Down the Rabbit Hole: An Ethnography on Loving, Desiring and Tindering in Cape Town

by

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Thesis Presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2021

Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This ethnography on loving, desiring and tindering offers insights into how the dating application (app) Tinder is adopted in establishing various kinds of intimacy in Cape Town. Given the scholarly neglect of intimacy's sensory aspects (especially when looking at Africa), the study, based on interviews and participant observation involving 25 participants, lends weight to phenomenological experiences unfolding in partially cybernated social processes. Considering the body to be a defining dimension of human social existence, it looks at how engagements with relative strangers unfold as virtual reality and realised virtuality.

Tinder and other apps have shaped what it means to get to know another individual beyond conventional sensory perceptions. Technologies as means of self-extension in Michel Foucault's sense and practices of relating (and non-relating) reach far in sundry ways. They have a significant impact on social identities, politics, economies and demographic developments. They also hold the promise of different economies of bodies and pleasures, as Foucault presaged.

This study's findings show that, although dating apps pervade everyday experiences and are embraced as extensions of the self, they are simultaneously disassociated from daily life and hypernormalised as less than 'real'. Desires for more meaningful and complete experiences were continuously manoeuvred by study participants despite disappointments, uncertainties and hurt. What these approaches of stretching oneself beyond profiled essences entailed is at the heart of this ethnography. The resolute, adaptive usage of Tinder despite disillusionments owes to the app offering refuge into both fantasy and reality, which have long become hybrid in a digitally enhanced experience. The multitude of dating app experiences in what Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) have referred to as a 'rabbit hole' with skewed proportions may not be an absolute escape from reality. However, it does provide opportunities for re-encountering different facets of the self when stretching beyond them. What is, nonetheless, needed to embrace technologically facilitated dating as 'real' encounters of equals is to understand oneself and others as non-unitary and incomplete. Thus, I argue, a broader view of relationships is needed than ideas and ideals of 'modern' romance and dating app designs relying on binary categories currently promote.

Acknowledgements

I hope I have been able to convey my profound gratitude to the research participants of this study. Their trust and openness made for valuable insights without which this dissertation could not have materialised. More than that, our conversations were a wonderful experience that I am happy we got to share.

My supervisor, Professor Francis Nyamnjoh, has a way of grasping what lies beyond the evident. I value his encouragement of alternative ways of expressing academic knowledge, dusting-off evangelical ways of doing research while embracing curiosity. Our working together was enriching and stimulating.

Without my family, of course, I would not have had the privilege of spending quite so many years studying, which is all I really want to do. Biggi, Paul, Klaus and Issa – I wish I had the words to convey how appreciative I am of your constant support. Lastly, my partner Abhik has done wonders encouraging me throughout this research without saying all too much and nourishing me with his actions. Thank you for being there.

Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

'Offline is much better': responses to a whisper of post-humanity

Kasia finally downloaded the Tinder dating app when she was working part-time as a makeup artist at a film set in the Cape Town city centre. It seemed a good moment to do so, being in a different and busier area from her home in the quieter northern suburbs, where the 23-year-old lives with her conservative Jewish parents. After all, the dating app works on GPS-coordinates and, almost mystically, reveals who within proximity is also looking for a brand-new, enticing connection. Kasia detailed her first experiences of using Tinder at one of our coffee meetings next to the beach near her home and while tearing the layers of her croissant apart. She was excited about the prospect of creating potential romance out of thin air, as it were, only based on some images and the vague sentence 'looking to meet new people' in her biography. In the two years since then, Kasia had had an array of experiences. Among the first was dating someone for three months who suddenly vanished and who, as it later turned out through a Facebook[1] post, had moved to another city to be with his ex. Her Tinder expedition made a stop at ghosting[2] someone herself and apologising for it months later via a brief but heartfelt text message. After having been on about ten dates with someone that were predictably followed by sexual intercourse, another interlude was being told that she was great but that he 'could never date her'.

Kasia's experiences echo many angled insights into dating that one will come across in an arbitrary online commentary on the Tinder app – a hyperfocused[3] medium offering a seemingly endless string of options always ready at one's fingertip. The promises that dating apps like Tinder contain, namely making connections and meaning out of nowhere, linking people and places, desires and memories, appear to reliably belie expectations and create confusion instead of ushering narratives of romance. What is perplexing is that this does not seem to affect the popularity of Tinder and similarly organised apps. As per a 2017 study, dating apps and services are used by one in three South Africans[4]. Tinder is considered to be, by far, the most notable dating app (James, 2015),

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[1] Platforms are introduced later in the chapter.

[2] Cutting off contact with someone without explanation or warning.

[3] Term used by Bothe (2016) to describe the internet's vast opportunities to establish contacts.

[4] https://businesstech.co.za/news/mobile/205888/the-ugly-truth-about-tinderand-online-dating-in-south-africa/ (25 December 2020).

which is why I grew interested in this particular medium. In contrast to niche dating apps, Tinder has moved into mainstream culture. This is reflected in Tinder-related terminology having entered vernacular language with tindering, tinderella and tinderitis [5] now being featured on *urbandictionary.com* (Duguay, 2017). Although initially considered and marketed as an app for casual sexual encounters (or 'hook-ups') used by people in their 20s, Tinder's image has since shifted to an app incorporating different kinds of relationships. Nevertheless, despite attempts to re-market itself, the market leader is still brander of a certain kind of relating and continues referring to itself as the 'hottest app in the world' and the 'most dependable wingmate' based on its 26 million matches a day.[6]

Although tindering experiences supposedly lack satisfaction, the app somehow continues to intrigue with the promise of unlimited potential regarding longed-for connections, either in the form of a brief sexual escapade or as an ongoing connection. At first glance, Tinder seems to be a medium for everything and all. Unequivocal merchandising (match.chat.date)[7] and the simple steps of setting up a dating profile do not only render the app globally appealing but also, in marketing manner, gloss over the challenges and ambiguities of navigating various desires in that space with implications for online and offline relationships alike. It also relativises the expectation that things ought to be 'hot' as per Tinder's flame icon and self-definition as a wingmate, a term that pre-Tinder referred to a friend helping another friend meeting a conquest at a bar. However, experiences like Kasia's, ever-present in the popular media, show that tindering is not as straightforward a practice and that a lot lies between matching, chatting and dating. Where dating experiences turn out to be disappointing, unpleasant, or simply more ambiguous, fragmented and distorted than advertised, everyday discourse tends to fault Millennial culture.[8] Similarly, scholarly understandings of contemporary intimacy (including anthropological ones) often reduce intimacy and sexuality to a consequence of external factors and neglect questions of what makes sensory experience when forming relations (Spronk, 2012). This intimate ethnography and ethnography of

[5] 'Tinderitis' refers to the addictiveness of Tinder. The term is often linked to negative psychological effects. https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/study-tinder-use-linked-to-negative-psychological-effects-0815161 (29 May 2020).

[6] https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115004647686-What-is-Tinder (27 April 2020).

[7] https://apps.apple.com/za/app/tinder-match-chat-date/id547702041 (5 April 2020).

[8] The term 'Millennial' refers a person who was born in the 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s. This is a generation that has grown up with the internet and is thought of as unable to live without the perks of digital technologies.

the intimate sets out to extend the conversation by capturing facets of tindering as it is experienced by people of different ages and from different contexts in Cape Town.

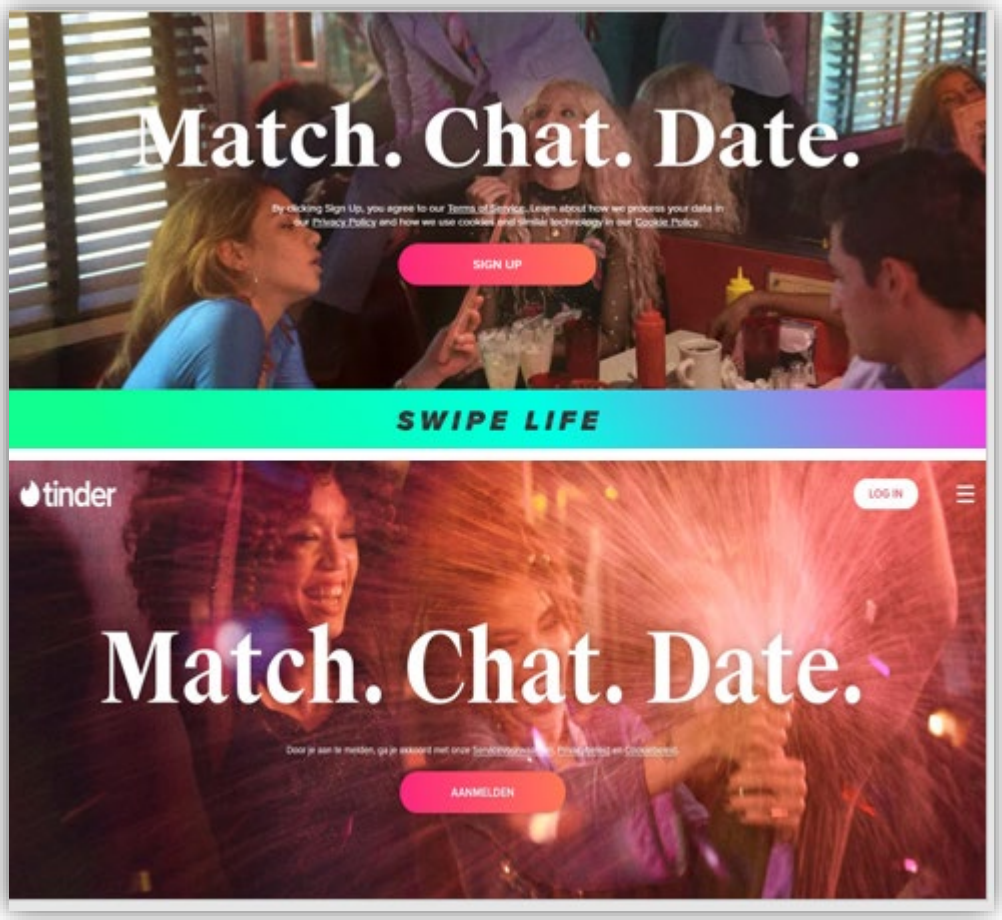

FIGURE 1 & 2

FIGURE 1: DESPITE THE APP PRODUCERS EMPHASISING THAT TINDER IS NOT MERELY USED FOR SEXUAL OR ROMANTIC ENCOUNTERS, IT IS LARGELY MARKETED AS A 'DATING APP' WITH EFFORTLESS, INTUITIVE AND SPONTANEOUS OUTCOMES. AVAILABLE: HTTPS://WWW.WHITENICHE.COM/TINDER-SIGN-UP-CREATE-TINDER-ACCOUNT/ (28 APRIL 2020).

FIGURE 2: HTTPS://WWW.DATINGSITETOP5.BE/DATING-APPS/TINDER (28 APRIL 2020).

Early in my fieldwork, it became clear that the study had to embed itself into a setting characterised by discrepancies. Tired from her attempts to navigate promises and disillusioning encounters, Kasia at one point exclaimed that: 'offline is much better. It just feels more organic'. This sentiment kept emerging in many of the conversations throughout my fieldwork. It was informed by a persistent association of the app with a lack of realness, which was explained to be less desirable than 'organic' or 'authentic' encounters. In concert with the claim of lack, the app was regularly

deleted. Interestingly, this was a habitual part of an exercise that involved re-downloading the app time and again. Each time, different approaches and levels of integrating online and offline were used, making the digital accommodating of one's desires. The tensions and apparent contradictions inherent to tindering practices intrigued me. They led me to trace a) how Tinder was appropriated and experienced and b) the social ecologies produced in the process.

My observations were channelled into the following core research question concerning intimacy, relationship formation in Cape Town and the role of Tinder as the most popularly used dating app:

What experiences emerge against the backdrop of Tinder's numerous, geographically and culturally broadened and seemingly accessible dating 'options'?

Sub-questions informing this ethnography ask:

1. What are the embodied and tacit knowledges underlying experiences of using Tinder, and how are desires sought to be met?
2. When and how do promised freedoms become hindered in search of intimacy?
3. What do interpersonal relations look like when abstracted (online) and then reanimated in a corporeal, offline space?
4. How is the fragmentedness of experiences and selves reconciled with Tinder's idea of freedom and autonomy? How are tensions navigated in the study context?
5. What kinds of encounters are experienced as (in)complete, (dis)satisfying and (un)fulfilling and anything in between?

The 25 study participants whose dating journeys I followed for two years through regular, semi-structured interviews, collecting life histories and conducting participant observation, are not representative of Cape Town. They are diverse in that they come from different areas, backgrounds, cover different sexual orientations and span ages between 21 and 63. However, most of them are of middle-class background or can, at the time of the research, be said to live 'middle-class lives', unlike the majority of Capetonians.[9] Most of them would locally also be classified as

[9] The Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) found that 50% of South Africans were chronically poor in 2019 while 20% belonged to a stable middle class. Across the country, there stark differences are continuous between males and females, urban and rural residents, lower income and higher income people, informal settlements and suburbs, and between what are still considered to be different groups in South Africa (e.g., black and white).

'White' while only 15.7% of people in Cape Town are allocated to this group[10]. Despite the study being limited in its reach, it provides essential insights into trends of intimacy building in Cape Town. It captures stories of how freedom is experienced in pursuing desires via Tinder and provides examples of how limits may be, at times, actively pushed, challenging space, place and territory.

Notwithstanding the proliferation of the internet and cell phones in the global south (Ling and Horst, 2011), how intimacy is navigated remains underexplored. In the context of South Africa, this topic has received inadequate attention, even after the end of apartheid, the legal system of racial exclusivity, which had also only allowed for a limited discourse of sexuality. Phones and apps are not mere artefacts but symbolise possibilities of taking part where one was not previously able to via digital means, to penetrate worlds and shift frontiers or, so to speak, reach for the stars with feet firmly on the ground (Nyamnjoh, 2017b). They may thus very well change the rules regarding who can interact with whom. However, their potentials remain unknown until creatively materialised through a human effort at harnessing this technology to activate themselves (Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2016). In cognisance of increasing interdependencies between humans and technologies, this ethnography discusses the ways in which apps like Tinder facilitate - or remain symbolic of - human endeavours for expansion, exploration and adaptation. It fills existing knowledge gaps and provides broader insights into increasingly common digital dating practices (in this case, via Tinder). It, furthermore, illustrates how practices, socialities and interdependencies are experienced and how the (never fully formed) self is positioned in the process.

Tinder is well integrated into the daily lives of many, especially in urban, cosmopolitan spaces. Yet assuming that there is a clear pre-Tinder/post-Tinder framework of relationships and intimacy would be a fallacy. Tinder is a mode of access to varieties of intimacies and expression, not an inventor of what it may mean for individuals to use technologies to connect and establish various forms of contact. There is potential to negotiate desires via dating apps, quite similarly to relationships facilitated through matchmakers in other contexts. The difference between tindering and otherwise guided relationships is that the contemporary sex, love- and marriage markets, formalised and condensed through internet technologies, render pragmatic interests less visible and blur the financial and non-financial aspects of the relationships it promotes, which can take various forms: casual sex, one-night stands, short- or long-term relationships, cohabitation or marriage. Given the lack of embedded logical coherence, there is no clear trajectory, no one way

[10] https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/cape-town-population

of using the app 'successfully' (even though step-by-step guides available online suggest otherwise), nor is there a shared notion of what successful tindering way mean. Instead, as is the case with other social media (Horst & Miller, 2013), Tinder is adapted in different ways to reconfigure socialites. These adaptations emphasise human interdependencies instead of taking away from them, as often assumed. Phones and their potentialities, as Nyamnjoh (2005a) puts it, 'become embodied as products of human imagination and creativity'. They do not act independently, but their functionality depends on who and how they are used in daily life (Brudvig, 2019). This also means that 'technologies and their users can only be accommodated to the extent that they are accommodating' (Nyamnjoh and Brudvid, 2016; Powell, 2014). Technologies, therefore, neither confine people nor do not offer a way to magically breach socially constructed limitations. The underlying workings of society at large and those embedded in the design of apps and other digital means of extension are a constant, often elusive and simplifying presence. Further tarnishing Tinder's promises of free exploration are persistent digital divides in South Africa (also affecting the sample in this study). This is despite the African continent showcasing the most considerable mobile phone growth globally and steadily closing previously large gaps in development (Powell, 2014) and regardless of phones having been favoured as means to mitigate and possibly eliminate poverty (Miller et al., 2016).

Describing Tinder to be a means to mediate changing realities, I use the metaphor of the rabbit hole. It is borrowed from Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016), who used it to describe the internet and, more specifically, the experience of using the casual dating app for men, Grindr. Apps such as Tinder and Grindr, like the magical rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' (1982), expose their users to a somewhat utopian space in which proportions are distorted, and the tyrannies of the physical are hurdled. However, as Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) clarify, this does not mean that dating apps are mere supermarkets from which uniformly packaged products are acquired. It is not the medium itself (and the affordances it offers) that shape human behaviour unidirectionally. Rather, it is a complex process of mutual adaptation between user and medium. Within this process, aspects of location, territory and bodies become emancipated. Alice's tale, informed by distortions and surrealism, is not unlike participants' experiences and their resulting desire for supposedly less fantasy-inspired, 'organic' encounters. Like Alice's story, topsy-turvy Tinder journeys appear to be liminal but are, indeed, ongoing. Different, absorbing episodes do not exist without one another but feed into each other, even where encounters are sporadic, brief, co-occurring or spread across multiple media. Kasia's story, to offer another glimpse into my findings, shows that tindering is always a process containing more than just one 'kind' of narrative. She felt mistreated by her Tinder encounters but also recognised her own shortcomings,

namely having 'ghosted' someone herself and apologising for it via text message some months later.

What is more, even though she claimed that 'offline is better', Kasia remained episodically on and off Tinder. Each new download also held the notion of being able to hit a 'reset button' and, thus, seems to be an invitation for new realities. Still, each download (and deletion) constitutes a continuation, with users still observing one another through a Tinder prism. Eventually, as I learnt when bumping into Kasia at a beauty store she was working at months after concluding my fieldwork, she ended up in a long-distance relationship with someone from Tinder she had previously matched and gone out with. Contrary to my use of the common phrase, 'eventually', one defining characteristic of the stories shared with me and captured by this ethnography is that, unlike in the hero's journey in Hollywood romances, there is no final stage or destination when it comes to intimacy and desire. Instead, it is a continuous mutual enhancement of people, stories, and things. My interviews and study participants' often very vivid descriptions were always a snapshot in time. In fact, picking up the story-thread at another get-together weeks later, our conversation's keynote may have undergone a significant change in tune. Although the metaphor of rabbit hole initially seems to reinforce the idea of separate worlds of experience, this study rather uses it to show how technologically enhanced experiences, especially when making oneself available to hurt, are contrasted to other kinds of experiences by tinderers themselves. This is despite the, in some ways, distorted Tinder experiences very much forming part of users' everyday realities and having continuity outside of the app itself. Ultimately, this ethnography seeks to challenge dichotomies between online and offline, reality and imagination, which form part of the public discourse on digital technologies.

Given the dynamic nature of the topic at hand, this dissertation follows Postill and Pink's (2012) call to think of social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential, immersive and animated. In line with the authors' suggestion and engaging with this difficult-to-grasp context, I focus on routine (and breaks with routines), movement, and sociality to understand the practices within them. The narratives outlined in the pages to follow are made up of apparently simple acts and decisions but, looked at on the whole, capture attempts to decipher realities in the face of the simplifying distortions which form part of Tinder's match.chat.date model. Tinder is used to traverse online and offline contexts in seeking out desires. Thus, it is explored as something that transcends trends of seeking immediate-pleasure and something yonder symbolisms of desire, which cannot be simplified to a mere result of culture. Following Postill and Pink (2012), I consider experiences via Tinder to be clusters or intensities of things of which both localities and socialities

are elements. These are all but evolutionary or complete. I look at ways in which the digital technology Tinder is used to mobilise another technology called upon in stretching oneself past experienced confines, namely the technology of the self in Foucault's (1988) sense. In such a way, the boundedness of bodies to territories and communities can be transcended, at least to an extent. As mentioned, this is not a once-off act. Bodies in these scenarios are composite entities, and technology is not a simple means to transcend the limits of their humanity. As Warnier (2007) suggested, I see them as containing different essences and desires, which are sought to be kept in a delicate balance when navigating needs in relationship with others. This is done by extending physical limits and by supplementing the self with Tinder. In this fusion, Tinder effectively becomes a technology of the self. In an exchange with others, bodily and material supplements are activated, producing possibilities of becoming in the process of giving and taking, similarly to the Mankon King in the Cameroon Grasslands. According to Warnier, the King is perceived as a container holding several transmissible ancestral life essences such as camwood, breath, saliva, semen and blood. I liken Tinder and the bodies contained by the app to the vessels of life essences that can be activated for different purposes by the Mankon King. The activation of certain essences for specific purposes only becomes possible in exchange with others and by traversing interrelations. Unlike in the Mankon King, however, Tinder hierarchies are less obvious, and positionalities are subject to mostly unspoken rituals of negotiation.

Contextualising tindering in Cape Town

Tales of sovereignty and normativity

Fantasy and virtuality are not limited to simulating a perfect world or version of the self online. Virtuality is increasingly integrated into the mundane – work, relationships and free time. It thus forms part of the norm, not the exception, making it impossible to meaningfully distinguish between both. Their experiential realm is reflected in physical constitutions and is no longer bound to physical spaces. The fact that modes of constructing authenticity, in part, rely upon digital, non-human actors blurs the lines of what can be validified as genuine. It also gives rise to questions of what happens when bodies and subjectivities become part of the mechanisation and commodification of human relations. Owing to their profound impact on the future of work, productivity, skills, education, language, beliefs, values and emotions, digital developments have

been equated to a fourth industrial revolution.[11] The expansion of these effects, together with the growing influence and popularity of apps, comes at the mostly unquantified cost of data privacy. Well-known data-related scandals at Facebook and other social media giants have led to increased awareness and concerns about the digital footprints one leaves online and how they can be manipulated with dramatic impacts. Policymakers are trying to gain better insights into social media platforms' practices in response to scandals involving the selling of data for-profit and political interferences, such as in the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States of America (USA) that brought Donald Trump into power. Still, there is a sense of helplessness regarding how practices of murky, vast online worlds can be and should be policed.

What looks like autonomous behaviour is never just that, and aspects infiltrating it must be disentangled. The docking of human and technology in warfare and violent video games is only one example that can be raised to signify how digital infrastructures facilitate specific embodied gazes. Another would be the companionship of artificially intelligent sex robots that are becoming more accessible (also in brothels). In Japan, an increasing number of young men choose to cultivate relationships with *Rinko*,[12] a virtual girlfriend who takes on a selected character and who is engaged with via gadgets, to relationships with other humans. Contrary to what this digital compartmentalisation of intimacy suggests, no space offers immunity to vulnerability. Grindr's data scandal is illustrative of this. Precariously for its users, the company shared sensitive data with an advertisement targeting company and software vendors containing users' HIV status, 'last time tested' information and medicine use, relationship status, romantic aims, contact information and GPS-location.[13] Such occasions are reminders of points where the personal and the technical intersect. What is 'real' cannot be determined by merely using binary categories, given their deep and delicate interwovenness. What has happened and what has been calculatingly created as a happenstance becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish. A case in point is the possibility of 'deepfakes', a human image synthesis fabricating convincing footage of people.[14] This is done by combining and superimposing images that already exist and is often practised on celebrities whose

[11] Ingrid Brudvig (2018) in a blog commentary. Access: https://thefamiliarstrange.com/2018/07/19/tech-sector-and-anthropology/ (20 April 2020).

[12] https://www.dailydot.com/irl/video-game-girlfriend-loveplus-japan/ (10 May 2020).

[13] https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2018/12/06/grindr-was-first-big-dating-app-gay-men-now-its-falling-out-favor/ (20 April 2020).

[14] See the following link for the risks such creations entail. Available: https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51204954 (9 April 2020).

images are plentiful online. On a more personal level, trust may be breached by distributing 'revenge porn' on the internet - sexual material that was entrusted privately and then becomes widely shared online without consent.[15]

The examples above show that autonomy and perceptions of reality as 'authentic' work together. In this dissertation, I bridge across dichotomies by outlining the very bridging processes that my participants underwent in making sense of the realities produced via dating apps. In so doing, ideas of incompleteness, fragmentation and compositeness of being as conceptualised by Nyamnjoh (2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2019) served me in adding layers to bodily experience. They also helped me contemplate how bodies as holistic, fluid entities are shaped in a rapidly changing, accelerated and space-crossing reality and what connections become possible within it. I interpret the utilisation of dating apps and the realities fabricated through their usage to be an extension of existing ways of thinking, feeling and being. Access to new virtual worlds can disclose new ontologies accommodating both utopian and dystopian encounters, as Boellstorff (2015) puts it. Philosopher and video-game designer Gualeni (2015) argues that they are essentially reformulations of existing (actual or imaginary) interpretations of reality and, thus, offer alternative ways for understanding the world and the time, space, physical properties and causality characterising it. Therefore, while conceptions of reality and what it means to be human have become extended, there is no transcendence of the human condition per se.

There are obvious 'dark sides' of the web like identity fraud, the distribution and access of rape pornography, dangerous drugs and weapons. Nevertheless, a qualitative study has shown that many users of the darknet market, in which browsers are anonymised, might not perceive it as only criminogenic (Mirea et al., 2019). Instead, they emphasise the socio-political values that can be achieved via the space, enabled by its technological structures such as anonymity, privacy and the use of cryptocurrencies. These characteristics provide a wide range of opportunities for a variety of purposes. In South Africa, the apparently 'lighter' side of the web in the shape of social media (Twitter and Facebook specifically) played a significant role in the 2015 and 2016 #*Rhodesmustfall* and #*Feesmustfall* movements (Bosch, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Through them, protesters were organised to draw public attention to demands for the university's decolonisation and more substantial initiatives towards equal access to education across the heavily economically divided

[15] A practice common enough to have been included as an amendment in the South African Films and Publications Bill in October 2019. Critical commentary available: https://ewn.co.za/2019/10/05/being-a-bitter-ex-could-land-you-in-trouble-with-the-law (9 April 2020).

social board. These divisions continue to overlap with the race categories propagated by the former apartheid regime, which was abolished in 1994, making way for the institutionalisation of human rights, freedom of mobility and association as well as media freedom. The nation-building project was accompanied by political transformation, but also by an economic industrial-capitalist transition and politics of exclusion of African non-nationals in particular. Both aspects imply that inequalities were not flattened but amplified and shifted. As a result, while South Africa is considered an economic powerhouse in sub-Saharan Africa, it remains a society still riddled with socio-economic discrepancies. These manifest through drastic gaps in education quality, employment (with an unemployment rate of 30,8%),[16] living conditions and service delivery. In this context, Bosch (2017) says, social networking sites offer potentials for new biographies of citizenship, characterised by more individualised forms of activism. Similarly, after the violent rape and killing of the 19-year-old South African university student, Uyinene Mrwetyana, in September 2019, among a spate of other brutal cases of femicide,[17] hashtags like *#amInext* (borrowing from a Canadian 2014 campaign)[18] in line with media-facilitated protest action served to draw attention to systemic problems of gender-based violence and helped organise large protest marches across the country.

Social media give traction to different issues of our time, including ongoing global climate strikes.[19] Simultaneously, these very same media are used to widely and strategically propagate 'news' that can now be 'fact-checked' by dedicated websites to be false, thus intentionally manipulating mindsets in certain ways.[20] Responses by social media platforms to criticisms regarding the harmful impact of epistemologies conveyed through them as 'normal' or 'true' are mostly modest.[21] However, since they are monitored and non-neutral spaces, there are selective limits to what can be said on a particular social media platform. In Tinder's case, users were reportedly banned after

[16] http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13758 (15 December 2020).

[17] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50431903 (21 April 2020).

[18] Information available: https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/am-i-next (3 April 2020).

[19] Information available: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/live/2019/mar/15/climate-strikes-2019-live-latest-climate-change-global-warming (15 December 2019).

[20] In Germany, for instance, false crime accusations, allegedly committed by refugees, fuelled mass protests of the ultra-right during which people associated with foreignness were targeted with violence.

[21] Only in the last days of the presidency of Donald Trump did social media platforms respond to dehumanising and violence inciting comments with a ban, setting an unprecedented example and showing that they can and do regulate content contrary to previous claims. Among them were Twitter, Facebook/Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat.

showing support for the *Black Lives Matter* movement[22] , with Tinder arguing that this was because 'promotions' were violating its community guidelines. After the issue gained traction on social media, the policy was revoked, and banned users could contact Tinder to have their profiles reactivated.[23]

Depending on the line of argument (following the above and other factors associated with the current state of being amongst/within technology for people with and without direct access to it), scholars have declared this to be the age of post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-factualism, post-truth or post-humanism. Brudvig[24] describes the situation we find ourselves in as 'eerily similar to anthropology's crisis of representation in the wake of independence and postcolonial movements'. Perhaps, she says, 'we are at the start of another such revolutionary time, one that is driven by citizen's demand for freedom of information, of association, of movement, of rights online; and of overcoming "the danger of a single story" characteristic of data-driven indicators of belonging'. As part of the digitalisation of the everyday, questions remain pertinent but insufficiently grappled with as to what it means to become a datum; to what degree we become our informational selves and how our various personas become navigated against the backdrop of accelerated consciousness. Such discussions are crucial when dealing with ethical grey zones, some of which I was confronted with while conducting ethnographic research on and via Tinder (see **chapter 3**).

On love and dating

There tends to be an assumption that we share some knowledge about what we mean when referring to terms like love, relationships or dating. Where dating apps like Tinder are concerned, there is a supposed freedom in re-defining the frameworks of dating, what it means to relate in each new relationship constellation and to what degree one chooses to takes part in them. At first glance, this seems to be a move away from what Brake (2011) called amatonormativity, referring to the widespread belief that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship and that this is the type of relationship everyone is looking for.

Tinder, Bosch's (2020) South African study suggests, is no longer just considered a 'hook-up' app (as it was when launched in 2012) but one that comprises different forms of relating. Thus, a

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[22] A decentralised movement that advocates against racially motivated violence against people categorised as black.

[23] https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52994746 (30 December 2020).

[24] Same blog entry referenced in footnote 16.

reconfiguration is required in terms of what oneself and others are searching for on the app. Potentials have become extended to include various scenarios, and these play a role when downloading the app, creating a profile, swiping, chatting, imagining and meeting. Even though other forms of relating are not excluded from the context, Tinder remains a platform marketed for 'dating' and constitutes a sexualised context. This reduces relationships to fit into narrow frameworks. Just like Facebook reduces and accumulates all relationships under the category 'friend', Tinder reduces everyone to a 'date', providing one with likes, confirmation, and other desires. Referring to anthropologist Robert Brain, Deresiewicz (2011) says that being friends with everyone makes one forget HOW to be friends. 'Dating' on Tinder provides a similarly narrow category with users expressing confusion about what it may imply. Occasional sex, for example, but also other forms of contemporary relationships via technologies are scriptless and normatively blurry.

Because of Tinder's lack of social scripts and image residues of being a 'hook-up app', the platform is often accused of fuelling casual sex and thus undermining more 'traditional' relationship frameworks – as though the latter had always been in place and not equally the result of historical developments. Fears have been raised about the impact of dating apps and other social media on how people interact, fall in love, create and end connections (Gershon, 2010; 2011). Some of these concerns have been discouraged. Miller et al. (2016) found that, contrary to popular opinion, social media is *not* necessarily making us more individualistic or even narcissistic as feared. A recent Swiss study (Potarca, 2020), which was summarised and widely spread across online news outlets (exemplifying great interest in the topic), suggests that couples who met via dating apps may actually have stronger 'cohabitation intentions' than couples who have met offline and use the dating period as a trial period to evaluate marriage. Although it can be questioned to what degree this applies to dating app usage across the globe,[25] the finding illustrates that nothing about contemporary dating is set in stone. The relevance of proximity as a factor in conceptualising intimacy and love feelings has been subject to significant changes. Katz (2016) describes how, once, most people married someone who lived within a few kilometres of them. With the advent of the internet, infinite possibilities emerged for finding soulmates across the world. It did not much matter any longer where one physically was, and dating became a prolonged and versatile process. With Tinder, physical location becomes, once again, of primary importance, consequently

[25] A few days after coming across this large-scale study, I found a conflicting psychological study by Pronk and Denissen (2020) saying that swiping cultivates a rejection mindset.

replicating boundaries of class. Some technology experts, say Katz (2016), believe that the next form of online dating will feature virtual reality, reducing the relevance of proximity yet again.

Even without technology's challenges and opportunities added to emotional equations, there are inherent contradictions in love, as Villiamy (2016) argues. Feelings of anguish, loss, and pain are lived out in politically uneven worlds, marked by patriarchal power structures and heteronormative assumptions. There is, however, also a persistent sense of hope about love – in this study evidenced by the continuous deletion and re-downloading of the Tinder app. Given the changing understandings of intimacy, relating, and love, this dissertation refrains from providing a concrete definition of 'dating'. Instead, it encourages readers to form their own opinion whilst reading through the manifold experiences it records.

What is Tinder, and how does it work?

Tinder was founded by Sean Rad, Justin Mateen, Joe Munoz, Dinesh Moorjani, and Whitney Wolfe Herd in Los Angeles (USA) and released in September 2012. The app quickly became popular with college students first before moving into the mainstream. In November 2014, Tinder introduced a subscription service that offers additional features and enhancements while keeping primary app services free. Since 2017, the app has been owned by *Match Group Holdings*[26]. Like other apps, Tinder matches users partly based on geographic proximity and works through an interface that allows users to either swipe right to 'like' or left to 'pass' on the touchscreen of a smartphone, tablet or similar device. Swiping left results in the profile on the screen disappearing. If two users have swiped right for each other, this leads to a 'match' and enables them to chat through the app. Gaining a better 'sense' of the person represented on-screen after matching was arguably made easier with the launch of Tinder's video chat feature in 2020. Tinder was the first app to use the 'swipe logic', which has become synonymous for a certain kind or relating and choosing, made recognisable through jingles and celebrities' references to 'swiping right' – a previously mundane gesture (Bosch, 2020). The mutual opt-in per right-swipe also seems to be designed to reduce unwanted attention and the embarrassment of rejection. As Rad himself put it: 'no matter who you are, you feel more comfortable approaching somebody if you know they want you to approach them'.[27]

[26] A company located in Dellas (USA) that also operates Match.com, Ok Cupid, Meetic, Hinge, Plenty of Fish and thus holds global monopoly of major online dating services.

[27] https://www.gq.com/story/tinder-online-dating-sex-app.

The requirement to set up a Tinder profile is to be a *Facebook*[28] subscriber. This makes the set-up effortless, as Facebook data is automatically being duplicated and fed into one's Tinder profile. Signing into the app either happens by providing Facebook credentials or phone number and password. Setting up a Tinder profile is also much quicker than a dating-website profile because it involves a limited amount of information. Choices are based on a selection of pictures (a maximum of 6), a 500-word biography (if one chooses to provide one), and, sometimes, links to *Spotify*[29] and *Instagram*[30] accounts. Visible as well are name, age, and shared Facebook connections. Professions may appear on the app based on Facebook information, as well. Some social media studies have described the forced connection to Facebook as creating a sense of authenticity, 'a further source of identification that better situates an online identity in an offline environment' (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017:2). However, this supposed safety mechanism does not preclude users from setting up profiles based on dishonest information.

Tinder has become synonymous with using mobile applications to find intimacy. Instead of calling it a 'dating app', Tinder could also be referred to as an introduction platform. Biological Anthropologist Helen Fischer, who works for Match.com, suggests this for all digitally enhanced dating[31]. In a non-representative online survey in South Africa, Bosch (2020) reveals that most respondents claimed not to search for a specific kind of relationship on Tinder. Regardless, the majority's (52%) primary aim *after* starting to use the app was finding a long-term partner or spouse. This motivation was corroborated by the author's interview data in which most respondents stipulated primarily using the app to find a girl-/boyfriend or long-term romantic partner. Twenty-one per cent used the app for short-term dating; 12% indicated that they used the app to look for friendship and the same percentage for short-term sexual relationships, while only (3%) used the app for professional networking. This stands in contrast to user surveys in Global North contexts, where entertainment is noted to be the primary motivation for users, and the search for sexual partners is foregrounded (Duguay, 2017). In Bosch's (2020) study, participants also specified that they used Tinder because the most successful dating app in South Africa with a large pool of users

[28] The social media conglomerate is being sued for its market domination and anti-competitive behaviour https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/09/tech/facebook-antitrust-lawsuit-ftc-attorney-generals/index.html.

[29] A Swedish music streaming services that saves most listened to songs, suggests similar music and provides themed playlists.

[30] A social networking service for photo and video sharing owned by Facebook.

[31] https://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_technology_hasn_t_changed_love_here_s_why#t-1109008 (20 December 2020).

enables them to meet people they otherwise might never encounter. At the same time, Bosch's survey data revealed that a considerable number of respondents (31.3%) thought it was improbable that they would meet a suitable partner through the app. My own findings confirm both the continuous usage of Tinder despite having little faith in the workings of the app and the desire to meet someone out of one's everyday reach.

The free version of Tinder limits the number of profiles users have access to, which is, in part, meant to be a way to 'thwart users, third-party apps, and spambots from continuous right-swiping and to encourage users to become "more thoughtful" through rationed swipes' (Duguay, 2017, 133). Another reason is that Tinder Plus (for ZAR 115,05/month) or Tinder Gold (ZAR 172,69/month) must be purchased for the privilege of unlimited swiping. The paid services both have a 'passport' function allowing users to swipe anywhere in the world. They also provide unlimited likes, allow for rewinds if one has accidentally swiped left or right and make it possible to hide one's age and physical distance (usually a piece of compulsory, Facebook-fed information). Rewinds when having accidentally swiped left for someone is an interesting feature. It indicates that one's habitual swiping rhythm may be too fast-paced to take in a profile, and the first impression formed around it. Additional premium features are five 'super likes' a day, indicating special interest through a bright blue star, and one 'boost' per month, meaning that the profile appears at the top of profiles in one's area for 30 minutes, supposedly increasing chances to match. It is difficult to know whether this assumption holds true, especially regarding the 'super likes'. Tinder Gold users are also shown daily 'top picks', which are algorithmically produced suggestions based on previous choices, as well as a list of people who have already swiped right on one's profile. The recently introduced Platinum package goes further in advancing freedoms by including the ability to message people one has not yet matched with (and perhaps never would).

Dating apps differ from websites in that they privilege picture-based selection, minimise textual self-description, and draw upon existing Facebook profile data (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). The use of smartphones or other mobile technology means that one can integrate online dating practices into other activities in any place and at any given time. The portability and the ability to link and share content across other social networking platforms make dating apps increasingly popular (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Smartphone-based apps can be considered the follower of previous generations of online-dating business identified by Finkel et al. (2012) as, firstly, personal advertisement sites and, subsequently, algorithm-based matching sites. 'Location-based real-time dating' with Tinder and other apps facilitates fast, locally-based meetings, whereas online dating sites tend to focus more

on long-term courtship (March et al., 2017). Dating app experiences are also more picture-focused and tactile (Hobbs et al., 2017), with embodied gestures bridging the body and technological interfaces (Duguay, 2017). Yet, as I have already indicated, desires on dating platforms may overlap and change.

Despite Tinder's market domination against the backdrop of the expansion of the internet and altered processes for finding romance, its availability in more than 190 countries[32] and estimated 50 million user-base[33], mobile technology was used much earlier than Tinder to find potential partners. Initially, it was primarily common among gay men using *Grindr*, which started in 2009 and is used by millions of users worldwide. Its launch represented a 'cultural shift into creating and performing a community without a shared physical space' (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017:1). Although Tinder is different in that it directly targets heterosexual users (Duguay, 2017), but both apps have in common that they were initially marketed for sexual encounters and have since broadened their image to other kinds of networking. Nevertheless, Tinder's image as a 'hook-up' app used by younger people and for casual dating with shorter-term sexual partners persisted to an extent (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016), and its marketing team attempted to counter this impression with campaigns focused on wedding stories.[34] There is, furthermore, a notion of tindering being a gamified practice, a mere recreational activity requiring a limited investment of emotions and time. While searching for randomly dispersed matches requires an unknown number of habitual and gamified right-swipes, this does not mean that choices are arbitrary or that people one encounters along the way are necessarily seen as disposable - an argument Baumann (2013) makes. Swipes are embedded in cultural, socio-technical, political and economic engagements. The simple gesture captures and feeds them into a prediction algorithm, affecting the profiles shown to a user. Another result of the constant exposure to potential matches and continuous swiping is the intentionally facilitated creation of intimacy between users and the app (Duguay, 2017).

