

HOW MEN DATE

Usually, it's his fault. Maybe he talked about his pet rat for 20 minutes too long, or bragged about his GCSE results more than a decade after leaving school. Perhaps the red flag showed itself in his political leanings, the way he slagged off his ex, or talked about his mother. Often, his crime is a classic (lies, ghosting, bad kisser); sometimes, it's amusingly novel (stopping mid-conversation to piss up a stranger's door). Worst-case scenario? He's a genuine, block-on-all-platforms creep, the kind of guy that reminds you why 'Ask for Angela' is a thing.

My best friends' dispatches from the dating world, shared every month over a bottle of Kylie's finest rosé, paint a vivid picture – one that's a near-perfect reflection of the popular opinion online. Behold, modern man: a noxious cocktail of ego, entitlement and 'porn brain', too busy performing podcast masculinity (all hot takes, no self-awareness) to notice his date's eyes glaze over.

It's so easy – fun, even – to write men off entirely when presented with such compelling evidence. To concede that, yes, 'men are trash' and, while we're at it, blame them for the cesspit of swipes on screens we call modern dating. The situation is so dire that, across the world, some women are choosing to remove men from the equation altogether, turning their disillusionment with dating into outright rejection of the systems that uphold it. In pop culture, celebrities such as Julia Fox and Khloé Kardashian are singing the praises of voluntary celibacy. In South Korea, the radical feminist movement 4B is encouraging women to abstain from sex, marriage and relationships with men to dismantle the patriarchy – a proposition that's suddenly become more appealing to American women in the wake of Trump's re-election.

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Of course, these extreme reactions don't exist in a vacuum. There's big-picture stuff at play here: rampant misogyny, inequality and the erosion of women's rights in increasingly regressive political landscapes. Dates and hookups provide the perfect petri dish for these divides to germinate. And a lot of anti-man sentiment is based on personal experience.

But here's the thing: I know a lot of men, and I like most of them. To write an entire gender off seems, at best, reductive and, at worst, a position that will only push more men towards incel-dom. The discourse around the disconnect between genders is nothing new – it's been playing out in culture for decades. But right now, it seems particularly fractured, backed up not only by anecdotes but also hard stats. According to a 2023 survey, 63 per cent of men under 30 consider themselves single, compared to 34 per cent of women in the same age group. To put it bluntly: what the hell is going on? Are men... OK?

Maybe it's time we checked in on some. Meet Dom*, 27, a bartender in London, who identifies as bisexual but mostly dates women. He is white, brown-haired and bearded. His last serious relationship ended a year ago, a three-year romance that crossed continents from his home country, Australia, to the UK. Since then, like many people, Dom's been on the apps. Hinge is his main offender. "I feel like the longer I've been on it, the fewer dates I've been on," he says. "At this point, it's more like a validation machine. Nothing ever really goes anywhere and everyone's kind of uncommitted."

Contrary to what you might expect of modern dating, Dom has better luck when meeting people in real life – apparently, one of the perks of spending Saturday night behind a bar is that more people give you their numbers. And since he prefers to date people he's met in real

life, having women approach him takes the pressure off. "I always find that people I meet through real interactions [result in] stronger connections. But I'm also hyper-aware of how shit it is for women in the dating scene." This, Dom says, makes him more hesitant to approach people on nights out, wary of how it could contribute to women's fatigue towards men. "It's literally so much more dangerous for women, and I think a lot of guys don't really see that. I hear guys moaning about how hard dating is, but you can't really compare it," he says. "From talking to my female friends, how many horror stories they have, it's so overwhelmingly common. I don't have anywhere near the same amount of complete weirdos [approach me]."

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Jamie*, a 25-year-old engineer, can relate to Dom's stance on IRL connections. He, too, believes that meeting in person yields better dates, but having come of age at the peak of #MeToo, he's also acutely aware of respecting boundaries. "I've seen too many creeps and I don't want to be one of them," he says. "There's a fine line between a good and bad approach – a lot of it depends on how attractive the girl finds you. If a good-looking guy does something, it's cute. But if someone she's not interested in did the same thing, it can come off as creepy."

