


Tinder and OkCupid have given up on finding you a soul mate. Their ads even admit it.

Lisa Bonos, The Washington Post

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 GALLERY: The U.S. cities where people Tinder the most

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GALLERY: The U.S. cities where people Tinder the most

We have reached a new height of dating-app fatigue: Even the online matchmakers have given up on finding you a soul mate.

It's not that you're hopeless. You're wonderful! You're a unique snowflake - so unique, in fact, that you should keep swiping and stay single as long as possible.

If you've seen ads for OkCupid or Tinder recently, you might notice something conspicuous: There's little mention of love or partnership. Instead of trying to convince users that their perfect match is just a click or a swipe or a wink away, OkCupid and Tinder are touting the joy of meeting new people yet remaining unattached.

Both brands are advertising in high-traffic areas in Washington. OkCupid has its edgy "DTF" ads at select Metro stations, and Tinder's video ad cycles through huge screens on the side of Capital One Arena. Tinder's ad shows a gaggle of diverse young people throwing their hands in the air and roller-skating under dreamy pink and blue neon lights - as if footage from a night out has been put through the Amaro Instagram filter. "Single is a terrible thing to waste" is superimposed over the carefree images. They skate in single-file, alone together - no one holding anyone's hand.

OkCupid's message depicts a range of relationship types. It rebrands "DTF" - that acronym that's slang for promiscuity, starts with "down to" and isn't fully printable in a family newspaper - by recasting that F into all sorts of permutations. The images from artists Maurizio Cattelan (the provocateur of golden-toilet fame) and Pierpaolo Ferrari feature interracial and same-sex pairs. A few of the messages depict passion: Down to Fall Head Over Heels and Down to Furiously Make Out. But they're also playful: Down to Focus on My Chakras. Down to Farmer's Market. Down to Forget Our Baggage. Some are political: Down to Fight About the President. Down to Filter Out the Far Right. And others make comments about gender politics: One reads Down to Foot the Bill. (The company says those many permutations mirror the

dozens of questions OkCupid users can answer to help get matched.)

In these ads, being single is a terrible thing to waste, while other companies' ads cast it as a terrible thing - to be fixed. A decade ago, commercials for Match.com, eharmony and others focused on reducing the stigma of online dating. They featured smiling, happy couples gushing about how lucky they are to have found each other - and noted how everyone seemed to know of an online dating success story. This kind of magic was theoretically waiting for you, if only you would look for companionship online, too.

Now that the stigma has been dismantled, Match.com still hawks itself as a place to find a committed relationship. But what if you're not ready for something that serious? OkCupid and Tinder are reminding you that there's a different app or site for each stage in a single person's life - and Match.com's parent company, IAC, owns both of those and more. The longer you're swiping or searching, the longer these apps can monetize those matches through their premium memberships.

Of course, Tinder can't say that outright. "We are pro-couples; we want people to meet people," says Jenny Campbell, Tinder's chief marketing officer. But, she adds, "We also want to be there when you're out there exploring." And that's exactly what Tinder's ads communicate: Finding lasting love before 30 would be tantamount to squandering your freedom.

The dating app's other ads proclaim: "Congrats on your big breakup"; "Single does what Single wants"; "Single never has to go home early." Based on grammar alone, Tinder is making a statement: Single is a noun, a state of being, not an adjective

that might apply for a short time. It's recognizing that its target 18-to-29 demographic isn't necessarily looking for that soul mate just yet. The app is also owning up to the criticism it gets - that it's only for hookups and casual connections - rather than showing you footage from Tinder weddings.

"There's less of a focus on finding The One and more on finding yourself and living your best single life," Campbell says of today's 20-something lifestyle.

These new ads also have an implicit feminist message. One of the goals of Tinder's ad campaign, Campbell says, was "to help alleviate the social pressures women face. There's so much judgment out there. This is a time in your life where you should be savoring experiences."

Similarly, Melissa Hobley, OkCupid's chief marketing officer, says the site's DTF campaign is an attempt to take an acronym that can be aimed negatively at women and spin it as a positive thing. "The idea was: We wish there were some things we could change about dating, including the DTF phrase," she says, noting that "the F should be whatever the F you want it to be."

These implied meanings and the politically themed "Fs" also reflect how important politics have become in singles' dating lives. Hobley noted that in the past two years, the dating site has seen a 1,000 percent increase in political terms showing up in daters' profiles.

But those buying the advertising aren't always willing to take such definitive stances. Washington's Metro system rejected OkCupid's ads that read Down to Fantasize About 2020 and Down to Filter Out the Far Right, with an image of a woman

dropping a gun into a toilet. (OkCupid kicked white supremacist Chris Cantwell off its platform in 2017 shortly after the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.) Hopley says New York City's subway system also rejected the ad against the far right.

For both online dating portals, it's their first foray into formally marketing their products. Tinder got its start through word-of-mouth advertising on college campuses in 2012; OkCupid has been around since 2004 and was ripe for some rebranding.

Both companies seem to be conveying a lightness to combat the drudgery of swiping. Brian Delaurenti, 28, of Portland, Oregon, is one-half of the popular Instagram account @thegaybeards with his best friend Johnathan Dahl. OkCupid is one of the many brands Delaurenti and Dahl have partnered with, partly because they know how hard it can be to be single and looking.

"You start to feel inadequate or you feel rejected," Delaurenti said in a phone interview. However, OkCupid's ad campaign "makes you realize [dating] is not so much sitting down and grabbing a drink, but instead reminding yourself that meeting someone and putting yourself out there can lead to all these incredible things you can do."