There exist a wide range of dating apps, many of them free of charge with some offering additional services for paying members only, and often usable both in app format and on websites. The ones with the biggest user-bases (a requirement to their efficacy) originate in the US. *Blendr* has the same

[32] https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003338183-Can-I-use-Tinder-anywhere-in-the-world-#:~:text=Tinder%20is%20a%20global%20online,is%20available%20in%20190%2B%20countries. (17 February 2021).

[33] https://techcrunch.com/2018/05/23/tinder-places-tracks-your-location-to-help-you-find-matches/ (17 February 2021).

[34] https://mashable.com/article/tinder-weddings-swipe-right-decor/ (3 March 2021).

creator as Grindr and follows a similar concept based on proximity. *Her* is the largest dating app for LGBTQ women or non-binary people and expressly excludes cisgender men (those whose birth sex is male and who identify as such). *Bumble* was designed by Tinder's co-founder Whitney Wolfe Herd (at 31, the youngest female CO to ever take a company public) in response to the sexual harassment she had experienced by the other Tinder founders[35]. Bumble's design leaves it to women in heterosexual matches to send the first message and otherwise has a similar interface to Tinder. This is meant to counteract the Tinder phenomenon of women (generally underrepresented on the app) being overwhelmed with many uninspiring messages from men. *Happn* simulates a sense of happenstance by tracking movements and showing with whom users have crossed paths. Those can then be swiped left and right on. There is also a South African app called *Intentions*, which (like dating websites) is based on common ground and shows whether potential choices have answered a set of thoughtful questions similarly with the profile set-up. When I tried out the app in 2016 upon learning about its launch on local radio, it was called *Predict,* and there were only a few locals in my area appearing as choices. Only three of my participants knew about the app and had tried it out. The international app *OkCupid* works similarly, based on multiple-choice questionnaires. Other options are *Afrointroductions*, the largest African dating site, and *Interracial Match*, which markets itself as a place for 'Black and White dating'. There are also apps exclusive to people who share a cultural sense of identity, such as *Zimcupid* (connecting Zimbabweans across the world), *JSwipe* or *Muzmatch* (for people identifying as Jewish or Muslim) and a range of Christian dating apps. For specific sexual appetites, there is likely also an app available.

The cogs and wheels of Tinder

What data scandals involving the harvesting and selling of personal data emphasise is that social media projects, claiming to be connectors of the world and forces of democracy, render users products themselves and monetise by datafying their personal experience and identity (Lyon, 2003; Zuboff, 2019). Adversely to ideas of extended freedoms, peoples' online behaviour is first monitored before individuals are targeted by corporations with content-specific advertisements telling them how they should think, feel, and what choices they should make. Thus, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are not at all 'free from the logic of domination and appropriation typical of neoliberalism, where the tendency is to prioritise profitability, often to the detriment of democracy and service to humanity' (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:7). Although

[35] https://www.reuters.com/article/bumble-ipo-wolfe-herd/bumble-ceo-in-billionaire-list-as-stock-continues-to-soar-idUSL4N2KI2XM (17 February 2021).

freedoms are enhanced through new technological developments in some ways, there is also surveillance and the assurance of a status quo. Through our digital selves, Brudvig (2019:22) says, 'we are programmed into contrived hierarchies with little choice in the matter and limited recourse for resistance'. Brudvig the following ethical concerns linked to this:

a) the use of personal data as currency in online 'mediascapes' is driven by the manipulation of consent in opaque terms of service agreements;
b) the technological architecture itself is emblematic of a culture of surveillance – the default mode that governs our digital interactions;
c) the combined application of big data and artificial intelligence by social media platforms fuels 'data-driven indicators of belonging'.

The design of algorithms and the use of personal data by technology companies may, as Brudvig (2019) warns, encode hierarchies through data and limit self-determinism in defining flexible identities. How and to what extent this is the case is not always easy to pinpoint as transparency and accountability concerning the very ways in which interactions are digitally guided are lacking. There are also globally few regulations in place that provide ethical guidelines in this regard. In their absence, the handling of data, the implementation of codes of conduct, and questions of access remain murky. Consequently, users share their speculations on various internet blogs and forums. In March 2019, Tinder declared their previous point-based Elo score (also referred to as desirability score), determining its users' attractiveness and matching them with people considered similarly attractive 'old news'. The Elo determined the desirability of Tinder users based on how their attractiveness was ranked, the attractiveness of the people who swiped for them, and their own swiping behaviour. This would affect whom they see (and thus may swipe for) and how many swipes one was given. Tinder's new 'cutting edge technology', however, is only described in broad terms and seems to follow the same basic rules as before. The process still largely depends on physical appearance and how one is ranked, even though the algorithm, as the previous one, also accounts for age and distance, and disincentivises people to swipe right too much.

An additional aspect of the apps inner workings Tinder remains quiet about is the matter of advertisement. In 2017 and in an effort to maximise revenue potential via targeted advertisement, Tinder partnered with *Audience Network*, which is an extension of Facebook's invasive personal-data-based business model. According to a website offering business advice, Tinder advertisements

now constitute the second-largest income stream after premium subscriptions[36]. As a result, the website claims that advertising via Tinder is seven times more successful than banner ads. This is because, as clearly stated in Tinder's privacy policy, user data is considered to be available to use for marketing and targeted advertising.

Tinder's features keep changing and differ depending on where the app is used. For instance, in early 2020, Tinder introduced a location-based emergency service for the US market, a feature that can but does not have to be added. Help will be sent to users if requested. However, the precondition is the supply of additional data, including ongoing access to geophysical location, information about the location, time and name of the Tinder date. This 'service' and additional plans that involve the verification of pictures (requiring users to supply various real-time selfies) sustain concerns about the increasing evasiveness embedded in technology features in the name of efficiency and safety. Tinder's lack of transparency, wavering features, and the fact that its owner (Match Group Holdings, which owns more than 20 other dating services) is a market monopolist with access to a deep pool of personal data, renders the app a noteworthy actor when it comes to contemporary intimacy building.

Situating mobile phone usage in South Africa

Analysing phone communication among youth in Mozambique, Archambault (2017) explains that phones are not just technical objects and that mobile devices also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. Referencing Larkin on roads and railways, she says about growing access to mobile modes of communication that 'they encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real'. They come with a promise for a better world. At the same time, Archambault criticises developmentalist imaginaries for reducing phones to a panacea to Africa's problems. Digital developments tend to be packaged in pledges of transformation and socioeconomic development in education, business, health, and democracy without acknowledging ambivalent responses towards them.

Before the existing variety of social media platforms became accessible to an increasing number of people in South Africa, there were two main ways in which people communicated using media. One of them was public broadcast media such as television, radio and newspapers. In South Africa, broadcasting was state-controlled and monopolised by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) during apartheid. SABC resisted the introduction of television broadcasting

[36] https://youmaximize.com/tinder-advertising-for-business-owners/ (1 January 2021).

as the new medium was perceived as a threat to the minority Afrikaner[37] governance and its segregation policies. At the time, Christian nationalist morality was (mis)used to mobilise patriotic media. Television was, nevertheless, eventually introduced in 1976. Cole and Thomas (2009), as well as Van der Westhuizen (2018), outline that love, decency and gender roles have also been the subject of newspapers, magazines and advice columns, which address different audiences on how to grapple with shifting expectations (this will be discussed further on in **chapter 2**). It is also noteworthy that, despite the now increasing prevalence of newer media, the radio has retained a position of importance as a space for political and cultural discourses (Bosch, 2014). Popularly consumed tabloid newspapers offer an extension of such everyday discourse in South Africa. Their sensational stories are usually sourced from low-income communities and can be argued to subvert existing power structures with ridicule and resistance (Walton, 2014). The second significant means of communication before the introduction of social media was through technologies facilitating one-on-one conversation such as telephones ('dyadic' communication).

Miller et al. (2016) refer to social media's advent as the colonisation of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, affecting group size and privacy degrees. Initially, one of the first and most popular instant messaging services for feature phones was *Mxit*, a platform developed in 1977 at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. One-on-one chats, group-chats and a public chat zone were its main features. With the uptake of smartphones and the increasing popularity of image-driven platforms such as Facebook, user numbers kept dropping, and Mxit was shut down in 2015. Currently, the most popularly used social media apps in South Africa are Facebook and its messenger service, the professional networking platform *LinkedIn*, followed by the photo and video sharing app Instagram, which has a comparably younger and more female user base to Facebook[38].

As previously mentioned, internet penetration in South Africa is still comparably low but steadily increasing. In 2020, 56.3 per cent of the South African population spent time online, which is expected to reach 62.3 per cent by 2025[39]. Nevertheless, as a country that remains divided across various lines, divisions also apply to digital media. This is not only a matter of access, although mobile data and fibre remain far above the international average and are thus not available to

[37] An ethnic group in Southern Africa predominantly descending from Dutch settlers.

[38] https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-south_africa/2020/11 (17 February 2021).

[39] https://www.statista.com/statistics/484933/internet-user-reach-south-africa/ (17 February 2021).

everyone to the same extent[40]. Digital divides also exist between those with digital literacy skills. With media landscapes changing, it must be considered how they map onto social groups. As Miller et al. (2016) show in eleven monographs looking at social media usage in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey, the effects can vary drastically.

After apartheid's state laws, designed to disenfranchise people categorised as Black and Coloured[41], were officially abolished in South Africa, aspirational ideas of a 'project freedom' commenced. These were enshrined in a new constitution that is, in many ways, reflective of the 'rainbow nation' ideal (the idea of unity and diversity) under South Africa's first Black and democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela[42]. The aspiration was that humanity would be progressing toward a harmonious future. The brutalisation and sexualisation of black bodies, which had long been treated as disposable, were hoped to disappear. It has become clear over the years since then that said is an ongoing, ideologically undergirded form of violence, finding its resonance in the structural violence of a capitalist economy all but supportive of a levelled playing field.

Similarly optimistic to the 'rainbow nation' are some of the dominant assertions about the rapid growth of technological innovations, their ability to improve civilisation, or media serving as a 'prosthesis of human agency' (Mitchell and Hanson, 2010). Archambault, for instance, describes how many Mozambicans understand the mobile phone itself as '*being* development' (2017:41) [original emphasis]. These developments ought to be interpreted as an extension of colonial logic, including its position towards poverty and inequality. Mignolo (2007) links this logic to a 'modernity rhetoric', which glorifies progress, development and growth. Simultaneously, the use of technology and its impacts are often accompanied by a kind of moral panic, suggesting a loss of authentic humanity. How digital dimensions intersect with bodies and desires in South Africa will be pondered in this ethnography. Through an experiential lens, it considers the continuities of what bodies are considered more human, masculine or feminine, and the ideas of sexuality attributed to them - and how these assumptions play into practices involving desire and intimacy. Goffman (1949) convincingly shows that there is no such thing as an unmediated, pre-, or non-cultural sociality or communication. Still, my findings show that technology and its consequences are critically embraced by its users, who suspect them to facilitate inauthenticity. The belief that

[40] https://www.businessinsider.co.za/sa-fibre-data-costs-the-most-expensive-in-the-world-2019-12#:~:text=South%20Africans%20fork%20out%20a,and%20then%20Norway%20at%20R993 (3 January 2021).

[41] A racial classification in continued usage in South Africa describing those who are considered 'mixed-race'.

[42] A term coined by human rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu for a then newly democratic South Africa.

technology resolves an element of humanity in dating practices specifically was, at the same time, contradicted by the continuous development of practices and strategies in this research.

Tinder and the suburbs

FIGURE 3 HTTPS://BOSPCAPETOWN.WORDPRESS.COM/MAPS/ (12 JANUARY 2021).

Throughout this ethnography, I consistently refer to the northern and southern suburbs in addition to the Cape Town city centre and some other places (including Stellenbosch, Muizenberg and other places in South Africa). While this is somewhat simplifying, the distinction between north and south is meant to help reader's orient themselves in Cape Town, which is rather an assemblage of cultural spaces. I discuss its persistent, differently marked divisions (including race, class, gender, and 'outsiders' from other African countries) in different parts of this dissertation. Thereby, I

attempt to form a more detailed impression of social distinctions that are invented but experienced in a very real way. The north and south separation is another one of such categorical distinctions, signifying stubbornly cultivated contrasts between people of English (south) and Dutch (north) descent – even though these lines cannot, in actuality, be this neatly drawn, as some of my ethnographic data highlights. While the southern suburbs are closer to the city core with its work opportunities and promises of affluence, the northern suburbs carry the image of being quieter, dispersed, conservative and family-oriented. The northern suburbs are also locally referred to as being situated behind the 'Boerewors curtain'. The wordplay likens the cultural divisions between locals identifying as English and Afrikaans (Boerewors being the Afrikaans term for a very popular local 'farmer sausage') to the non-physical, ideological borders of the cold war. I ask the readers to bear with this distinction as I gradually seek to relativise it throughout this work.

Thinking about social media ecologies

In their broadly applied study on social media in different contexts (leading to very distinct books for each of them), Miller et al. (2016) draw out how the world changed social media - more so than how social media changed the world - and outline how platforms become localised. Their ability to reconfigure time and space in ways that limit barriers of distance and location in the creation and maintenance of old and new relationships (de Bruijn et al., 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2005a; Nyamnjoh, 2009; Ling & Campbell, 2011; Tazanu, 2012) imply an increase in mobility and innovation. At the same time, Henry & Powell (2017) show, online channels are frequently co-opted to drive sexist, racist and homophobic discrimination, ultimately encouraging homogeneity and extremism (Brudvig, 2019).

Still, technologies are adapted in locally specific and innovative ways too (for examples in Africa see Powell, 2014; de Bruijn et al., 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2009, 2004; Ekine, 2010; Orgeret & Ronning, 2009). Locally, this is evident in Bosch's (2011) observations that capture how the introduction of both Facebook and Mxit offered a space for play in South Africa, especially for young women whose movement was restricted due to parental safety concerns. Bosch (2011) further finds that these networks promoted a cult of femininity and socialised women into specific roles. In her study on unemployed black youth in Grahamstown, South Africa, Schoon (2017) correspondingly discovered that technology appropriation is highly linked to context while also informed by infrastructure. Hip hop in her study was used to counteract despair and produce a dignified sense of self, critical of self-defeating narratives rooted in racism, colonialism, and apartheid, which often manifested in violent forms of urban masculinity. Instead, ways were found to 'remix' identities by

cultivating alternative notions of a successful self, partly constituted through digital media competency.

Brudvig (2019), Powell (2014) and Miller & Slater (2000) also illustrate how techno-social relationships can be used to impact space, desires and possibilities. Working with Somali migrants in Cape Town, Brudvig (2019) argues that digital technologies are culturally constituted frontier spaces, characterised by various layers of (im)mobility through which belonging is navigated and performed. She finds there to be inventive ways in which Somali migrants adopt digital technologies in the face of manifested violence. Brudvig (2019) shows how physical and virtual spaces in contemporary worlds intersect and how belonging is further complicated by the politicisation of mobility and immobility - both online and offline. Powell's study (2014) shows that virtual forms of belonging are equally important and complementary to face-to-face and material forms of belonging. Engaging with mobile populations in the informal settlement Langa in Cape Town, she conveys how mobile phones have grown to be important facilitators for social inclusion and negotiating marginalities.

Latour (2005:71, quoted by Powell, 2014) claims that '… any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor…' [original emphasis]. Powell (2014) agrees with this since even mundane uses of mobile devices can affect their users' situation as much as users allow them to. The latter point, namely that of 'allowing', warrants particular emphasis. Miller and Slater (2000) were among the first to challenge the 'cyberspace' as a placeless domain. The Trinidadians they studied in the late 1990s used the internet (at home and abroad) in ways that showed online domains to be very much a part of the everyday, used for business and socialising. Later, Horst and Miller (2013) questioned the idea of the phone as an alleviator of poverty based on its potentials for redistribution and coping. In Jamaica, they found people living in poverty using mobile phones to *get* money rather than to *make* money. Therefore, they argue, the phone is an expansive rather than a transformative object that 'allows a previously constituted desire to become realised' (Horst and Miller 2013: 64). Phones did not create new desires and possibilities out of thin air. What they 'did' was to provide opportunities for desires that already existed and were then imaginatively materialised. They are, thus, only extensions of sets of practices that people employ for communication and survival.

The examples above show that technologies 'come to be embodied as products of human imagination and creativity', as Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2006:5) phrase it. Their volume provides a range of additional illustrations for recalculated configurations, showing that humans and technologies are two sides of the same coin and that different kinds of technologies are worked

into different cultural contexts in Africa. Its authors emphasise the interdependencies of humans and technologies and, indeed, humans as technology. Humans, it becomes clear, are the ones attributing power to technology (not the other way around). It is, therefore, evident that there is no 'technological determinism' at play in digital-human interactions, which is the now widely disputed theory suggesting that technological changes force social adaptations (Chandler, 2018). Although the influence of digital technologies is not at all to be underestimated, technologies are not omnipotent or actors by themselves.

Adding to the complexity at hand is the constant change that social media platforms, their usage, and features undergo. Sometimes, they are utilised in ways they were not initially designed for, such as facilitating protest movements, and developing new biographies of citizenship (Bosch 2017), as already mentioned. Facebook made a shift from a platform on which male college students rate female students according to their attractiveness to a platform that also includes older users. With parents now being on Facebook, many younger users have migrated to spending more time on other social media platforms such as Instagram (Miller et al., 2016; Gershon, 2020). The fact that users tend to move across social media makes it even more challenging to capture the 'essence' of a particular format. As argued by Miller et al. (2016), different platforms address different people and differently sized groups. According to the authors, sociality is scalable in that *Twitter*[43] may be used to access a large group of people and for banter, while *Snapchat*[44] pictures may be sent to a person of trust. Where Tinder is concerned, users, as aforementioned, integrate platforms like Facebook, Spotify and Instagram into the dating process.

With their interest in 'scalable sociality', Miller et al. (2016) adopt a polymedia approach and investigate media sociality more broadly. Tinder is somewhat different from the media ecologies the authors describe at large in that it explicitly initiates intimate one-on-one relationships[45] (of one kind or another). These are sought to be built with strangers based on minimal information. It is a place of sociality that is ultimately sought to be left behind and exchanged for a face-to-face encounter, even though it appears that the game-like design of the app encourages users to spend time on the app swiping rather than meeting offline. Furthermore distinguishing Tinder is that rapid successions of one-on-one online encounters with relative strangers mean that there is no

[43] A social networking service on which interaction occurs through microblogs or 'tweets', which are short posts.

[44] A messaging service on which pictures and other communication are only available for a limited time.

[45] These may sometimes extend to a couple and an additional person. What is more, Tinder in South Africa used to have a group function where one group of people would indicate where they are going, providing an open invitation to other groups to join. This feature was soon removed again for reasons I, unfortunately, can only speculate about.

standardisation of usage in the way that Miller et al. (2016) found in social media usage across different regions. My findings are reflective of this.

Although social narratives (also embedded in the design of technologies) do not uniformly determine the usage of these technologies, etiquette and 'rules' of social media are, as Gershon (2020) indicates, established through exchanges with friends and families about encountered conundrums. These could be problems such as when and with what medium to respond to people. Different input is then evaluated. This may not be as easy for demographics other than the North American undergraduate university students Gershon (2010; 2020) interviewed. Many of my male participants (and specifically those who were conservatively raised) indicated not having such an outlet, which led to more confusion than already prevalent around social media codes of conduct and reluctance when deciphering another person. Even for Gershon's interviewees, figuring out social relationships within heavily mediated environments that continuously offer new communicative choices required careful consideration and became complicated by the features of a particular medium (in her case, mostly Facebook).

Media studies have long moved on from essentialising, deterministic frameworks along the lines of McLuhan's (1994) theory that 'the medium is the message'. These were overhauled by more complexifying approaches, taking into consideration different channels, flows and interconnections. This ethnography follows suit by thinking 'outside of the medium', investigating meaning and interactions beyond Tinder itself. It does so not primarily by looking at media landscapes but by paying special attention to the experiences of transitioning from the Tinder app to a corporeal dating set-up (and often back).

Significance of the study

With the rapid expansion of the internet and communication technologies across Africa in the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in how mobile technologies are used in local contexts and how they facilitate flows. Paradoxically, even though technologies are expected to facilitate fluid movement and more open societies (Powell, 2014), there is a simultaneous global rise in trends to control identities, a fear of mobility, and an obsession with confining difference (Appadurai, 2019). Thus, Brudvig says, in addition to being a force of mobility, digital technologies also have the potential to be a force of immobility and political and social control.

As will be discussed further on, public discourses usually go into one of two distinct directions. Some are overly optimistic, considering digital technologies to transcend humanity in progressive ways, overhauling frontiers and firm notions of identity and, ultimately, making things more fluid

and adaptable (see Castells et al., 2007; Gumpert & Drucker, 2007: Powell, 2014; Brudvig, 2019). These views of 'technology as saviour', a notion challenged by Archambault (2017), tend to disregard various manners in which technologies can be employed. On the other end, there is a pessimistic chorus, claiming that digital means interrupt 'traditional' frameworks of relating. They also warn of new forms of social control through algorithmic workings and the largely uncontrolled forces of what Zuboff (2019) refers to as 'surveillance capitalism'. This sceptical tenor is replicated in some famous sociology-inspired works on contemporary dating practices, like Baumans' (2013) work *Liquid Love. Modern Romance,* co-written between comedian Aziz Ansari and sociologist Eric Klinenberg, argues that 'modern romance' (among heterosexual, middle-class, college graduate Americans) has fundamentally changed dating sentiments with the introduction of technology into intimate spheres. Klinenberg developed the methodology of the accessibly written book, but a lot of the data anecdotally portrays 'bad dates' and disappointing encounters for women with men.

There is truth to both of these antithetical suggestions. However, one must be careful not to credit the digital itself with agency and, instead, highlight both the workings behind a digital interface and the cultural adaptations of concepts that appear to be liberating in some ways and confining in others. ICTs themselves are neither inherently positive nor negative; they are enablers. For that reason, Horst and Miller (2013) urge scholars to investigate *how* individuals appropriate technologies and phones in particular. With their usage being linked to understandings of culture (Castells et al., 2007), cell phones and their contents are useful instruments for locating social changes and resistance. Therefore, questions must be amenable to smartphones and mobile apps like Tinder that allow for intimate engagements in any place and at any given time (at least for many). They also play a crucial role in looking at the reconfiguration of socialities. Cole and Thomas (2009) critique that investigations of new technologies and media in Africa often remain prominently concerned with difference. Thus, the authors encourage expansions of the topic as its understandings contain visions of intimacy and provide different avenues for them to be tested and enacted. As Escobar (1994) says about studying cultures and emerging methodological considerations in a digitally mediated world, the question persists of how notions of community, fieldwork, the body, nature, vision, the subject, identity, or writing are being transformed by digital technologies.

Regarding anthropology, the increasing mediation of lives via technology and the internet means that 'all anthropology is now digital anthropology in some way, shape or form' (Boellstorff cited by Horst & Miller, 2013:12). The obscure and speedy commercial developments that a steadily

growing part of the global population is routinely exposed to, and their engagement with it, must be accompanied by careful thinking about the impacts on socialities, including their nodes and manners of cultivation. The cultural signification of the mundane act of swiping is of great relevance here. With people embodying technologies and technologies embodying people, as Powell (2014) suggests, queries into just how they do so remain to be integrated into nuanced academic debates. The unparalleled popularity of Tinder renders the app an appropriate medium to examine just that.

According to Postill and Pink (2012), the implications of the rapid growth of social media apps and practices are threefold for internet ethnographers: 1. they offer new sites for ethnographic fieldwork, 2. further new forms of ethnographic practice and 3. stimulate a critical re-thinking of the theoretical and methodological frameworks that dominate internet studies thus far, primarily looking at large data sets and using network analysis. This dissertation is an internet-related ethnography. In other words: Tinder is its locus, not its focus. It does not, first and foremost, analyse the app itself and its online socialities, although they do inform my analysis. Instead, the focus lies on experiential aspects, online and offline, spanning years and including different relationships. My interpretations are also informed by participants' life histories. Through this dissertation and by presenting on the topic at various conferences as I have had the pleasure of doing in the past couple of years, I intend to further the discussion of the mutually shaped experiences between human and technology. My larger interest lies in encouraging an open and blunt discussion about new methodological approaches in this changing environment, which must include personal reflections on behalf of ethnographers. In this manner, I hope that my study contributes to a much-needed understanding of radical digitalisation and its social footprints.

What kind of ethnography is this?

Despite its interdisciplinary affinity, this is first and foremost an ethnography that bases its conclusion on close observations and intimate conversations. In the absence of a 'traditional field' of study, one that physically contains the dynamics the ethnographer desires knowing about, this work may appear to be reliant on narratives more so than classic ethnographic works. Like the latter, it hinges on observational skills against the backdrop of peoples' life stories, their interpretation beyond language or psychoanalytical takes of what was said.

Narratives are a valuable approach to understanding experiences, life histories and social worlds. They also played an essential for the tinderers participating in this study, as they helped to position their composite selves. When dating and connecting across spaces, sharing experiences helped making sense of fragmentations taking place along various axes, present past, public and private

and interpretations of expectations regarding social space, gender, age, etcetera. I liken this process to a dance in **chapter 6**, showing the difficulties this encompasses. It also illustrates how tinderers try to overcome them by finding patterns, strategies and rituals in a context that does not provide any substantial guidelines in terms of social conduct.

Despite the value attributed to narratives, this study considers participant observation, the pillar of 'traditional' anthropology, crucial in avoiding arguments based on 'performed selves' in an interview setting (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015). This is because, although internet(-related) ethnographies mean moving away from communities and towards sociality and movement (Pink, 2016), it, nevertheless, remains challenging to communicate participants' experiential, sensory knowledge through them alone. This ethnography therefore grounds itself by applying valid anthropological standards. At the same time, it does not follow the mystified anthropological suit of discovering hidden layers of meaning within a culture. Rather, it aims to draw out the 'in between', the dynamic processes about becoming and fading away (Wittel, 2000). It furthermore addresses the challenges of a more intuitively guided methodological approach, including those of access, gatekeepers, consent, and validity of information.

Dissertation overview

Chapter 2 critically engages with the concept of modernity and authenticity as a particularly relevant sub-theme of modernity. It offers an analysis of existing literature, including vantage points and gaps and suggests an augmentation of perspective by incorporating elements of the fantastic. The theories employed in analysing my ethnographic material are then detailed. Hypernormalisation is introduced as a conceptual framework that gives traction to descriptions of how bodies and their engagements produce – and are produced – by fantasy-inspired phenomenologies via the digital.

Chapter 3 offers a candid description of this research's intersectional journey on and via Tinder, which other researchers will hopefully benefit from. In the process of this journey, my pre-existing notions of 'doing ethnography' were challenged and my understandings of ethics as part of the practice were very profoundly enriched. My experiences 'in the field', hurdles when using Tinder as a recruitment tool, and the resulting shift in research methodology in the midst of my fieldwork formed an important part of how I came to understand relationships via Tinder, including my own relationships with this study's participants. I describe my embodied experiences as a researcher, how I became 'native' and how I was forced into 'coming home'. The chapter concludes by making

an argument for 'ethnography as jazz', meaning an approach to ethnographic research that allows for the necessary improvisation.

Chapter 4 goes on to engage with my findings. It conceives Tinder as a rabbit hole in which relationships can be quickly made and undone and investigates how the self and others are encountered in the process. Furthermore, it discusses how representations and desires are experienced and grapples with understandings of encounters as real, genuine, or lesser. It illustrates what tinderers may see when scrolling through profiles in search of intimacy on the dating app and opens up questions of how impressions via Tinder may impact encounters. The uniformity of Tinder conceptions, it appears in the light of user descriptions, examples of Tinder profiles and Tinder's marketing strategies, does translate onto tinderers' approaches to connect. In laying out the first steps of tindering, the chapter sets the groundwork for the introduction of participants and their narratives in chapter 5.

Chapter 5 moves from outlining user perceptions towards peeling through the phenomenologies of tindering. Drawing on the experiences of the tinderers taking part in the study, it shows how layers of superficial representation may also be penetrated. Tinder's hypernormalisation, it becomes clear, is not limited to uniform profiles. Rather, it extends to an understanding of Tinder itself as a non-place in which hedonist desires are unapologetically chased. The chapter describes how these understandings ultimately rub off on approaches to relationships, which are often characterised by the practice of caution in order to avoid hurt. Even so, the adoption of varying modi operandi reflects a willingness to share vulnerability within certain magnitudes to enrich encounters and extend the self towards the unknown.

Chapter 6 proceeds by inquiring how the ideas Tinder promotes, namely that it is a tool that extends user autonomy and reach, factor into digitally facilitated intimacies. This involves a discussion of how understandings of Tinder and approaches to tindering reflect on gendered, raced and classed encounters in the post-Apartheid setting of Cape Town, where frictions along various identity lines remain relevant, not only when it comes to structural inequality, but also in everyday encounters. By extension, the chapter engages with questions of whether Tinder, the usage of which is structured both by algorithms and coloured by user perceptions of the app, may reinforce rigid identities among them. It also questions to what degree Tinder may offer a space for emancipation and agency.

Chapter 7 provides a summary detailing the veneers of my findings. Each chapter's conclusions are discussed in relation to the research question and overarching arguments. This is followed by

a discussion of the contributions this research is hoping to make. Building on other authors' thoughts related to the topic, I make an argument for this research to be read as an invitation to a continued discussion about what 'doing ethnography' may mean in contemporary research contexts. The final chapter of the dissertation also reminds its readers of the theories that have contributed to the development of my arguments and closes with suggestions for areas of future research.

Chapter 2
Literature review and conceptual framework

Introduction

This chapter consists of two parts. Firstly, I look at literature pertinent to contemporary intimacy and the role of technology as a potential facilitator for change. Secondly, I discuss my conceptual framework and the theoretical implications of investigating online dating apps within the relatively new field of digital or cyborg anthropology. The chapter starts by addressing how digital technology users see themselves and others whilst swiftly moving across spaces. It probes how apps like Tinder may be used as a fantasy-inspired extension of the self, despite the epistemologies of inauthenticity they are discursively cocooned in. The initial section discusses the gaps and vantage points of existing research regarding how people connect online and via dating apps. This is followed by a contemplation of how existing academic insights are supplemental to my own ethnographic stratagem. Taking a critical look at the most dominant scholarly voices, it becomes clear that intimacy tends to be described as part and parcel of a unilinear process of 'modernisation'. After a critical look at this notion in South Africa, authenticity and the Tinder platform are deliberated. Ideas of 'authenticity' are outlined as permeated with different oppositional ways of thinking such as genuine or fake, original and imitate and conforming or resisting. Understandings of the term insist on an omnipresent essence to be captured and grappled with. Tinder's potentialities are then canvassed as invigorated with fantasy. The augmentation of reality – for better or worse and as facilitated by the digital – is touched on, encouraging readers of this dissertation to open themselves up to the more puttylike attributes of Tinder phenomenologies.

The conceptual part of the chapter explores how online notions of selves have been discussed. Tinder offers the possibility to unfurl current understandings by exploring how users interact with one another both techno-socially and in an analogue manner. Apps differ from other forms of online dating in that their usage is based on proximity and quick, intuitive (and largely looks-based) choice, as opposed to having access to plenty of information about a person (Illouz, 2012, refers to this as information-thickness versus information-thinness). Despite the association of online experiences with the superficial or less-than-authentic, my theoretical approach is situated in opposition to those that have equated becoming digital with becoming less human, less authentic, or more mediated. In line with Horst and Miller (2013), my understanding of the human goes beyond being in the digital world and encompasses the entering of digital spheres as a lived quest

for opportunities. These offer crucial insights into what it means to be human and what it means to extend the self via digital means.

The theme at hand – intimacy and the digital – requires borrowing from a vast array of thinkers to make sense of how historical changes and individuals' needs become quilted and how this interwovenness takes shape when relating to others in unscripted ways. In this chapter's theoretical section, I first elaborate on the metaphorical use of the 'rabbit hole' and its possibilities for self-extension, notwithstanding a hypernormalisation of discourses around agency and subjectivation in the digital sphere. Second, I deliberate understandings of post-humanity and online sociality. I follow this trajectory by framing online subjectivities and their fragmented nature. Subsequently, my understandings of embodiment and technologies of the self are outlined, and the phenomenological focus that I adopted in this thesis is critically discussed. I go on to describe apps as translators of cultural, imagination-fuelled fantasies.

Gaps and vantage points of existing research

Ethnographers increasingly concern themselves with internet practices (Beaulieu, 2004; Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006; Hine, 2008; Burrell, 2009; Kozinets, 2010; Postill, 2010; Pink, 2012; Boellstorff, 2015). These works emerge along with a body of anthropological work on social media platforms and practices (see Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Miller, 2011; Juris, 2012). More recently (2016–2020), several studies on dating apps specifically were published and are outlined in the following section. These are mostly based on large data sets, often focused on college students and frequently conducted by media scholars analysing social networks. Many of the recent publications on Tinder (Albury et al., 2017; Courtois & Timmermans, 2018a, 2018b; Duguay, 2017; LeFebvre, 2018; Lutz & Ranzizi, 2017; Ward, 2017) make arguments for further research on Tinder-related behaviour. What is still largely overlooked are the social conditions that inform online dating activities and how online technologies mediate intimate interpersonal connections (LeFebvre, 2018), even though these significantly change and speed up the dating game (James, 2015).

Large data sets and statistical overviews can be useful when contextualising ethnographic work. However, in answering questions of how, why/with what consequence social media are used, in-depth and close-up approaches are required. These will help refigure social media as a study context and provide insights into how people conceptualise, experience and express emotions around intimacy. Not many but some anthropologists have looked beyond the global North's confines and acknowledged that courtship and passionate love might work together in South Africa, too (Hunter, 1936; Krige, 1936; Schapera, 1940). Yet, there has been an overall lack of anthropological attention and scholarly depth pertaining to contemporary intimate practices more broadly, which

is partially owed to Radcliffe-Brown's (1923) call for social anthropology to be independent of psychology. While anthropologists have not been sufficiently attentive regarding intimate practices' intricacies, sociological traditions have had generalist inclinations and made heavily normative claims about intimacy, specifically in relation to individualism (Santore, 2008).

What is more, anthropology, sociology and other humanities continue equating feelings with subjectivity as a physiological and psychological experience (Illouz, 2012) and not as one incorporating a more bodily holistic and intersubjective experience. These gaps extend to technologically-informed relating practices in African settings, especially where it concerns the grossly under-researched erotic self. There is, therefore, an opportunity to explore contemporary relationships in ways that move beyond standardised ways of thinking. In this dissertation, I set out to do so without either romanticising the past or simplifying contemporary relating practices. Instead, I problematise unidirectional understandings of current media and their usage, favouring binary understanding of online and offline, real and fake, emotion and rationality.

Virtual choices: the desired self and other

The increasing number of quantitative studies on Tinder offer indications of how desirability is culturally shaped via discourses on what is 'hot'[46] and how the self and others are seen in the process of tindering. Attention has been given to users' self-presentation and self-disclosure processes in online dating (Ellison et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2012) as well as security risks (March and Marrington, 2019; Fansher and Eckinger, 2020.) and authenticity (Duguay, 2017) on Tinder specifically. Other academic literature has explored the characteristics of people who visit online dating sites. A multitude of desires is found to be at play when looking for intimacy online, including love and companionship, intimacy, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, the thrill of excitement, trendiness, passing time, surveillance, learning about one's preferences, entertainment and relaxation (see LeFebvre, 2018; Ligtenberg 2015; Sumter et al., 2017; Ward, 2017).

Timmermans and De Caluwé, (2017) find that Tinder users are more open to new experiences than single non-users, whereas single non-users tend to be more conscientious than single Tinder users. Carpenter and McEwan's (2016) research suggests that, while dating goals using apps are varied, there are three kinds of personality traits that may be associated with dating apps: sociability,

[46] 'Humanitarians of Tinder' offer an example of a Tinder trend, describing how users present images of themselves in humanitarian or volunteer settings outside of the global North, evoking a dialogue about the intersections of sexiness and racialised benevolence (Mason, 2016).

impulsiveness and interest in varied sexual partners. The authors also outline gender differences in the goal orientations of users of dating apps. Similarly, studying the dating site *DatingBuzz* in South Africa, Rietchard (2008) draws parallels between online dating personas and emotional intelligence. The most significant difference concerning the South African (compared to international) online dating personas was that females in South Africa appeared more socially competent and motivated to achieve success than their male counterparts.

The varying motives for using Tinder seem to impact how the self is presented online (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Profile photos are selected to present an ideal version of the self that is simultaneously authentic, illustrates one's desirability and highlights factors such as education levels (Ward, 2017). Tinder users and choosers 'swipe right' not only if they see people they may like, but also in search of clues regarding how to present themselves online to attract others (Ward, 2017). Moreover, Kalinowski and Matei (2011) found that social norms expressed by validating or discrediting social feedback in online dating influence individuals' self-presentation and self-identification.

Despite claims that Tinderers are more adventurous, there seems to be a clear preference for a potential match who has similar personality traits (Neyt et al., 2020), and (at least in Ranzini and Rosenbaum's, 2020, study conducted in Holland) not much appetite for inter-racial dating. Overall, there is scepticism regarding the empowering capacities of social media. Referring to the practice of selfie-taking, Barnard (2016) says that there might often also be a paradox divide between material and affective conceptions of empowerment, meaning that self(ie)-expressions can feel empowering to the individual controlling the camera while concurrently conforming to hegemonic norms. This trend is particularly apropos of the many networked selfies shared via social media. It is also argued by Renold and Ringrose (2017) that there are new formations of sexual objectification when the 'more-than-human' is foregrounded and where there is a blurry ontological divide between human (flesh) and machine (digital). The authors highlight 'tagging' as an example for this, which can operate as a form of coercive 'phallic touch' in ways that can both shore up and transgress normative territories of dis/embodied gender, sexuality and age. Looking at hegemonic-masculinity representations in male Tinder and Grindr profiles, García-Gómez (2020) finds there to be evidence of a devaluation and policing of femininity, but also notes the presence of contradictory gender ideas.

Braziel (2015) remarks that Tinder self-presentations are judged with a 'tourist gaze', meaning that Tinder users treat each other as objects and make decisions following the logic of consumptive

capitalism. To be desirable and complete as a subject requires passing the first stage of being 'liked' in the form of a profile. Anything standing out on the app works as a filter and being 'liked' on it is not least of all dependent on either fitting into sleek categories of beauty or by creating contra-images challenging them. According to philosopher Han (2015), digital beauty eliminates the negativity of anything beyond the auto-erotic subject. It is part of a smooth space of sameness that does not allow for alterity for 'likes' (a sentiment excluding any pain, vehemence or tremor) to be granted. On Tinder, beauty can thus be argued to have become McDonaldised in line with Ritzer's (2013) sociological framing of societal standardisations producing efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. This also becomes evident in the mushrooming of research efforts on happiness and well-being, including happiness economics and positivity psychology, which, effectively, manufacture 'happy citizens', as Cabanas and Illouz (2019) point out.

Reading these more recent studies on digitally mediated dating and its particularities, it becomes clear that dating app users are required to develop a new literacy of self-representation in the process of being chosen as a date. The findings also render apparent that more in-depth insights are needed in figuring out how tendencies towards a promotionalism that permeates contemporary social life (Fullick, 2013) impact peoples' efforts and experiences of relating and the kinds of relationships that occur. Moreover, despite the expansion of online dating and Tinder's popularity in South Africa (Bosch, 2020), scholarly attention to online dating in the context (and on the continent as a whole) remains more than scarce. An ethnographic approach is needed to extend existing insights on relationship-building, considering overlapping desires and detailing how these become navigated using digital media. Even where initiations of relationships themselves have (arguably) shifted from courting and long-term dating to 'hooking up' (at least according to Hobbs et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2017; Courtois and Timmermans, 2018a, 2018b), Tinder should not be assumed to be a mere casual sex app without 'strings attached' (see Bosch, 2020). Such assumptions would camouflage more complex aspects of intimacy and obscure what it means to use apps as a relatively new way to initiate relationships. Intimacies that develop via the platform can take various forms, and the relationships facilitated through them are likely to be complicated by contradictions (Daglish, 2011). Ethnography is a way to tease out the challenges, pleasures and improvisations that form part of what is often negatively summarised as a 'gamification' of dating through apps.

Tinder matches ideally turn into 'dates' as a narrow yet scriptless and normatively blurry category. Illouz (2018), a sociologist who spent decades studying intimacy and love against the backdrop of capitalism, attributes the absence of a dense normativity in contemporary dating practices to the

practice of freedom itself, which goes hand in hand with commandments that set the tone and vocabulary of the 'modern self'. Important keywords here are independence, autonomy and hedonism. She considers scopic capitalism to be responsible for a sexualisation of bodies, transforming individuals into visual units and turning the ontology of sexuality into a theatre of the self. Non-choices, then, become an expression of autonomy.