It's on this basis that Jamie has concluded that, in the initial stages, dating is harder for men, exacerbated by the superficial nature of dating apps. At the moment, Jamie's avoiding them completely, having just called off a year-long situationship. But he admits that, previously, the impulse to open Hinge and Bumble was more driven by boredom than a desire for a serious relationship. Still, a relaxed approach doesn't make him immune from the sting of a low swipe-to-match ratio. "I feel guys swipe right on girls more than girls do on

guys,” says Jamie. And, to be fair, he’s right: on Tinder, the average man receives one match for every 140 swipes, while women average at one in ten. “The fact that dating apps are more based on looks doesn’t help,” he continues. “It’s harder for guys to find a relationship, but more difficult for girls to find a good relationship.”

James Preece is a dating expert who makes a living by coaching people like Jamie into relationships – “the UK’s version of [2005 Will Smith film] Hitch,” as his website puts it. He backs up Jamie’s assessment of dating apps’ lopsided gender dynamics. “There are far more men on there than women,” he says, referring to a reported 60/40 split between male and female dating app users, respectively. And, according to Preece, men in their early-to-mid-20s have a particularly hard time standing out to women of a similar age, who may also be targeted by users in their 30s, 40s and, well, so on. “You can have the most amazing profile and pictures, but you might get overlooked because women are being overwhelmed by the wrong sort of men,” he says emphatically. “Then women aren’t taking them seriously, because they probably want someone a bit older, who’s more settled and secure. But having said all that, I’ve got plenty of clients who have made this work. I think mindset and positivity are the main things [needed for success].”

Easier said than done when staring down a barrel of unrequited swipes on a Sunday night. Every guy I speak to laments the ills of dating apps – the gamification of romance, the shallow performance of building your profile, the way people are made disposable by the ‘what if?’ behind another match. And everyone believes a relationship has a better chance of survival if it has an off-app origin story. They’re by no means alone in this opinion. A 2023 survey found that only one in five Britons believe dating apps are superior to real-world encounters. The trouble is that only 27 per cent feel comfortable approaching someone in person, leaving us at a social crossroads. No one wants to stay on the same route; no one wants to risk taking the wrong turn. Better to retreat to the safety of the apps.

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“Online dating is so readily accessible and there’s less risk, the reward threshold is much lower,” says Caius, a 26-year-old actor who lives in east London. As a gay man who’s been single for four years, however, the apps present a different dilemma: navigating the diverse desires of the LGBTQ+ community, where everyone seems to be looking for something different. “There’s more variance in what people are looking for, whether it be polyamorous, monogamous or open relationships,” he says. To make matters more complicated, Caius suspects some guys aren’t being totally honest about their desires. “I think sometimes people put their preference [on dating apps] as short-term, open or whatever as a form of protection. The community’s very sex positive, and that’s great, but potentially there are loads of people like myself who want a long-term thing but don’t want to get let down.”

He might be on to something. A recent survey by dating app Feeld found that 81 per cent of Gen Z fantasise about monogamy – more than any other age group. What’s more, men are reportedly more interested in monogamy than any other gender – surprising, when you cast your mind back to the fact that 63 per cent of guys under 30 consider themselves to be single. Perhaps the issue is less about gender divides and more about self-preservation. “It’s vulnerable to say that you’re looking for something more serious,” says Caius. “You open yourself up to potential hurt. I think women are probably way braver than men in that respect.”

At the moment, Caius only goes on one or two dates a month because, “well, it’s really expensive”, he says, citing £8 pints in central London bars. This isn’t

particularly surprising – a 2023 survey found that almost a quarter of single Brits planned to stop dating in the interests of saving money amid the cost-of-living crisis. But money, or lack thereof, is a common theme throughout many of the conversations I have for this piece, either explicitly or implicitly. Jamie, for example, explains how his recent situationship ultimately ended because life got too busy – not least because he has a weekend retail job to top up the earnings from his nine-to-five. “At the beginning, it was a lot of texting, calling, meeting up. But as we both got busier with work, there wasn’t as much of a connection.”

