writing to them that they were disgusting and fat—and that's just something you don't want to hear, no matter what you think about it or about yourself. Social pressure is forcing them to take the easy and accessible route to lose weight faster.

This is particularly absurd in the case of Serena Williams, who is literally one of the best athletes in human history, having won more Grand Slams than Federer or Nadal. And yet her body, which achieved this, is the subject of public debate...

For me, Serena's case was a big disappointment. She'd shown that athletic bodies can look different. Her body achieved what few others could, and yet it still wasn't enough. What's worse about her "turnaround" is that she is profiting from her current and publicly discussed weight loss—her husband is sitting on the board of a company that Williams promotes. As a result, we're back to the fact that corporations are getting rich off women's insecurities, which they're simultaneously reproducing.

We're also talking about invasive prescription drugs (primarily for diabetes). When taken without consultation, they cause bone thinning and the loss of muscle mass and healthy fat. And similar global influencer campaigns are only encouraging girls to take these drugs without consulting with a doctor and exposing their bodies to something they're not sufficiently informed about.

Let's turn from physicality back to relationships. Today, most relationships start on dating apps. How do you think Tinder, Bumble, and the Czech dating scene have changed our perception of relationships? Do apps also influence how we feel about ourselves? What do you think is the safest dating app and why?

In my opinion, there's no such thing as "safe". It depends on how you mean that. Do we mean one that doesn't allow sending dick pics? Tinder and Bumble have measures for this.

I meant an app that you'd recommend to a normal, confident, progressive woman. I don't have any experience with apps, but I've repeatedly heard positive references to Bumble as a place where there's a higher concentration of "normal guys."

I used Bumble, Tinder, and Feeld. Feeld is more focused on sex, but paradoxically, people around me often found partners there who were generally open-minded. Tinder currently has a bad reputation—and it also works seasonally: In the summer, Prague is flooded with tourists who come to have fun, and a girl can't find a normal relationship there. It's all about "Let's enjoy a few days in Prague."

But that motivation is understandable. I had a good experience with Bumble in Spain in this regard. Zuzana and I went to a sex party and found a partner there through the app who was extremely polite and respectful, showed us around, translated for us, and drove us there and back. So definitely a great experience, but in Spain, not the Czech Republic.

Today, research in the Czech Republic and globally estimates that around 80% of people meet through apps. How do people meet offline these days? And is it still seen as an "original," "traditional," "reliable," or even "correct" way, or is it more of a rarity, or retro?

Some people find a certain period to be more suitable than others. Almost everyone has been single at some point in their lives, so they've tried out some kind of app. And around 12 to 20% of them have even found a permanent partner there. I often feel like young people are, so to speak, "over" social media, and perhaps because of this, they keep the romantic idea that they'll meet their true love offline, that a friend will introduce them, or that they'll meet at work.

I also find it interesting that many people meet through Instagram, for example. Compared to dating sites, it has the advantage of presenting people in a broader context. And if I like someone's self-presentation on this network, I can say to myself that I'll try to get to know that person better and we'll go out together. It's actually a middle ground.

At the same time, there is a more general trend, particularly among younger people, to increasingly put away their cell phones, at least for a while, and then get to know each other through offline activities. Most recently, I was struck by the example of running clubs in this context. For people over 30, I would definitely mention the dating quizzes co-organized by Pavlína Louženská. So it's not "just" an offline dating site, it's an activity, a form of entertainment that offers a nice opportunity to meet someone in a natural and relaxed environment.

I feel that this approach is appropriate, because the main purpose of apps isn't to introduce people to each other, but rather to keep as many people as possible in the application and generate as many "matches" as possible: the algorithm may know who I'll like, but it won't show me right away, because then I'd leave the app and they wouldn't make any money off of me, because I wouldn't buy their subscription to see who likes me. It wants me to keep trying. Unlike the original old applications, the new ones are no longer completely innocent.

Some studies point out that people who spend more time on apps experience both positive and negative changes: the positive change is that it slightly reduces their fear of never finding anyone. However, the negative consequence of this is that they begin to feel replaceable in this digital sea of dating sites. Added to this is the stress caused by the gap between online self-presentation and offline encounters. What do apps do to our self-image?

I notice this mainly among my male friends. They have a more complex chance of matching on apps, and most

importantly, of the match turning into a date. They also pay for premium much more often. There are generally fewer women on these apps.

It reminds me of the club scene, which often works with promotions such as "free entry and two free drinks for women" for this very reason...

Guys simply get frustrated more often by these apps. And in the long term, this logically affects their self-esteem.

So it's another cause of the ubiquitous "frustration among young men"...

Sure, but I think that anyone who fails for a while on the app will in time start to deal with this in some way. Thoughts creep into my mind that I'm not good enough, that I probably need to change my bio/photos to make them more appealing.

But it's also true that men aren't historically as accustomed to presenting themselves as women, who are raised from an early age to play this role—they have to be well-groomed, they have to look good, they're photographed from an early age, dresses and accessories are designed for them, and they get their ears pierced. The lack of this experience among men is now being addressed by psychologists, who are giving them advice on how to better present themselves in order to find a relationship.

It's worse, of course, when a frustrated man like this doesn't discuss his frustration with a psychologist, but with a group of other frustrated men on some forum. There, the frustration often turns into hatred, and the blame is placed on women.

The gender dimension in dating is clearly significant. I noticed a small app where women share their experiences with specific men from other apps. If a woman is going on a date, she can check there to see if her partner has accumulated any negative experiences.

It corresponds to a specific requirement that women have. I remember that even before this app appeared, my friends and I used to say that we'd really appreciate a service like this. But before I go praising this, I should try to imagine the other side of the coin, like someone might ask me "What if guys created their own version of the same thing? What would you do then?"