My ethnography is based on the premise that there is more to the experience of swiping than the consumption and reproduction of idealised selves. Tindering is not a mere theatrical performance, nor can it be narrowed down to stage glamour or a 'Tinder sexuality' aligned with ideas of freedom. Vulliamy (2016) observed that, when faced with new ways of being, relating and living, individuals have the capacity to be propelled as they seek love. They may flourish despite the pain and discomfort inherent in love itself and the presence of various oppressive mechanisms, such as algorithms, gendered relationships, or the sexualisation of bodies.

'Modern' freedoms and reified relationships

Sociological, psychological and biomedical research looking into social media and sexuality consistently foregrounds risks of dysfunctional relationships, sexual violence and other psychological problems. Another foreshadowed consequence of social media practice is disrupted intergenerational estrangement. Prominent academic voices have linked similar problematic aspects of technology and intimacy to notions of 'modernity'. Giddens (2013), for instance, strongly associates what he calls a transformation of intimacy with the idea of 'tradition', arguing that social expectations play less and less of a role when designing one's biography free from a repressive 'phallic sexuality'. Without giving attention to the role of a changing economic system or acknowledging cultural and class specificities, he mostly sources the dramatic changes of relationships in the separation of sex from reproduction and marriage. This, Giddens says, gave way for 'confluent love' (mutual openness and vulnerability) and 'pure relationships'. He finds women and 'homosexuals' to have been drivers and primary beneficiaries of the 'reflexive project of self' trajectory he describes and refers to the latter as 'pioneer experimenters' with relationship paradigms. According to Giddens, these are distinguishable from previous forms of relationships in that they prize intimacy and happiness over other social concerns. Consequently, he argues, relationships may be less durable on the one hand but more equal, democratic, potentially satisfactory and characterised by individual styles on the other.

Giddens has been widely criticised for turning a blind eye to persisting inequalities. Hunter (2009) joins the critics in saying that Giddens' descriptions of the 'West' as developing from romantic to

confluent love is ethnocentric and based on assumptions of women's levelled economic and social power. Hunter rectifies that this is not reflective of South African (and many other) realities, where gendered inequality remains ripe (despite a flagship liberal constitution). While this is indeed the case, I must mention that most of my female middle-class interviewees were well-educated for South African standards and found themselves in relatively better economic positions than the women Hunter refers to, of whom some are dependent on exchange-based relationships. Still, the women in my study would find themselves connecting on a playing field where firm understandings of gender continue to matter, as evidenced in recent protests against gender-based violence. Despite the heavy criticism they triggered, Gidden's ideas are worth mentioning as they continue forming part of the contemporary discourse on digital liberations.

Illouz (2014) observes that romance has replaced religion as a focus in everyday life as a means to pursue happiness, increasingly defined in individualistic terms and as a model for sovereignty. Neither celebrating this development nor denouncing it, Illouz shows how ideas of romance feature in 'our' world (primarily referring to the United States) today. She argues that utopian potentialities of romance are merged with consumerism to the extent that the very act of consumption can create a romantic moment. Illouz shows how romance has become central to the consumerist ethos. It has also become more accessible to less privileged classes through cheaper leisure consumption from the beginning of the last century. The consumerist ethos also introduced contradicting terms, such as selfishness and selflessness, public and private, interest and sentiment. Slowly but surely, increasingly common dating practices made way for a political economy of romance, wherein leisure and relative wealth gained relevance. Central to ideas of romance and its ritualistic consumptions was liminality, an escape from the everyday through travel, eating out, and an overall emotionally intense character of romance. Although no in-depth studies like Ilouz's have been conducted for South Africa, Hunter's (2009) similarly observes that leisure spaces, including shopping malls, restaurants, and beaches have become central in post-apartheid dating practices. Moreover, Hunter describes how advertising during the period has aligned consumption with notions of freedom, cementing the former as an indicator for status. Increasing electrification also meant a bombardment of South Africans with TV programs ensnaring love with consumption and turning it into a metaphor for social mobility.

In her interviews, Illouz (2014) found that people struggled with contradictions between episodic, non-linear ideas of romantic affairs and continuous life narratives. Her respondents found the former (including the love-at-first-sight paradigm) to be the most desirable, yet unrealistic. The utopian power of 'romance', nevertheless, continues lingering and shaping relationship

expectations. Her more recent works further emphasise how personal freedoms are curtailed in masked ways and how capitalism affects relationship-building. In *the End of Love*, Illouz (2018) describes how 'modern love' has shifted from the freedom to choose sexual encounters and emotional bonds to non-choice and a withdrawal from relationships. Thus, her focus lies on the cultural and emotional mechanisms involved when people revise, undo and reject relationships and avoid falling in love altogether, a process she refers to as 'unloving'. These very mechanisms are also central to this dissertation.

Bauman (2013) is one of the most cited scholars in the humanities (says Best, 2019) and argues that rampant individualisation and an unregulated, pleasure-driven sexuality (here counter-pieces to 'tradition') result, accordant with his title, in *Liquid Love*. As individuals try to create a balance between desires for freedom and security, the lack of the latter renders them, and experiences of connecting, marked by chronic anxiety. Zuboff (2019) references Bauman in showing how the launch of some technologies have promised to close 'the yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible'. According to Bauman, 'it is from that abysmal gap that the most poisonous effluvia contaminating the lives of contemporary individuals emanate' (quoted in Zuboff, 2019:45). She continues Bauman's thoughts reflecting on the launch of Apple. The multinational technology company positioned itself in this 'abysmal gap', and it appeared as though the company might fuse capitalism and the digital in freeing ways, enabling users to find what they want, whom they want and in ways in which they wanted to connect. Tinder can be argued to convey similar promises. However, a lot has happened since Apple's launch to render digital media users sceptical of promises of maximised freedoms, and it has become clear that 'free' access often comes at a (private data) cost.

In interviews with Indiana University college students in 2011, Gershon already found undergraduates resisting the workings of the then still recent social media technology Facebook, which had started to reorganise social lives significantly. It was the only new medium that her interviewees described as a threat to romantic relationships. In an attempt to preserve their relationships, some students deactivated their Facebook accounts. Gershon (2011) posits that Facebook was singled out because it encourages users to introduce a neoliberal logic to their intimate relationships, which, her interviewees believed, turned them into selves they did not want to be. Facebook knowledge was considered too incomplete to allow for a sound evaluation of newly formed relationships and, hence, too incomplete to indicate what actions were appropriate when navigating these relationships. This was due to Facebook-informed expectations of

managing selves as flexible collections of skills, usable traits, and tastes in constant need of upkeep and enhancement.

Tinder does not seek to produce a complete picture of a person, and the use of limited information is part of its allure – it is timesaving (as per neoliberal market logic) and allows for the imagination to fill in the gaps. Bosch (2020) makes Bauman central to her argument on how Tinder is used in South Africa, arguing that there is little evidence to support his claims that networks of romantic possibility erode ideals of commitment and romantic love - an interpretation of current practices that, as Gershon (2011) shows, tend to be linked to specific platforms. Bosch (2020) concludes that Tinder plays a crucial role in augmenting courtship practices but that monogamy ideals, contrary to common assumptions, are still largely prevalent. Most users search for long-term partnerships while testing new possibilities that emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes and expectations. Nevertheless, even though my fieldwork focuses on a different platform, a different point in time characterised by its own discourse and a different social setting, it promptly revealed similar scepticisms to the ones in Gershon's (2011) study. These will be unpacked throughout this thesis.

One major critique of theories the likes those of Giddens, Bauman and Illouz that render ideas of 'modernity' central to their arguments ought to be that family life in capitalist societies tend to still be governed by prescriptions that could be considered 'traditional' – vexingly used as an antonym to modernity in these works. Marriage remains the normative ideal, and family relations continue to reinforce hegemonic masculinity while sexual and romantic imaginaries reproduce gender inequalities (Jamieson, 1999; Santore, 2008). Cătălina-Ionela (2016) argues that such postulations can be interpreted as just another normative discourse promoting unwavering beliefs in the individual's power to achieve complete autonomy and become freed from 'traditional' formulas. There are two aspects I want to point out as particularly problematic in this regard. One is the meaning of 'modern' within frameworks of romance and sexuality in the study context. The other has to do with how bodily existences continue to be distinguished in South Africa. Lives may, indeed, be less subjected to obvious forms of state control than in the colonial and apartheid regime – with minimised subjectivation being the premise of the works cited above and their idea of modernity.[47] This development, however, does not mean that bodies are no longer subject to

[47] Although this is not necessarily the case in the UK, where Bauman has lived most of his adult life and where Giddens was born.

policing, containment and control, as Bauman (2013) suggests, nor does it mean that all bodies are treated the same. (Both aspects will be critically assessed in the following subsections.)

It is not only academic positions that tend to see changes in intimate engagements involving a move into the unknown as either inherently dangerous or liberating. There is also an air of dualisms surrounding public concerns around media technologies and sexuality, which, Naezer (2018) warns, can become intense and emotionally charged. They also often lead to the pathologizing and policing of youth sexuality especially. Lanzing (2019) poses the question of why commodification is seen as problematic where intimate relationships are concerned, while markets and social norms do not seem to conflict elsewhere, for instance in the arts. What, then, are deemed appropriate relationships between persons and between persons and things - and why? Commodification becomes problematic when it reifies and alienates, dehumanises and devalues. Tinder, Lanzing (2019) suggests, may be a facilitator of this, given the gamification of connections and its algorithmic scoring systems rating users, their online behaviours and confronting them with their market value. Technologies and their algorithms can embody their designers' gender and racial biases, reproducing individual vulnerabilities and social inequalities through stereotypical and gendered scripts of romantic and sexual behaviour. Therefore, technofeminists debate whether such technologies can be feminist and based on equity at all in their usage.

Butler (2016) convincingly argues that the concept of modernity is too general and is, for the most part, too broad and sketchy to be useful. Nevertheless, authoritative terms such as development and globalisation, constructed from particular cultural and ideological vantage points, remain key where new media are concerned and futures imagined (Slater, 2014). Using them, we risk promoting seemingly unchallengeable, over-generalised frameworks that can blind us to the intricate global patterns. An important question Slater poses is how we can democratise how we think and practice new media, development and globalization, and how these terms can be used to facilitate dialogue within North-South relations. This dissertation is critical of popular views that there is an undifferentiated Tinder culture – intrinsically linked to ideas of 'modernity' in academic and public discourse and usually either carrying moralistic undertones or putting forward an idea-unimpeded autonomy. It is essential to keep in mind that dating technologies may both disrupt and reproduce social scripts, as Chan (2018a) suggests in a qualitative study on the use of dating apps among urban women in China. The politics underlying the artefact must be acknowledged but also the circumstance of there being no unitary motivation of usage. Recognising the potential of digital self-extension, one ought to take Chan's (2018b) caution to avoid masking underlying structural (gender) inequalities in one's optimism seriously.

‘Sexuality in Africa’? Metamorphosis versus hybridity

Contemporary affective ideals are the process of complex, intersectional historical processes and cross-regional movements. They are given shape by political, economic, and cultural formations and ought to be traced through multi-layered histories from which they have emerged. Yet, despite an ever-present discourse on love, the tendency remains to treat intimacy as an export item of ‘the West’ with its understandings of ‘modernity’ permeating reflections of love and sexuality, located in very particular traditions of thinking.

There is a problematic history of portraying sexuality in Africa from an outside perspective. Depictions of Africans as hypersexual and without the emotional or intellectual depth needed for a sentiment like love were constituents of the very justifications for slavery and colonial-era domination. With the HIV epidemic persisting on the continent, scholarly foci continue to be settled on sexual behaviour rather than love. This prejudicial Eurocentric gaze upon Africa, says Achebe (2018), reproduces an assumption that Africans do not love romantically or amorously and neglects modes of loving and desiring. People in Africa have expressed amorous and romantic love for one another from time immemorial, which Achebe (2018) shows looking at proverbs, beaded love letters, tales, poetry and other literature (including a comprehensive reference list), courtship traditions and types of marriage as diverse expressions of love. The author also points out that even accounts that have sought to address silences of love as a category for analysis in Africa may still advance a resolute ‘provider love’ trope, criticising Cole and Thomas (2009) and Hunter (2010) in particular.

Sexuality in Africa has been simplified, generalised, ‘de-eroticised to an act devoid of meaning’ (Spronk 2012:267), quantified into behavioural frequencies and either associated with violence or other social ills. Cole and Thomas (2009) consider this a consequence of the ‘West’s’ history with Africa. Spronk (2012) points out that the intense focus on health will likely persevere as long as research on the continent depends on development-related funding (which is not usually the case in the northern hemisphere). Pleasure was a quintessential theme in the Euro-American sexual revolution but has been a thornier issue for African feminism, given that, in colonialism, sexuality was used as an instrument for terrorising African bodies (Gqola, 2011). Due to the doubtlessly real problems associated with sexuality on the continent, says the author, ‘there has been scant attention paid to some of the innovative, refreshing expressions of masculinities and femininities and articulations of sexual orientation and preference’ (Gqola, 2011:8). In the face of the narrow and troublesome representation of sexuality and love, Drinka (2019) urges researchers to include the positive aspects of romantic relationships and love, to ‘start a conversation, not around “afflicted

Africa", but instead around an inclusive, nuanced, and loving connection between complex and unique human beings' (Drinka, 2019:54), without considering them as something to be 'resolved'.

It is worth noting that there have also been critical and thoughtful evaluations of the concept of 'modernity' and arguments made by a postcolonial scholarship for 'alternative', 'non-Western' modernities (Gaonkar, 1999; Chatterjee, 2004). Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) also questioned modernity as a practice with one voice and uniform ancestry and referred to the 'invention of tradition' as insisting on continuities of a steady past. An 'epistemology of alterity' was challenged by Mafeje (1998), cautioning anthropologists about the 'othering' of Africa and Africans. The work of Geschiere et al. (2008) is a vital addition contesting a topos that reduces African socialities to products of colonialism or processes of globalisation. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) point out, African modernities have long had their own trajectories with diverse-yet-unique ways to make sense of the world, fashion identities, and act on current conditions. These are both located in distinctive aspirations and a complicated set of realities, speaking to a tortuous endogenous history still actively being constructed. In sum, it must be the task of contemporary ethnographers to move beyond ideas of subjugation. In Nyamnjoh's analogy, this means yonder acting like 'a workman whose only tool is a hammer and to whom every problem is a nail, or to an undertaker who would rather trim the corpse than expand his coffin to accommodate a giant' (Nyamnjoh, 2001).

Regarding media and portrayals of romantic love, one should be cautious not to fall into the trap of understanding their consumption as a process of 'westernisation'. Such would mean missing the point, Spronk (2012) explains in her ethnography on sexuality and young professionals in Nairobi. The latter use romantic love models created by the media as sounding boards, as applicable to reality, rather than a mimetic representation of reality. Pleasures and self-perceptions in her work are shown to be ambiguous and to not follow one unilinear path. Spronk's findings suggest that sexuality and love ought to be considered concepts that contain various aspects, including personal feelings, desires, social ideologies, power relationships, symbolic meanings of gender and their reproduction, as well as moral discourses.

Exploring *Love in Africa*, Cole and Thomas (2009) also challenge the logics behind modernisation theories. The authors of the volume portray love not as a universal category but as a discourse emerging from particular convergences of political, cultural and economic processes. It is also emphasised that there was no sudden explosion of a discourse of love sparked by globalisation. Instead, understandings of love are the result of long histories of cross-regional movements and exchanges. Their book shows how different parts of the continent have been engaging with various

love ideologies whilst claiming a 'civilised' or 'modern' status and defending their respectability. The work could be criticised for the absence of same-sex love and the perpetuation of the focus on economic dependencies rather than social circumstance. Nevertheless, the coverage of diverse regions and insights into the hybridity of ideals must be acknowledged. This includes the media's role in what could be understood as 'Western' ideas of love observable in Nigerian movies and South African soap operas. Similar trends are observed by Salo (2003) in her study on young men's and women's racial and gendered identities in Manenberg (a predominantly Coloured, Afrikaans-speaking area in Cape Town, South Africa). Youth in this setting are found to destabilise, renovate, and transform local racial and gendered identities in relation to local histories, repertoires, and ideals – and in tune with global cultural forces such as soap operas, rap music and international brand-name clothes.

The authors discussed above challenge the idea that cultural flows from the North necessarily lead to a cultural hegemonisation and homogenisation in the South and, instead, suggest that specific local histories and cultural practices shape meaning making. There is a need for further scholarship paying attention to gradation, especially regarding media and gender (Gadzekpo, 2009).

Courtship, romance, and intimacy in South Africa

Intimate affairs lay bare that social change is defined by uneven, circuitous, and submerged routes, generational forgetting, and the continuous reformulation of cultural boundaries. Lewis (2009) points out that, in South Africa particularly, sexuality politics are entangled with nation-building discourses. Insightful literature on how these are lived out in intimate relationships, adding to existing narratives and highlighting their fluidity, continue to be few and far between. I have indicated that living in 'post-colonial', 'post-apartheid' South Africa does not mean one thing and certainly does not imply equity of existence. Bodies continue to be forced into categories, whether it is by policing and excluding certain kinds of bodies from specific spaces (Junck, 2019), through 'corrective rape' (a homophobic hate crime intended to force non-conformers onto a path of normative sexuality), or gender-based violence, with femicide in the country being five times higher than the global average (Statssa, 2018). As in any other context, bodies are not treated the same in South Africa, and they are exposed to different degrees of precarity, apparent agency and freedom. Fears of judgement and exclusion determine how individuals negotiate their intimate practices and sense of self. Current ways of being and connecting cannot be disassociated from historical ways of sexualising and brutalising some bodies while protecting others. The violence of colonising bodies was followed by a system that created racialised bodies and determined the social possibilities available to them. Physical movements were limited, and interracial sex prohibited

under the apartheid regime. Levels of subjection, rigid censorship and repressive policing of sex and sexuality, along with various cultural taboos, were severe for many decades in South Africa (Posel, 2004). The obsessive determination to prohibit sex across racial boundaries was driven by colonial anxieties about 'black sexuality' and convictions that the 'purity' of the white race had to be preserved, leading to the propagation of fears of over-populating 'black masses' (Anderson, 2003; Posel, 2004). Following 1994, the year that officially heralded the start of democracy in South Africa, sexual imagery, display and debate emerged, and sex became, for many, an expression of freedom and associated with style, progress and upward mobility (Posel, 2004). However, what this means for courting practices remains a neglected topic of investigation.

As already indicated, scholarly knowledge about intimate relationships and courtship in South Africa is primarily gleaned from studies whose primary focus has been on sexuality and violence and health risks. Many of them use a quantitative approach and tend to be centred on either men having sex with men, young people in general or young women specifically. The latter are the most vulnerable to HIV, and young people in South Africa have been said to date early (before the legal age of 16) and engage in various sexual behaviours ranging from kissing and touching to intercourse (Gevers et al., 2013). As violence is linked to risky sexual behaviour (Jewkes et al., 2012) and HIV prevalence and violence remain high among youth, intimate relationships among them are a crucial area of concern, especially since early experiences have a significant impact on adult relationships. It has been critiqued that discourses on relating are often limited to the issue of condom-use and suggestions were put forward to broaden discussions on sexuality and intimacy (Harrison, 2008; Harrison et al., 2001; Pettifor et al., 2005). Thus far, only a few studies in South Africa have put intimate relationship-building practices at the core of their inquiry, even when they pertain to safe sex. Therefore, this study is an essential contribution as it looks at contemporary forms of intimacy building and courtship and covers people from different areas and age groups in Cape Town.

Another topic feeding into understandings of relating amidst the AIDS pandemic is transactional sex and uncritical claims that, in impoverished South African settings, 'girls want money, boys want virgins' (as per the title of Bhana's & Pattman's paper, 2011). Transactional sex is, as flagged by Hunter (2009), usually inadequately discussed as either being located outside of 'traditional' African moral values or as 'modernity' aggressively individualising, casualising and commodifying intimacy in Africa. For a long time, literature has reduced relationships to kinship and bridewealth (Ilobolo) and marriage as an exchange process. Hunter (2009:135) cites Radcliffe-Brown saying: 'the African does not think of marriage as a union based on romantic love…'. Instead, the famous

structural-functionalist anthropologist claims, 'it is the product of marriage itself'. Some of the few writers that did rest their focus on love and intimacy in African contexts also paint a picture of romantic love and companionate marriage as a form of protesting restrictive traditions. These findings often rely on written sources such as diaries and love letters and assume a progressive development towards (a very particular idea of) 'romantic love'. Therefore, some recent anthropological literature has assumed a universal form of romantic passion (like Jankowiak, 1995) pursued at different paces. Hunters' (2009) analysis resonates with Illouz' (2012) observation that constructions of romantic love in the northern hemisphere have downplayed the role of economic aspects when choosing long-term partners. Instead, conversation was presented to reveal true, inner self in dating rituals, something of which there is little academically documented evidence in African settings. Hunter opposes such assumptions and looks at South Africa's contemporary relationships as both material and meaningful, even when not expressed in writing. His analysis is based on the notion that the emotional body and material world are inextricably linked. Love, he says, has long been present among the Zulu-speakers he interviewed. In the colonial area and with many men becoming absent providers, romantic love became infused with provider masculinity. With many South Africans being in increasingly precarious economic positions, providing for wives becomes more difficult and supporting girlfriends a viable alternative. This is not to say that sexual exchanges have become disembodied acts. They still involve obligations, emotional investments, moments of intense intimacy, pleasure as well as pain and sometimes violence. Thus, any form of relationship must be understood as reflective of profound gender, class and race divisions in South Africa and cannot be understood without reckoning with love as a social force.

A qualitative study looking at the dating behaviour of teenagers at Cape Town (recruited from schools within different fee categories), Gevers et al. (2012) suggest a heterogeneity and fluidity of experience with relationships and sex. Overall, however, the dating landscape is highly gendered and greatly influenced by peer relations. Relationships are described as usually initiated by boys who would 'ask a girl out' often via text messages or a message passed via their friends and ended either via the same channels one by partner beginning to ignore the other partner or reducing contact until the point that the other would assume the relationship to be over. As established elsewhere (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012), teenagers would not formally end relationships if they thought of rekindling them later. There was a belief that females are more likely to feel upset or hurt about a break-up because males are thought to find someone new to date more easily. The latter are thus seen to have more power in leadership-type roles than the girls, who have more passive roles ascribed to them, according to Gevers et al. (2012). Other studies in South Africa also find that males are expected to initiate or lead the relationship, while girls play a more passive role of either

accepting (or perhaps not-objecting) or declining advances. This covers relationship initiations, relationship type, dating activities, and sexual behaviour (Harrison et al., 2001; Noonan & Charles, 2009). Interestingly, this conflicts with Rietchard's (2007) findings that South African women may be more determined to achieve success in online dating than men.

Challenging the above understanding of gender further is Jewkes's and Morell's (2012) suggestion that young women in the rural Eastern Cape (South Africa) use multiple and dynamic femininities to open possibilities for change and negotiate greater respect and non-violence within relations with men. A qualitative study by Shefer and Foster (2001) exploring the negotiation of (heterosexual) students at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, indicates that power dynamics are also challenged at a later age. Their findings do highlight a lack of a positive discourse on women's sexual desires and continued double standards in constructing masculine and feminine sexualities. This includes males being viewed as sexual, while women are seen as representative of love and relationships. Yet, apart from these hegemonic views, some voices challenged the constructions of women as passive, responding to an active, male sexuality and overall lacking sexual desire.

Hunter (2010) highlights that discussions around what qualifies as 'appropriate' male or female behaviour often remain closely tied to the very understandings of diverging but essentialised cultural identities that the apartheid system systematically manifested. Such narratives become facilitated by public political figures like former president Jacob Zuma (and member of the African National Congress party (ANC), which is still ideologically associated with the anti-apartheid movement) and Julius Malema (formerly in the ANC Youth League and now the leader of the political party Economic Freedom Fighters or EFF). In Zuma's trial seeking a verdict on a rape accusation against him, his defence claimed that there are particularities to 'Zulu culture' that demanded him as a man to take sexual action in the moment. The various social aspects playing into discourses on intimacy and sex in South Africa (such as vast economic gaps, abilities of access, presumptions and fears around inherent differences associated with bodies) are complexly intertwined with one another – wedged between ideals of self-development and a language of human rights as per the constitution on the one hand, and notions of cultural separateness on the other.

Although idealistic views of what it means to be a man or a woman across South African contexts are ingrained in the country's history and keep being perpetuated in specific formats, complexities of sexualities in South Africa, while under-researched, ought to be recognised. Sentiments around

sexualities that have relatively recently entered public discourse in South Africa also coexist and form a curious symbiosis with urgent calls for 'safety' and caution against the backdrop of AIDS and male heterosexuality, which is still broadly conceptualised as threatening and predatory (Posel, 2004). At the same time, brewing within multiple, embodied hegemonic masculinities (see Morrell, et al., 2012; Everitt-Penhale & Ratele, 2015; Mfecane, 2018), there is an anxiety in men about their masculinity being undermined by women who assert their rights in the bedroom as much as elsewhere (Posel, 2004). 'Hegemonic masculinities' cannot be measured, reduced to male bodies or specific acts. The term also should not be conflated with oppression and violence, as some research has done but, instead, acknowledged to be multidimensional and fluid, as Morrell et al. (2013) suggest.

For one thing, it is essential to recognise the circumstance that many women do not feel safe in the streets or their homes in South Africa, says Gqola (2007), since their bodies are considered accessible for consumption with the problem often being made the women's responsibility. At the same time, the author remarks, Africanist feminist scholars such as Ifi Amadiume, Carolyn Cooper, Zine Magubane, Patricia McFadden and Elaine Salo 'have reminded us that there are varied relationships to self, that in addition to bruisings, sometimes collision happens in the form of an embrace, a caress or a wink' (Gqola, 2011:4). More such work is required to destabilise the (hetero)normative binarism of gender, representing girls and women in relatively unitary terms as passive, submissive and inevitably vulnerable and men as carriers of violence (Shefer, 2016). Crucially, South African anthropologist Salo (2010) says, there is a need to complicate hegemonic representations of sexualities and desires and acknowledge the social heterogeneity and rich diversity in South African settings. Among other things, this ought to involve an acknowledgement of knowledge production being situated, partial and inflected by our identities as researchers, as well as a representation of time and space that is non-linear and ruptured (Salo, 2010: 93).

Given the sets of ideas attached to racialised, gendered and classed ways of being, it is unsurprising that methods are developed to counter fixed understandings of bodies by structuring social status and interpersonal relationships. The notion of respectability, Ross (2015) and Van Der Westhuizen (2018) say, has served this very purpose in the Cape, with its meaning changing over time. For 'white', Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, there often remains an emphasis on sexual modesty and clearly outlined gender roles as a means for cultural identification (Van Der Westhuizen, 2018). Ross (2015) and Salo (2018) exemplify that, for those who were attributed the racial categories Coloured and Black (markers sermonised under the colonial and apartheid regime and linked to ideas of 'rawness'), respectability and properness (or *ordentlikheid* in Afrikaans) serve to

counterweigh this stereotypification. Far from being objective indicators of social status, notions of rawness and respectability result from 'terrible histories of oppression and subjugation, exclusion, and marginalisation' (Ross, 2015:99) and have taken on deeply gendered dynamics.

In Love in Africa, Thomas details how a black South African newspaper, *Bantu World*, advised a Christian reader base in the 1930s on how to forge respectable (heterosexual) relationships in this time of transformation. Urbanisation, the cash economy, labour migrancy and mission Christianity were leaving their marks on social relationships. The notion of 'true love' written up by mission-educated Africans combined Victorian values with existing customs. As per the author, the newspaper framed a particular kind of singular connection characterised by female self-sacrifice. Aspiring to this ideal formed part of claiming a 'civilised' status and countering racist tropes. Later in the 1960s/1970s, Mutongi shows in the same publication, young people across Africa posed their love-related questions in the English language magazine *Drum* and its advice column *Dear Dolly*. These postcolonial and apartheid-era discussions addressed a more literate young audience and offered guidance on how modern men and women should behave.

Van der Westhuizen illustrates how the Afrikaans-language women's magazine *Sarie* (first published in 1949) continues acting 'as a purveyor of a contemporary, officially sanctioned discourse creating hegemonic white Afrikaans femininity' (2018:9). The magazine, says Van der Westhuizen, is used as a source for understanding the hegemonic (heterosexual, middle-class woman) role model for this specific group of South Africans. Here, too, *ordentlikheid* is still key for meeting expectations, as is the contemporary version of *volksmoeder,* which translates to 'mother of the nation'. Both ideas were central in claiming Afrikaner nationalism and continue being reasserted to preserve 'Afrikaner culture'. Ideas of 'proper' womanhood correspond with modified hegemonic masculinity, keeping 'femininity white and in heterosexual check' (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:195). In enclosed suburban Afrikaans-speaking enclaves, these understandings offer a form of cultural escapism that is reflected in the Sarie microcosm in its ideal form. Illouz (2012) observed (in the context of the United States) that women's magazines may also therapeutic discourse that tries to reconcile contradictions of emerging consumerist ideologies and rationalise them. As such, they could also be imbued with potential for empowerment in that they take on a mediatory role that was previously reserved to kinship structures.

Most of this study's participants (20 out of 25) are British and Dutch descending middle-class South Africans. At first glance and from some perspectives, they may be considered almost representative of colonial ideological penetration and segregation, and it may thus be assumed that

a broader and extended history of South Africa's does not apply to them. Such assumptions have resulted in a regretful lack of coverage on how 'white' South Africans grapple with issues like the ones described by Cole and Thomas (this has been deplored by Pederson, 2020, and Van der Westhuizen, 2018) and reproduce the impression that cultural narratives in South Africa can be neatly ascribed to certain groups and locations.

Assemblages of authenticity as originality

Especially given the cultural tensions outlined above, authenticity plays a crucial role in selecting intimate partners in South Africa and Cape Town (the colonial 'mother city'). As a cultural construct, authenticity has been a central idea in anthropological enquiry and became deeply embedded in its theory. In line with this ontology, 'cultures' were (and continue to be) 'ascribed substance and facts to, enclosing their existence, within the covers of their monographs' (Handler, 1986:4). In more recent history, scholars of the discipline have challenged ethnographic authority to define 'authentic culture' as supposedly unspoiled, pristine and untouched and imagined as bound, discrete units (see Clifford, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Far from being confined to the scholarly proverbial ivory tower, 'the word [authenticity] has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences' (Trilling, 1971:93). Authenticity replaced sincerity as a central element in the individualist world view, it is argued, the latter essentially being 'the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence' (Trilling, 1971:13), a congruence between avowal and feeling. Ultimate reality is thus located within the self instead of the outside world, which individuals ought to assert themselves against to maintain a locus of ultimate meaning that underlies what Trilling calls 'modern notions of authenticity'. With individualistic ideals forming part of both scholarly and public discourse on the authentic, cultural critics diagnosed what Anderson (1995) refers to as a 'culture of authenticity' to be motivating a moral decline of 'modern society'. Widespread egoism and narcissism, according to the critique, can be directly attributed to the prioritising of self-realisation and self-exploration over self-control and self-discipline. Individual self-fulfilment, so to the concern, has fragmented peoples' sense of identity and urged forward a rethinking of the meaning of life. Responding to this trend, Taylor (1992) notes that shallowness is not inherently part of a culture of inauthenticity, nor is self-fulfilment or self-development necessarily individualistic or self-centred. Rather, there is an ability to transcend the ideal of authenticity by not subscribing to certain aspects that have become attributed to it.

Handler (1986) warns that it is precisely the anxiety about existence (inherent in the binary concerns around 'authenticity') that feeds divisive ideologies, based on the fundamental conviction that 'a' bounded, distinctive nation exists, making it clear that this way of thinking is not reserved to the past or a scholarly niche. Such anxieties are especially apparent where groups find themselves struggling for recognition, sovereignty or equal rights. Questions of what is acknowledged as authentic are densely interwoven into discourses of science, development, conservation and commodification. The 'realness' attributed to (essentialised) cultural identities in South Africa is complex, with all said tropes playing a role whenever they are discussed. For instance, this is the case in preservation and archiving. Cultural expressions captured through a colonialist gaze, inscribing both coloniser and colonised subjectivities, may not be situated within these discursive structures (Naidu, 2001). 'Authenticity' may also become a problematic notion regarding ethno-tourism and identity formations when stereotypical presumptions are reflected in primordialist self-representations. For example, in the case of revivalism of what are often collectively referred to as Khoisan people (which actually are diverse groups), Besten (2011) argues that this is partially to legitimate demands for recognition and restoration. Performing Khoisan-ness as reinvented stereotypical tradition reinforces clichés, but there is also nonconformism counteracting essentialist expectations. Concerning 'black' masculinity in South African cinema, media and youth culture, Haupt (2008) questions what versions of masculinity promise young men success in popular culture and may thus become embodied and reproduced (here related to gangsterism). Resisting an uncritical reproduction of 'authenticity' in response to ongoing politics is the drag-style in South Africa that features 'traditional African' clothing (Spruill, 2004). As homosexuality is often denigrated to be a colonial, European import and 'unAfrican', this form of drag is inflected with cultural authenticity questions and offers a response to representation. Innumerable examples of similar navigations of apparently opposite demands show that these are not as incompatible as individualist-versus-traditionalist discourses imply.

Authenticity on Tinder

Given how heavily essentialist ideas feature in debates on 'authenticity', it stands to question how useful it can be as a concept. Given that the 'realness' and 'authenticity' of encounters produced through Tinder were questioned across my sample of participants, it certainly is not a perception to be ignored. Indeed, at a time when the phrase 'fake news' has become hashtag-worthy and structural power comes in different disguises, notions of 'realness' palpably constitute a concern of the present. What is more, within the powerful reaches of consumption industries, freedom continues to be a signboard and hedonist ethic of authenticity, with many modern technologies

reinforcing this thought regime. The simultaneous reduction of bodies to palatable representations means that freedom becomes experienced as ambivalent.

When encountering strangers online, there are bound to be concerns about misrepresentations (March & Marrington, 2019). Antisocial behaviour like catfishing (using a sham identity), kitten fishing (seducing someone with an unrealistically positive self-presentation) and trolling (deliberate online (mis)behaviour such as insults, and bullying, designed to provoke a reaction that has significant emotive effects) is not uncommon. According to March and Marrington, there has been a change in trend from provoking others for mutual enjoyment and entertainment to abusive behaviour not intended to be humorous. Given these behaviour trends, some might think it a contradiction to associate authenticity with Tinder, a supposedly inauthentic medium par excellence, to begin with. However, as technology advances, it becomes increasingly evident that there are no distinctions to be made between an 'original self' (the idea being very much in tone with pristine, monographed cultures) and self-understandings extended by technological means.

Dating apps like Tinder encourage sharing more personal information than other social media apps, including constant location data and recoverable chats (Farnden et al., 2015). Data incorporated into and emerging from dating apps produce intersecting data cultures (Albury et al., 2017). As an accumulation, these data may or may not correlate with how one sees oneself at a given point in time. Sold for advertising purposes and manipulated by others, data may even develop a life on their own. What, then, can be called 'authentic' within this strategically arranged, composite scenery? Duguay (2017) critiques that research engaging with the performance of authenticity and the meanings it takes on in a networked social media context has failed to dissect personal and material involvements. There is an entire expert system at play when claiming authenticity on Tinder, consisting of humans (including celebrities and bloggers), as well as algorithms and design features. Authentication not only involves photos and biographies but also settings, buttons and extensions of the app that inform these claims. Using Facebook as a safeguard was novel upon Tinder's launch in 2012, with authenticity claims being digitally delegated to a network of interconnected platforms and data products. These are used as a reference for a coherent digital, biographical narrative and the adherence to normative standards relating to age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, explains Duguay. This form of authentication fosters Facebook-friendly, normative selves and reinforces the app's framing of mobile dating. Not only may these mechanisms be ineffective in preventing abusive behaviour, but they also lead to the discrimination of everyone falling outside of the paradigm of a consistent, essentialised identity because self-presentations must align with pre-established impressions. This has, for instance,

resulted in a suspension of drag queens and transgender people's accounts run under pseudonyms. The 'real name' requirement on Facebook is all but one indicator, says Duguay, that shows how a certain kind of policy-abiding, peer-approved behaviour is welcomed whilst the performance of fluid identities or the differential self-presentation desired (and often needed) by diverse minorities such as queer subcultures becomes excluded on Facebook and, by extension, Tinder.

Moreover, through Tinder's promotional videos and social media accounts, lifestyles are shown that reflect dominant discourses of sexuality, gender, race and status, which shape understandings of attractiveness, safety and authenticity. Hannan-Leith (2017) emphasises that many people are blatantly absent from Tinder's marketing, namely older, gender-variant and queer people, as well as individuals of low socioeconomic status. The actors shown are predominantly white and display self-mastery through fitness while wearing the latest fashion. These characteristics become reproduced on other social media platforms, and even couples who have actually met on Tinder and submitted engagement and wedding photos thanking the app for bringing them together resemble the actors in Tinder's videos. Therefore, says Duguay (2017), narratives are communicated that encourage certain lifestyles constructed as authentic.

Meanwhile, non-normative sexual orientations, gender presentations, practices or desires risk being viewed as non-compliant (and therefore dangerous) within this framing of authenticity, dissuading the use by anyone outside of normative categories. With the increasing popularity of dating apps like Tinder, Duguay warns, this could negatively impact individuals' access to potential partners, relationships and families. At the same time, as the author puts forward, some users 'overflow' this framework, for instance by adding information in the biography that the profile setting does not include or by integrating Snapchat and Instagram handles and thereby extending self-presentations to other platforms (with different sets of constraints).

Platforms like Tinder do not merely circulate images and posts (after approving them as 'authentic'). They also algorithmically promote some over others (Gillespie, 2015). They further, discursively and materially, influence attitudes and behaviours through speed and repetition. What David and Cambre (2016) describe as 'screened intimacy' in their ethnographic study on Tinder manifests through a swipe logic on the app. Users, the authors argue, engage in the figuration of intimacy as *levitas* (volatile, ethereal and quick) knowingly and despite its ambiguities. The term 'swipe logic' describes the pace, or the increased viewing speed, informing techno-social relationality. Intimacy here is considered to be of a certain kind of closeness and duration that has been discursively modulated and disturbed through the ubiquity, immediacy and acceleration of

connections provided by Tinder. Users' gesture-bound decision-making powers are limited to a binary yes-or-no and guided by an algorithm. As a result, Tinder users cannot unrestrictedly choose how to interact with other users, The app, therefore, domesticates them by shaping social dynamics. This will also reflect in notions of what and who is 'authentic'. David and Cambre claim that users are nonetheless aware of this figuration of intimacy on the app and play with its limitations and affordances, thereby asserting agency and the curatorial self. The authors leave it open whether understandings of the self as non-unitary, non-continuous with porous, fuzzy boundaries is possible on platforms like Tinder, which would mean a reversal of the outlined objectification process.

Even if one considered the creation of Facebook and Tinder profiles to be self-reflexive archiving projects and Tinder swiping as agentive, purely intuitive acts of decision making, trust must be invested when expecting to be shown real, potentially compatible partners in the form of profiled strangers. What comes across as 'authentic' is a result of the dynamics developing online and offline. It must be taken into consideration that constructions of authenticity are, in part, delegated by objects, regulations, mechanisms and algorithms. My analysis is geared towards disentangling some of the power dynamics at play when relating via dating apps and aspires to show the push and pull at play at the technologically and ontologically set social scene.

Materialising utopia: fantasy spaces as a religion of the everyday

Digital cultural spaces like Tinder are embedded within the physical and vice versa. At this point, some may suggest that it is dangerous to not distinguish between virtuality and reality, especially at a juncture where a similar logic is adapted in political narratives that are dismissive of scientific insights and label inconvenient truths 'fake news'. Tinder operates in a digital space that is distinguishable from the physical space. However, characterising it as a separate or alternate domain would mean ignoring how increasing, habitualised online practices feed into our very embodied existence in face-to-face settings. It would also be ignorant of the intersubjectivity, the sharedness of realities produced via Tinder, which means that experience cannot be pinpointed in a singular location to begin with. Tinder users' social life is thus best understood as augmented reality (Newett, et al., 2018) with a focus on interactive elements of the digital. Extending the limited discourse of the experiential realms of dating apps, I argue that fantasy plays a major role in how augmented reality is produced using them as tools.