Emanuel is in a similar position, juggling his main job as a teaching assistant with extra shifts at a bowling alley on evenings and weekends. The 25-year-old lives at home with his parents in London, so he doesn’t necessarily need the extra cash to pay rent, but he’s conscious of saving to “build wealth”. Between 5am starts for his day job, unpredictable shifts at the bowling alley, gym sessions and catching up with his mates, there’s barely any time left to think about romance. “I do want to date, but when do I even have the time? If I have a day off, I’m going to rest,” he says. “I do have the apps – Tinder, Hinge – and I use them, like, once a week. Someone will message me, I’ll forget to reply for over a week and by then it’s too late.”

Courtesy Harry Freegard

But if the extra admin of dating apps is overwhelming, it’s nothing compared to the high expectations of his Christian Congolese parents. “They want me to date a Black girl who is Congolese, religious, is shorter than me and speaks French, so they can talk to my family – but I can’t even speak French like that!” And all of the women Emanuel has dated in the past tick exactly zero of those boxes. Fair enough. I can’t speak to how many petite, French-speaking Congolese women are in London. But the fact that Emanuel, a Black man, has

never dated a Black woman reinforces a years-old narrative within the community: Black men don't like Black women.

To be clear, it's not that Emanuel doesn't want to date Black women. But he does hold a loaded opinion that could be holding him back. "I don't want to sound offensive," he says, "but it seems like some Black girls have high standards. They want a guy who's, like, six foot, has his life together and doesn't live with his parents." He knows this is a generalisation, shaped by personal experiences and what he sees as increased competition within the Black dating pool. "I was around [Black girls] in my youth who may have not fancied me. But when I was 'exposed' to girls [of other races], they seemed to fancy me more, maybe due to the rarity of seeing a Black man – the 'fantasy' of Black men." In contrast, he says, Black women are more likely to compare the average Black man to celebrities like Michael Jordan and Aaron Pierre. "And I obviously don't look like that."

Emanuel is aware that his views perpetuate racial stereotypes, just as he's aware that "a stereotype is not the truth". So, how does he reconcile his feelings with the truth? "I think some Black men have this view because they are looking to blame something when they are getting attacked for not being with Black women," he says. "Sometimes I'm like, 'Oh, I really want to date a Black girl.' But most of the girls that I've dated have been the ones to approach me. I'm really not picky. I'm there for your personality."

Most guys – or at least the ones I speak to – seem to say this. That they don't have a "type", they want someone funny and caring, who doesn't take themselves too seriously and shares similar interests and values. Except Adetokunbo. His terms are clear, and directly contradict Emanuel's dating history: "I couldn't date a white person." This, explains the Nigerian-Irish 23-year-old, is a decision he arrived at as a teenager, before he'd been

romantically involved with anyone. Growing up in predominantly white spaces in Ireland hardened him to the realities of interracial relationships – constantly having to explain himself and his culture, the uneasy feeling that his peers would never quite understand.

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“After seeing how those dynamics play out and feeling so culturally alienated, I would just find it difficult,” he says. What does Adetokunbo make of Black men’s perceived dating bias? “There’s so much to unpack,” he sighs, pointing towards the long history of fetishisation of Black men. “The issue is that a lot of Black men get really defensive [about the subject]. But what really frustrates me is when people use their preference [for white women] as an opportunity to denigrate Black women.”