But guys did create one such app, but it was only about appearances. It was called Facebook.

True...

What impact do you think the global trend of boys and men turning to conservatism and girls and women turning to liberalism has on current relationships?

This mainly applies to younger generations, millennials, Gen Z, and younger. Older generations of young men may be frustrated by the app itself, while younger women are more likely to return frustrated and bored from the date itself. Boredom is normal, it just wasn't working. But this frustration relates to deeper problems, such as the fact that this man is unable to listen to them or ask questions, and worse still, that when it comes to questions of values, they often encounter strongly conservative and anti-feminist reactions and attitudes from the guy. More and more often, the bios in these apps read: No feminists, no LGBT. No libtards, no green hair.

It's as if these young men have come to dating with a ready-made set of conservative values that they simply expect women to fulfill.

And are these still the same patriarchal values, or is there something new in them?

In part, they're still the same, but there's also a certain dissonance: in the perception of this "new conservatism" among young men, women should already be self-sufficient, able to earn a living and take care of themselves—but at the same time, they should continue to play the traditional role of housewives.

However, even young women today often expect both from men: to be masculine, manually skilled and protective, but at the same time be able to talk about their emotions, listen, and care. This results in the creation of nonsensical standards on both sides, mixing what we really need from the other person in a relationship with what is just some conservative fantasy that's now returning in this new guise.

We see some of these trends, for example, in the reality show Love Island, where attractive people compete to see who can form the best couple in the villa. I've noticed a certain tension in the preferences of women and men during the "hideaway", when a selected couple, who may have known each other for only a few days, receive the keys to a garden shed equipped with a large bed and erotic promotional items, where the couple can spend the night in privacy. The director attempts to create constant sexual tension in the villa, in which everyone is forced to perform constant sexual desire. However, it's often clear that these women aren't particularly pleased with this "gift" from the director. Do these shows, which have millions of viewers, also contribute to the reproduction of toxic relationships?

Previously, hideaways were given to couples who had already clearly crystallized, but last season, the directors put them into play much earlier. It's always fascinating to observe the different reactions of the guys and girls when they go back the next morning. The guys welcome one of theirs back with cheers and pats on the back, while the girls welcome one of theirs back modestly as she tells them "A lady never reveals anything". A woman can't say she had sex, whereas a man can't say he didn't. I call it "hetero-drag". It's as if the contestants were literally dressing up in distinct gender masks and trying to perform accordingly.

This is clearly evident in the show's annual "body count" competition, where contestants reveal the number of sexual partners they've had: men receive applause for high numbers, and women for low numbers. As soon as a woman reveals a higher number, it causes embarrassment or even outright slut-shaming. A man wouldn't be a "slut" even with a three-digit number. This brings us back to what men and women have to talk about and what they're not allowed to — we deal with slut-shaming because of our podcast simply because we're women talking about sex.

In recent years, two beliefs have coexisted with regard to intimacy: first, we're more sexually liberated, and second, the younger generation is having much less sex. What can we take away from this?

I don't think we're freer. I would say that the same applies as in the case of physicality. At one point, it seemed that this might be the case, but even in this area, we're experiencing a certain backlash.

When it comes to young people not having much sex, my first reaction is, "Who cares?" So what if Gen Z isn't

having sex? That's really not the problem. Gen Z is primarily depressed because the older generations have left them with a scorched earth. An uncertain future, antidepressants, and women don't have a legally or culturally safe environment for free and safe sex with men. Entire American (and some European) states prohibit abortions, and some even prohibit contraception. The social climate in many places is creating an environment in which sex is dangerous for various reasons.

And the only aspect of the sexual liberation of recent years that the conservative reaction will preserve is the purely transactional nature of sex. I'm not saying that sex must only be an expression of romantic love, but it should definitely be an expression of love in a general sense in all circumstances, because people share their intimacy in a vulnerable state. Values such as responsibility, respect, and consideration are associated with this kind of love. When I have a "friend with benefits" relationship with someone, the friendship part of it shouldn't fall by the wayside. Friends take care of each other.

What's the status of monogamy today?

Monogamy persists, and society rewards it. And as an option, it has undeniable importance—it offers stability in an increasingly confusing world. It offers a path that two people can take together. This has great value. But it's not the only correct path.

That's why I'm more interested in the question of what position polyamory and other types of open relationships occupy today. There isn't any hard data on this, but it seems that the percentage of infidelity in monogamous relationships is enormous. Many people aged 40+ today have parallel romantic relationships—but, without discussions or education on how open relationships work, this is often poorly communicated. Polyamory, on the other hand, is based on communication.

It's difficult for people to function in non-hierarchical relationships when society raises them to be hierarchical and competitive.

What do people actually expect from relationships today?

What each person expects from a relationship should, above all, be discussed openly with the person concerned. Where are you right now in the relationship? Are you satisfied with the way we've set things up? Simply put, it's a regular check-in.

To say something to the show's credit, that's actually a positive moment in Love Island. The couple have been dating for two days and they're already discussing their situation on the couch. This brings me to my final question: Besides open communication, what do you think love should look like in the future? What parts of the present would you like to see remain, what should disappear into history, and what new things should appear?

Above all, we should preserve the positive nature of love, continuing to associate it with everything beautiful in the world. The term has, of course, become somewhat meaningless; it's used in advertising to boost sales, etc. But I'd like for love to remain that inner tension that motivates us to actively care for each other. That activity is essential. In the words of American author Audre Lorde, love should not only be an emotion, but also our actions.

In loving relationships, where we act responsibly toward one another, we can all grow as individuals and as a

society. And we should finally realize that it doesn't matter how many of us there are in a relationship, or whether the relationship between us is romantic or friendly.

Love is simply our actions toward the people we love.