In the 1980s and 90s, the concern arose that, strolling through immersive worlds, boundaries between reality and the artificial would be blurred. However, Esposito (1998) pointed out that there is no firm reality that could be dissolved in the first place. Ubiquitous computing, practised

since the 1990s, changed the belief that there are multiple, concurring realities and technologically inspired worlds to a concept of 'augmented reality', meaning that there are normalised layers and overlaps of technical and physical realities. Within this framework, technical environments, cooperatively built and inhabited by human and technological agents, come into existence. Apropos of a reality that derives its meaning in a dialectical relationship with fiction, illusion and make-belief (and in hyperbolic language), Baudrillard (1996) already declared reality dead in the late 20th century. Baudrillard used the media coverage of war as an example to show that impressions can be (technically) perfected, creating a different reality – yet it may be the only reality most of us know. Advertisements and films offer additional examples for creating simulation and hyperreality whilst tapping into supposed norms of femininity and masculinity (Baudrillard, 1995). An analysis of virtual reality, therefore, ought to engage with the production of realities and their effects. Smartphones and their apps produce the image of a non-committal space. This space extends the more moments are spent in it – routinely swiping 'yes' and 'no' on Tinder profiles, for instance. Phones against this backdrop contain a compression of virtual, lived space that can carry many and multiple meanings. Tinder users are a repository of memory with the capacity to know, tell and generate feeling beyond its relationship to the materiality of the world.

Tales and Science Fiction are, indeed, constantly around us, affecting our corporeality (here, including the experiential realm of bodies as well as bodies as symbols) and ways of seeing the world. Stoller (2017) takes Donald Trump, then president of the United States of America, as an example of creating alternative realities using glitz, illusion and fantasy of the celebrity world where shallow perception is more appreciated than profound insight. In the mythic cultural space of celebritism, illusion manages to produce imaginations of a fantastic future – lies become truth, and conspiracies become convincing.

Looking at popular Ghanaian cinema, Meyer (2002) argues that easily accessible media bring about a visualisation of otherwise invisible fantasy spaces. Here, Pentecostal[48] styles of representation in popular video-films helped spread a social imaginary geared towards reviving the project of modernity under the new condition of an open public sphere, which is marked by the retreat of the state and the overwhelming presence of market forces. Cinematically, Accra is recreated as a certain kind of modern city on screen, beautifying its messes and offering a symbolic transfiguration that viewers can take part in, thereby also becoming part of the wider world. This,

[48] A protestant Christian movement emphasising a direct, experiential relationship with God.

Meyer says, is not simply a matter of escapism or outward orientation toward global arenas, but there still is an implication of a dream of modernity. Tinder also constitutes, to many, an accessible fantasy space with an emphasis on the visual. Not unlike popular Ghanaian cinema, it symbolically recreates local realities on screen in the light of the global, brushing over shortcomings and disappointments in claiming a transfiguration of access and mobility. In line with Meyer's argument, Tinder as a fantasy space should not be regarded a mere producer of misguided distortions (it merely exaggerates already existing distortions). Conversely, it is a source for gaining insight into imagined dimensions of contemporary society as a religion of the everyday.

Haldner (2016) uses Tinder as a metaphor for a modern adaption of a fairy tale and a tool for self-presentation in search of one's knight in shining armour and saviour from dull 'reality'. Growing up, fairy tales are integral to the complex layering of cultural influences and stories that perpetuate cultural norms. They also influence ideals of goodness, images of manhood and womanhood and fantasies about 'true love' (Fisher & Silber, 1998). Such culturally cultivating and cultivated fantasies represent people's wishes, needs and social values, and thus the social order in each historical period (Zipes, 1978). While contemporary ideas of romantic relationships feed on fairy tales, they tend to neglect the 'relationship' part of romance, where one learns how to accept the partner in their imperfectness.

Virtual dating can constitute a safe space for exploring and experimenting with identity and connecting with new people and ideas, says Ryan (2008). However, in the process of imaginative and corporeal experiences spilling into one another, notions of virtual safety and fantasy-inspired experiences may be violently interrupted through hurtful love but also by cyber-misogyny and online harassment (Shaw, 2016). Campaigns such as 'Bye Felipe' are a consequence of this: a feminist campaign using screenshots of examples of harassment and sexual entitlement from men on online dating apps such as Tinder and publicising them on an Instagram page (similar to the *Tinder Nightmares* page). Such initiatives show how social rules and online etiquette continue to be reconceptualised. The #metoo campaign, for instance, transgressed some of the barriers to report individual cases by using technology as a powerful communication tool in challenging sexual abuse and configurations of power in relationships more broadly.

Conceptual Framework

Hypernormalised rabbit holes and challenged dichotomies

In their paper on the dating app as a 'theatre of cyber grooming', Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) analyse the strategic online search for intimacy as happening in two worlds, the virtual world and

'real life'. The authors liken the internet to the rabbit hole through which Alice finds herself turbulently entering Wonderland, where proportions are suddenly very different.[49] In this utopian space of distortions, location, territory, and bodies become emancipated. However, the authors contend, it is not the medium itself (and the opportunities it offers) that shapes human behaviour unidirectionally. It rather constitutes a complex process of mutual adaptation between user and medium (Polanyi, 1973). Apps such as Tinder[50] interrupt, modify and provide the stage and rough social script in a hybrid space. Within the online sphere, proximity is reconfigured in a way that makes it seem as though distance and closeness can be easily produced, offering the possibility to remove oneself from situations emotionally unscathed.

Nevertheless, as Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) point out, love hurts online too! Likewise, egos can be left dented, and dependencies on the approval of other users developed. According to Boellstorff (2015), embodiment in a virtual place and the pluralisation of place that virtual worlds entail holds foundational implications for online corporeality. The same applies to offline corporeality and its overlaps with virtuality. It is my desire to show the complexities that lie within both the online and offline and their interwovenness (as opposed to conceptualising them as separate), I adopt the metaphor of Tinder as a 'rabbit hole'. The app is a surreal-seeming space of alternate proportions but not devoid of pain, despite the promised agency. Instead, capacities for action become limited at different junctures and through different, intersecting platforms.

To help expound how thinking about interconnections, guided via technologies, have been conceptually freed from their intricacies because of simplifying discourses, I borrow the term 'hypernormalisation' from the 2016 Adam Curtis's documentary.[51] The neologism of the documentary's title came from a book by Alexei Yurchak (2005) entitled *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. Yurchak (2005) introduces the term hypernormalisation (or extreme normalisation) when chronicling a collective cultural delusion that had become indispensable in the late Soviet regime (1960s–80s). The author describes hypernormalisation as a process involving the social engineering of certain ways of thinking that grow to be hegemonic, and that does not only 'affect all levels of linguistic, textual, and narrative structure but also became an end in itself'

[49] Own translation from German.

[50] Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) discuss Grindr, which is a geosocial app geared towards homosexual, bisexual and transsexual encounters with people nearby. Even though it operates differently (there is no swiping involved and one is simply shown whoever is nearest to one's location), the authors' observations regarding space are still transferable to other app experiences.

[51] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh2cDKyFdyU (22 April 2020).

(Yurchak, 2005:50). Curtis employs the term in his polyphonic work incorporating YouTube footage, music, and movies, thereby creating what Deamer (2018) calls a digitally baroque kaleidoscopic narrative. The popularisation of reactionary and regressive attitudes which both Yurchak (2005) and Curtis (2016) identify include a political, economic, technological and cultural language that turns self-referential and 'freed from ambiguity and indeterminacy' (Yurchak, 2005:50). The latter describes a 'false' expression of the world to be the result of this. I fear for the current rhetoric about technology use, especially when it involves interpersonal and sexual relationships, to become similarly simplified, distinguishing between experiences that are and are not worth having, real and lesser.

The 'opposition between rationality and emotion have been the touchstone of Western philosophical conceptions of human nature and have obliquely penetrated sociological theory' with the dichotomy being one of the most enduring (Illouz & Finkelman, 2009:401). For the most part, according to Jamieson (2007), intimacy is now either described as becoming attenuated or as having little social worth by academic commentators. Such all-or-nothing interpretations of intimacy seek individualism out the be a drain of solidarity sentiments in relationships. Santore (2008), therefore, calls for a 'normatively reserved' idea of contemporary intimacy. Hypernormalised thinking becomes amplified when adding technology to the equation. Put differently, the concept of intimacy is increasingly forced into a package of social changes referred to as globalisation. Instead, it should refer to the *quality* of any close connection between people and the process of building intimacy across contexts, as argued by Jamieson (2011). I problematise assumptions of linear developments of intimacy by understanding it as located practice and improvisation.

Past humanity and towards online communities?

Identity and humanity have been questioned in debates about the development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Claiming a transcendence from concrete realities to be a result of the subjection to such developments, post-humanist rhetoric often organises such conversations. Yet, there is no pre-technological state of being human per se to leave behind, nor is there a natural state of the body to be transcended. Bodies have always been subject to the instating of limits, even before the 'digital age'. Identities, along with them, are contingent upon interpretation and continued attribution of significance and are produced within certain historical sites and through specific enunciative strategies. As Stuart Hall (1996:6) puts it, identities constitute 'points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us'. Butler even deems bodies themselves to be 'consequence of taboos that render that body

discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries' (Butler 2011:133). Extending the post-humanity debate, Butler guides questions of importance back to the subject as the onset of any analysis of supposedly universal norms or developments.

Boellstorff (2015), as well, argues against characterisations of virtual worlds as posthuman and suggests that 'it is in being virtual that we are human'. Likewise, he says, virtuality characterises being human in the 'actual world'. Virtual worlds borrow from social practices outside of their realm but are not mere recreations or simulations of what lies beyond them. Their departure from the analogue involves creating novel meanings, reshaping selfhood, community, even notions of human nature. In *Coming of Age in Second Life,* Boellstorff does not only provide a detailed portrait and thick description of the immersive online platform *Second Life* and online sociality more broadly. He also demonstrates the methodological potential of ethnography for studying virtual worlds. In the form of an avatar based on himself, he conducted ethnography, including participant observation and focus groups (thus by no means armchair anthropology) as a declared ethnographer exclusively online. Boellstorff studies the platform and its socialites in their own terms, meaning without any substantiation from what happens beyond them. He produces a nuanced account of what it means to be human 'online' and the meaningfulness of online interactions, also considering the aspect of governance and, albeit briefly, touching on social inequality in *Second Life*. In his approach, Boellstorff takes online identities at face value. It, therefore, does not matter whether his respondents are 'really' someone very different in another context. The work speaks to identity expectations rather than to truth value. Boellstorff distinguishes between episteme (knowledge) and techne (art) and explains how humanity has always been virtual. Being in *Second Life* and creating virtual selfhood, it follows for Boellstorff, is not essentially different from creative activities (or extensions of self, as I will frame them later in this chapter). Boellstorff looks at such online practices as independent realities that may have a transformative effect. For my ethnographic study, it was essential to also include 'offline experiences' since both are, as Boellstorff conveys, mutually embroiled.

This is where the challenge of making an 'ethnographic place' comes in. Ethnographic place-making is problematised by Pink (2009). According to her, it is something that is constituted through the emergent relations between things and processes. Looking at social media and activism, Postill and Pink (2012) maintain that these online landscapes are not bounded territories or groups/communities. Rather, 'they are clusters or intensities of things of which both localities and socialities are elements' (2012:2). The circumstance that places in social media studies traverse online and offline contexts and are, to an extent, collaborative, participatory and public, means

that the methodological emphasis ought to shift from models of network and community to a focus on routines, mobilities and socialities involving specific departures from conventional ethnographic practice. Postill and Pink (2012) highlight the significance of accounting for face-to-face socialities and material contexts with which social media are co-implicated. This is because of the dispersed nature of web-based activities across various platforms and associated offline contexts, all constantly in progress and changing, implicating both physical and digital localities.

The relevance of looking beyond Tinder and considering participants' subjectivity as an assemblage also becomes evident in my research approach and the use of the same medium (Tinder) as both subject and research tool. For both myself and study participants, Tinder served to connect and expand within and beyond the digital. Consequently, I refer to mine as an internet-related ethnography (see Hobart's 2010 'media-related practices'), rather than an internet ethnography, the former being defined by Postill and Pink (2012) as an ethnography that engages with internet practices and content directly, but not exclusively. It gives credit to the transformative effects of new digital technologies as part of a broader historical site, discursive temporality and sets of limits. At the same time, it avoids attributing these processes to a type of sociality or humanity resulting from newly discovered transgressions of being, since the creative challenging of frameworks of being is all but a new phenomenon.

Online subjectivities and fragmented selves

For Warnier (2007), bodies can extend physical limits to create and maintain socialities and he regards technologies of objects and technologies of the subject to be interrelated. Warnier (2001) suggests that techniques of the body merge with a given materiality involving sensori-motor subjectivation. He describes the body as a container, as an object in the material world, constantly in a state of becoming and supplementing itself with distinct and multiple surfaces (2007). Tinder becomes an extension, a supplement of being, in that it produces possibilities beyond the realm of the immediate. The app is also very much integrated into other daily acts, with swiping becoming simply something one does to find intimacy. Tindering is thus not just an experience limited to a hypernormalised rabbit hole but rather an act of social significance.

Another way in which Tinder users stretch themselves beyond their limits is through strategic depictions in Tinder profiles which minimalize information and maximise visual representations in the form of pictures. Cultural artefacts (such as cars), props (such as pets) and other symbolic elements (such as alcohol) and landscapes (such as mountains, beaches and travel destinations) are used to strategically convey certain surfaces or notions of what 'essence' a certain body may

contain. As containers of bodies, social lives (see Appadurai, 1988) and virtual 'things', dating apps give meaning to the social relationships unfolding through them. The readily presented bodies within them can be interpreted as symbols for different kinds of encounters and interpersonal relationships. They can also be understood as global, flexible, transnational, cannibalistic, symbolic and mobile (Scheper-Hughes, 2001). They are transportable across contexts, carry different meanings within them, and may be consumed in different ways from variously cultured (but surely to some extent globally merged) vantage points.

In the case of Warnier's (2007) figure of the sacred 'pot king' in the kingdom of Mankon in Grasslands Cameroon, the ruler maintains harmony and balance by acting as an envelope of creative force. Connecting himself and his realm into a single technology of power by distributing ancestral substances among his people, the king protects and strengthens them. While the Mankon king deems it his responsibility to strategically maintain a balance between his three bodies (his own physical body, the royal palace and the wider city), bodies lined up on the Tinder app in the form of concise profiles represent a different kind of material engagement. In line with Malafouris (2004) and his take on material engagement theory, Warnier looks at human ways of being through the lens of the material world and concrete, ritualised exchanges. These are guided by pragmatism and follow the rationale of balance. Tinder knowledge is sometimes described as strategic, for instance when symbols are manipulated in a profile. It also has many tacit, sensual and creative elements that regulate activities in less predictable ways. Ultimately, tindering is a knowledge acquired through habituation (Bourdieu inspired by Heidegger) and informed by memory, but it also changes and takes on very different forms at different points in time. Learning how to use Tinder in ways that are (at least sometimes or partially) satisfying also leaves the question open of what the greater balance beyond fast-paced, intuitive decision-making may be.

Investigating Tinder requires a composite view of bodies connecting via phones and apps. It is not a process of thinking with or through the technology but one of continuous adaption and self-extension far beyond it. Tinder is not considered helpful in making sense of the world. If anything, the opposite is the case: the app is symbolic for a lack of social protocol and, as a result, of uncertainty. Consequently, tindering resembles what Nyamnjoh (2017b) describes as reaching for the stars with one's feet firmly on the ground. What makes dating apps like Tinder attractive despite their quandaries is the inherent freedom they represent in managing impressions through an online profile (reaching for the stars). One can emphasise and de-emphasise specific parts of the self without any long-term obligation to maintain this interpretation of the self. After all, matches can be chosen or easily rejected with an immediate left swipe or later by blocking chat conversations.

This suggests a continuous opportunity to redefine oneself and actively guide one's experiences. Nevertheless, things are rendered murky not only due to the underlying structures of the app and social expectations (firming feet onto the ground) but also because of concerns around 'authenticity' voiced by study participants. Ellison (et al., 2006) emphasise the complicated ways in which honesty is enacted in the virtual sphere where one is expected to be both 'authentic' and the best version of the self. There is a discursive imbalance of capacities between the freedom to manage impressions and the reduction of identities to commodified bodies in social networking forums. Bodies on Tinder, too, may become alienated from the self and commodified in the process of presenting themselves online. What this would mean for tindering experiences is subject of this dissertation.

Moreover, relationships cultivated via online apps are based on mutual choice and therefore appear to encourage an equal standing. In actuality, the dating process may also reveal spaces for different forms of exploitation and create pressure to present oneself as socially flexible (Charteris et al., 2014). Encounters, it follows, are channelled into specific directions. Examining the ways in which bodies and selves are dynamically constituted within interpersonal engagements on Tinder, I also considered the potentially suppressing effects of biopower (Foucault, 1980) that might perpetuate notions of 'good bodies' as in line with contemporary beauty standards (physical and behavioural) whilst 'othering' bodies that fall outside this frame of reference. More specifically, I pondered the impacts the visual availability of lined up bodies for optic consumption has on individuals, how other bodies, vessels of unknown essences, are perceived and in what ways one's online presence is experienced as a container for multiple, composite selves. Thus, beyond expressions of agency, I recognised tindering to be a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints are articulated (Gonquergood, 1989).

In his discussion on rationality and consumerism, Nyamnjoh (2018b) addresses the dualisms attached to human interaction like reason and emotion, mind and body, brain and heart, insider and outsider. The author argues that what has been accounted for as oppositions when it comes to behaviour are indeed more intertwined than dichotomous categories account for. Not only is there no clear distinction between rationality and emotion, Nyamnjoh (2019) identifies a state of incompleteness to be a normal way of being, challenging scholars of humanity to look at relationships between humans and digital technologies as existent beyond binary ideas and zero-sum games of conquest and superiority. Instead, he says, here should be a recognition of humans and things being part of one another and existing as open-ended composites. Nyamnjoh speaks of ICTs as juju, a form of self-activation, referencing an ontology of the magical in Western Africa.

The ability to exist across spaces simultaneously and the future being 'firmly in the past and the unfolding present' (2019:282) is something digital technologies and notions of the magical share. I want to decentre the question of what makes the human subject and to what degree it is self-governing or governed and rather let myself be guided by Warnier's afterword to Nyamnjoh's work, describing the 'subject as something more elusive, divided, incomplete: it never knows exactly where it stands. Neither do we. It is not an essence but an event. It may happen or not. It may come into being or disappear. There may be processes of subjectivation and de-subjectivation' (Nyamnjoh, 2018).

Embodiment and technologies of the self

As radical as ongoing technological shifts are, artificial self-modification is not a new phenomenon and technologies have always formed complex sociotechnical systems, therefore, rendering distinctions between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' obsolete. Michel Foucault (1988) dubbed the use of means to enhance bodies and minds 'technologies of the self'. What is changing, however, is the availability, power, and range of action of self-modification tools. Looking at online practices alone, it seems easy to overcome ontological boundaries and for the self to become an object to be moulded. Avatars and simulations help fragment reality and make new worlds accessible. This study emphasises how experiences can come across as obscured when both online and analogue narratives are considered. This is the result of how 'modern' technologies are conceptualised. Strict distinctions between real and inauthentic, online, and offline, affect how moving from one space to the other is experienced, often in a casual manner, to create a smooth transition for the eye of the conversational counterpart - the desired other. The process is furthermore filtered by the medium, in this case, Tinder itself. Through the app, social selves become subjected to algorithms, abstracted, integrated into the infosphere, and ultimately rendered editable. While Foucault writes about deliberate operations by systems and individuals, one must now also think about the intricacies and unintended consequences of daily interactions with digital technologies. These become filtered through bodies, even though this is largely unacknowledged by transhumanists who focus on the disruption of experiences rather than their corporeal dimensions. Linchpins to my understandings of tindering experiences in Cape Town are, therefore, both Foucault's idea of 'technologies of the self' as well as Csordas' understandings of embodiment.

Foucault (1980) poses the questions of why the history of sexuality has been written as a history of repression, why sexuality has emerged as something widely and incessantly discussed in recent times and why it has become key to individuals' notion of self. Most crucially for this dissertation, he asks why sexuality has become a central bearer of power relations and how knowledge of

sexuality relates to sexual liberation. Foucault outlines a repressive theory of sexuality by telling a story of 17th century Europe, an increasing non-recognition and denial of sexuality. It reached its zenith with the Victorian bourgeoisie and, eventually, myths are gradually released with science. As for sexuality but also in terms of technological developments, this process tends to be either framed as a loss of ethics or as progression. Foucault, however, speaks about a larger dynamic of power. He describes how sexuality became a pivotal way of controlling populations and individuals through what he calls *biopower* and says that 'what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad-infinitum while exploiting it as the secret' (1980: 35). Foucault outlines new forms of knowledge regarding sex operated in terms of power and what/how objects were constructed in emerging discourses on sexuality. These include sexualities that had not existed before, for instance, a 'hysterisation of women's bodies', a 'socialization of procreative behaviour', and 'a psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure' (1980:104-105) in the late 18th/19th centuries. Such newly invented categories shaped identities significantly.

Feeding examples of historical constructions of being into his reasoning, Foucault (1988) identifies four major types of 'technologies': (1) technologies of production, allowing for the production, transformation and manipulation of things; (2) technologies of sign systems, permitting the use of symbols, or signification and meanings; (3) technologies of power, determining how individuals conduct themselves and submitting them to domination (4) technologies of the self, by means of which individuals influence their own trajectory, direct their own bodies, conduct, thoughts and ways of being in the world. These four types of technologies imply a modification of individuals by acquiring certain skills and attitudes, but they hardly ever function in isolation. They are a form of self-imposed power that does, however, not happen in a vacuum. When talking about technologies, Foucault (1986) refers to a matrix of reasons employed in a conscious process of self-transformation, which he outlines for Greek and Greco-Roman philosophy and early Christian spirituality. For Foucault, this poietic process takes place against a messy and shifting backdrop of institutions, objects and human relationships. Decades after the publication of Foucault's essays, computational technologies have become pervasive, and their use has accelerated self-modification practices. His understanding of the interplay between biopower and its counterpart thus lends itself to categorising a new generation of instruments and techniques of self-transformation/enhancement as they alter how we experience ourselves and others.

Foucault rejects essentialist ways of thinking about sex and other totalising theories, which may also be interpreted as pessimism towards political positions defining concrete strategies for

resistance and change. Nevertheless, his is a scholarship directed towards developing a social theory which takes account of sexuality and its characterisation by surveillance and control. This thinking remains useful in isolating how power (often invisibly) operates in contemporary societies, which is an aspect of increasing digitalisation especially that must be highlighted. In the case of dating apps, this would be the app itself and the socio-cultural environment in which it is used. One of the main problems with Foucault's work (apart from its neglect of love and gender that Giddens, 2013, criticised) is that it does not read as giving much credit to agency, although he does acknowledge freedom and the possibility of insubordination. Indeed, he says that for power to be exercised, there ought to be an availability of means to escape it. Employing 'technologies of the self' may be one way of doing do. There is, in his words, a 'reciprocal appeal…a perpetual linking and perpetual reversal' between power and resistance (Foucault, 1982: 226), and the subject is conscious of the possibilities of insubordination. Despite these concessions to the individual, Foucault arguably takes on a culturally relativistic view on sex, most apparent in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). This view can be problematic in that it does not account for pushback within a cultural context. Making this even more vexed is the circumstance that his concept of governmentality has also not been much applied to settings other than the global north.

Another question Foucault does not answer is how materiality (or 'hard technology', as he calls it) shapes processes of subjectivation and how artefacts and practices of the self shape one another. Given the speed at which digital inventions mount, it is important to keep in mind how the materiality of technologies and everyday experiences overlap. After all, exposure to the digital *can* be an opportunity to refashion the self in an artistic exercise of power, resulting in a shift of ontological frameworks. Concepts of reality and what it means to be human may be expanded upon and reshuffled using technology, but, Gualeni (2015) argues, not completely transcended as claimed by sophisticated technologies. This ethnography seeks to re-appropriate Foucault's question of what kind of bodies a certain society may want and need and incorporate the body in asking what kind of society the body needs, wishes and dreams (see Scheper-Hughes, 1994). While Foucault's theory does not deny subjectivity, it does not invite for an existential view on the human subject either. His vision of the body is inscribed with social and cultural disciplinary values. Theories of embodiment, on the other hand, suggest that there is more to the body than its physicality and concern themselves with how they become habituated (Scheper-Hughes, 1994) - and habits play a big part in how online encounters play out. Partly, the idea of habituation is inspired by Mauss's notion of the 'habitus', meaning the acquired habits and tactics of using and being in the body. Mauss (1936) conceptualises the body as physiologically, psychologically and

sociologically trained, and consequently as predictably acting within a given social context, reliably adapting to these societal expectations. As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, it is memory and not mostly history (the focus of Foucault) that is turned into nature.

In his discussion of the computer-generation of 'virtual cadavers', Csordas (2000) criticises that much cultural analysis has privileged representation, with culture being understood as constituted by symbols, signs, and images. He argues that, especially when considering the consequences of biotechnological applications, it is important to consider the links between textuality and embodiment, representation and being-in-the-world, as inaccessible as they may seem. This is, firstly, because the human body is the objective target of technology and, secondly, because the user is the embodied subjective manipulator of the technology. According to Csordas (1999), the body is not to be considered an object that takes on a cultural form but rather as the 'existential ground' for culture. He situates embodiment at the level of lived experience and not of discourse. The body here foregoes the objectivation that Foucault describes and collapses differentiations between the mind and body, cognition and emotion or subject and object. He, thus, brings together Merleau-Ponty's view, claiming that objects do not have any sense a priori since they are end products of our perception and Bourdieu's habitus, which he explains to be a mediator that reveals how practices come about. How the body then orients itself in the world is by incorporating bodily experience, cultural milieu and habitus (Csordas, 1994).

My own view of the body seeks to bring and Csordas's experiential and Foucault's ideas of powerful, developing structures into conversation and corresponds with Warnier's (2004) notions of the human body as extending far beyond the human organism: it is the meeting ground of hegemony as much as counterhegemonic practices. While I acknowledge subjectivity in its composite, embodied form, I also recognise that subjectivity itself is framed by influences of power and deeply intersubjective by nature (Biehl et al., 2007). In engagement with others, technologies of the self can take on various form, that of a narrative, imagination, memory or perhaps of a parody. Dating is a deeply inter-corporeal process, and my findings emphasise that aspects such as amassed experiences, discourse and the institution of the family play a significant role in tindering. I see the self as embodied, contextual, and as producing itself in a practical knowledge process not so much centred on the question of 'who am I' but around making sense of different aspects of the self in a process of becoming. This is not an independent process of self-making in interaction with a few selected others but one that is also permeated with questions of hegemony and power and influenced by socially sanctioned self-images. Therefore, I focus both on the idealised body

and, more strongly, on the moments of embodied uncertainties, the ruptures between experience and discourse, and attempts to archive a sense of self and belonging when facing them.

One way in which I interpret this is by drawing on Haraway (1988), who, challenging notions of post-humanity, looks at the relationships between devices, methods, objects, means of knowledge production and communication. She argues that any perspective is always already embodied and calls for an accentuation of aspects of embodiment, locatedness and partiality of experiences, as well as knowledge and objectivity claims. She refers to these ways of being – or *dasein* in Heidegger's terms – as situated in the ambience of diffracted experience that is neither hierarchical nor linear. The cyborg is contrasted to the idea of a technophobe goddess (is a central metaphor of ecofeminist thinking of the 1970s and 1980s) and staged as a challenge to established power relations and a parody to the archetypes of modernist discourse blending civilisation and nature, female and male. An aspect to consider when adapting her idea of the hybrid is that it may be used to justify hegemonic tropes and practices of subjectivation. It also ties into nostalgic narratives of a matriarchal, pre-historic time. Her comparison of the cyborg and the goddess also runs the risk of reproducing dualistic notions of nostalgia for the past and a progressive future. Hence, I adopt Kronberger's (2019) expansion of Haraway's imagery to that of the cyborg-goddess, reconciling apparent dualisms in the form of a dance.

Capturing phenomenologies

Phenomenology had a big impact on the reflexive turn in anthropology that came about in the 1970s and 1980s. Its approaches are delicate and challenging in that understandings of reality are both, patterned in a dynamic flux of embodied attention from one perspective, activity and moment to another, and further defined through ongoing engagements with others and by particular existential modalities encompassing imagination, dreams, memory, perception and various sensory registers (Desjarlais and Troop 2011). Put differently, as per Husserl (1970), phenomenology is a philosophy of continual beginnings.

Some of the most pressing critiques are that phenomenological approaches focus too much on the consciousness and the subjective, on the realm of appearance and sensation - and is perhaps even limited to the surface level of experience. There are also concerns about tendencies toward abstraction and totalisation, the role of distortion and self-deception. Furthermore pondered to be a potential issue is that such approaches fail to capture the broader political, structural and social forces that influence peoples' lives. It is therefore suggested that phenomenology is more a method of description than analysis or explanation. However, attention to descriptions and offering a voice

to people who experience the very phenomena that are being studied may exactly be what makes phenomenology a powerful tool. It must also be acknowledged that phenomenological approaches incorporate a vast array of considerations and tend to the intricacies of palpable political, cultural, discursive and psychological influences. Many phenomenological methods even incorporate other approaches, may they be linguistic, psychological, neuroscientific political or philosophical theory. Given that I firmly believe in the value of working across disciplines, this ethnographic work includes a variety of literature.

I am acutely aware that it would be much safer to write a thesis focusing on more overt elements of social life such as kinship structures, cultural histories, symbolic meanings, or political systems. Yet, these foci risk overlooking the most enthralling concerns of people, their families, and communities. Rightfully, the question might be posed as to whether one can ever really know what a person is thinking and feeling and whether careful analysis might not still be tainted by projection with a work like this. I gage such concerns by including autoethnographic elements to make it easier for the reader to discern how my own experiences may have come into play throughout the research. The narratives I outline are also attuned to moments of interaction and engagement, offering the reader the opportunity to form their own impressions. At the same time, they are meant to show common threads of existence weaving through different lives.

With the spotlight on bodies and cultivated selves in digital contexts, it stands to debate what phenomenologies (within them and yonder) may entail. The creation of new virtual or fictional worlds conveys promises of immersion as an experience that comprehensively affects the cognitive and the body, say Breyer and Kasprowicz (2019). Immersion means more than being a passive recipient with known sensory dispositions of seeing and hearing. Rather, per the authors, immersion manifests itself in a bidirectional dynamic in which the focus lies on reciprocal relationships between subject and object, producer and recipient, as well as meaning and sensuality. The intensity of this dynamic shifts on a subject-object scale. Contrary to unidirectional analysis of technologies and the subject, Breyer and Kasprowicz argue that desires for immersive experiences cannot merely be explained with an enthusiasm for media that create illusions, nor does it presuppose a subject who is searching for a reflexive, aesthetic experience. Alternatively, the historic and ideological embeddedness of the individual must be considered since simulations of complete experiences necessarily move beyond the reach of a human subject. Experiences of a fragmented world do not simply influence the sensory experience but establish new connections of a person with what is external to them. Thus, the promise of immersion is not the result of

technological superiority or the active or passive aesthetic subject but is a situated and distinct experience with entire environments becoming mediated spheres.

Harcourt (2015), likewise, questions how subjectivities are experienced when individuals immerse themselves in the digital. The data world, it is asserted, frees itself from links of probability, as well as from links of causation and produces alternative rationalities. Private and public actors actively exploit individuals' exhibitionist impulses in the digital age. At stake is the moral agency of the individual, the author concludes. Living in such an 'expository society' may, paradoxically, then be to the detriment of being able to cultivate an 'authentic self'. Harcourt (2015) explains how power relations within an institution or larger system can produce a moral experience and compares wearable technologies, like the Apple watch, constantly collecting personal data, to an involuntarily worn ankle bracelet in the penal system. With the constant juggling of various digital devices, there is undoubtedly a risk of institutional appropriation and manipulation of data at play, as granularly outlined in a report of the *European Association for the Study of Science and Technology* (EASST).[52] At the same time, the report's contributors conclude there is a need to rediscover the human data inside digitisation and dissect what we mean when we refer to digital subjectivity, especially with a gaze towards technical inventions.

Although he calls for resistance against the tyranny of this expository society, Harcourt (2015) also suggests that the individual is not entirely caught up in webs of power. People may only selectively expose themselves and in ways that also empower themselves. There is, therefore, not necessarily a loss of subjectivity. This resonates with Nyamnjoh's (2017b) reflections (inspired by Tutuola's storytelling) on people responding to powerful forces by selectively enhancing the self. In their understanding of dating app usage as a subjective experience, David and Cambre (2016) also acknowledge that the dictates of Tinder's interface and swipe logic (dual and gesture-bound) can be disrupted at times. Technologies deconstruct subjective experience but, at the same time, lend it a new nature. The degrees to which daily life is becoming digitised suggest that this process extends the meaning of what it means to be human.

Summary conclusion: extended realities

Dating via Tinder is not the sum of consumed profiles and swipingly made decisions but exceeds these habitualised processes. The different intricacies outlined in this literature and theory review will form part of the discussions to follow, incorporating the phenomenology of tindering and

[52] https://easst.net/conferences/ (11 May 2020).

experiences of connecting. I have addressed trends to essentialise ideas and ideals of 'modernism' and 'traditionalism', for example when discussing intimacy in Africa as well as some of the narratives translated upon certain bodies in South Africa in an ideologically undergirded process. Meanwhile, experiential, sensory and bodily aspects of sexuality are rarely foregrounded in scholarship on intimate connections. It is not my intention to focus only on pleasure in this dissertation. The study aims to give weight to both desires and fears, their exploration and their limitations. In so doing, it includes dynamics across the socially constructed lines of gender, race and class when using technologies that denote transcension of such confines.

Technologies like Tinder and their promises of self-extension appear to be ample tools in reshaping narratives in South Africa. While investigating their usage and how/what relationships become possible through them, it is paramount to stay aware of the dualisms they have become accessorised with. Discussing technologies as synonymous with 'modernity', inviting for a mirroring of their prospects against their antonyms, may also perpetuate existential anxieties that, in turn, encourage the preservation of ideas of boundedness. By extension, this entails a tendency to overly dichotomise between the otherwise complementary realities of online and offline intimacies. It is also important to keep in mind that living up to ideals of authenticity may, in some ways, be reserved for cultural elites, as Anderson (1995) warns, since sources of access are not equally available to everyone. Dedicating spaces to fantasy or considering them less than real also increases the risks of using ambiguity to veil violations. Taking all of this into consideration, this dissertation zooms into how the self and others are experienced while tindering. Looking at Tinder and its celebration of autonomy, freedom and control, it engages with questions of how bodies are encountered, what ideas of sexuality are attributed to them and how this unfolds in practices involving desire and intimacy.

Dating experiences are fuelled by imagination, couched in cultural fantasies (Illouz and Finkelman, 2009) and guided by different forms of insinuated knowledge. In recognition of the circumstance that there is no prepared script for social life (online or offline) with people working things out as they go along (Halam & Ingold, 2007), my analysis focuses on phenomenologies and the tacit knowledge of tindering. In acknowledging the embodied nature of relationships with technology (including my own as a private person and as a researcher), I investigate intimate and affective aspects of technology use and tease out the humanity of knowing, sensing, remembering, and imagining where technology and bodies meet. After all, even as scholarly foci shift toward the digital entity, the body remains at the centre of our experience as humans (Lunceford, 2017).

Considering Tinder to be a producer of fantasy-fuelled virtual experiences, this ethnography investigates the potentially nourishing space between the self and others, online and offline.

In view of the conventional aspect of dating apps, I recognise that digital and non-digital responses and experiences are also heavily influenced by one's embodied memory and understandings of the world. As digital dimensions contain acts, objects and tools of remembering just like physical spaces do, the digital realm is a place of memory and an integral component of contemporary daily life (Sak, 2016). Notions of spatial existence become transcended, and simplistic views on the digital as a separate, hyper-rationalised or less authentic experience is bypassed. The self, then, becomes imagined not just in anticipation of some future but also in synthesis with past experiences and embodied assumptions. Once again, this speaks to an imaginative return towards the body not as a singular essence but as an expanding map where fantasy and reality converge. Even if not all voices involved have the same weight in this quarrel, they form part of a communication system and chain of interaction rituals that are very much moulded by both the imaginative and internalised epistemologies. With this as a conceptual premise, I take on Ratcliffe's (2012) understanding of existential feelings as an overarching style rather than a singular psychological entity that reveals itself in one or another way.

Chapter 3
Tindering into a methodological cul-de-sac: My voyage of exploring interconnapptions

'You should remember the flight, for the bird is mortal' Forough Farrokhzad (in Hillmann, 1987: 163)

Introduction

Like the bird in Farrokhzad's poem, my research findings are highly relevant but 'mortal' in the sense that they may only manage to capture a glimpse of individual experience, in a certain place and a given point in time. Yet, in their ambiguous state of being, there may be an opportunity for them to transit into another form of life. My findings, in my opinion, only make sense when framed as part of my epistemological journey as a researcher. Discussing the challenges of researching Tinder using the app as a recruitment tool (versions of issues all anthropologists face when conducting ethnography) is meant to be an encouragement. It serves to recognise the abilities digital technologies entail, as does ethnography as a method in dealing with them.

With that intention, this chapter focuses on my flight, the course of my research on and via Tinder. Describing it, I want to render apparent how my understandings of technology-mediated intimacies were formed and what knowledge may mean in the context of this research. Beyond my own experiences, the chapter explores what a digital ethnography focus on embodied experience can tell us as researchers. Being banned from Tinder three months into my fieldwork played a major role in shaking me awake and making me reflect on questions around relationships in the context of technology more generally. It also made me recognise interconnections of various kinds between the physical and the virtual, online, and offline, Tinder and the interview setting. Reminding me of the complexities of human realities, it enabled me to reel in online and offline into my research, conceptually expanding it beyond the confines of space. Using both conventional and digital techniques of collecting data as perpetually remade conventions in an open-ended process thus made for valuable insights into the nature of tindering.

In the following, I outline my fieldwork on Tinder (including using Tinder as a recruitment tool) as a journey and phenomenological experience. Particularly, I seek to highlight the moments that led me to hesitate, pause and reflect. These moments also increased my awareness about the importance of practising engaged anthropology as an intellectual pursuit animated by contemplation, as Nyamnjoh (2015) encouraged ethnographers to. Particularly the initially anticlimactic-seeming experience of being blocked from Tinder made me reflect more deeply on

what it means to occupy spaces as a researcher – spaces in which oneself and one's role shift. My explorative account of methodological complexities in the form of my own research journey shall serve as a step towards a more critical, interdisciplinary engagement with various forms of connecting in conducting research. It addresses issues around researching the digital as an embodied experience, 'going native' and becoming part of the social space studied in unexpected ways, reflections on wearing my research profile as a mask, navigating challenging ethical waters and, finally, on improvising ethnography. Overall, this chapter aims to interrogate what a digital ethnography focus on embodied experience can tell researchers. Expressed focus on the consecutive challenging aspects of my research: my positionality; the overlapping of spaces and *rollenstress;* risks of 'going native' when using a hypernormalised platform like Tinder; and being blocked as 'coming home'. I will conclude by discussing ethical considerations and ethnography as improvisation.

Motivations for studying Tinder

I remember becoming conscious of the accumulation of Tinder stories shared with me in the summer of 2016. I had not yet tried out the app for myself. This was not just due to me being in a monogamous relationship but also because I found the mere idea of setting up a date with someone I can hardly claim to know and waiting for that person at an arranged meeting spot nerve-wracking. A few months later, I still had the topic Tinder on my mind and continued asking people around me about their experiences. I also posed questions about the mechanics of the app. 'You want to research Tinder and have never even downloaded the app?!' was the challenging response. Even though my relationship had recently ended at that point, I felt a persistent barrier keeping me from clicking on the 'download app' button. The idea triggered a feeling of exposure in me that I could not quite explain. One morning, still in bed and ritualistically consuming the contents of my oversized cup of coffee, I told myself: 'In the name of research …' before finally taking the step after all. Even though this was many months before I ventured on my PhD journey, rationalising the step as 'just a little self-experiment' gave me comfort and offered an irrational sense of security when entering this unknown world. Setting up a quick profile on the app meant opening myself up to experiences without any solid knowledge of how to guide myself through them. Soon enough, I had embodied the motions of swiping left and right – yes and no – initially slowly and considering each profile with care, but quickly picking up the pace.

I deleted the app six months before putting up my research profile. Before that, I had gone on 15 first dates, made a few friends, had a casual lover, and dated someone over a few months, all of whom were aware of my research interests. These experiences had drastically moved away from

my 'in the name of research' dogma, but I continued keeping a Tinder diary, capturing how I felt about the variety of experiences online, 'in transition' and offline. A year into my research and upon a participant telling me about the dating app Bumble, I felt compelled to try it out and had my first match with someone with whom I now live in a cohabitating partnership. I believe that these very personal and intimate experiences were of great value in conducting my PhD research, enabling me to relate to research participants and to write a thesis that uncovers some links between the anthropologist as an erotic subject in her quest for insights into app-mediated intimacy and the interpretations of her findings.