Both Adetokunbo and Emanuel’s experiences are deeply rooted in identity and lived experience, a lens through which dating becomes inherently politicised. “It’s something that affects me internally more than externally,” says Emanuel. “Thoughts pop up like, ‘Is my race a factor in why they are or are not dating me?’” And it only gets more complex when you add family politics into the situation. Jamie, who is east Asian, can relate. “My family is more traditional, so that impacts who I seriously date,” he says. “I think a lot of Asian people will agree that the family’s relationship [with your partner] is very important.” Obviously, not everyone carries such a heavy load. Take Olly, a 27-year-old filmmaker and bartender. Out of everyone interviewed for this piece, he has by far the most optimistic outlook on the current dating scene, which might be

down to two crucial factors: (a) he's a white, trendy, conventionally attractive, straight man, and (b), he's never used a dating app. Like Dom, he finds working in a bar particularly helpful for meeting women. "It's surprising how often women hit on you at the bar – I haven't really experienced that much before." But unlike most, Olly is also happy to approach strangers himself, even if it feels mortifying. He remembers plucking up the courage to approach a girl in a pub one night, awkwardly mumbling, "Can I give you my number please?" only for her to mishear and make him repeat the question. "My mouth was dry and my heart was beating, because it is scary," he says. "But I guess I read it right, because she said yeah and texted me immediately."

It would be easy to look at Olly and conclude that guys would have more success if they could only tear themselves away from their phones. But there's no guarantee – in fact, it's unlikely – that men from different demographics would get the same response from someone they fancy. Then again, there's no guarantee that they'll get a message back on Hinge either. Olly is an optimistic case study, a beacon of meet-cute hope in a world of screen-protected pessimism. But he doesn't provide all the answers.

“It's about having someone who really understands you, what you think, the way you feel and the parts of you that need work”

Stumped for real solutions to the modern dating malaise, I ask Preece, the expert, straight-up: what, genuinely, can men do to up their odds on the current playing field? "People say the best advice is to be yourself," says Preece. "But I disagree with that – if you've got a really boring, dull life." Brutal. Instead, he tells his clients to "make your life as interesting, fun and engaging as possible". As a dating coach, naturally the key goal behind Preece's advice is to make his clients more attractive, but while he does often prescribe gym memberships, it doesn't have to be all about looks. What you really want to unlock, he says, is a way to "live your best life with someone or without them.

You'll be happy, you'll get a bigger social circle, you'll have more to talk about, you'll increase your options. That's so much more sexy."

But don't just take his word for it. Learn from Adetokunbo, who was unknowingly following Preece's gospel when he met his girlfriend of three years. They met while he was at uni in Warwick, a period when the then-student would regularly travel to London and stay with his aunt – ostensibly for internships, but also for the nightlife. Adetokunbo got chatting to his now-girlfriend on a night out, almost bumped into her again at Yam Carnival the next day, and then proceeded to see her during weekend visits to the capital for the next year. In March 2022, they made things official.

"It's really beautiful to grow together with someone," says Adetokunbo, reflecting on the ways their relationship has enriched his life. "I think this was the advantage of us having met when I was 20 and she was 19 – we were still in uni, working things out. It's really nice to share that journey with someone." There is light at the end of the tunnel, then; romance, love and harmonious partnerships are yet to be totally killed off by the demands of modern life. It is – in Adetokunbo's estimation, at least – worth persevering through the bad dates and bad chat. "[It's about] having someone who really understands you, what you think, the way you feel and the parts of you that need work."

Are men OK? Still up for debate. But modern dating isn't failing because they're all inherently flawed to the point of redundancy. In all honesty, it's difficult to come to a conclusion to this contemporary conundrum without falling back on the common theses behind every "Why is X so shit right now?" polemic: the systems that uphold modern life are broken, too much technology, too little money and spare time, blah, blah, blah. It's not that those answers aren't accurate, it's just that, deep down, you already know that those are the answers. So, instead, some optimism: the best, most tried-and-tested way to

meet someone you genuinely connect with is – drumroll – to go out, have fun, be young, be daring, be a bit cringe and, for God’s sake, just speak to someone. It’s not revolutionary and it’s not some earth-shattering commentary on gender. It is, simply, what humans are supposed to do.

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