What tickled my curiosity further was the question of how people make sense of strangers in an environment that encourages a sense of overseeing one's destiny whilst being characterised by an increasing murkiness in terms of what is real, trustworthy, and reliable. What does it mean for individuals to be habitually integrated into a domain designed to be profitable to some while feeding on the desires of others? Navigating the Tinder rabbit hole, full of beautiful potentialities but also home to unexpected hurdles, requires skills. Among them are abilities to sketch out the broader scene and mediate underlying and unspoken etiquettes, which are in a continuous process of formation and contestation. New language and perceived needs to share, explain and penetrate behaviour phenomena associated with Tinder (exhaustively discussed on various media platforms) continuously demanded my attention regarding the scripts developing in this context. They form part of a common understanding of the rules of the dating game, which, Bourdieu's (1990) sense, shape the contemporary habitus.

Moving beyond reluctant curiosity

It is important to engage with apps to render anthropological work responsive to contemporary developments. In fact, anthropology and ethnographic research methods have an important part to play in the context of the digital and its social and cultural transformations. While 'big data' may provide useful insights, 'thick data' reflects diverse epistemological ways of knowing and answers different questions (Brudvig, 2019). Among these are how we come to understand and treat social issues, complex cultural phenomena and transformations associated with the digital. Thus, social science scholars have called for new methods appropriate for the contemporary 'computational turn' (Berry, 2011), involving new concepts and approaches to study technologies as socio-cultural artefacts. However, while there have been discussions within anthropological circles of how social media are used, little attention has been paid to Tinder as a tool used personally or professionally (Evans, 2016), even though Tinder has been in existence since 2012.

The 'digital age' appears to threaten anthropological methods: the virtual is no longer necessarily remote, and mediation is required - both online and offline, with their meeting points being simultaneously complex and banal. This calls for a reconsideration of how the empirical, methodological, and theory relate in ethnographic inquiry. Another reason that social media can be terrifying to some in the anthropological community, Collins et al. (2017) point out, is that, for the first time in history, audiences and research participants can often access the same means of representation and information than 'us' through the internet, social- and broadcast media. What is more, these audiences may have similar expertise in producing and distributing material in real-time. Nevertheless, mobile-app anthropology promises to be an extension of anthropology that supplements how research is conducted with the potential for more ethnographic engagement and more reflective interventions. This engagement cannot unfold without immersing oneself in the digital, encountering hazards and surprises, and having to navigate murky grey zones. The volume *efieldnotes: The makings of anthropology in the digital world* conveys that this reluctance is not warranted and that there are great opportunities to produce important insights. For instance, Kelly notes that 'fieldwork' has always been a forgiving cover term for an adaptive mélange of methods' (2016:38). The ethnographic palette (including participant observation and fieldnotes), says Kelly, is by design flexible and underdetermined. In the same publication, Kraemer, focusing on digitally mediated fieldwork, highlights how 'online' and 'offline' interpenetrate one another so much so that ethnographers are usually in both at once in any case.

Pink (2016) points out that there are different ways to engage with the digital. These engagements do not have to be digital-centric. The integration of self into digital spaces in this work is more metaphoric or associative, meaning that participants do not identify as part of Tinder as a space. This is one of the reasons this is not an internet ethnography like, for instance, the impressive work of Boellstorff (2015) and why my 'thick descriptions' are reserved to my engagements with participants. Another reason is that I could not possibly gain informed and meaningful consent form all Tinder users whom I swipingly came across online while recruiting through the medium. Even though users are pressed to agree to their data being used by other parties to be able to use the app (as previously mentioned), it is questionable to what degree users are aware of making the sacrifice of personal data when ticking the 'agree box' signing up to Tinder. This ethical qualm resonates with Nardi's discussion of the problematics of confusing raw data on the internet with fieldnotes (Chapter 11 in Sanjek, & Tratner, 2016).

In the sections below, I refer to my own experiences in conducting fieldwork on and via Tinder in an effort to further the discourse on social research and the digital, which can no longer be left out

of ethnographic equations. The various dark sides of the web are not limited to the obvious hazards, such as identity fraud, rape pornography, drugs and weapons as provisions of the dark-web market. What gloomily obfuscates the digital overall is an avoidance of aspects of knowledge production that are not easily grasped. Such discussions, however, are crucial to engaging with ethical grey zones – which I found myself faced with as an ethnographer on and via Tinder – as opposed to avoiding them altogether.

Where is my field?

Having been wrapped up in my research for so long, it was only late in the process that I, once again, started pondering about mine being a 'different' kind of ethnography. This was upon reading my friend's wonderful PhD work located in a specific neighbourhood in Cape Town. I shall explain. One of the ways in which this work differs from previous research I conducted (Junck 2018; 2019) is that it is more reliant on what may read as interview set-ups rather than on observing one particular place and its socialites over an extended period of time (or 'traditional' participant observation). The participants of this research inhabited different places in Cape Town, which is where I would meet them for what would usually be a 2-3-hour get-together. The intimate nature of the stories shared meant that, what would by some researchers considered 'too personal' (especially from the side of the ethnographer), was not a boundary that I sought to maintain. Perhaps, dealing with virtual and, in some ways, liminal spaces that seem less constrained by the ethics and consciousness of face-to-face interactions also made participants feel more open to sharing intimate details.

I am trained to be a critical thinker and have gained a decent amount of experience in interviewing people (academically and through my previous work in journalism), meaning that I do not take everything I am told at face value. At the same time, I am inclined to empathise with people to the extent that it affects my physicality. I often came home from interviews with an aching stomach or feeling non-specifically emotional. My partner challenged me in questioning to what degree this is 'healthy' or good. Contemplating this throughout my entire fieldwork, I do believe that my emotionality and conversational openness brings an autoethnographic strength to the table, a process that I tried to weave into this work. My own experiences are included in narrations, showing that this research is written from my perspective and also sensitising readers to the form of representation they are dealing with. I am aware that, to qualify as an autoethnography per se, this is not enough. Given the scope of the topic and the variety of experiences I seek to capture, my own take a backseat for the most part in this dissertation. However, as Ellis et al. (2011) point out, autoethnography is not just a product but also a process.

Autoethnographies tend to be held accountable by critics to criteria applied to traditional ethnographies and/or to autobiographical standards of writing and be criticised for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful (Ellis et al., 2011). Furthermore, autoethnographically illustrated works may be accused of not maintaining supposed boundaries, scholarly standards, or being too concerned with themselves. What is more, they may be pushed to choose between an 'evocative' or 'analytical', as per Anderson's distinction (2006). This ethnography does not seek to fit in anywhere particular in this supposed quandary. However, it affirms the need to recognise the many ways personal experience influences research processes and challenges assumptions that research can be done from an objective, neutral and impersonal stance. The digitalisation of experiences for both ethnographers and study participants exhibits just how necessary continuous evaluations in the spirit of the 'crisis of confidence' in the 1980s is. Scholarly meaning-making, modes and objectives, relationships and positionalities, it becomes increasingly clear, are resistant to standard formula. This also should mean that, as Ellis et al. (2011) emphasise, subjectivity and emotionality are to be acknowledged rather than hidden from these matters and rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research ought to be eschewed.

Digesting tacit knowledge as a researcher

What initially fired my interest in dating apps was thinking about their spatial aspects. A while before downloading the app myself, I watched my close friend, Alia, with great focus swiping and chatting while we were sitting in the yard of her shared house with her housemates joining in here and there. Alia would never schedule a date in advance but decide in the moment whether she was up for an encounter with a match. It would, thus, be beneficial if the person was close by and accessible or willing to take a spontaneous drive to Observatory, the southern suburb she was staying in. How she constructed space and the ways in which she perceived proximity and distance would change and shift, only on occasion allowing for her intimate desired to result in the virtual experience becoming shared corporeality. This depended on various factors, which she would summarise as being mood-related.

While Alia had many 'options' to choose from on a given night, this was not the case for all my participants, depending on their gender, online self-presentation and what they were looking for. The meeting point, the internet, is where the world of love boundaries becomes extended to a world of love possibilities. Bothe (2016) explains that the intimate partner search via a location-based app does reference individual corporeal-spatial environments but that it is seemingly more transparently and structurally open than usual foci. It is not the portability of the smartphone,

tablet or laptop that is of significance but the continuously established spatial reference through the constant carrying of such devices. There is, hence, an overlap of private and public space in which the subject can act. The quick peek onto the screen during lunch, at the office, at a lecture or with the backyard glass of wine in the evening are just a few examples or how perpetual availability and presence in the digital realm penetrate everyday experience.

As Alia's way of using Tinder shows, perceptions of digitalness and realities are subjective and subject to change. At first glance, they also seem to confirm the dualism of communication and praxis. Someone on the dating app may only be one kilometre away, but one might still prefer to continue the experience online for various reasons – an experience described by a few of my participants. However, this does not mean that either form of experience is more complete or real. Online encounters are not reduced to the virtual sphere but become a part of the individual, as Flick (2007) points out. I felt this on my third date with a former neighbour of mine, whom I Tinder-matched with after he had moved to a different block of flats. I was invited to his new place where he was cooking a three-course dinner. As he walked me in, he seemed slightly nervous, and so was I. While still in the apartment's entrance area, my date told me not to forget to greet Alexa. I was confused about what that meant – who was Alexa, and where was I to meet her? When he led me to the living area, I scanned the room and still could not make out anyone who might answer to the name 'Alexa'. With a firm and louder-than-usual voice, my date instructed: 'Alexa, dim the lights'. To my astonishment, an electronic voice responded something I cannot recall. For a technologically sassy person this may have been a completely normal experience. For me, the encounter with the cloud-based digital assistant was a novel experience and a moment that helped me take cognizance of how pervasive and impossible to disentangle technology is from everyday experience.

The challenge of studying dating apps does not only lie within the circumstance that there is no traditional 'field' to refer to. Online dating also, for instance, incorporates creative practices, sometimes intercultural communication, perhaps certain rituals and certainly varying experiences, beliefs, and expectations where encounters are concerned – which can range from one-night stands to friendships, committed long-term relationships or temporary, casual engagements (and whatever else). As mentioned above, tindering and tracing Tinder experiences requires tacit knowledge, embodied and pre-reflexive knowledge that underlies actions, decision-making, and knowledge production. Pink et al. (2016) have urged mobile media researchers to be mindful of what the body (and hands, in particular) can tell in exploring everyday intimacy. I argue that exploring these media myself as a researcher and using my own body in doing so was an important

element in engaging with embodiment. It led to important revelations in terms of relating and offered experiential insights that added and fuelled conversations with my participants when certain topics arose. Becoming part of this digital space made me aware of different experiential dimensions, may they be temporal, spatial or taking the shape of other phenomenologies. However, transforming my own and participants' embodied experiences into explicit knowledge was a difficult task at hand – one I am hoping to have fruitfully navigated in this dissertation with attention to detail, by using various ethnographic examples and incorporating them as part of a research voyage.

The form of participant observation I employed and outlined in this chapter offered a highly intimate lens for recording individual experience by sharing everyday stories. At times, I let myself venture into the field with every fibre of my being and felt very much like I was becoming part of my participants' stories. I furthermore used a phenomenological approach (Jacobson, 1991) in that I avoided neatly distinguishing between subjective and objective realities, but rather considered gathered information to be 'partial truths' (Clifford, 1988), a result from memories and experiences, transcending virtual and physical spheres.

Tinder as a recruitment tool, setting up and becoming part of the space

As I have pointed out, the digital can be a highly effective means to reflect upon what it means to be human, anthropology's quintessential task. I set out to study relationships for my dissertation and make use of Tinder as a recruitment tool. I was excited to set up my research profile. Looking through the folder labelled 'pictures' on my laptop, I realised that there were few of only myself. Not being a selfie-taker, the pictures I did have were mostly with my ex-partner (and rather old by then) or with my family visiting from Germany. Eventually, I found one that I deemed appropriate for the purpose, which, I thought, captures the way I see myself (figure 4). The photograph was taken about two years back by a photographer I met on Tinder with whom I went out for a few weeks. A friend of mine added a UCT logo to the picture and the words 'Online Dating Research'. I decided to include an additional picture of me on the UCT campus in my graduation gown (figure 5), remembering that I had heard people responding negatively to Tinder users only portrayed in one image and wanting to confirm my connection to the university. Highlighting my intentions in that manner was an attempt to negotiate my desire to gain an impression on 'authentic' Tinder behaviour (presumably more achievable through covert research), and my conviction that ethical research starts with potential participants being as aware as possible as to the objectives of the researcher – especially since looking at peoples' profiles who had not swiped right for me would inform my understanding of the space as data.

FIGURE 4 & 5

Enthusiastically, I started swiping right for everyone, as the idea was to let participants choose me instead of the other way around. I hoped that this would allow for a more democratic approach to ethnographic research in that participation is not just voluntary but encouraged by participants. While I actively orchestrated the research, no participation would occur unless an individual decided to swipe right on a profile declaring to research online dating. My mini biography read as follows:

> Hi there! I'm doing my PhD research on Tinder experiences and am looking for people who are happy to share their stories with me. Coffee is on me :)
> Looking forward to having a chat with you.

I expected the recruitment process to require great skill and negotiation online before an offline encounter could be scheduled. To my surprise, the feedback based on the information provided in my profile was much greater than expected. As Flick (2007) phrased it, the online sphere provides the opportunity to construct identities removed from reality. Thus, there is often scepticism and suspicion related to digital presence, which could have rendered entering the field and recruiting participants via an app difficult. Jackson et al. (2018) describe the labour of detecting differences between the phoney and the genuine and the idea of 'fake' being a simulation of an authentic/original behaviour to be a pervasive, modern semantic shift. This is in line with the

laboured orchestration and lack of realness participants of this study attributed to carefully crafted profiles and somewhat staged encounters. Some female participants mentioned security concerns when meeting with men (even though there is no knowing whether profiles are intentional misrepresentations and users would mostly minimise risks by setting up meetings in well-visited public spaces like cafés and restaurants). Contrary to this anticipated scepticism, my intentions and recruitment method were seldom questioned – at least not outwardly so. In fact, I had to do little to convince my potential participants about the genuineness of my identity as a researcher, the soberness of my intentions or my responsible handling of collected data.

Apart from some jokey comments about me using 'research' as a pick-up strategy and a few enquiries about anonymity (with me being able to offer reassurance that identities will be disguised), there were only three more critical responses. One match of mine called me after we had exchanged numbers, and we (or rather he) spoke for more than 30 minutes on the phone. When he questioned the ethics of my collecting data, I clarified that I would only interview people who are keen on a conversation and aware of my research interests. I also said that I did not think we should meet if he were still not comfortable discussing the topic with me, but he kept finding ways to extend the conversation. He contacted me a few times after this with apparently mixed feelings about meeting with me and expressed concern that he might misinterpret my interest in his stories with romantic aspirations at some point. Ultimately, his tendency to get caught up in political conspiracy theories in our conversations made it clear that an interview would have become frustrating for both of us. Another potential participant said he had been scammed before and insisted on a video call to verify that my physical presence matched my profile. The third explicitly sceptical response came from one of my later matches on Tinder, who suggested that my research endeavours on Tinder had to be exploitative in essence. He questioned why anyone would want to talk to me about their experiences. The impression I gathered from what I read as an aggressive message was that entering a discussion might escalate the aggression. The instance also brings to the fore questions of how text messages are interpreted. Emojis, GIFs and 'lols' appear to be sure indicators of tone, but they might not always lead to accurate interpretations of what was typed. For this and other reasons that will be addressed in the sections to follow, I reduced online conversations to a minimum and used my phone and its apps mainly as tools to set up meetings, check in with my participants on occasion and be available for further questions or comments.

The examples above were exceptions. Meanwhile, the overall semblance of trust invested in me by most matches surprised me since random, isolated cases like a Tinder date-related murder

charge in New Zealand[53] and the case of the 'Tinder swindler' who defrauded women across the globe[54] made international headlines. Such stories kindle easily fuelled fears. I maintain that choices made online are just as difficult and ambiguous as choices made offline as they are linked to the same fears and desires. There are various forms of relating to the fabricated, which is what online presence is often associated with. Thus, as Jackson et al. (2018) highlight, the subjunctive (often a form of expressing wish, emotion, and possibility) carries a productive role in experiencing the world as ambiguous, uncertain, fake or in other 'as if' modes. I consider interconnections and interdependencies to be more complicated than this – both online and offline.

Participant observation via Tinder

'Traditional' ethnographies have grounded their approach in ideas of locality. Along with globalisation processes, theorists have put to question assumptions linked to this and argued for multi-sited ethnographies (among the earliest being Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Just as much as people are on the move, so is ethnography itself, making its way from spatially confined 'fields' and 'fieldwork' connoting locality to 'the here' and 'the elsewhere (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997) to networks, multi-local sites and political locations. This ethnography is multi-sited in that it moves in-and-out of cyberspace and in-and-out of different places in Cape Town. In line with Marcus's sentiment, it 'moves out from the single sites and local situations [...] to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (1998:79). Despite these established insights, realisations of necessary theoretical transformations and some anthropological research moving from physical to digital spaces, practical research implications have hardly been discussed. Attempts to exclude material worlds and only focus on cyberspaces indicate that notions of 'the field' are difficult to escape. In trying to transcend them, the ethnographer might actually participate in constructing spaces and in the spatialisation of difference (Wittel, 2000).

The shift also requires thinking about a locally limited, long-term participant observation that privileges face-to-face contact and pays less attention to more mediated interactions, movement, and connectivity. Prescriptive approaches of this kind may furthermore sanctify boundaries and exclude rather than integrate context. Gupta and Ferguson have therefore argued for a defetishization of participant observation, since 'talking to and living with the members of a community are increasingly taking their place alongside reading newspapers, analysing government documents, observing the activities of governing elites, and tracking the internal logic of

[53] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-51563388 (31 May 2020).

[54] https://www.vg.no/spesial/2019/tindersvindleren/english/ (31 May 2020).

transnational development agencies and corporations' (1997:37). At the same time, the authors concede that participant observation continues to be a major part of positioned anthropological methodologies. The question, then, is whether a reconceptualization of 'thick description' (which Geertz (1973) closely linked to being in 'the field' rather than later during data analysis) would take away from the meaning of ethnography. Like Gupta and Ferguson, I believe that participant observation remains, with good reason, one of the major markers of what constitutes an ethnography. I nevertheless suggest that we may want to understand ethnography less as descriptions conveying physical co-presence and revealing context. As per Pink's (2009) suggestion, adapting to new situations requires adaptivity and shift away from 'the whole' while retaining an awareness of the knowledge produced and of its limits and strengths. This does not mean that long-term immersion into a society is replaced. Rather, the aim is a contingent and contextual knowledge produced through intensive and collaborative sensory, embodied engagements, often involving digital technologies in co-producing knowledge.

Observing and, to some degree, taking part in my participants' lives did offer me access to the experiences of cultural insiders from, as Geertz (1983:56) suggests, a 'native's point of view', with gazes slipping in-and-out of the cultural sphere of Tinder dating. Having been a tinderer myself and thus qualifying as one of the 'natives', talking to my participants helped me put my own impressions into perspective by situating them within the array of stories I have been exposed to since I started engaging with the research topic. After having recruited a core of willing participants, I scheduled to meet with them informally and, with most, frequently. In the interviews, I encouraged conversations about dating experiences as well as online encounters.

Initially, I would meet with my matches in or near the area they reside or work in and start the conversation by asking for permission to record the interviews. I relied heavily on technology not just for matching but also for arranging meetings (via the WhatsApp chat) and trusting Google Maps in helping me find these meeting places that were often in areas I do not typically spend time in. Whenever seated, I would also put my little black notebook and pen on the table during meetups, even after a few interviews when the atmosphere was very relaxed. At that point, we would sometimes have replaced the coffee with a drink or/and food. These places were selected by participants and were often their favourite spots. In the ethnographic chapters of the thesis, I briefly describe the cuisine and setting as they are indicators for participants' social standing. Beyond that, they provided a shared sensual experience between ethnographer and participants that made for an intimate setting in which to enliven narratives.

I would also visit some of my participants at home and spend time with them there as they were going about their everyday business. Alternatively, we would sometimes go for strolls to catch up. Walking-and-talking is a method that I cultivated during prior fieldwork with a suburban neighbourhood watch group (Junck, 2016) and found to be a good way of engaging while letting the mind drift. Life histories enabled me to explore participants' own understandings of their layered and multiply situated selves. Without them, narratives would have remained anecdotal. As the study seeks to draw on various embodied experiences, there is limited space to dwell on participants' pasts, but I made sure to work them into my interpretations. After each interview, I would take detailed notes about my thoughts and impressions. The first interview with each participant was more structured, voice-recorded, and then thematically analysed using NVivo. Yet, they were conversational and open to be taken into different directions by participants. All the documents were stored in a password-protected cloud along with my fieldnotes. The follow-up interviews entailed more individually tailored questions based on previous conversations and were a continued, causal, and intimate exchange.

Study participants and researcher positionality

There is no cohort of this study than can be exactly pinpointed and localised. Tinder is a cultural sphere but can hardly be claimed to constitute a cultural group. Given that, I do think that my recruitment approach is an appropriate one. As Santore (2008) pointed out, there is no single social factor or milieu to which contemporary intimate culture is traced. Instead of assuming such factors, I had the opportunity to rather trace and collect factors by virtue of the stories shared with me. My participants were based in Cape Town city centre and the southern and northern suburbs. These can be considered 'middle class' contexts. Although, many people in the areas fall outside this category, for instance people sharing a rented room with others, homeless people and those who move in-and-out of the vicinity to access work and other opportunities. Even where the so-called middle class is concerned, it takes on different shades. While I would describe my research participants as belonging to this class for the sake of contextualisation, there was a big gap between the levels of stability that my participants could enjoy. Some of them were students and dependent on maintaining themselves through work or grants. Others were just starting their work life. One was, at times, struggling to get freelance work and others signalled that they were living a financially secure life. Only one of my participants had previously lived in an informal settlement after his family moved from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg. Another grew up in rural South Africa. A third was raised in the housing project for 'Coloured people' in the so-called Cape Flats – an area east

of the northern and southern suburbs of Cape Town that 'non-Whites' were removed under the *Group Areas Act* and the *Pass Laws* during apartheid[55].

Eighteen of the 25 people I met with were recruited via Tinder, and seven (all female) I met using the snowball recruitment method. Most of the sample was from South Africa, even if originally from different provinces. Only three participants were from abroad: one from India, one from Zimbabwe and one from the United States of America. Of the South Africans, one person identified as Black, one as Coloured and the rest as White (of which two specified that they culturally identified as Afrikaners, a group associated with Dutch descent). Eight of the participants identified as female, and the remaining 17 as male. Fifteen participants were university-educated, with many of them having acquired postgraduate degrees. As I have already mentioned, my sample consists largely of educated middle-class South Africans. In terms of age, five interviewees were in their early 20s, seventeen in their late 20s or early 30s and three were over 40 years of age. Overall, the sample turned out to be more varied than it may initially seem. Studies on dating apps have mostly focused on either heterosexual dating or men having sex with men (MSM), leaving not only women but also more fluid gender identities and different facets of relating out of the picture. Interestingly, besides most of the women in the sample having experienced relationships with both men and women (they had set their profiles to women, so this was not a surprise), this also applied to two of the men in the sample.

In Bosch's (2020) aforementioned study (the only available study on Tinder in South Africa at this point), she summarises her sample to be mostly female (62%), White (62%) and aged between 20–52 and the majority falling into the 20–25-year age bracket. Referring to North American research, which shows that men outnumber women 2:1 on the app (Hakala, 2015), Bosch (2020) concludes that this is either due to there being a larger female population (51%) or reflective 'of a fairly conservative society like South Africa, where men are generally expected to "make the first move"' (Bosch 2020). It is possible that the opportunity for male participants to approach me in the first message on Tinder (as was often the case) rendered my pool of participants more male in terms of percentage while Bosch's online survey circulated on social media and through personal connections did not invite the same response. My sample is also majority 'White' (even though the group only represents 9,1% of the South African population), a circumstance Bosch attributes to a potential sampling bias and class issues that can also be traced along racial categories. Lastly,

[55] For more information on this see: https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa/Resistance-to-apartheid (20 February 2021.

most people I interviewed were older than 25 years (as opposed to Bosch's study), which could simply be coincidental.

Regarding whom indicated their interest in this study per right swipe on my profile, my positionality as someone identifiable as a cisgender 'White' cisgender (expressing myself in a way that is not too far removed from conventional social norms of (White) femininity, in terms of hair length, clothing etcetera) and foreign researcher from Germany (recognisably through my slight accent) affiliated with the prestigious UCT help me in appearing approachable and safe. My positionality is something I have been grappling with from day one of moving to Cape Town, which was nearly ten years ago. What this means for researching another continent and, in my case, in a country in which racial categories persist (MacDonald, 2006) and permeate every aspect of society (Maré, 2014) dawned on me even before my first noteworthy ethnographic research during my Honours degree in 2014, based on my personal experiences as well as discussions in anthropology classrooms.

Arriving in Cape Town, I felt constantly forced into the role of being 'White' and thus presumably well off both economically and in terms of social standing. Meanwhile, in Germany, I would rarely be confronted with the category of Whiteness, nor would I or my lower-middle-class family considered to be especially well-off. To my surprise, being 'White', German combined with my appearance as a woman first in her early 20s and now in her early 30s who likes to play around with dressing styles seemed to credit me with not only the assumption that I must be affluent but also of trustworthiness. This is likely to have contributed to people in Tinder responding to my profile. What is more, females are often disassociated from online predatory behaviour, especially when intentions are not related to establishing romantic, long-term relationships (in which case some aggressive data- hunting/manipulation may be feared as well as financial exploitation). A concern I was often confronted with by colleagues and others as I explained my research approach was that the 'dating factor' of my research and my being female were inherently problematic. It was, for instance, strongly argued by one fellow anthropologist when I presented on my methodologies at the Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA) conference in 2019. I must acknowledge that dating interests may have been a motivator for some to swipe on my profile, even though it declared my intentions. Nevertheless, as I discuss later in this chapter, I found the reasons among the actual study participants to vary and to not be dissimilar from research on other topics/in-person recruitment.

My claim to be registered at UCT and to be conducting fieldwork on Tinder-related behaviour sufficed in establishing my credibility as a researcher when meeting with my participants. Nevertheless, I supported these with ongoing elaborations on my intentions and the progress of my data collection. I did not mainly do this because I felt there was a need to maintain my credibility – an impression I never gained – but rather to feed information back to my participants, extend and stimulate our conversations and offer opportunities to contest my findings. My interest in the topic and focus on Cape Town itself were not questioned by participants either; rather, I was sometimes asked to elaborate on what initially brought me to South Africa.

I can refer to myself as somewhat of a cultural hybrid, which offers the advantage of having both an insider and outsider perspective, (un)bound by my ability to move between spaces relatively freely. After all these years, I often do feel like a Capetonian, with my engagements in several of the city's living spaces having become a part of me. However, there are those rarer moments when I distinctly feel my (original) foreignness and its implied lack of commonness to be pointed out to me. A role I cannot even momentarily escape in local engagements is the attribution of 'Whiteness' with all its privileges and historical weight to my body. This is due to my light skin and the fact that I live in a relatively wealthier area than many people in Cape Town, many of whom live in appalling living conditions. I also own certain luxury items such as a car, a smartphone, and a laptop (although all of them on the cheaper side of the spectrum). When eventually in conversation and (usually through my accent) categorised as a cultural outsider and thus less familiar with intricate local social code, this often benefitted me as it encouraged research participants to go into great detail with their explanations of cultural particularities.

In the process of researching Tinder, I had to come to terms with some of the – only at first glance – superficial characteristics having manifested as data points via the Tinder app. Immersing myself in the topic of big data and how it is frequently misused for profit (Cambridge Analytica/Facebook is only one recent example of this), I found this notion deeply discomforting. Yet, there was nothing inherently new about it. The data I provided on Tinder is only a snippet of the information the digital sphere holds about many of us. Nevertheless, thinking about volunteering it startled me at the beginning. Having read Zuboff's (2019) work on surveillance capitalism and Koopman's (2019) on knowledge and personhood and how these are interlinked against a digital backdrop, I thought carefully about the data I had encountered while online. Koopman asserts that things like mass-scale record-keeping systems – such as birth certificates and social security numbers and new data techniques for categorising personality traits, measuring intelligence, and racializing subjects – culminates in what he refers to as an 'informational power' we as 'informational persons' have

become subject to. Reducing humans to algorithmic data points and the new forms of economic oppression taking advantage of it, says Zuboff, place humans at a new frontier of power.

I have only in the last few years begun to acknowledge that my life has become gradually interlaced with the digital, even though I have always somewhat disassociated myself from technology and have a limited intuitive affinity towards it. Only at 27, I acquired a smartphone, despite being sceptical towards this new, steady companion. I am also not an avid social media user and am easily irritated when using new platforms or navigating unfamiliar apps. This is also why I decided to become an 'insider' before starting my PhD fieldwork and downloaded Tinder to explore it as an individual open to different interactions. Tinder temptingly lent itself to me in that regard at a time when I was very open to extend myself and to explore my personal curiosities, including sexual and romantic ones. I intended to embrace the technology outside of my research gaze, but, I must admit, the latter could not be entirely blindfolded.

Although I do not consider myself a big social media user, I have the privilege of being mobile in many ways. I am able to maintain contact with family and friends abroad, and I own a passport that allows physical access to many places, which is not the case for many South Africans. These reflections of my positionality - being an insider and outsider, a female of foreign origin and forced to recognise my many privileges - made their way into this ethnographic account in subtle ways and through relationship building with participants.

'Going native'

At least since the advent of the ubiquitous embrace of social media and the 'deprimitivisation' of its user 'tribe', the idea of the expert ethnographer as the knowledgeable outsider has been put into question. Truth as a metanarrative by the authoritative expert becomes more and more brittle. Among members of the 'tribe, it is fashionable to be a native and render your world unknowable to the excluded outsider, regardless of whether he/she lays claim to expert knowledge. It appears that, here, natives and nativism are celebrated, and natives believe their echo chambers are all that is needed to be affirmed as such through likes and emojis. Immersing myself in this world, I had no concrete idea of what my sample would look like when I started the recruitment process. I was not prepared for the feedback I received, putting me in the position to establish selection criteria after all. Initially, about 7–8 out of 10 swipes of mine were a match. The pool of 'options' overwhelmed me. As there are many more men on Tinder looking for women than women looking for women, my swiping right for everyone initially left me with a predominantly male sample. When I started 'skipping men', that is swiping left for them in search of females, and consequently matched with more women, this, at first, still failed to 'even out' my sample. Partially, this was due

to women being less proactive in conversations and these fizzling out quickly. At the same time, gender roles on Tinder (only allowing for the binary categories 'male' and 'female') are rather clearly divided and defined in that men tend to take the first step in initiating conversations, ensuring the rapport continues (unless interest fades along the way) and initiating meetings.

Albeit overwhelming, having more than enough keen potential participants approaching me made Tinder appear to be the ultimate recruitment tool at the onset of my fieldwork. While I attempted some conversations with women, I continued conversations with men who actively initiated meetups for an interview. The first few interviews I conducted were with individuals who had 'super-liked' me on Tinder. Those would jump the profile queue and be more quickly visible to me. A blue star would highlight this 'special interest', which can be expressed with one click by every user a limited number of times per day. 'Super-liking' is often deemed a desperate measure, as I had heard some women commenting. In this case, it felt convenient since they were a clear expression of interest and engaging with evidently keen individuals in my queue allowed me to start the interview process while figuring out my selection-criteria dilemma.

My ethnography was never meant to be a representative study, but one based on individual experiences. However, I was concerned about ending up with a niche sample, even though my settings were broad (male and female; maximum age span, up to 20 km away). To my surprise, most of my first interviewees were based in the northern suburbs, a vast area and sub-division of Cape Town. In contrast to the constantly buzzing core of Cape Town, the northern suburbs are much quieter, broadly spaced and promoted to be safer than other parts of the city. It is an area that I tend to associate with white Afrikaner conservativism. Contrary to my poorly substantiated impression, there were a polyamorous couple and a young man from Zimbabwe amongst my five participants from the region. The recruitment process made me reflect on my areal prejudices, which are particularly problematic in a context where geographic boundaries and fixed ideas of cultural identities overlap. I also became aware of how tendencies to date amongst one's racial group (at least this was reported by most of my participants) may affect my sample even when I do not apply any selection criteria myself.

I avoided having too many online conversations running parallel and thus risk losing track of the individuals behind a profile along the way. Focusing on two to three people at a time worked best to ensure that I was giving each person the deserved attention. On Tinder, this means keeping your (right) swiping in check, as each one may lead to a potential conversation one should be ready to attribute time to that very moment since, in my own and participants' experience, conversations

flow less freely if they are picked up a while after matching or if there are long time lags in communication. I felt reliant on such 'Tinder knowledge' and on learning the setting's cultural code of conduct. Yet, something inside me rebelled against simply following these guidelines. It felt like becoming part of the app and going 'native' to a degree that kept me from fully appreciating the individual I was engaging with.

To feel as though I had more control over my sample or at least an idea of what it could look like, I decided to purchase Tinder Gold for six months at the price of R727,51 (R121,25 per month, but with the total to be paid at once). One feature only paying Tinder customers can enjoy is seeing who one has already been liked by with a swipe to the right. It thus becomes possible to select more time-efficiently, skipping over the playful process of making speedy decisions with one's thumb gliding across the smartphone screen and, instead, going straight into a list of 'confirmed' options if one chooses to do so. Nonetheless, this alternative selection process takes away the possibly igniting 'it's a match' moment that Tinder advertisements play on.

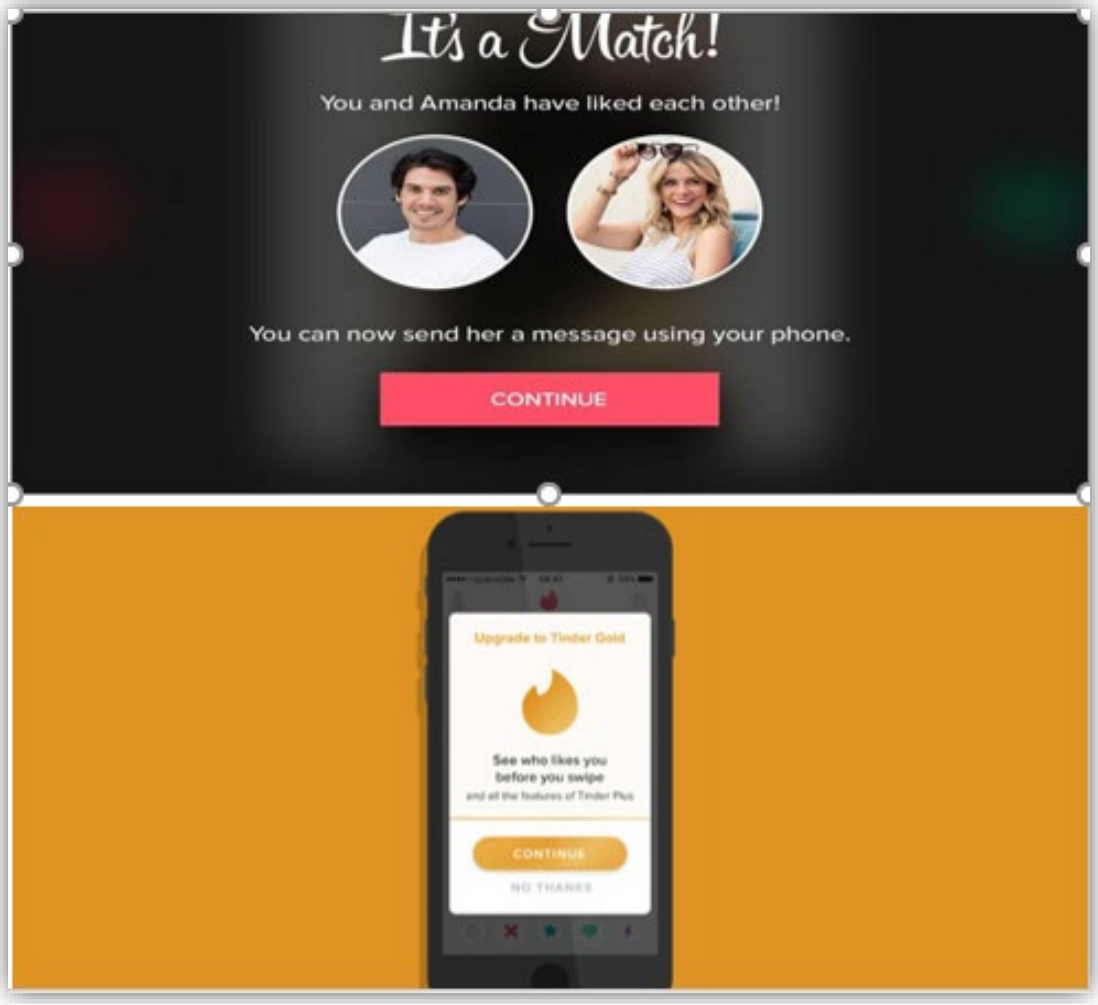

FIGURE 6 & 7

FIGURE 6: HTTPS://WWW.WIRED.CO.UK/ARTICLE/TINDER-APPLE-TV (28 APRIL 2020).

FIGURE 7: HTTPS://THENEXTWEB.COM/APPS/2017/08/30/TINDER-WILL-REVEAL-USERS-LIKE-5/ (28 APRIL 2020).

Upon purchasing Tinder Gold, I was even more struck by how many people showed interest in participating and sharing their stories (if that can be assumed by a right-swipe for my research profile). I could watch my 'likes' accumulating in the left upper corner on my match list, browsing through what soon began to feel like an endless task. I had collected more than 1 000 'likes' in about two months, comprising mostly of men and quite a few women. When I went to my hometown in Germany, a smaller city right next to Frankfurt am Main called Offenbach, to visit family, I opened the Tinder app after a few days of settling in. This was out of curiosity to see whether profiles would differ from those I had come across in Cape Town, not for recruitment purposes. I then realised that my matches had suddenly almost doubled. In conversations about

this, I was made aware that the location change would have automatically boosted me towards the top of the Tinder list.

What is more, the denseness of the population (compared to the part of Cape Town I was swiping in[56]) has a radical impact on how people can swipe. Frankfurt alone has about 650 000 inhabitants, and my radius, still set to 20 km, also included other areas surrounding my hometown. Being on top of the list and the novelty aspect of my research profile must have expedited the feedback I received. Travelling with Tinder, I mused, can be a whole new experience for people – not merely because the technology affords the ability to connect with others who are nearby, but also because being boosted to the top of the Tinder list and therefore likely having more swiping feedback can be a big morale booster for those individuals equipped with at least some of the assets commonly popular on Tinder.

I felt accelerated but, at the same time, overwhelmed just looking at the list of what were at this point 2 150 'options'. The idea of having to make choices among them burdened me. Looking at my 'likes' from Cape Town, I noticed that the profiles were more diverse than my initial set of matches in the sense of an apparent variety of ethnicities, and I wanted to select wisely for my sample to be reflective of it. Eventually, I decided to put this task aside for the rest of my home visit and focused on reading anything related to dating, relationships, and other forms of intimacy instead. The hybrid sea of 'options' to my availability rendered it difficult for me to navigate my desire to connect and have an open exchange of thoughts. Tinder does not only create the illusion of an unlimited number of possible connections (given the 'right' settings, appearances, and investments), but matches also carry the promise of a certain kind of experience, namely one that is inherently intimate. The idea of being ethnographically intimate with a variety of people and being able to create these experiences made me feel excited and numb, powerful, and paralysed at the same time. Each of these experiences would require investment and commitment on my behalf, and trust that at least some of my matches are interested enough in participating to not impulsively shift from a 'right swipe' attitude to a not-instantly-gratified 'thank you, next'[57] sentiment.

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[56] Cape Town certainly has densely populated areas, some of which would have fallen within my Tinder radius. The fact that I had few matches with people from those areas is indicative for there being less swiping activity, likely due linked to the costs related to it.

[57] Title of a song by Ariana Grande.

Using Tinder as a recruitment tool, especially so after becoming a paying member, I felt the loss of distance between me as a researcher and my research objectives. I 'went native', not necessarily in the sense of becoming close and sympathetic to the individuals I intended to connect with and whose experiences I desired knowing about. Rather, I temporarily felt myself growing to accept an emotional distance that made me collect data and informants like a zombie, always looking for an 'even better' and more complete sample instead of valuing the interest and the connections already established.

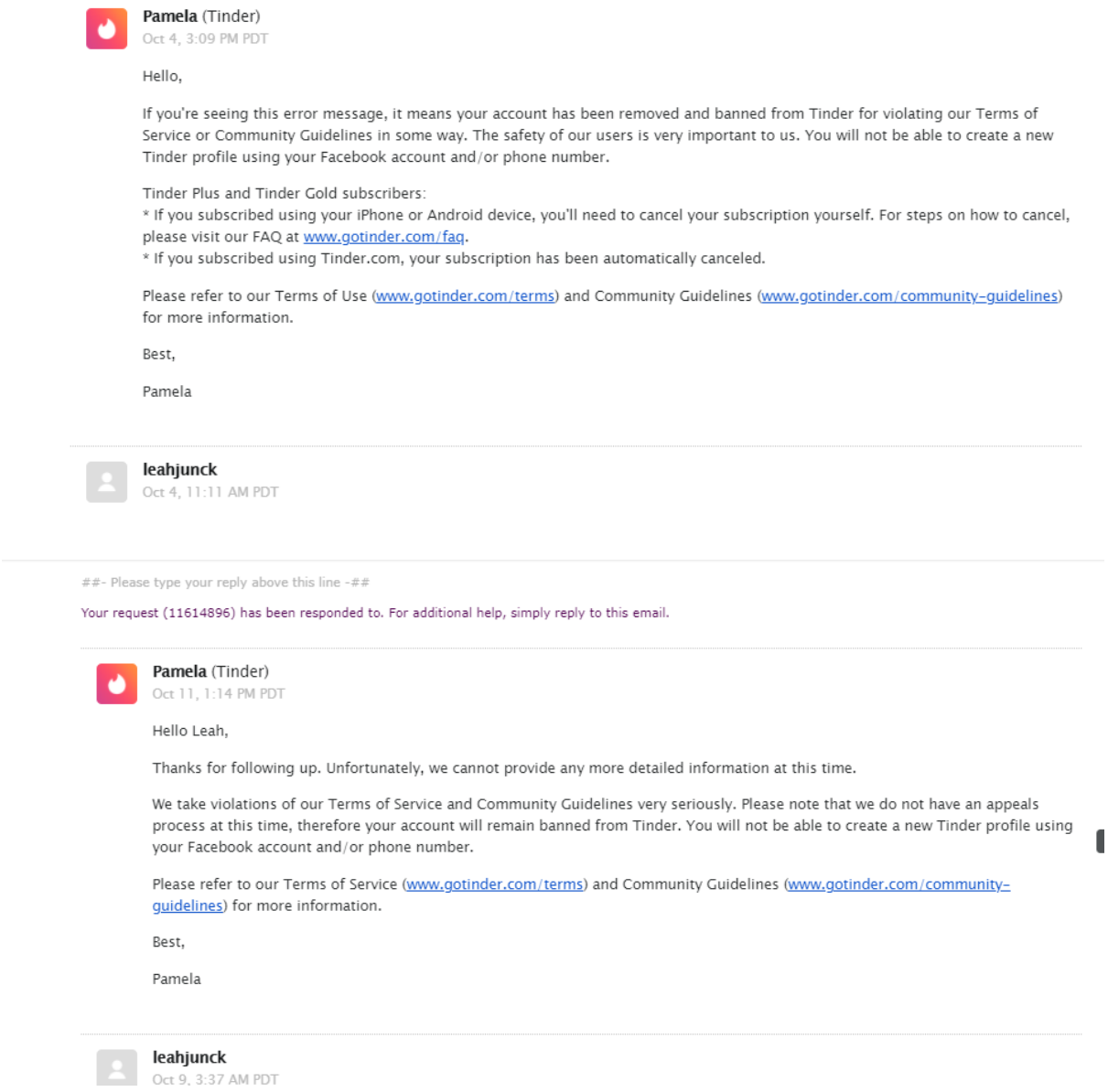
Failed combustion or 'coming home'? Getting banned from Tinder

The next time I tried to open the app towards the end of my stay in Germany, I was denied access. Consulting the Tinder website, I realised that there was neither a hotline nor a live chat feature. The only channel of contact Tinder offers is a customer email address, through which I ended up exchanging 14 emails with Tinder support staff. Asking for clarity as to why I was banned, I was responded to with a generic email (below). After pressing for an answer and stressing that I had checked the terms of service and could not find myself to be at fault for violating any of them, I received the same email content again.

Further emails from my side then prompted a response stating that Tinder cannot 'provide further details at this time' and emphasised that I will not be able to create a new profile. I eventually asked for all my Tinder data to be sent to me and was informed that my data had already been deleted from Tinder.[58] When I googled the error code and the content related to Tinder bans, I found this to be a much-discussed topic on sites such as the discussion website Reddit[59]. On them, blocked Tinder users seek to find out why they were banned and/or share their frustrations about it. While social media platforms are generally not generous with this kind of data, Tinder is notoriously secretive about its protocols and behind-the-screen processes. Thus, people are left to speculate whether other users have reported them or whether their profile has been picked up by a bot.

[58] The website clarifies that the data of deleted accounts is disposed as per Tinder's privacy policy: https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115005626726-How-do-I-request-a-copy-of-my-personal-data- (13 January 2021).

[59] See for instance https://www.reddit.com/r/SwipeHelper/comments/khbrhu/tinder_banned_my_account/ (31 December 2020).



Pamela (Tinder)
Oct 4, 3:09 PM PDT

Hello,

If you're seeing this error message, it means your account has been removed and banned from Tinder for violating our Terms of Service or Community Guidelines in some way. The safety of our users is very important to us. You will not be able to create a new Tinder profile using your Facebook account and/or phone number.

Tinder Plus and Tinder Gold subscribers:
* If you subscribed using your iPhone or Android device, you'll need to cancel your subscription yourself. For steps on how to cancel, please visit our FAQ at www.gotinder.com/faq.
* If you subscribed using Tinder.com, your subscription has been automatically canceled.

Please refer to our Terms of Use (www.gotinder.com/terms) and Community Guidelines (www.gotinder.com/community-guidelines) for more information.

Best,

Pamela

leahjunck
Oct 4, 11:11 AM PDT

##- Please type your reply above this line -##

Your request (11614896) has been responded to. For additional help, simply reply to this email.

Pamela (Tinder)
Oct 11, 1:14 PM PDT

Hello Leah,

Thanks for following up. Unfortunately, we cannot provide any more detailed information at this time.

We take violations of our Terms of Service and Community Guidelines very seriously. Please note that we do not have an appeals process at this time, therefore your account will remain banned from Tinder. You will not be able to create a new Tinder profile using your Facebook account and/or phone number.

Please refer to our Terms of Service (www.gotinder.com/terms) and Community Guidelines (www.gotinder.com/community-guidelines) for more information.

Best,

Pamela

leahjunck
Oct 9, 3:37 AM PDT

FIGURE 8

The emails emphasised an ethical quandary: What is data to the people I came across on Tinder? I did not always pay too much attention to each profile, given the large number of them, but people who came across my research profile might have assumed otherwise. Given the lack of information, I could only hypothesise. What it did, however, was that I re-considered my own presence on Tinder and my relationship with non-participants with whom I had happened to cross paths. It is a shift that reminds of Joy Owen's (2011) PhD on researching migrants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Muizenberg. Owen had entered an intimate relationship with one of her participants, and after one of their fights, when a break-up became imminent, he denied her to use their conversations as research data. While I could not even begin

to compare the level of intimacy Owen and her partner had with tinderers I never even got to speak with, I understand the anxiety and discomfort that come up when questions of ethics and the nature of relationships surface.

Fortunately, I did not necessarily need more research participants at this stage of my fieldwork (having met with about 15 people already), but I was dreading not having access to the data I had collected online – that is my initial conversations before moving them onto the chat platform WhatsApp, the profiles of my participants (which I could still obtain during the ongoing interviews) and the long list of potential participants. The ban meant a loss to the digital component of my research. Even though the fieldwork portion of it took place offline and my usage of the platform was limited to recruitment purposes and learning how the app works, it was an abrupt and complete positioning of my gaze to the offline.

I would have still liked some 'fresh blood' in terms of interviewees on occasion, perhaps providing me with an alternative angle on my research topic. After I explained to an acquaintance I had made on Tinder via my private profile months before, he put me in touch with a friend who led to further meetings. Thus, being blocked on Tinder led me to flirt once again with the more 'traditional' snowballing recruitment method, which also happened to bring me in touch with more female participants. Having lost access to my digital data, I became even more meticulous with taking and neatly archiving detailed fieldnotes. The vast access to data that computer technologies provide also facilitates a deceptive sense of control that researchers should stay aware of when using them. I found myself missing swiping profiles on occasion – typically during in-between moments after having checked the news and emails and not yet having made up my mind about what to do next. There was something soothing about the bodily, haptic experience of getting into a swiping rhythm while lying on my couch at the end of the day. According to Pink et al. (2016), the haptic touch of screens has a significant impact on feelings of embodiment. What is more, attention to this form of tacit knowledge can further understandings of how everyday intimacy is experienced with mobile media. The realisation that I would have liked the opportunity to swipe without needing more participants or being particularly keen to date made me ponder how integrated an act the haptic motion of swiping across my mobile screen had become within a relatively short period.

The experience of being blocked challenged my assumptions about the ethical soundness of my research and the masking of myself with a research profile in my quest for information. The primary meaning of a dating app, says Bothe (2016), lies within getting to know potential intimate

partners, whereas this is more of an unplanned side product of other experiences in other meeting places. For a dating app user, this means that expectations and perceptions develop based on a certain consensus with their location rendering the potentialities in terms of partner search in proximity transparent. My research intentions, declared in my Tinder profile, interrupted this consensus around the search for romantic or sexual intimacy in the hope of transforming matches into a different kind of intimate relationship between researcher and participant for those interested in sharing their stories with me. I wondered whether my exclusion from the space had to do with a perceived dissemblance of Tinder users' protection due to my presence. Even though it is generally known that Tinder offers niches for people with intentions other than dating (some, for instance, have fake profiles or look for business opportunities rather than friendship, sex, or romance),[60] as a researcher, I have to be acutely aware when I may be breaking down the veneer of confidentiality. From someone's perspective, I might have seen things on Tinder I was not entitled to see, and I may have unintentionally pointed out to users the limits of their privacy on the app. Being blocked made me wonder how individuals may have felt coming across my research profile and whether the ones who did not 'like' my profile had felt preyed on by me, a declared researcher in the context but still somewhat hidden behind my profile. After all, Tinder is meant to be a context exclusive to those looking for specific kinds of intimacies, even though it promotes a certain openness inviting anyone to join the club[61].

Most importantly, my being blocked afforded me with the opportunity to reflect upon the imperative of bringing the virtual and the physically experienced into conversation in my quest for knowledge. Here, I think of the already introduced metaphor of incompleteness as employed by Nyamnjoh (2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2019), not as describing an inadequacy, but as a disposition reflective of a reality that is always composite and layered, and never fully there at any time to claim superiority in status. This applies to both the offline and online and the power of existence in simultaneous multiplicities. Eloquently challenging dualistic assumptions about reality and scholarship, Nyamnjoh (2017b, 2019) highlights the virtues of acknowledging interconnections, overlaps and interdependence between different ways of knowing and experiencing. This also means embracing conviviality. It was my intention to explore what makes for a convivial

[60] The dating app Bumble has recently introduced a 'business' function and shifted their marketing approach from 'dating' to 'networking'.

[61] In the Google play store where Tinder can be downloaded, the app invited people 'here to meet new people, expand your social network, meet locals when you're travelling, or just live in the now'. Yet, the description immediately goes on to adopt a sexual undertone when referring to Tinder as the 'hottest' dating app.

experience pioneered via an online platform, yet I had limited myself to a one-dimensional experience on Tinder. A key lesson from my good fortune of being blocked and, as a result, having focused on other ways to complement my knowledge was an epistemological one. It helped me appreciate the complexities and nuances of reality and incompleteness as a normal state of being. Spending more time engaging with my participants (instead of worrying about my sample and the kind of information I might be missing out on) also provided me with a moment to take a pause and a step back – or a 'coming home' moment as the traditional distinction between ethnographic 'field' and 'home' suggests. I increased my emotional proximity to the topic and my participants' narratives instead of backing away from it. Being blocked turned out to be a crucial moment in my fieldwork and made me take heed on a deeper level upon the independences between different facets of the realities of being human and seeking affection.

Regardless of all the challenges outlined above, I cannot help but be intrigued by the potential for collaborative research on 'real time' technologies and their increased accessibility potentially provide. However, the specificity of socio-economic and spatial divisions and differences when it comes to access in contexts like Cape town must be accounted for. For participants to share and demand information or deny me access to it via such technologies is speaking to the critical issue of power imbalances and the historical tendency to 'Other' in Anthropology. Through the process of mutually engaging and sharing, a disruption of dynamics of influence becomes more attainable. Moreover, Collins et al. (2017) highlight that apps as mobile, geocoded technologies offer new possibilities for 'locative storytelling' and 'counter-mapping' and can therefore be tools of agency. There is a perpetual imbalance inherent in being a researcher and storyteller, which is why I ascribe great significance to welcome processes of collaboration. I thus encouraged study participants to share their thoughts in whichever way it suited them and approached interviews as a canvas with only a few clumsy strokes of my own on it and with all the significant details still having to find their imprint. My research participants were creators, designers of stories and choosers of paths, even if broader social circumstances provide shape to the landscapes these are situated in.

My research field as a rabbit hole

Steady flows of exchange also mean that one's role and availability as a researcher must be negotiated in different ways, especially where intersections overlap. This includes adjusting to developments one may not have been able to anticipate, much like Alice adjusts her size in wonderland as the circumstances demand it. As someone who has used Tinder privately, I always considered that I might bump into former dates somewhere randomly in Cape Town, however awkwardly. Yet, I did not dedicate as many thoughts to my research overlapping with my private

life in Cape Town, as I had conceptually somewhat neatly distinguished between the personal and professional when switching profiles to maintain boundaries more effectively. I did, however, come to recognise that this was not possible to the degree to which I would have liked it to be. For example, on occasion, I noticed that I would lean more towards picking individuals from my Tinder Gold list, whom I found intriguing when I was going through a partially self-imposed romantic and sexual 'dry spell'. I tried to be aware of this overlap of desires but acknowledged that it was not possible to keep my 'researcher' and 'private person' hats in entirely different compartments. My intention to converse only with (potential) participants during office hours to 'keep things professional' also turned out not to be feasible, often unnecessary and sometimes an ineffective precautionary measure.

I further came to concede that paths may overlap at unexpected turns when doing research. For instance, it turned out that one of my participants had dated a man with whom I had also been on a few Tinder dates for a few weeks. When I told this as an anecdote to a friend over a glass of wine at the popular *Old Biscuit Mill* market in the southern suburbs, I suddenly realised that the friend of this very participant who had been present during the interview was sitting right behind me. I had not recognised her in the mass of people and with her sunglasses on. She greeted me and loudly announced that she was on a date, pointing at a young man next to her who was sporting a colourful shirt, a well-tended moustache and a confused smile. The experience left me uncertain whether she had overheard me talking with my friend about her friend and whether the random overlap of research and my 'everyday life' and private space had been uncomfortable for her. I also had to question how casually and publicly I should or could share my findings, even if I never mentioned actual names. Other forms of overlaps, for instance the sharing of Tinder stories, formed a big part of my research. In interviews, they would feed into conversations and sometimes stimulate them. I thus initiated a circulation of stories that may colour individual perceptions to a degree. With friends and acquaintances, the retelling of Tinder stories would help me reflect out loud about my findings, having as much a stimulating effect as the input from the person I shared them with. Dating anecdotes thus served as a kind of fuel during my fieldwork – the power of which I came to acknowledge.

It is the emotional proximity to my topic and field and my personal preferences that, at times, created something Bothe (2016) described as 'rollenstress' - a German word creation that can be explained as tensions resulting from reconciling different persona in the field. Apart from my experience at the market, another example of *rollenstress* would be my relationship with Travis, a participant I grew to like very much and had interesting philosophical discussions with. When he

learnt that I had just met someone I quite liked, he suggested a double date with him and the young woman he had recently started dating. I replied with a non-committal, 'Ja, let's see how it goes,' but felt uneasy about the idea of my private life spilling into my research field to such an extent. All these experiences would momentarily obscure my realities and encourage me to look at them as otherwise proportioned.

As I have pointed out, being identified as female and, upon enquiry, as single at the early stages of my fieldwork, there were some attempts by male participants to shift our researcher–interviewee relationship into a dating context. In two cases, I was tempted for a moment to not merely study the Tinder menu but to try the cuisine once again myself. One of them was on a first interview, which was pleasant and ended with my interviewee suggesting we meet for a date. Even though I found this person attractive in the moment, I declined and decided not to meet for another interview. The other situation in which interest was verbally expressed was with my long-term participant Aidan, with whom I had spent a few times at that stage. When I felt his flirtatious comments to take a more obvious turn, I mentioned that I had just started dating someone (this came up after he directed my questions about his last intimate encounter back to me). He responded by saying that he could now stop wondering how to eventually 'put a move on me'. We jokingly brushed the slight awkwardness aside and continued our conversation. In this manner of fabricating a light moment, I felt like I could circumvent the flirtatious approach in a way that allowed for further collaboration and restoration of relational symmetries.

Violence of the intimate and the intimacy of violence

Bothe (2016) points out that, where there are emotional proximities, questions should also be posed about the kind of data produced and the impact of personal entanglements on interpretations and conclusions. This aspect of ethnographic research must be reflected upon in any research context. It is precisely the possibilities in-depth, intimate engagements render possible when peeling apart layers and analysing social phenomena in-depth that I value most. After all, no accounts are complete as human experience is inherently ambiguous, manifold, and fragmented.

Intimate ethnography, Waterston (2019) notes, materialises when the need to engage larger publics in rethinking and recounting lives and experienced become increasingly urgent. Here, intimate ethnography (and ethnographies of the intimate) can serve as an intervention in public discourse. However, intimacy can be profoundly interspersed with violence. As Brown (2018) emphasises in her blog, many of us (as in humans) are not very good at knowing how to engage with (or to disengage from) people we do not know well, even with people we have engaged with over a longer period. The cultivation of everyday intimacy with participants, its sensitive navigations and

impositions are integral to being an anthropologist. Brown (2018) sees the potential for violence within this cultivated everyday intimacy to be reflected in subtle ways, for example in how 'we', in the role of the researcher, make eye contact.

Moreover, even where interactions with someone feel intimate but benign to oneself, it is difficult to know whether the other person feels in similar ways. Rapport (2004) sees subtle democratic violence in any everyday encounter, as social exchanges disrupt social worlds and the lives within them, unfolding in familiar and predictable ways. Thus, Brown (2018) stresses, exchanges eliciting meanings pertaining to both 'norms' and something more personal require for permeations of personal space to at least begin to feel in step. Ethnographers should, consequently, make themselves continuously aware of their power and potential incongruences of interpretation of intimacies in engagement with each and every participant in the field.

Caution is always warranted when diving into and retelling human experiences. The first time I became acutely aware of the delicateness of the kind of data I was collecting was after my first interview with Travis at a bistro in the city centre of Cape Town. We had coffees and a long chat during which he would, for the most part, gently take a narrative lead. He expressed great interest in the topic of dating and relationships and curiosity as to what I would find throughout my research. At the same time, he volunteered vulnerable information about his insecurities, perceived inadequacies, attempts to navigate romance, and currently having started to see a psychologist. After we said goodbye, I stayed behind to settle the bill and take notes. When I left the bistro, it was with an odd feeling in my stomach. I was a little overwhelmed, and it took a couple of hours for me to process the things discussed in the interview further and let the feeling in my stomach settle. I was still processing when I received a message from Travis, clarifying that his decision to see a psychologist was not related to the dating experience he had described. Stories can have a major impact. For me, as a listener, Travis's elaborations created a curious heaviness in my body. For him, they seemed to have left some kind of aftertaste as well with his message suggesting to me that our talk might have made him feel emotionally raw and – regardless of my usual introduction of what my research intentions are, how data will be anonymised and how participants should feel free to indicate when they are uncomfortable talking about something specific – perhaps with a delayed grasp of how his descriptions may be turned into data.

Similarly, another participant, Chase, asked me after our second interview, during which he went into great detail about his sexual preferences and family issues in a WhatsApp message to explain again what I would be writing about. This question I tried to answer without sounding abstract

and vague, and it alarmed me once again as to how interviews may not only leave me with an ambiguous inner echo but also in my interviewees. In our encounters, research participants and I were interconnected. The ways in which I was guiding the conversations and what they decided to share in the moment would depend on the atmosphere we created between us. When I received Travis's message, I understood that decisions to share might be the result of a momentary experience. Thus, to really ensure consent, it was important to pay attention to signals that may indicate comfort or discomfort as the interviews proceeded and relationships between my participants and me were moulded further.

Moods and atmospheres affectively ground personal and social approaches to the world (see Schützeichel, 2015). What is more, tacit knowledge is 'collective' and thus at least co-determined by this study's participants, but their engagement with technology, their dates, other people surrounding them and myself. The digital becomes part of daily contemporary life and, as Sak (2016) points out, forms an aspect of memory, rooted in the spatiality of the digital and non-digital realm. One moment during my fieldwork especially underlined the role of memory for me. Sitting with study participants Johana and Athena at the kitchen table of the house they share in Woodstock, a rather trendy and increasingly gentrified southern suburb, I asked Johana if she remembers her initial Tinder dates and whether she feels nervous anticipation before meeting someone new. The economics PhD student had used the app on and off for years and responded she never much stressed about dates. Her friend and housemate Athena, a philosophy PhD candidate, interjected and shared her memory of being called by Johana in panic before the latter's first Tinder date. According to Athena, Johana even considered cancelling it as she could not shake a feeling of stressful apprehension. Johana seemed astounded and said she did not remember this experience.

I had to consider how my research may intrude and interfere with constructions of the self. Thinking about this also made me retrace how I, retrospectively, sometimes conversationally simplify my own dating behaviour patterns, perhaps subconsciously editing the chafed and painful parts in some ways. Another notion that struck me was that, through my ethnographic account, my participants' stories would become data, established, and ingrained as public memory (for whoever shows interest in reading up on this topic) and that this data and its determination may violate the fluid memories of my interviewees. The participants who will end up reading my dissertation – and some have expressed interest in doing so – will surely encounter a different version of themselves to the ones they adopt at different times and in different situations (see Goffman, 1949, on the presentation of self in everyday performances). I sincerely hope that none

of my descriptions and interpretations of our conversations will create a feeling of conflict with notions of the then-current self.

Sampling based on mutual choice

The interest expressed in me and my research in the form of right swipes made quite an impression on me and left me deliberating what the subconscious criteria may be in deciding to 'like' a research profile with a swift finger movement, potentially leading to an interview and conversation with me about relating. Many (especially female) swipers are rather selective in choosing matches and taking the further steps of exchanging numbers and meeting up. On the other hand, male study participants felt they had to take on the role of the pursuer on Tinder, expressed frustrations at having to take the lead, and with skilled, charming persistence, convince women to meet up.

Initially, I thought I would have to take on a similar role of pursuing people on Tinder – albeit expressly non-romantically – and was worried about the motivations of participating in my research. Even though my Tinder profile was clearly marked as a research profile, I would still receive occasional messages asking whether I am sure that I am only interested in research or if I would be open to 'more'. I excluded anyone who sent suggestive or flirtatious messages as potential participants and would find a polite way to end the conversation. Such messages, however, remained the exception rather than the general rule. Some of my male participants showed interest in my dating status. Since we would talk about dating, sex, relationships, and intimacies most of the time and as my interviews were conversational, I was often asked about my own dating life and sexual experiences. Such questions did not usually make me feel uncomfortable and, in fact, seemed natural to me, especially when they were posed by those of my participants with whom I had developed a friendship. Yet, when these questions emanated from my male participants who were less successful dating-wise, the ones who seemed lonely and were very actively searching for intimacy (as opposed to users who claimed to keep their Tinder app active as a backup plan in case no other relationships materialise for a while), I was more consciously establishing boundaries by guiding conversations in certain ways and through my body language. This stemmed from a concern that individuals who crave intimate contact may read wrongly into the intimacy we, as co-creators of an ethnography of the intimate. Produced. Perhaps, this was an overly judgmental and unnecessary notion. Female participants, many of whom had experience dating women, never enquired about my sexual preferences or otherwise triggered concern about boundaries between us.

I also quickly realised that there were a variety of reasons why the people I encountered in the recruitment process were eager to participate. For some, it was loneliness and an opportunity to

talk. In many cases, motivators for participation were curious about the topic itself and interest in my findings. Every Tinder user I encountered admitted to not entirely understanding how Tinder as a social space works. I found that talking to me was sometimes an opportunity for 'telling oneself'. A few men emphasised their success on Tinder and the positive feedback they received from women on the app when I talked with them online. These men would also say that they found app-initiated encounters to be too superficial and not meaningful enough. While I did identify the search for meaningfulness as a dominant theme with my key-participants, these usually brief online conversations came across as employing the trope as a dating strategy and way to portray oneself in a more interesting light online.

Overall, I do not think the motivators for participation greatly varied from research on other topics and using different recruitment methods. Some of my interviewees apologised for going 'on a rant' towards the end of an interview, which I did not perceive as such but rather as a generous offering. Many highlighted that it was nice to meet someone from Tinder without the dating pressure and said it was an opportunity to talk openly about the topic of dating. These comments raised firmed my question of whether the frustrations expressed with Tinder and the kinds of relationships produced through it may be linked to the one-dimensional app concept of reducing all relationships to an amorous nature (just like Facebook reduces everything to 'friendship'), even though being social entails cultivating and entertaining relationships on myriad aspects of life. This renders it difficult for those who think of themselves or others as being more-than- or less-than-friends not to warm up to such one-dimensionalism.

Potentials for dark paths

Another point I would like to make concerns the aspect of paths being unknown when leaping into the Tinder rabbit hole as a researcher. These paths could be light and bright, or there could be various kinds of dimly lit alleys. Hence, I set out a guideline to follow for security purposes in my original research proposal. My proposal established that I would always inform another person where I would go for an interview. I did not adhere to this, as meetings were often set up rather spontaneously, and first encounters would occur in busy public areas, which I would google beforehand. These I deemed to be sufficient security measures. The screening process would also be based on my overall impressions in online conversations, followed by the exchange of phone numbers and a meeting confirmation via WhatsApp. Not being an avid social media user, I am also not in the habit of conducting pre-date online research on people – a practice that I have been told is common in avoiding scams and other dangers. Therefore, this did not form part of my screening, also because I wanted to minimise pre-conceived ideas before meeting.

After formulating my research proposal, I concerned myself with the aspect of security again only when it was raised as a worry by female participants. Sometimes, these were fears about physical safety on a date, and sometimes the concern was misrepresentation or getting emotionally hurt and not treated well at some point further down the line, which is a risk intimacy initiated through any kind of channel will entail. Yet, one experience briefly brought the matter of my own security back to mind. I was driving through an industrial-looking part of the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town when I became quite aware of the circumstance that I did not even know the name of the person I was about to meet – nor did I know what he looked like., nor his name His sexually explicit profile had not offered this information. I only knew that he was 21, sexually dominating (as his Tinder biography emphasised), open for an interview and wanting to meet at a sit-down bakery I was keeping an eye out for. I felt a bit lighter having found parking right outside the entrance and identified a young man in the corner of the seating area as the participant in question who greeted me with a nervous smile.

Name and pictures of a Tinder profile are not necessarily indicators of what kind of encounter will follow. They could be intentionally misleading or depicting someone else. What made the most sense to me was listening to my 'gut feeling' in deciding what I was comfortable with when setting up interviews. Based on it, I, for instance, decided not to meet with the man who kept insisting on a video chat before getting together, allegedly for him to verify my profile claims. I did not take issue with the proposition but with the way and urgency with which he persisted. In summary, the paths that I found to be available to me through Tinder were largely intuitively chosen.

Further ethical considerations

Conflicts in ethical decision making are bound to arise in any context in which researchers are required to respond as human beings and adhere to disciplinary ethical codes (Posel & Ross, 2014). The authors have also argued that intensified institutional ethics regulations in social research and a 'tick-box' approach may sometimes stand in the way of philosophical and methodological reflections. Using Tinder as a rather methodologically novel approach in anthropology, I intended to further such reflections. There are various ethical considerations at play when conducting research: a) in the digital sphere and b) on a topic relating to sex and sexuality. I sought to address these by introducing my own online dating experiences into my research strategies and the thesis itself, giving it confessional auto-ethnographic weight and adding substance to its reflexivity. In my interviews, I shared some of my own experiences as they pertained to Tinder dating, relationships, and other thoughts where I deemed it to be appropriate, not only to familiarise myself with a potential sense of vulnerability my informants may experience, but also in

acknowledgement of the fluidities and the muddledness of the roles of researcher and informant. Hopefully, exchanges of this kind are made for a balanced rapport and 'thick description' á la Geertz (1973).

Becoming data

The entire recruitment process using an app raised concerns of whom I see and to whom I get access based on who and where I am. Who gets boosted? Who am I denied connecting with via this medium? What are the decisions made by private companies that remain hidden to me as a researcher? Choice-making on Tinder is a less democratic and autonomous process than it appears to be, not least because of the already mentioned algorithmic promotion of some over others. Another aspect to consider is that Tinder's binary gender categories offer little room for intersections and may have impacted which rabbit holes I was invited into by study participants. Tinder's platform features do more than facilitate, guide and distort social activity; they also further certain encounters. The unequal treatment of users means that, in line with consumer-capitalist principles, Tinder becomes a bazaar to which many are called, but few are chosen (Nyamnjoh, 2001).

The *Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013* (PoPIA)[62] is South Africa's data protection law and, as such, offers grounds for punishment where there are violations as it pertains to appropriating personal information in ways not consented to. The PoPIA holds institutions and individuals responsible for how data is collected, processed, stored, and shared where a person's or entity's private information is concerned but only came into full effect in July 2021. Tinder users in South Africa and elsewhere may not be fully aware of their rights as users granting access to a range of personal data, even where they agree to certain terms and conditions. While I was able to view the information Tinder offers about their users via their profiles, such as geographic distance and Facebook-fed information (users will have to have had agreed to this information being shared upon the download of the app) in addition to the information actively chosen by users to share via the app settings, I was cautious when making use of such personal content. App data merely served as seminal information for my research and did not directly inform this dissertation. This means that the data I came across online was not collected as such, but it broadened my understanding of how the app is used. Information such as age, living area and work environment eventually became relevant during the semi-structured interviews with my participants and were documented after gaining verbal informed consent. According to a Tinder representative, profile details stored

[62] https://www.justice.gov.za/inforeg/docs/InfoRegSA-POPIA-act2013-004.pdf (11 May 2020).

via my Tinder account were deleted, including information about study participants. Moreover, other parties will not be allowed access to digital and physical documents containing information about this research, apart from this final dissertation itself.

Digital anthropology and its socio-technical gaps

The study of digital anthropology hosts two terms: anthropology, traditionally associated with the study of custom and tradition in small-scale societies and the digital, the epitome of rapid transformation (Horst & Miller, 2013). In their work 'Digital Anthropology', Horst and Miller (2013) highlight humanity's capacity to re-impose normativity just as soon as digital technologies create conditions for change and argue that it is this very drive to the normative that renders attempts to understand the impact of the digital in the absence of anthropology unviable. However, this process of imposing normativity is convoluted and methodologically harder to pinpoint than it may sound. The online is a re-imagined and experiential space, neither public nor private, and the re-configuring of its social components generates new subjectivities and identities (see Donnan and Magowan, 2010), which this research focuses on. Such abstractness and muddiness form part of what Rode (2011) has called the 'messy bit[s]' in digital anthropology, rendered even messier by the socio-technical gaps in the sub-discipline. Hence, there is a need to understand technology use in actual practice and propose new research approaches and guidelines. In discussing my findings, I elaboratively grapple with the 'messy bits' – the ambiguities and challenges of being in the digital sphere (both as a user and researcher) and thereby contribute to the filling of said socio-technical gap.

As a guiding ethical basis, I leaned on Horst and Miller's (2013) six basic principles established as a foundation for the relatively new sub-discipline, digital anthropology. The first principle is that the digital itself intensifies the dialectical nature of culture. It is set out as the second principle that, if digital anthropology should progress, this ought to include an awareness that the digital permits for the essences of the analogue, that pre-digital life is cultural, and that humanity is not merely mediated by the rise of the digital. The third principle is that digital anthropology has a commitment to holism, the foundation of anthropological perspectives on humanity, incorporating both the frame of a particular ethnographic study and, at the same time, the wider world that impacts upon and transcends that frame. The importance of cultural relativism and the global nature of encounters with the digital, negating assumptions that the digital is necessarily homogenising, constitutes the fourth principle. The fifth principle covers the essential ambiguity of digital culture regarding its increasing openness and closure, which emerges in matters ranging from politics and privacy to the authenticity of ambivalence. Horst and Miller's (2013) final

principle recognises the materiality of digital worlds, which are just as material as the worlds preceding them. The relevance of all the above principles is reflected in this ethnography's stories and underpin my analysis.

Let's talk about sex[63]

Although the very essence of participant observation as a research method is to gather insights into participants' most ordinary and intimate experiences, researching topics relating to sex and sexuality specifically renders it likely for a researcher to be accused of voyeurism. Additionally, cyberspaces blur expectations of where public and private boundaries lie. Sexuality is a central aspect of social life and is where discourse, desire, embodied performance and commodification, governance, and the economy meet in interesting ways.

In *The anthropology of sex* and in the context of the cybersphere, Donnan and Magowan (2010) state that sex is a product of individuals who influence the possibilities of engagement in relation to constraints imposed by regulators. The authors point at the necessity to interrogate sexual spaces in which new forms of sexual encounters occur, since contexts set the rules and shape the kinds of encounters unfolding within them. Sex comes with an odour of danger, pleasure, and risk, depending on the sexual geographies and the relationships evolving. A lack of knowledge on these geographies translates into a lack of a regulating 'public gaze' in online encounters, making it more difficult to determine boundaries between the public and the private and establish what is acceptable.

Themes of transformation and transgressions are important to accentuate. A lack of exploration of this social sphere will leave the aspects of agentive possibilities provided by online spaces and their potential dangers and confinements in the dark. The precariousness of dark social corners with insufficient clarity regarding what is welcome, appropriate, and tolerable behaviour and what rights can be accessed within them was not long ago brought into broad daylight by the #metoo movement and other campaigns associated with it. While this is, by no means, to say that Tinder is a platform for abuse, the online sphere is sufficiently ambiguous to serve all types of purposes and may thus frequently trigger unsolicited behaviour such as sending 'dick pics' (a often unsolicited picture of male genitals) or catfishing. Thus, it is of concern for contemporary anthropology to investigate online etiquettes and negotiated social norms concerning sexualities, especially.

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[63] Song title by Salt-N-Pepa (released 1991).

Undeniably, the anthropologist is an erotic subject herself. Kulick and Willson (1995) are among the first to introduce the erotic into discussions on fieldwork and thereby penetrate the taboo topic of sex in the field. The authors emphasise that throughout decades of being concerned with the sex lives of others, anthropologists have stayed tight-lipped when it comes to their own sexuality. To ethical concerns posed by other social science scholars on her using Tinder in the field, Evans (2016) responds that there is value in exploring our sexual and romantic practices as anthropologists, especially as they change in the field. What is more, desire is a useful sensory means by which an anthropologist can explore their position as a transitioning, cultured self. Questions of what to do if romantic or sexual feelings emerge in the field and what renders a relationship inappropriate, instinctively unethical, or abusive are questions that may arise in any research context, even though these are rarely discussed in detail. Evans, furthermore, stresses that it does not make sense to ignore feelings of desire and sexuality as though they are not a part of the fieldwork. Just as much as we consider other aspects of positionality in the field and our subjectivity and influence on situations as gendered, sexual and racialised bodies, this should also be encouraged where our romantic or sexual encounters and our use of romantic or sexual dynamics with interlocutors in the field are concerned. I intend to adjust the voyeuristic lens of researching intimacy by subjecting myself to the gaze of the voyeuristic reader. By infusing this dissertation with an autoethnographic flavour (without rendering myself the main subject), I hope to contribute to a discussion on negotiated, erotic subjectivity in the practice of anthropology.

Summary conclusion: ethnography as jazz

Improvisation is part of ethnographic work, Dequirez and Hersant (2013) argue. With social science research and research relationships being increasingly codified through formal procedures set by ethics committees, the authors find that improvisation allows for a detailed analysis of topics that would otherwise only be studied superficially or within the confines of the trendy analytical frameworks of the time. Leaning on Van Maanen's metaphor of 'ethnography as jazz', which is used to explain that ethnographers learn interpretive skills more akin to learning a musical instrument than to solving a puzzle, Humphreys et al. (2003) point out that ethnographers are engaged in a dual quest for self-identity and empathy, which is improvised in ways resembling the musical 'conversation' between performing jazz musicians. Ethnography is, hence, a process that is fundamentally creative, exploratory and interpretive.

Throughout my fieldwork, I improvised in the sense that I went back to the traditional snowball recruitment methodology after being banned from Tinder and by re-negotiating my understanding of self as a researcher. As should have become clear in this chapter's elaborations, there were a

variety of challenges and surprises I encountered in the field. Most significantly, I engaged with the pressures that the highly intimate stories of research participants placed upon me. As much as I appreciated the openness and trust put towards me by my key-participants, it came with an awareness about my responsibilities as an ethnographer in maintaining those stories as something precious and intimate while turning them into a scientific account. My alertness to treating people as data was heightened the more I reflected upon my initial recruitment approach and my getting caught up in swiping for the 'optimal' sample in my insatiable quest for new stories.

Fieldwork processes are far messier in practice than can be outlined by a strict set of methodological steps and theories. What is more, as Cerwonka and Malkki (2008) highlight, all forms of improvisation involve risk. Yet, it is the vulnerability of such creative acts that give them heart and soul. Ethnography is an exploration in response to the puzzles, surprises, and dilemmas of the field and, as such, can be idiosyncratic and difficult to articulate. For me, being in the field meant making myself vulnerable, having moments of realisations and of making and unmaking. It was thus more of a piecemeal process than a gradual, steady accumulation of data. The internal struggles and balance acts described continuously posed challenges throughout the fieldwork process. So did my grappling with the ethical conundrums of my virtual existence, even after I had been blocked and this existence had, technically, ceased.

For this reason and to provide me with emotional space to process interview content, I scheduled interviews in various stages. This way, I could let impressions settle, some of which I would discuss with participants later, who would occasionally offer an alternative view. I also started writing-up my findings early on to allow for continuous revisits of my chapters before finalising them. This felt like an artistic process, much like the intuition-guided improvisation of music that characterises the skill of jazz. Tinder itself constitutes a marketplace, a mere melting pot for ethical improvisation and contestation. Researching this very social sphere called for negotiations that were often based on intuition and rooted in guiding strategies employed in grappling with complex ethical aspects of this research. Therefore, my research as an epistemological flight, a journey through the rabbit hole, required a great degree of awareness, reflection, and movement beyond stringent scholarly traditions of the social sciences.

Regardless of the challenges I experienced, I still maintain that Tinder is an incredibly interesting research tool that provides multifaceted possibilities while acknowledging its limitations. Using such technology requires new kinds of reflections that are not sufficiently dealt with in literature that is meant to offer methodological and ethical guidance. Boellstorff (2015) says that those

challenges are versions of issues all anthropologists face when doing ethnography, not problems of a different order. Anthropologists, Collins et al. (2017) affirm, would be remiss not to take up these challenges and harness the unique ability of technologies to communicate with different public entities and the anthropological community. My contemplations shall contribute in that regard.

Chapter 4
Hypernormalised distortions: Making sense of Tinder as a space

Introduction

I have broached the metaphor of the rabbit hole and outlined its resemblance to the hyperfocused Tinder environment in **chapters 1 and 2.** What makes the terrains similar is that, in both, experiences become distorted and narrowed in different ways. These distortions are attributed to a certain context – wonderland or, in this case, Tinder. In the process of rendering oneself available for a concurrence of realities via a platform that promises to contain desires of various sorts and makes them accessible through a sequence of game-like actions, storylines materialise in the form of self-imaging and through the ways in which others are deciphered. This chapter seeks to capture how experiences of writing oneself and reading others become tied into phenomenologies of tindering in attempts to grapple with the gravities and frivolities of intimacy on the eroticised medium.

It begins with an excursion into Tinder profiles. I draw on the broader discourse pertaining to Tinder representations and exemplify trends specific but not confined to Cape Town with actual profile images that have been obscured for ethical reasons. This chapter's focus lies less on analysing an array of profile 'types' and serves more to draw out how the anecdotally prominent phenomenon of Tinder clichés is perceived and responded to. The demands of unidirectionality and uniformity of Tinder-selves seem to play a significant role in disassociating tindering experiences from authenticity and realness, linked back to the platform itself. In certain ways, tindering and the Tinder app seem to caricature humans, reducing them to an oversimplified lowest common denominator and thereby replacing them to the point of the ridiculous. Moving within this space can resemble an odyssey of grappling with being human-like (in a predictable way) and being human.

Tinder's algorithms, formats and the ease with which experiences can be made and undone support the marketed impression that realities are makeable via the platform. This chapter shows the conflicts that lie between the stylisation of Tinder as a producer of freedom and the shortfalls of autonomy in its application. A lack of freedom in presenting the self and consuming profiles constricts user cognisance of their sovereignty, with both turning out to be less playful than imagined. Instead, the deciphering of the blurred, approved formats of profiles constitutes a disillusioning exercise, especially when coupled with romantic ideals that run contrary to Tinder's

promises of freedom. How a persistent search for authenticity fits within these antagonisms is also discussed. Attempting to maximise a sense of both agency and 'authentic experience' on Tinder makes for a changing and testing social playing field.

Tinder profiles as palatable summaries of selves

In their work *Visualising Facebook*, Miller and Sinanan (2017) illustrate how human communication has fundamentally changed. Where it previously consisted of either oral or textual forms, in times of social media, it is equally visual. Tinder, of course, is no exception but rather illustrative of this. In their systematic comparison between the images people posted in two field-sites situated Trinidad and England, Miller and Sinanan render local distinctions evident. In England, for instance, gender may create a highly repetitive association between males and generic beer and women with generic wine. English school pupils' media practices show that demands for authenticity have resulted in a shift from formal posing to equally rule-based, repetitious attempts to create 'spontaneity' and convey a sense of fun. Meanwhile, the authors show, the portrayal of glamour plays a bigger role (both among the young and older Facebook users) in Trinidad. Online images as staged expressions of self tend to be carefully cultivated, the context-specificness of which applies to other social media platforms as well (Miller et al., 2016). They also form a considerable part of the immersive routines, movements and socialities of tinderers.

One characteristic aspect of these was that participants frequently and mockingly outlined humorous Tinder clichés, some of which I will recount. These clichés are by no means limited to tindering in Cape Town or my study sample. There are a variety of online articles covering them with satirical and sometimes cynical undertones. For instance, there is the 'I'm a Tinder guy holding a fish, and I will provide for you'[64] commentary, sarcastically listing the possible messages behind male profile pictures on the app infamous for its imagination-deprived profiles. Apart from the 'guy holding a fish', there is also a topless image, because 'abdomens are important for fishing excursions and mirror selfies'. An additional picture may be taken with a high-contrast filter, displaying a serious expression and, perhaps, including the casual slight eyebrow raise. Another picture could be in formal wear at the side of another person whose face has been scribbled out, the article humours. In line with such predictable profiles, there are numerous articles and YouTube instructions advising men on how to 'pick up' women (often referred to as 'girls') using

[64] https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/i-am-a-tinder-guy-holding-a-fish-and-i-will-provide-for-you (27 April 2020).

Tinder.[65,66] The *Tinder Nightmares* collected in a popular Instagram account mostly contain cringe-worthy stories and, frequently, sexual pick-up lines. The account was also published as an entertaining book (by Gale, 2015).

FIGURE 9, FROM THE MENTIONED ARTICLE (FOOTNOTE 67)

Most of the articles I came across referred to the US market, with much fewer South Africa specific commentaries. One of the latter summarises the '10 types of South Africans you will meet on Tinder'[67] and sports the roles of the 'outdoor enthusiast', 'the eclectic vegan yogi', 'the cynic' (complaining about the app but using it ferociously), 'the lucky catch' (using their profile space to show how perfect their life is) as well as 'the Instagram tinderer' (looking only for affirmation and 'likes'). There is also 'the expat', pretending Cape Town is their home while hanging out at *Mzoli's*

[65] There is a long list of such clips to be found on YouTube, designed to approach women during lockdown. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2D3Upv5xGg4 (27 April 2020).

[66] One of many examples available: https://www.reddit.com/r/seduction/comments/8ryry9/how_to_get_girls_on_tinder/ (4 April 2020).

[67] https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/the-10-types-of-south-african-youll-meet-on-tinder/ (27 April 2020).

(a grill restaurant in the informal settlement Gugulethu simulating an 'authentic' local experience) and 'the homecomer', who is back on Tinder as soon as they return to South Africa to eagerly share everything about their latest trip, visually summarised in their profile. In my interviews, running jokes repeatedly surfaced that, if one were to trust Tinder, *all girls* in Cape Town just *live* for travelling, wine, yoga and the beach. There was evidently a shared sense that profiles often lack effort, creativity, and genuineness and that most are generic.

Thirty-three-year-old programmer, Joseph, expressed his irritation with the uniform portrayal of a lifestyle presented on Tinder:

> I was getting so annoyed with the, excuse my words, basic bitches on Tinder. You know, girls, fitness girls for instance. They all have the same pictures on Table Mountain doing yoga poses; they all have the pictures hanging at the J&B Met[68], their sexy outfits… They're all projecting the same thing, and they all like the same things, I promise. They all like pets (cats or dogs). They all like wine. And they all love adventure … I like adventure. I don't get a chance to do it, though.

Biology postgraduate student Tom (29 years) commented as follows:

> The theory I came up with is that it's advantageous for most people to be pretty generic. Then you match with more people, and you can talk about whether you actually have the same desires or whatever, right. So if you scroll through them, it's like: I like fun, I like food … So it's pretty boring. And if you sit there, 'I got to find my soulmate', and I'm looking for the person who wrote the perfect thing – no one wrote the perfect thing.

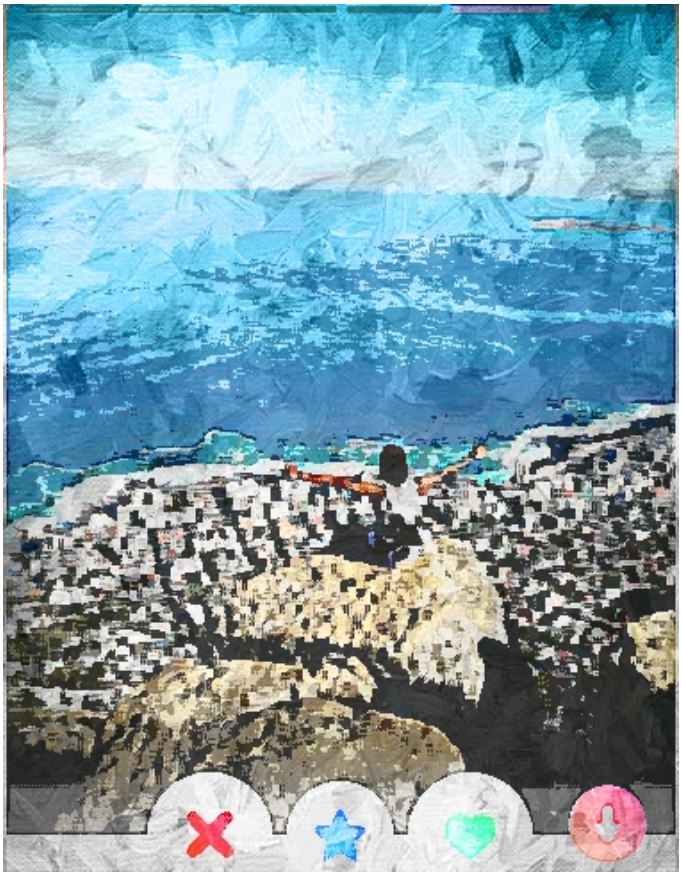
Joseph felt excluded and as though he did not fit in with what he considered characteristic of the Tinder platform itself: an arrangement of superficial exteriors. He attributed the fact that he had very few matches to this and his low 'market value' (to borrow Lanzing's, 2019, words) within the Tinder paradigm. We will learn how Joseph navigated being denied 'proper' access (meaning *more* 'choices') and his Afrikaans, Christian background in **chapter 6**. Joseph also ascribed an overall exclusion to the trendy lifestyle represented by sexy outfits, yoga and fancy events to living in the less vibrant northern suburbs of Cape Town, even though he rarely left the house he stayed in and largely entertained his social contacts via online channels. This shows that 'middle class' in Cape Town is not one thing - nor is tindering as an experience. Real and perceived exclusions can cut across class lines and are part and parcel of the Tinder app. As a result, tindering experiences differ.

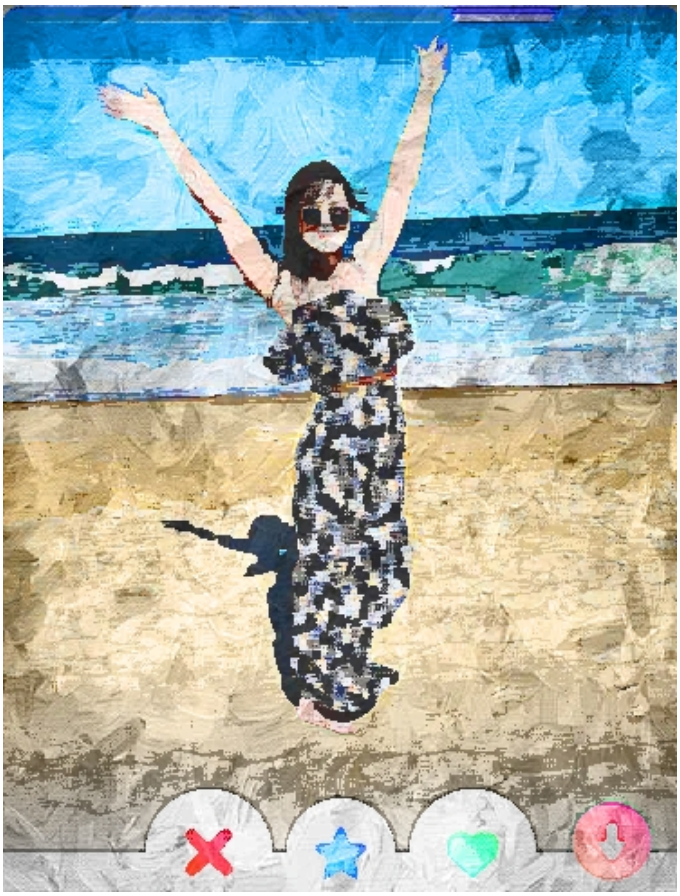
[68] A luxurious horse racing event, attracting dressed-up tourists and celebrities to Cape Town every year.

Tom, born to British parents and raised in the Southern Suburbs, was in a different situation to Joseph's. Sharing a flat in Rondebosch, where the university is located, he was exposed to animated campus life, surrounded by people, and regularly attended events. Unlike Joseph, he had many more 'options' on Tinder (and beyond), which he swiped through in search of the 'perfect thing'. Yet, Tom was unhappy with the 'types' of options on Tinder which he found to be an insufficient match with his ideals of intellectualism, humour and physical attractiveness. These, he found to be more appealing when swiping on holiday in the US, which is where he considered moving after graduating. The comments of the two men around 30 reflect a sense of disillusionment with the platform and the type of representation it stands for. This disillusionment is linked back to the type of relations that the platform contains, as evidenced in both Joseph and Tom deleting the app - and downloading it again months later with a different approach.

The following selection of local Tinder profiles[69] is informed by my own observations of online trends as well as those of this study's participants. Tom and other participants reported that Cape Town Tinder profiles differ from those in similarly sized cities. In Johannesburg, for instance, material wealth tends to be displayed, and images appear polished. Meanwhile, the theme of nature and pictures taken during outdoor activities are common in Cape Town. Among the most popular portrayals are outdoor yoga postures, the pose on top of the mountain Lion's Head, pictures at the beach, surfing, cycling and other activities that illustrate activeness, sense of adventure and connectedness to nature.

[69] The profile pictures were made edited using an app that turns images into cartoons to disguise identities. Where this seemed insufficient (mostly in close-up pictures), I added a censoring function that blurs the chosen portions of an image. Additionally, names were cropped out or covered. The only likely way the images could be associated with their account owner is if one were very familiar with them (which would be the case for the owners themselves), especially given the repetitiveness of the illustrated themes.



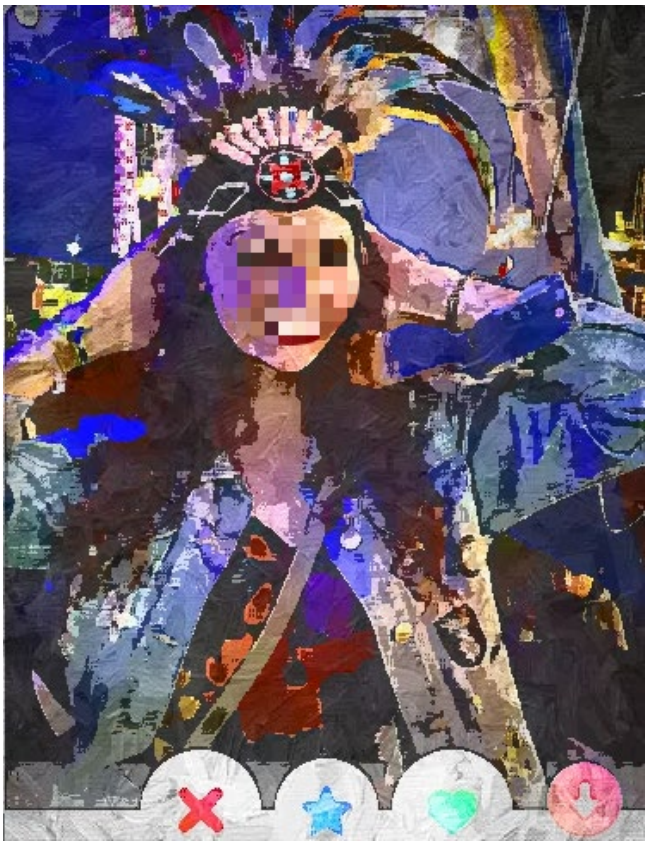


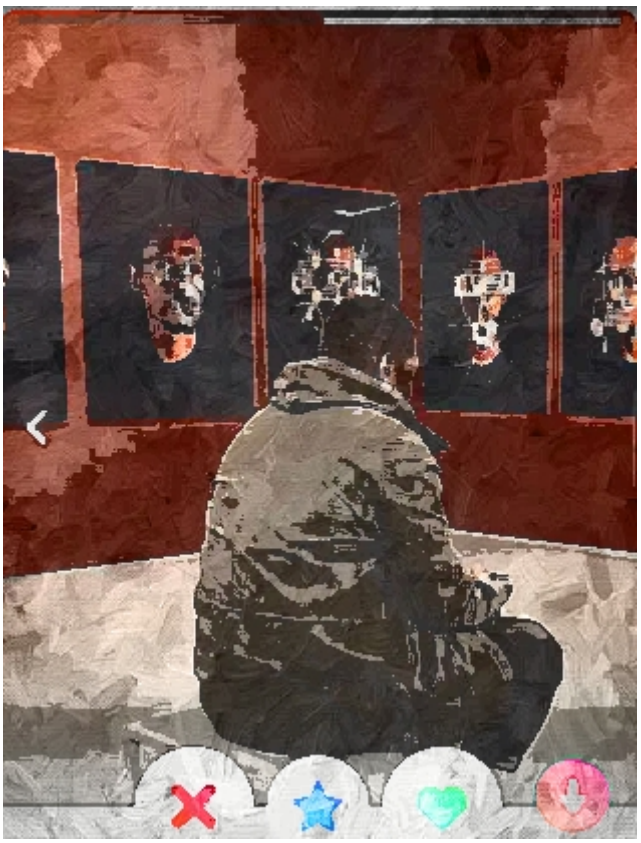
FIGURES 10-15

Pictures taken with international travel landmarks are frequent. Often, these identify European settings (common is the Eiffel tower, for instance). These are an indicator of mobility and economic status.

FIGURE 16 &17

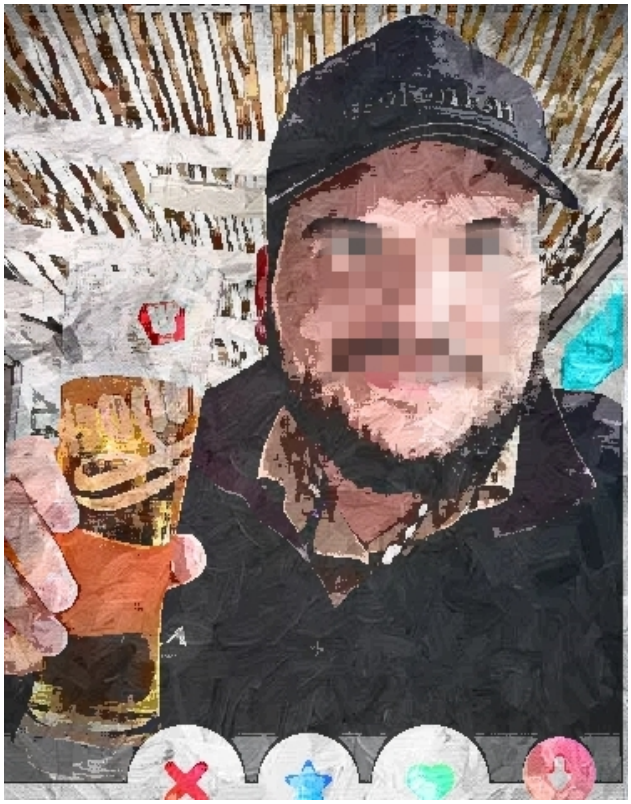
There is also the posing with statues and pictures taken in art spaces. *Afrikaburn*, an annual South African art festival in the Karoo region, routinely occurs when swiping. It is a specific event that can be described as a liminal space in which people are encouraged to transgress norms temporarily and enter a Facebook-like reality, a sentiment symbolically captured by wearing unusual outfits.





FIGURES 18-20

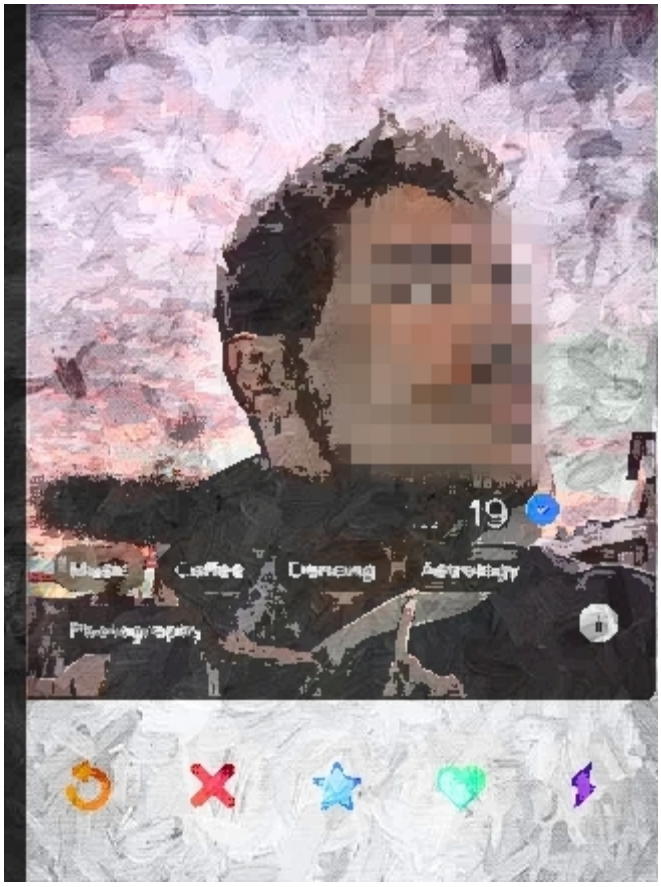
Group pictures of people getting together to have drinks and a good time are common as well. Alcohol, barbeques (locally referred to as *braais*) and being surrounded by friends are indicators for how one spends their free time, one's ability to have fun and level of sociality. People are mostly dressed casually, even in beachwear or sports gear, although there are also pictures taken in formal wear, sometimes at weddings. Group pictures at these events sometimes contain formal poses but often indicate spontaneity, such as a picture snapped while giving a speech. In most cases, there would be only one formal picture among less formal ones, emphasising multiple facets. What stands out in group pictures is that mixed groups in terms of the local 'Black, White, Coloured and Other' distinctions are uncommon. There is also the posing with pets and small children – male tinderers here often clarify in their biographies that they are not the father but the uncle or friend of the child's parents.[70]



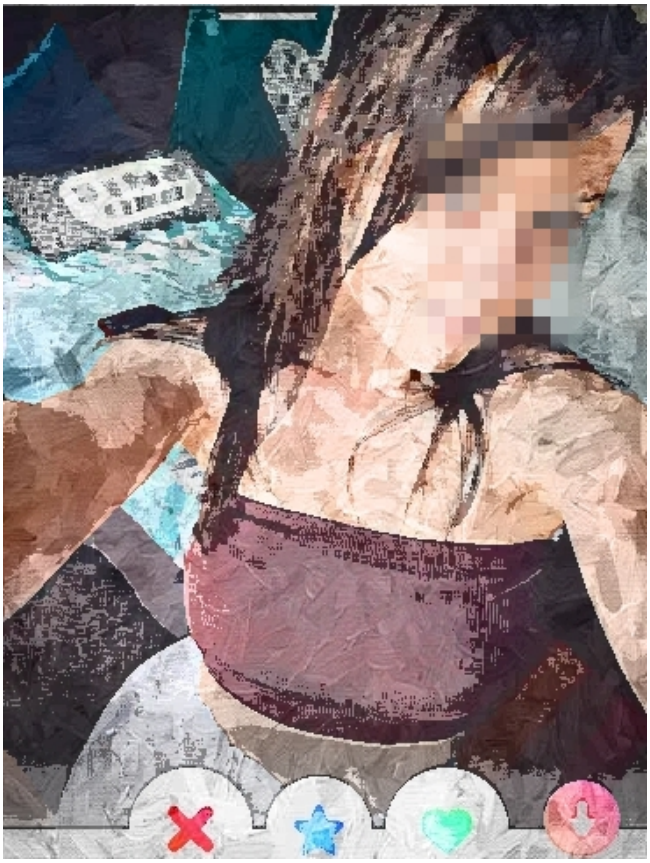
[70] Perhaps an indicator that single parenthood is not considered advantageous on the dating market.

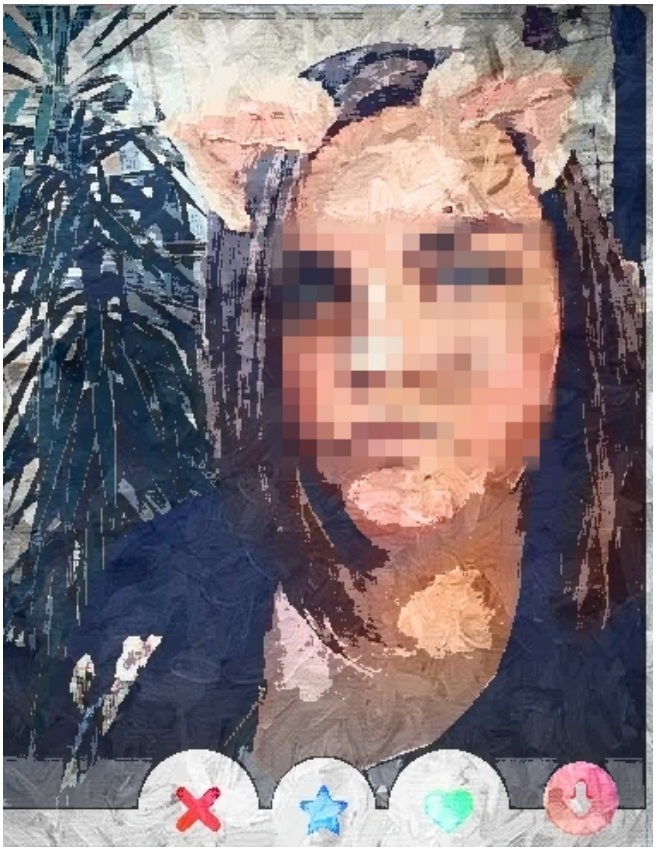
FIGURES 21-23

Another common occurrence is close-up pictures of faces. Some appear to be filtered perfectly smooth and may be taken from the so-called 'MySpace angle'[71], a popular style of profile picture associated with deception and intentional misrepresentation. It is still mostly young women who use Snapchat filters to add features such as animal ears to their pictures while smoothing over their skin and features, even though it is not exclusive to them. Images are also sometimes staged so that the person photographed is not looking at the camera, as though unaware of the moment being captured. This shows a demand for spontaneity and, perhaps, authenticity (contrary to well-practised selfie poses). Yet, the viewer can assume that the picture is, in fact, posed an only simulating spontaneity.



[71] See Session's (2009) discussion on the topic.





FIGURES 24-26

FIGURE 27

The bathroom mirror selfie is among the most infamous Tinder clichés and associated with narcissism.

Another dominant setting for selfies is cars, signalling mobility, status and flexibility (as opposed to a picture taken on the couch or in an office chair, which are rare).

FIGURE 28

A variety of social assets are emphasised in more-or-less subtle ways: fashion and looks, university degrees, height (which men often mention down to the centimetre) and having a fit or curvy body. Male tinderers showcase their bodies in topless profile pictures, while female tinderers tend to select pictures that accentuate their body shapes (in workout wear, a bikini, or tight-fitting clothes).

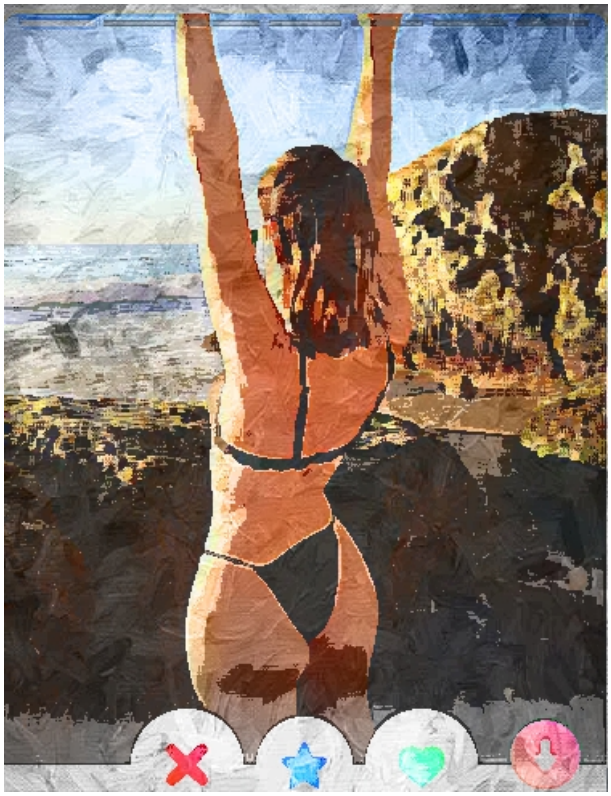


FIGURE 29

Some tinderers wear uniforms indicating their profession (like firefighters, pilots, or doctors), and others can be otherwise witnessed in their professional element, for instance, while teaching and writing on a blackboard.

FIGURE 30 & 31

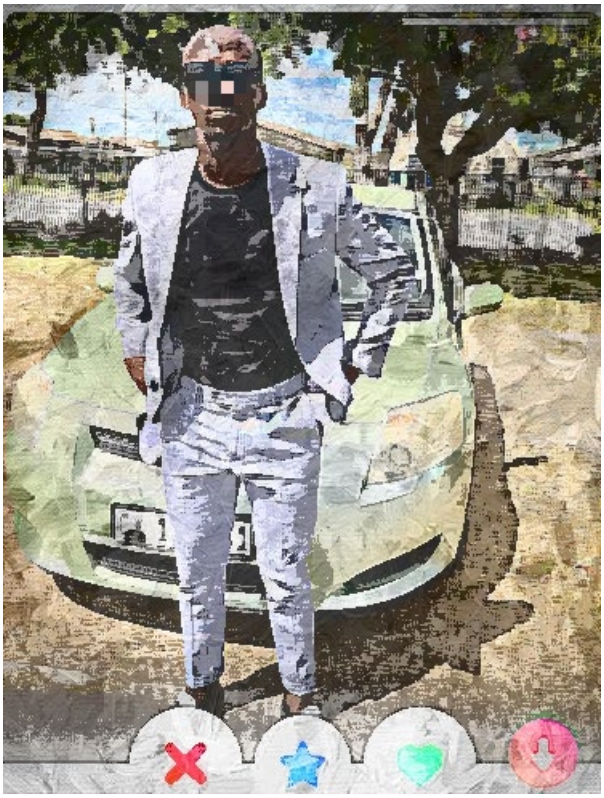


FIGURE 32

Easily identifiable status symbols like cars or attractive women may be included in the pictures. Among the most notorious (but not as frequent) images are individuals (usually from the global north) posing with groups of children of colour (also referred to as the 'hero volunteer').[72]

Some of my interviewees pointed out other apps that can be used to edit facial features, change skin tone and add muscles to the body. More blatant forms of scamming for financial gain like catfishing, exceeding tolerated degrees of profile editing were also identified by them as an occasional Tinder occurrence, as something built into platforms like Tinder and that one must look out for. Indicators are suspiciously attractive women with only one (sometimes grainy and usually sexy) profile picture who seem too eager to exchange numbers. There are also cases where people simply look different in person than expected based on their profiles. Johana, for example, an economics PhD student at UCT who had just moved into an artfully decorated Victorian-style house in the southern suburbs with her best friend Athena and another housemate, recalled

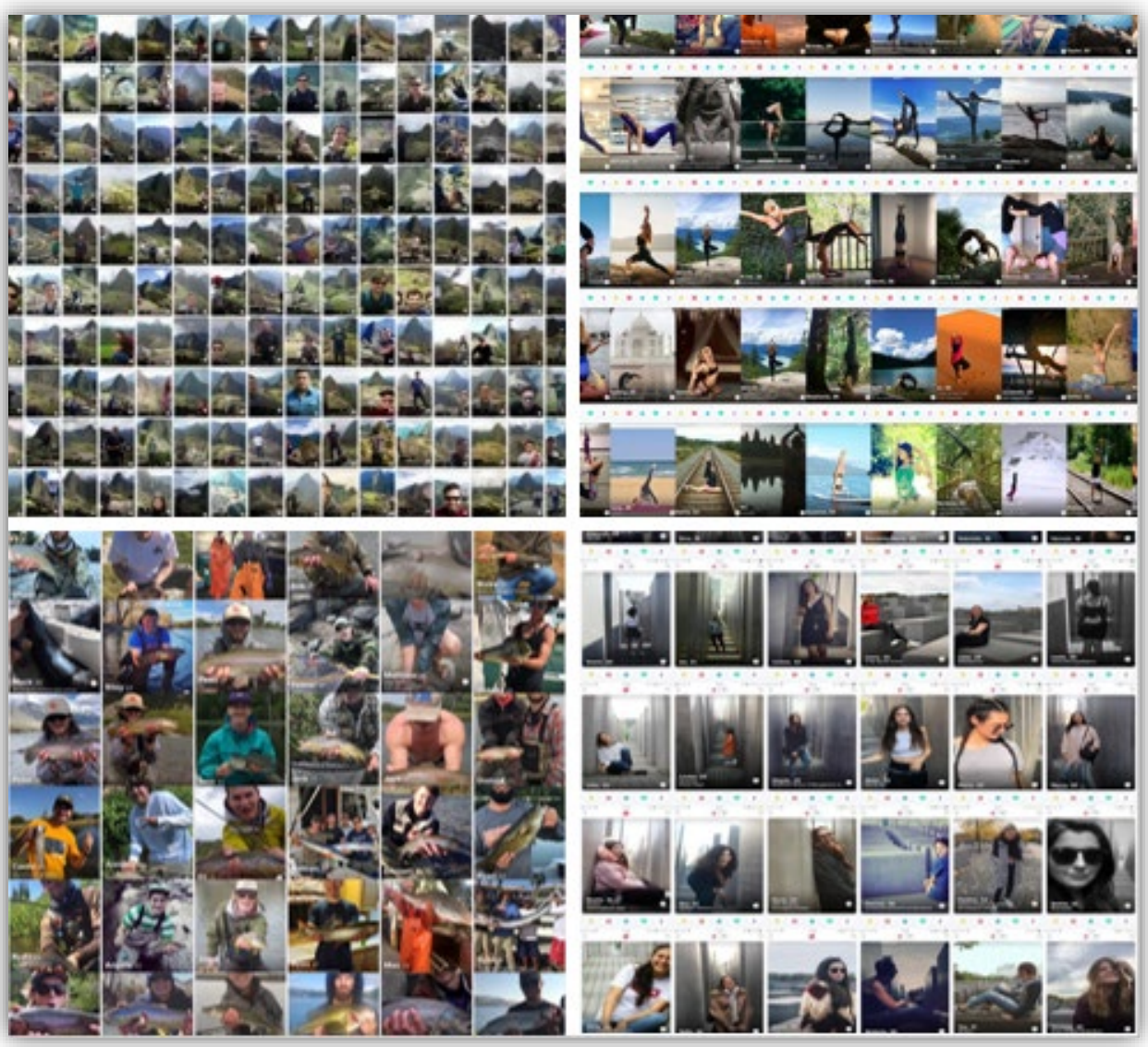
[72] See Richey (2016) for an investigation of 'Humanitarianism' on Tinder and representations of North–South relations.

matching with a man whose profile consisted exclusively of topless pictures. She assumed that his muscular upper body was his 'major selling point', as she jokingly put it. When he arrived at the café at which they had arranged to meet, Johana hardly recognised him as he looked much heavier and less fit than in his profile pictures. 'I didn't want to come across like I'm rejecting him because of his body, but I felt kind of tricked,' she explained. She proceeded with their one-time date, making small talk for 30 minutes and later making an excuse via text for why she cannot meet again. Some of the interviewed men also mentioned that the women they had met through Tinder somewhat resembled their profile pictures but still looked notably different face-to-face. This was attributed to their skills in 'selling themselves' well using the right selfie angle (thus editing out 'extra' weight and other less desirable features) or using filters (which are less common among men in the study context).

Cultural capital, in Bourdieu's sense (1986), plays a significant role on Tinder. This includes one's level of education, language use, dress style, and other aspects signifying social mobility. Economic and social capital become markers for compatibility, desirability, and nourishment for the imagination. Signs and symbols used in profiles and their artefacts become fetishized (see Bakhtin and Bakhtin, 1984) as they constitute major initial selection criteria rendering a person desirable on the app - but are simultaneously dismissed as mere clichés. To an extent, they are formed into a thingified sexuality against the backdrop of unchecked pursuits of consumerism (also see Nyamnjoh's, 2005b, analysis of practices and language use in Botswana, Cameroon, and Senegal). Even though these profiles may lack originality and are considered 'one of the same' (thingifying them further), they carry a language within themselves. The persona of the traveller, for instance, was described as alluring by my participants (despite its cliché status), as it is imbued with character traits, such as being adventurous, flexible and an embodiment of potential. The ability to travel is communicated through exotic landscapes and landmarks, which serve as a universal language of travel (see Barthes, 1997). Since the early last century, these images have been nurtured through the media and the advertising industry to facilitate consumerism (a development contoured by Illouz, 2012, and outlined for South Africa by Hunter, 2009).

The pressure to display artefacts or merely having access to some of them can be circumvented to a degree (albeit not necessarily substituted) with flirtatious wit and humour or counter-narratives. In Cape Town, as a place that is ill-famed for its unequal distribution of wealth corresponding with certain areas, some Tinder-capital is currently, by the same token, confined to affluent geographies. Despite certain uniformities in presentation, drawn attention to in Tinder-collages circulated online (figures 33-36), and the requirement for cultural artefacts, tindering cannot be reduced to neat

checkboxes, clichés and things. My ethnographic examples should not be read as simply mirroring seemingly simple divisions, nor as another Tinder anecdote within a unilinear, 'modern' cultural subtext. Rather, they show interdependences among humans and between humans and things.



FIGURES 33-36

FIGURE 33 (TOP LEFT): COLLAGE OF TINDERERS HIKING THE MACHU PICCHU, PERU. TRAVELLING AND KNOWN SIGHTSEEING SYMBOLS ARE COMMONLY PROFILED ASSETS. AVAILABLE: HTTPS://THECHIVE.COM/2018/07/10/LOCATION-BASED-TINDER-COLLAGES-REVEAL-SOME-INTERESTING-PATTERNS-11-PHOTOS/ (28 APRIL 2020).

FIGURE 34 (TOP RIGHT): YOGA AS ANOTHER POPULAR ACTIVITY. POSES ARE USUALLY DISPLAYED IN A NATURAL SCENERY. BOTH THE FISHING AND THE YOGA PORTRAITS HAVE A GENDERED DIMENSION TO THEM. COLLAGE AVAILABLE: HTTPS://WWW.REDDIT.COM/R/TINDER/COMMENTS/AJJJ0C/MY_TINDER_EXPERIENCE_IN_VANCOUVER_SO_FAR/ (28 APRIL 2020).

FIGURE 35 (BOTTOM LEFT): SHOWING THE COMMON IMAGE OF MEN (IN DIFFERENT REGIONS OF THE WORLD) HOLDING FISH IN THEIR DATING PROFILES. AVAILABLE: HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/_CLAUDIUGH/STATUS/1081577732431962112 (28 APRIL 2020).

FIGURE 36 (BOTTOM RIGHT): TINDERERS POSING INSIDE THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN BERLIN. AVAILABLE: HTTPS://WWW.REDDIT.COM/R/TINDER/COMMENTS/9CM4F6/TINDER_IN_BERLIN/ (28 APRIL 2020).

With the visual forming the main information base for Tinderer's decisions, a question Csordas poses becomes relevant regarding its role. Namely, 'whether even a simple photograph captures something essential about a person (and anthropologists know that in some societies this is thought quite literally to be so), or if it is better understood as an arbitrary and momentary simulation that can be repeated without limit to the ultimate degradation of meaning, similar to what might happen to the meaning of the word "egg" if it is repeated a hundred times' (2000:190). In cultural analysis of the visual, there is most commonly a notion of representation applied, Csordas (2000) suggests. The standpoint of embodiment is less prominently used in articulating culturally conditioned modes of being-in-the-world. This is despite modes of representation and being-in-the-world being closely connected, for example in how they are superimposed on the relation between subject and object. Csordas offers the example of visualisations of computerised cadavers for medical students to engage with in 1991. Photographic images of a dissected body were manipulated and combined using state-of-the-art visualisation programs, making it possible to penetrate the body via virtual reality. A sense was created of walking or flying through the body. In this manner, the visual representation seemed much more real than the (at that point cremated) body it was based on.

The virtual reality Csordas describes, and the subjective sensory presence experienced through it are not the same as experienced via the Tinder app. Images here do not substitute 'originals'. Rather, Tinder profiles are generally meant to bridge online and offline experiences not by providing great detail but by fuelling imaginative curiosity. What Tinder and medical cadaver visualisations share is that they highlight specific ways of incorporating technological development into the condition of culture that involves many people routinely moving between online and offline, between differently animated worlds. Tinder profiles are considered to have the capacity of capturing some kind of essence, or else they might not be judged so harshly – for being 'basic' (Joseph) or falling short of the 'perfect thing' (Tom). Understanding engagements via digital means requires looking at experiences that can capture characteristics of the 'existential space between virtual and actual, between the cultural imaginary and culturally literal, between remoteness and

intimacy, and between representation and being-in-the-world' (Csordas 2000:191). The figure of the traveller is symbolic of this with its ability to symbolically transfigure limits of social mobility and the freedom to connect where and with whomever one chooses. Thus, it is carrier of an idealised, smoothed over version of modernity, almost like the one Meyer (2002) describes for popular Ghanaian cinema, which offers people refuge from reality. In that sense, tinder figures become idioms and Tinder itself an ethos for contemporary accumulations. In the Mankon Kingdom that Warnier (2007) describes, the past and the present are linked up in a long history of inequality and hierarchy in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Unity and closure of the kingdom were dependent on the king's ability to reproduce balance through the accumulation and exchange of essences. He is described as a container, an envelope or a piggy-bank for a certain kind of being. Tinder and its design, likewise, act as a piggy-bank in sparing certain kinds of contents while increasing others, effectively reducing them (and the platform itself) to a singular essence. Its hierarchical structures are likely to resemble that of South Africa's unequal past and present (more on this in **chapter 6**).

Beyond the mere profile picture, abilities to tell a story are just as important in contemporary dating and mating practices. Although they may look unimaginative, no Tinder profile is exactly like another, and *some* degree of thought goes into them. Sometimes, the mini, 250-word biographies on Tinder are made creative use of. Other times, they are left blank or simply consist of a list of 'likes' or, alternatively, a list of emoticons[73] representing what one enjoys (often referring to food or activities). In some cases, Spotify or Instagram accounts are integrated into profiles to fill in the blanks. Attempts to build a wholesome link that, ideally, guides towards a face-to-face encounter rarely consist of only one image and, if it does, it tends to be quickly dismissed as too vague. After the story is framed through Tinder profiles, it is spun further via the app's chat forum. Responses to images will differ, even if they are reminiscent of clichés, depending on who does the swiping. Similarly, conversations will differ, even where they may start with a YouTube-inspired pickup line. This study's findings show that, if interest persists, communication is then moved to *WhatsApp*[74] before meeting face-to-face. This implicates a sign of trust and adds a notion of 'realness' to the experience. The tinderer's story is, thereby, added another layer to, carrying it beyond the 'standard egg' status. Communication is also often substantiated with GIFs[75] and

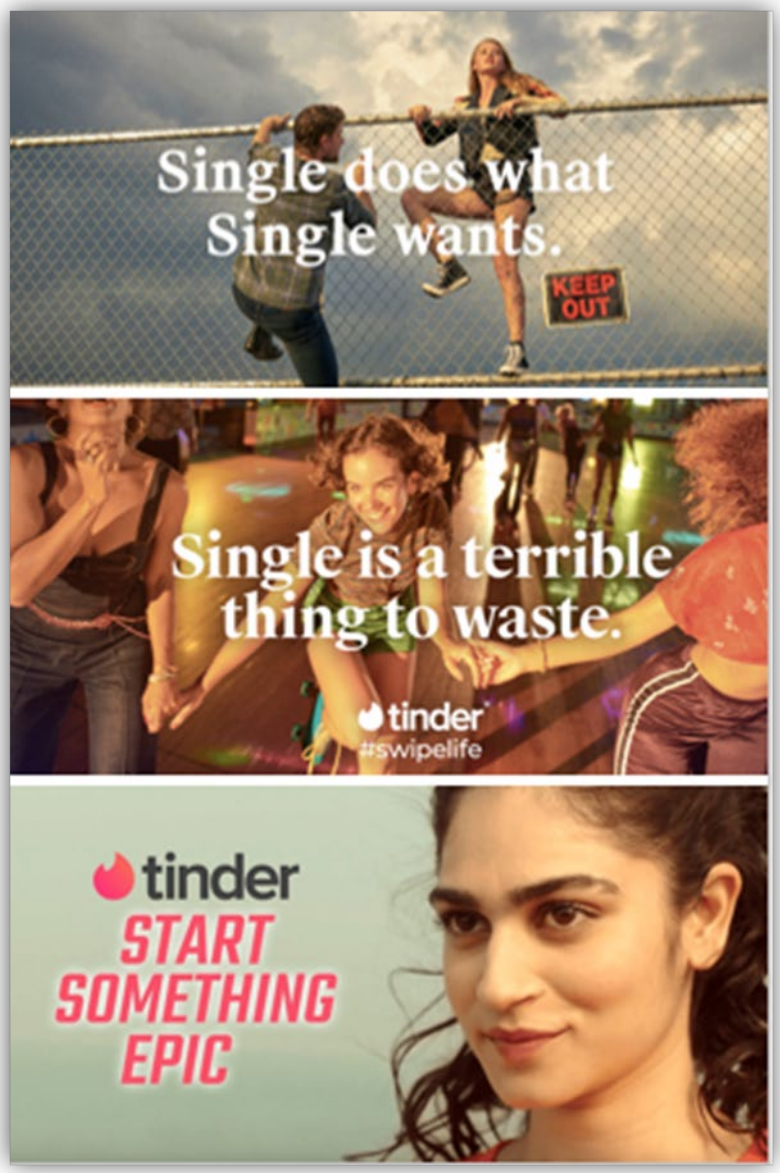
[73] Short for 'emotion icon' representing a facial expression such as a smile or frown to convey feelings or intended tone.

[74] A free voice and messaging service owned by Facebook.

[75] GIF stands for 'Graphics Interchange Format', which supports aminated or static images.

emoticons. Overall, to connect via Tinder, the skills of presenting oneself online and the 'language' spoken (in words, pictures, or symbols) in connecting with fellow tinderers are crucial. Tindering experiences, it follows, cannot be reduced to the simple exercise of swiping on similar-looking profiles. There is a lot the motion of swiping itself incorporates, and the same applies to everything that happens thereafter. What is attributed to online profiles and engagements is subject to the norms through which they are evaluated. Tinder's image also impacts its modality of evaluation as a platform for the intimate.

FIGURE 36: HTTPS://SEARCH.MUZ.LI/ZMM4ZWEZYZZH (28 APRIL 2020).



FIGURES 37-39

FIGURES 37 & 38 ARE AVAILABLE UNDER: HTTPS://WWW.THEDRUM.COM/CREATIVE-WORKS/PROJECT/WIEDEN-KENNEDY-NEW-YORK-TINDER-SINGLE-TERRIBLE-THING-WASTE (21 FEBRUARY 2021).

FIGURE 39: HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=O_WTLKDKCRG (21 FEBRUARY 2021)

The marketing images above are interesting because they manifest the idea of agency, freedom, makeability of experience and authenticity of self. Despite the seeming standardisation of profiles, Tinder gives the impression of purely intuitive and agentive choice making for women. It is also

noteworthy that Tinder marketing never seems to capture the 'online portion' of the tindering experience and that its sensory essence is, rather, attributed to the 'offline experience'.

In figure 36, Tinder users are encouraged to actively find their match instead of waiting for the kind of fate that forms part of the romantic tales many of us have grown up with. Figures 37 and 38 also oppose the notion of fairy tales that encourage females to wait for a charming prince to come along and, in the case of Cinderella, have her settle for the role society has attributed to her until a male protagonist rescues her. Young women are animated to consume based on the notion that they thereby gain agency, avoid a passive 'wasting' of experience. Figure 39[76], an advertisement published by an agency in India (BBH), is specifically geared towards a female market that is open to transcending societal norms and restrictions. In the video version of the advertisement, actress and musician Kavya Trehan is shown walking the streets, intuitively picking or dismissing men with a simple gesture – a symbolic swipe to the left or right. She moves from encounter to encounter with ease and, it seems, enthusiasm for what comes next. The images portray singledom as a lifestyle, characterised by women determining their own rules for the dating game.

Tinder's promise of autonomy has distinct connotations in South Africa. The move away from the structurally induced puritarianism of the Apartheid regime coincided with the time when access to technologies became more common in the late 1990s. Unlike many other people in Cape Town, this study's participants live in areas with good infrastructure and security measures. Many of them had access to better education (the quality of which varies drastically between private and some public schools) and broader connections via steadily accessible technologies. It stands to question what kinds of stories unfold in an unequal context like Cape Town, in which not only preferences and desires have to be negotiated in a dating environment that is now open to the 'casual' after the, in many ways, restrictive apartheid regime, but that also constitutes a multicultural space in which categories signifying difference continue to pertain. Finding that Tinder encounters are conceptualised as 'less than authentic' despite being marketed as a tool to express individual needs was an interesting onset to investigate the intricacies of connections and exchanges within and beyond Tinder.

Authenticity and freedom

The sheer amount of Tinder profiles and locally specific repetitive patterns suggests both - variety and unpredictability of choices and, therefore, a de-McDonaldisation in Ritzer's (2013) sense. The

[76] The full video is available at: https://spectacle.is/video/start-something-epic-india-tinder (24 October 2019).

author refers to profit models that rely on unpaying customers creating content (the web 2.0). In a sense, this principle runs contrary to the predictability of McDonaldisation, a phenomenon that occurs when social institutions, organisations and structures adopt the same characteristics to those of fast-food chains (including the aspects of efficiency, calculability, predictability as well as control). Ritzer uses the multinational e-commerce corporation *eBay*[77] as an example for generating a notion of unpredictability that appears to be a counter-image of the disenchantment of modernity (in the German original, the term used is '*entzauberung*' or the breaking of a magic spell) that Weber had discerned borrowing from Schiller. While one knows what one will get in a McDonaldised structure, places like eBay promise enchantment through variety and unpredictability because their mass content is consumer-produced.

Nevertheless, McDonaldised structures are continuously implemented and underly the database itself and its user interface, Ritzer explains. Variety on eBay – and I would like to add Tinder as an example – would not be manageable without the architecture underlying the fast-food industry and many other contemporary social aspects. To ensure efficiency on Tinder, the format of profiles is predetermined, as are the characteristics to be shared, the maximum length of the biography and the modes of interaction in line with centrally controlled structures and principles. Being able to craft a short biography implies liberty, but it is a much-reduced version of more 'traditional' web-based dating platforms. The different checkboxes (although these are fewer than on other dating platforms) and the category of the 'date' per se are also characteristic of a quantified experience. Tinder's prized emphasis on *autonomy* (coming from the Greek and meaning 'regulation of the self') is, in fact, to a noteworthy degree *heteronomous* (meaning 'regulated by others') on the app. It is, therefore, plausible that research participants shared the sentiment of there being a lack of enchanting authenticity in a place that connotes instantaneous, invocable, even flaming magic. As Gross and Simmons put it:

> Whatever one thinks of claims of affinity between contemporary culture and post-Fordist production regimes … it is not hard to imagine that people today, having become connoisseurs of experiential variety, might feel stymied by personal relationships they view as standardized and utterly predictable. (Gross and Simmons, 2002:552)

Tinder's seemingly endless (but similar) options may have hypernormalised perceptions of an arbitrary mimicry of reality, converting to a loss of actual engagement or commitment.

[77] A US-based, multinational e-commerce corporation.

Notwithstanding, individuals find ways to adapt to cultural change facilitated and zoomed into by technology and persist in navigating contradictions. The app's reputation and the quick, looks-based swiping practices it produces is not all there is to tindering experiences. Even though users may be reluctant to express what they are looking for on Tinder (as we shall see onwards), what motivates people to download (and re-download) the app is a more sincere desire for some form of connection than jokey anecdotes convey. Zeldin (1995) considers the search for new and old types of relationships, both close and distant, to be the most important human preoccupation, though given different names and taking different paths. As a channel for various 'kinds' of relating (distantly or within reach, with the new or the familiar), Tinder is disassociated from realness and authenticity, which is partially due to the prevalent patterns of self-representation. However, many of these trends apply to social media use more broadly and have, as such, been in the focus of social researchers. I argue that there is something more specific to how Tinder, ultimately dedicated to an eroticised, face-to-face intimacy, is experienced, rendering the platform about as undesirable as it is intriguing.

'What we make of other people, and what we see in the mirror when we look at ourselves, depends on what we know of the world, what we believe to be possible, what memories we have, and whether our loyalties are to the past, present or future,' says Zeldin (1995:13). Mentalities of tindering are just as rooted in embodied memories as any other ways of connecting. These are not simply extinguished by ubiquity and repetition but, instead, expanded upon. Technology is used as a supplemental tool, as an extension in seeking to improve on or learn about themselves by dint of actively facilitated encounters with others. There is an attraction about the notion of being able to create and undo experiences via the technology. The multiplicity of choices to be made on Tinder do produce a welcome air of autonomy when setting the stage for each encounter. This can be done by quickly putting together a new profile, finding a new match, and starting a new conversation. The steps are straightforward and consume relatively little time, but their efforts were often described as tiring and sobering. Tom put it this way:

> It feels like work. And I don't really understand the culture of it. My experience has been that there at least three different codes of conduct. Like there's different subcultures that run into each other and get confused, like people who want to hook-up like right now, no strings attached, there's people there to date, there's people who want to get married … There's just a whole lot going on [laughs]. So I deleted it because I think at the time, I was just looking for random hook-ups at the time, and then I realised I didn't have time for this. I'd rather just meet someone more organically.

When I matched with Tom, he had a very humorous profile in which he integrated commentary into pictures and poked some fun at himself while also showing what he does, for instance, working at his desk at university – thereby affirming the authenticity of his profile. Despite Tom's creative profile, his approach to conversations, he admitted, was rather standardised:

> I guess I have to be honest here because it's for research … I have a pretty set thing, like I don't send the same message to everyone because that feels kind of weird. I almost imagine them finding out … but I'm trying to be short. I sent long, jokey messages to people before, and they never replied. So now I try to say something specific or funny about their profile and then something else, like two different sentences. Something like, hey, I'm not totally psycho – that's something I'm trying to signal – and there's something cool about you, the reason I swiped right. The second thing is that I say something to open up a conversation, ask a question or say something that invites for her to say something back.

After trying out the app for casual sex and, at another point in time, looking for the 'perfect thing', Tom developed an approach that encourages a conversation based on an aspect specific to the person, but one that also allowed him to move between matches without spending too much time and effort on only a few. The embrace of Tinder's freedoms whilst expressing a desire to meet someone 'by chance' shows that what is sought to be merged is both a maximised sense of agency and a maximised notion of experiencing 'authentically'. It also exemplifies that measures are taken to align desires and expectations with the Tinder format. Such standardised-yet-crafty tindering, curated to fit into instant, binary 'yes' or 'no' selection paradigm resonates with frameworks of social fiction. Like Alice, who keeps adjusting her size to the requirements of the situations she finds herself in, tinderers' desires capture aspirations for completeness and capacities to adapt. Tom managed to produce more matches than he would have had he spent more time on each individual message and using too much humour (which may be misinterpreted in a message). However, temptations of agency may also become dampened by aspiring to the absolute. The arithmetic of maximising experiences leads to the aspect of authenticity to be associated with a dually conceptualised offline experience. Efficacy is also exemplified in blogs and YouTube tutorials, further contributing to the notion that tindering lacks a sense of 'realness' and that 'success' on the platform (here limited to matches) can be manufactured by following certain steps.

Authenticity is a major virtue of modernity, not least since Rousseau introduced the idea of the authentic individuum. It became an ideal, a code that, in the words of Illouz (2018), organises decision-making and consumption practices, also in contemporary dating. Authenticity, she contends, is an economic worth – organic vegetables, the Prada handbag, and the Picasso artwork

are the most expensive when they are authentic. A marriage may be left for a life in which we are more authentically ourselves, maximising self-worth. There was a consensus among participants that meaningful connections meant establishing links where, initially, there were no points of connection. Authenticity, on the other hand, can comprise different maxims. Is it genuineness (whatever the markers may be), is it knowledge of originality or a faithful, traceable representation of self? Does it require a seal of approval and, if so, who declares a Tinder profile to be authentic? If authenticity implies the representation of an essence of the self, what precisely would be the filters altering it? Can those be considered producing a 'lack' if they are already increasingly integrated into daily routines?

Van Leeuwen (2001) argues that the media as well as the social sciences grant certain people and certain kinds of talk more authenticity than others and, hence, consider them potential sources of truth upon which to base their judgements. This also tends to be based on the romantic belief that what people say spontaneously is more truthful and unedited than what they say after preparation. Ethnographers' focus on 'ordinary people' also incorporates particular notions of truthfulness and the authentic, implying that their choice-making captures reality more than, for example, talking to politicians who are skilled at constructing narratives. Thus, there is an underlying idea of something to discover beyond the surface of social reality and performativity, which rules the social surface. Authenticity is not an absolute, all-or-nothing matter of this kind and certainly is not an objective feature. As Goffman (1981) explicates, it is, instead, very much relative to the norms associated with a social role or identity and the group or relationship it finds itself in. There are parallel and co-existing manifestations of the 'real', but, as a social fiction, authenticity has moral merit.

The McDonaldised aspects of Tinder (more so than other dating platforms that are not considered to be as hyperfocused on a multitude of options) show that its capacity to connect has its limits. The app does not simply serve to make its users strong, smart, fast, and free. If it were, they might not resort to re-downloading the app after deleting it as they would have been effectively enchanted or supplemented utilizing Tinder. Who has access, who is authorized, who is algorithmically pre-selected for a tinderer - these aspects become deliberately obscured through the gamified swiping interface and an abandon of images. While they attribute a lightness to the swiping portion of tindering, they also create a sense of uncertainty. Online and offline experiences failing to live up to their marketed image, promising an experience produced with ease and immediacy, generate anxieties and insecurities, not unlike the ones Bauman (2013) describes as liquefying love. Scholars like Bauman (2013) and Illouz (2018) assume that digital media, as sources of freedom, lead to a

lack of solidarity when connecting with others. 'Ghosting' is often considered symptomatic of this trend and indicative of individualistic, unapologetic and detrimental effects on relating. Fears of becoming a prop in another person's story, deprived of one's humanity, were reflected in study participants' concerns with authenticity.

While Tinder clichés (in terms of pictures and conduct) are met with some degree of disillusionment (and claims that *everyone* on Tinder is a certain way), there are also forms of resistance, namely by creating distance between oneself and the app or by developing a tindering expertise that allows room to guide oneself through claims of subjectivity governed by Tinder. This may be interpreted as a healing ritual, like the ones happening in the Mankon kingdom at the beginning of each agricultural cycle. Warnier (2007) describes how, after the women started farming, the country is sealed off by the palace from external malevolent forces such as tornadoes, hailstorms (frequent in this season), locusts and other pests. This apotropaic ritual is also performed by putting medicines across the paths and at road junctions. Deleting Tinder (before downloading it again) effectively seals off the rabbit hole as an entry point and allows for a time of recovery. Following this recovery, essences may become accessible again in their multiplicity.

Tindering is an acquired skill. The way in which the commonly used platform is structured, structures (but does not unidirectionally determine) how courtship happens. How a person responds to Tinder profiles depends on the social codes they carry, but its economy may also be countered. With outcomes of matches not actually being predictable and rather characterised by unknown factors (for instance, one cannot be sure what a match is looking for and whether there will be attraction in person), Tinder profiles and their interpretation are imbued with risk but also power and potential. As Horst and Miller (2006) observe, digitally infused change tends to be driven largely by practice, rather than top-down planning. Tinderers were constantly straddling the standardised, guiding structures underlying Tinder and the room for adaptation its vague guidelines allow for.

Pictures and mini biographies are very particular representations of the self, captured on special occasions. Participants of this study were acutely aware of this. Some profiles stand out for their unusual degree of creativity, like Tom's. The widespread shares of a Twitter account created by a 21-year-old man to woo a woman he had Tinder-matched with show a recognition of extra effort. As the dating app does not allow for the sending of pictures, he used the 'Tortellini for Tilly' account he had made for his match to demonstrate his cooking skills, including pictures of the steps of making the stuffed pasta parcels. The last tweet showed a selfie entitled 'win her heart' as

the final part of the series of self-instructions.[78] The story made its rounds after 'Tilly' shared it on Twitter and received many appreciative comments.

More often, though, clichés and stereotypes (even if despised) were used by participants themselves. Some took conscious steps in seeking to eliminate 'unfitting' matches by listing their personality type (according to different psychological tests) or state what they want under *no* circumstances, such as hook-ups, relationships, a 'pen pal' they will never end up meeting in person, or an encounter with a sexist/racist or other '-ists'. Usually, this is the result of unpleasant previous experiences. Stereotypes were used as guidelines to avoid certain 'kinds' of people, with women often reporting staying clear of men who feel the need to portray themselves in topless mirror-selfies and male users saying they avoid the 'duckface' – another common social-media pose that involves a pouting of the lips while sucking in one's cheeks. These specifications work as additional filters beyond Tinder's design, which is limited to the parameters of distance, gender (binarily distinguished as 'man' and 'woman') and age. The app also informs the swiper about shared 'likes' and 'friends', as they pertain to Facebook sites, to suggest commonality.[79] These indicators (as well as shared music preferences) may serve to match someone with whom one has social references in common. It can also be used to follow the often-mentioned desire to meet a person one, without Tinder, would be unlikely to come across. Even though Tinder's visual focus is one of the aspects that makes the app seem superficial, many participants said they would not swipe right for profiles unless there were a) multiple, clear pictures capturing different angles of the person, b) at least one full-body picture to eliminate the possibility of someone being overweight and c) an indication as to who the profiled person is in a group picture if that is the first or only picture on their dating profile. Where this was not the case, it would allow for a notion of uncertainty to grow (whether the person will be as expected) and firm suspicions that the person was 'not portraying themselves 'authentically' enough.

In response to my enquiry of selection criteria on Tinder, 33-year-old marketing specialist Michelle, who had just opened up her relationship with Bill to other partners, quickly produced hers in the form of a checklist:

> So if a profile has only one picture and no bio[graphy], doesn't matter how nice the picture is, I'm probably gonna say no. And if

[78] Access https://www.insider.com/man-wins-over-tinder-date-with-twitter-dedicated-to-pasta-2019-10 (4 August 2019).

[79] It should be kept in mind that the specificities of the app change and also depend on the market.

> they're really gorgeous you go oh, it must be a fake profile. And if the picture looks like someone screenshotted it, when the quality is bad, then I won't choose that or if they only have a few pictures and it's maybe just their face and only use that typical selfie angle where everyone looks skinny at and they haven't written anything about themselves, then I'll stay away from that.

One single picture, couples looking for threesomes, pictures in which people exclusively wear sunglasses or are only shown in groups, pouting, Afrikaans names, and people indicating that they are shorter than her (178cm) are exclusion criteria for 32-year-old Phoebe. She would also get irritated by profiles popping up continuously, presumably because the person has a paid profile allowing for (inauthentic) boosts to the front of the profile queue.

Looks tend to initially override the expressed desire for meaningful conversation, as Latin-American, postgraduate Public Health student Enrique's comment shows:

> Ahmmm … if girls don't post bios, description-wise, it's… I don't know the word I'm looking for. (pause) It's boring [laughs]. It's a cute girl but no bio … I mean I'm gonna swipe anyway because she's cute. But as soon as we match and only give me one-word answers … oh this is boring … what's the point.

Tinder's overall 'thin' or sleek indicators of beauty and desirability are not vastly different from stereotypical representations of beauty and desirability in other societal contexts, be these commodified or otherwise. The prevalent idea that Tinder is a space for the social cultivation of a unified taste is indicative of broader processes of simplification, standardisation and routinisation. Albeit commonly presented as capturing the very essence of modern dating practices, Tinder is not a unique space in terms of self-representation. On the contrary, desires and fears brought into the Tinder space quite resemble those in other contexts of intimacy building. Still, anecdotes about 'Tinder profiles' (often shared in a tone of humour or sarcasm) and the homogenous stance of study participants that encounters arranged via Tinder lack authenticity, speak to a grappling with symbolisms, standards and routines that are, specifically, linked back to Tinder as a platform. This is reminiscent of Gershon's (2011) findings on Facebook in its early stages. The college students the author interviewed were not only disillusioned by a lack of magic but more so by the realisation that neoliberal market logics were now infiltrating romantic relationships via the platform. Facebook profiles were understood as reflexively managed representations of embodied selves. The constant need for management and reflective distance that forms part of the Facebook logic was not something users wanted in their intimate relationships, nor was it how they desired to be - especially so since Facebook information was considered to be tantalising and incomplete,

encouraging more and more compulsive and unsatisfying Facebook use. Very similarly, the ever-present possibility of playing with Tinder's expectations of a formattable, GPS-locatable embodiment may sometimes be appealing but also challenging and horrifying.

Tinder users are neither under a digital spell, nor are they entirely *entzaubert*. There are different ways in which Tinder's narrow-yet-vague frameworks are adopted and these, as the remainder of this dissertation demonstrates, are subject to shifts and changes. Tinder has a field of action in responding to non-compliance with its guidelines. For the most part, this will take the form of reduced matches, being rejected for not fitting into a standardised frame of reference or even being banned from Tinder without an explanation. (It is possible that my being banned from Tinder as a declared researcher had something to do with Tinder's desire to keep up their own appearances). Power, says Foucault (1978), is only tolerable and thus maintainable on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself, as Tinder does with its promised agency and gamified approach. Tinder users themselves do play a part in constructing the discourse for and against the form of modernity, which the app serves as an anecdotal placeholder for. The dating app's famous flame icon may, at times, be read as a promise for excitement and, at others, as a bad omen for the relationship between technology and bodies. Bodies are made to fit into this narrative that is rich with tensions, but they themselves remain the leading medium with which fantasy-fuelled desires are approached. Like Gershon (2011) found to be the case for young Facebook users, distance to the Tinder app is created. For Gershon's student interviewees, this was done by removing themselves from the platform. For my participants, it would usually be a 'Tinder break', but it also took the form of downplaying expectations and attempting to create emotional distance to matches. Thus, distance and proximity are not superimposed by the app but continue being negotiated and experiences re-located by users, as the following chapters will show. It will, furthermore, become clear that seeking autonomy from Tinder may also take the form of simply thinking of oneself as counter-hegemonic or using adaptive strategies in manoeuvring constructions of normality.

Summary conclusion: the maddening maximisation of pleasure

With intersubjectivity being grounded in the body, it has the potential to transform and be distorted. Tindering is a normative practice that demonstrates trends, but it cannot be essentialised in line with the Tinder ethos. There are variations based on parameters such as class and ethnicity, but also individual preference, just like Miller and Sinanan (2017) find it to be the case for Facebook users across contexts. The frequent changes to the app design, the apps shifting image (from hook-up to an app for other kinds of - eroticised - connections) along with a variety of contextual circumstances and personal desires render tindering anything but static. There is no inherent

condition to being a tinderer, to being a male or female tinderer, or a tinderer with a certain cultural background and class. Yet, users themselves stubbornly scan profiles for indicators of an essence, which is often described along the lines of the authentic.

Being 'authentic' in the digitally mobile dating scene has a nuanced flavouring with an emphasis on individual freedom. Its limits are set by the Tinder framework itself, in line with which profiles are created, approved – and viewed by other users. However, Tinder clichés should not be considered a mere trite and fictitious banality as they illustrate such processes of distortion. The apparently standardised process seems disillusioning, and Tinder fails to follow up on its allure of makeable experience. Tinder's 'single is a terrible thing to waste' campaign reflects pressures to 'maximise' dating realities with freedom and autonomy becoming an obligation to constantly explore without actually knowing (or being hesitant to specify) what one may want to experience beyond the archetype of the free, flexible individual.

I postulate that standardised and, thus, distorted representations of tindering also become hypernormalised in public discourse. This means that Tinder is considered a somewhat 'false' world separate from experiences worth preserving. Conversationally, it is, at best, deemed a tool for adventure or a stopover to an improved version of the self. It becomes a notion difficult to look beyond. An accumulation of encounters experienced as less than authentic trigger a Tinder fatigue, which, interestingly, does not necessarily mean that users exclude the platform from their repertoire of establishing intimacy. Confronted with a growing array of tindering approaches, I became increasingly intrigued by what behaviour trends, memories and corporeal experiences may be embedded in the ostensible superficiality of Tinder and in what ways reported trends of an increasing disposability of relationships might be responded to.

As a world of fluidities, Tinder is a problematic fantasy space. Even desires for some forms of boundedness often remain undefined and thus uncoagulated. Yet, users seem to always find new ways to extend the self and edit their story in interesting and sometimes surprising ways. Beyond concerns about syntheticness and vanity, carefulness but also playfulness are evident in the various, imaginative ways in which technologies are used to establish genuine connections, to explore selves and the very real worlds surrounding them. Introducing the study participants in more detail, **Chapter 5** investigates how the app is used to relate to the self and others and how these approaches tie into broader life histories. Hence, I consider how interviewees give meaning to a hypernormalised app in the hopes of finding worthwhile (however long the 'while') connections. It is conveyed that, even when trying to reduce experiences to the superficial level in attempts to

maximise the self and reduce experiences to pleasure, the manoeuvring of relationships penetrates layers of memory, pain, and pleasure.

Chapter 5
Hedonism, fantasy and 'real' experiences: Phenomenologies of romance and intimacy on Tinder

Introduction

Thus far, I have touched on the fast consumption of images associated with inauthenticity and Tinder itself, as well as the platform's promise of agency, autonomy and freedom. Hereafter, I explore how Tinder as a tool signifying makeability is adopted to guide relationships in a predictable manner to avoid pain and produce a safe form of enchantment. I also address the tensions produced in the process with bodies and embodied memory factoring into a practice of dating that is, initially, reduced to the liminal experience in a non-place. Whereas desires for meaningful connections were often expressed, the abstractness and lack of reality attributed to Tinder were dominant themes in participants' efforts to address their own needs through dating apps as places of relating, as were hurt and disappointment. Having been on a 'fair share' of dates, they would reflect on their interaction strategies and often become increasingly economic about how much they would invest in a date – thereby hypernormalising Tinder as a space of mere superficial caricatures of the human and their exchangeability even further. Despite an appetite for connections beyond the standardised, selection strategies are established that do not necessarily tease out more 'realness' but foreground the minimisation of disappointment. Adding to insecurities, as this chapter shows, were narrow and simultaneously vague of ideas of Tinder dating. Instead of extending the self freely (as advertised), tindering approaches were cautiously and strategically geared towards extending the self in certain ways. Despite this apparent adaptation to standardised tindering frameworks, vulnerability and control were aspects that remained relevant and that were frequently expressed. While Tinder was used to simplify realities, it also sometimes served as a space for fantasy and the imaginative, allowing for an extension of the self beyond the confines of liminality.

Economics of emotions and meaning making in a non-place

I met 30-year-old Emily in the afternoon of a Capetonian winter day in a little café near the city centre. She had been the only woman thus far, who seemed keen on a conversation about dating experiences. It was my second official interview, and I was looking forward to learning more about this person who had presented herself on Tinder with a variety of pictures, accessorised with friendly smiles but little personal information. As I headed for an empty table and checked my

phone for a message from her, Emily approached me with a purposeful step. A large pair of sunglasses, which she only took off a while later, made it difficult for me to read her expressions. Her smiles were brief and restrained by a tenseness in her face when she, before even sitting down, rushed to explain why she had been keen to meet me. Emily, born into a family that would be considered English (of White British descend) in South Africa, worked as a remote English teacher, instructing mostly Asian clients via a computer screen for most of her days. She was doing this to finance her part-time psychology studies, which she was also doing remotely. I was surprised to learn that her English teaching income was sufficient for her to live in this pricier area of Cape Town in which most flats exceed the rental prices of the student-popular southern suburbs, but she claimed that it paid well enough. Stiffly positioned in front of me, she started outlining how her dating experiences had been intense due to her only feeling attracted to women with mental health conditions. Her previous partnerships were primed by her taking on a supportive, caring role with the result that she felt her own needs becoming unrecognised. This, she said, had led her to wonder whether there may be a way to influence her intuitive choice-making (online and offline). She inquired about my view on whether and how Tinder may be a useful tool in developing strategies that allow her to determine the course and the kind of intimacy she thought was good for her.

I was unable to lend her any concrete answers. Even if I had been convinced of a guideline to offer, I do not consider myself in the position to give qualified life advice – nor would I want to take on this responsibility. In fact, as a scholar of the mind, she is likely to be more equipped to answer the question herself. A few months into my fieldwork, Emily had even started working as a trainee psychologist and had four regular clients seeking her advice. Over a glass of wine at a braai we both went to (it turned out that her then-partner was friends with a good friend of mine), Emily explained that she thought two of her clients were in love with her and that she found the power she felt over the two men both enticing and confusing. Control and vulnerability, pleasure and pain, seemed to ultimately form part of the same coin and form a synergy - rather than being the sum of its own specific parts.

The urgency with which Emily was searching for answers, trying to decipher love and attraction, and seeking out concrete strategies in doing so, did make me think about how the self and desired potentialities of being form part of the interpretations of vague Tinder profile summaries and how matching with them topples into intersubjective experiences. Thinking about Emily on my way back home, I started visualising the dating stories and concerns she had shared with me as a journey, much like Alice's fall down the rabbit hole in the tale that had her unsuspectingly stumble

into a fantasy-fuelled wonderland upon trailing a curious white rabbit. Already at the start of the journey, Alice is held back by entries that are disproportionate to her size. Consuming a potion of some kind becomes the only way to continue the adventure she anticipated. The story can be read as a hedonistic tale of self-discovery – after all, the rabbit hole with all its adventures is the alternative path to the dull, apparently pre-determinedness of the everyday. Alice's journey, guided by the white rabbit who had triggered her curious awakening as well as other obscure characters, is linear and committed. There is no going back to the beginning of it all. Only at a trial during which Alice protests the powerful Queen of Heart's proceedings for their nonsensicalness and knocks over an army made of playing cards upon growing to a huge size, her rabbit-hole journey is eventually concluded. She wakes up with her head in her sister's lap at a riverbank and retells her adventures to her, like this study's participants recounted theirs. Emily was intrigued by Tinder as a means to avoid an absorption into dating experiences. Using the app was an effort to move away from what she had pinpointed as her issue: an attraction towards co-dependent partners. Shrinking and extending herself in adjusting to someone else's needs is what Emily intended to avoid. However, what she did not consider is that distortions, exaggerated expressions of ordinary madness, are also very much part of the rabbit hole called Tinder - containing stories of dating, desiring, wondering and imagining. Like Alice, tinderers are encouraged to stretch and shrink themselves according to the situations they find themselves in – indeed, even before being able to enter the beautiful, promising, variety-rich gardens of Tinder. Certain aspects of the self are emphasised when online and searching for an envisioned intimate counterpart, while other aspects of the self that seem less desirable (or not in line with visions of the desired other) are shrunk until they become almost unrecognisable. These distortions, the ways in which they are deciphered, and the tindering journeys this process becomes enveloped in are at the core of this chapter.

Unlike the rabbit hole Alice winded up falling into and the confusing aspects of her journey detached from 'reality', Tinder seems always to offer an easy way out. The acts of downloading, swiping, blocking, deleting - and starting all over again - promise endless potentialities one can actively influence, depending on one's mood and current desires. Tinder holds a promise of enhancing and even perfecting experiences. It is a space in which, from the outset, little is given away about a person and their desires, apart from a few, posed images and, perhaps, a usually informationally thin mini biography. The rest is a drawing board for brand-new tales to form vagueness into shape. Expectations are kept similarly nebulous and require skill in being deciphered. At the same time, they are concretised by certain understandings of sexuality (Illouz, 2018) as well as the app's frameworks and clichés associated with the app, as **chapter 4** has shown.

Tinder, therefore, constitutes a wondrous lore through which to examine contemporary dating experiences and how they are sought to be guided by individuals, as I shall do hereinafter.

Some of the Tinder journeys outlined during my fieldwork were narrated as continuous correspondence between people, things, and imaginations, unfolding over a limited time, apart from the few that were ongoing. Nevertheless, most of the contacts made in the form of matching, chatting, and going on dates were significantly shorter-lived. In most of the interviews I conducted, dating stories did not take on sensational dimensions, as the *Tinder Nightmares* Instagram page and online articles I have come across about dating apps had me believe. There were, however, sudden changes of pace, deafening silences, and a lack of a certain 'quality' or intensity associated with an 'organic' way of meeting, which is offline. Pains and disappointments experienced via the app were, initially, minimised as an experience. They were also described as something one grows immune to. Upon further narration, it became evident that the quickly accumulating pains and rejections did leave their marks. I was left thinking about what a desire for the authentic may mean as an experience in this social milieu, what it says about popular (if measured by the number of downloads) contemporary dating practices and what it was that beguiled study participants to continually download Tinder after (often repeatedly) having deleted the app out of frustration.

One of my first interviews struck me as very interesting in the sense of the ambiguous relationship users seem to harbour with Tinder, leading to the continued usage of an app described as producing less-than-authentic experiences. Twenty-eight-year-old English-South African architect, Nick, embraced the idea of meeting someone unknown to him:

> I really just want to have that experience of talking to a complete stranger that you know nothing about. My standard thing to say is would you like to go for a drink. Let me know if you do or don't. Some say it's very forward, but for some it's fine, I like the spontaneity. Suddenly you're in a space with this person that you know nothing about. I find this really … exciting. if it's a stranger, you can open up. Even if it's just for one night.

Having lunch with me at a swarming restaurant in downtown Cape Town during his break, Nick also characterised Tinder as the perfect tool if one wants 'love without the fall', borrowing the idea of love without falling from philosopher and sociologist, Slavoj Žižek. The theme of wanting to avoid the pain of rejection via Tinder recurred in different conversations with interviewees interpreting the kind of rejection and pain on Tinder or by their Tinder dates to be somewhat different and less intense than 'real life' emotions. Even though Nick spent the greater part of our first interview outlining the benefits of dating via Tinder, the adventures it promises without risking

too much of a 'fall' and thus getting emotionally wounded, he later reported having downloaded an additional dating app, *Happn*:

> I got it recently. I like the idea but in practice it doesn't really work that well. I LOVE the idea … It's exactly … but there aren't enough people on it in Cape Town for it to work properly so it ends up like Tinder, oh you crossed paths with me today. Often you cross paths once. I envisioned it, like, you cross paths with that person every day but you just never met. But it's probably, we're sitting here and someone just drove past. Imagine you work together and you cross paths often, that could be something interesting. But it wasn't as exciting as I thought.

Along with Nick's desire for adventure and elasticity regarding self-extensions, social frameworks were keeping them contained by painting pictures of idealised forms of connections in the background, including Hollywood-inspired narratives of instantaneous, unambiguous passion. Ahmed (2014) sees emotion as endowing bodies with value, aligned with powerful ideologies. This also means that there are bound to be disjunctions between signification and material circumstance. For Nick, this was not the case when using Tinder for a safer kind of intimacy and ending up dating someone he described, in significantly few words, as anything but enchanting. It merely turned into a relationship because they started seeing each other frequently and not because he had strong feelings for her, Nick stressed. He found himself between poles of different impulses when giving up control to some extent in outsourcing choice to chance despite those becoming blended in any kind of reality (online or offline).

Upon his description of how he would use Tinder for spontaneous distractions and casual sexual relationships, reasoning that keeping things somewhat superficial was best for him right now, Nick went on to share an experience with me he seemed both reluctant and excited to put into words. Halfway through his vegetarian burger, he explained, a smile promptly illuminating his expression, that he had actually met someone on Tinder the previous night whom he really liked. Initially, Nick had made her acquaintance offline a while back, but, at the time, he was still dating the unenchanting Tinder match. The night before our interview, they had spontaneously decided to go out after matching on Tinder and spent the night together at his place. 'It was … it was actually really great. Ja … it was great.', he said blushingly with a shy laugh and in a lowered voice, as though conveying a secret. The 'realness' Nick wanted to avoid using Tinder on account of the risk of falling - and thus making himself vulnerable - had caught up with him. The contradicting desires of Nick and other study participants speak to the tensions produced by ideals of autonomy, a yearning for the magical and inhibitions towards Tinder as a channel via which to connect.

Mitigating desires and vulnerability via Tinder

Although authenticity (contrasted with stagedness) was priced and imagined as enchanting, one of Tinder's major ostensible affordances was being able to determine the pace of connections and, thus, to mitigate degrees of vulnerability. On the app, one can let engagements unfold gradually, with control and geared into desired directions. One can decide when to swipe, whether and when to respond to a message, or to disconnect and communicate for a while before meeting face-to-face with someone. Phoebe used the app intending to learn navigating heteronormativity, as she put it, and explore a part of herself that is attracted to men. She had dated only women since the age of 19, when a man sexually assaulted her. Now, in her early 30s and after separating from the woman Phoebe had been dating for years and whom she described as her best friend, she discovered her initially latent sexual interest in men. At the same time, she said: 'I'm trying to get my life together' with her intuitive decisions leading her into the exact opposite direction of 'togetherness'. I had met Phoebe through a friend of mine whom she had known for a long time. He was the first man in years with whom she had sexual contact, and they carefully, and with much verbal communication, found a way to be intimate without her feeling triggered. The subsequent conversation expresses her attempts to keep her intuitions in check using Tinder and the balancing act of maintaining both a sense of control and desire.

> Phoebe: The people I have a crush on right now … there's a lot of uncertainty. … It's appealing. But that's really hard to achieve. I think a first Tinder date has to be knock-it-out-of-the-park amazing to reduce that fact and often I wonder about things like … like I don't necessarily bring my A-game to every Tinder date. I'm sort of sassing it out … how are you, who are you.
>
> Leah: Why's that?
>
> Phoebe: Maybe partly a defence mechanism. Like if I pull out all the stops and try to really charm this person … I put in a lot of effort … but also ... For me it's about anxiety. So when you fall for someone organically … that feeling … there's no real, like, assessments, you're like, argh, I have these feelings now. Often for me there's a lot of these in the background. So people I fall for organically it's like my brain stem lets me down. Like men and women … whoever. In different ways. And Tinder is almost an opportunity to try and short-circuit that, to have quite practical criteria that are sensitive in assessing a potential long-term partnership without engaging that animal part of your brain that just wants … I mean I think what most people do when they get into a relationship organically … they find a person that appeals to them for all the unconscious reasons … and then you try to work together to turn them into conscious reasons. And on Tinder it's like I'm not even gonna touch that guy … I'm not getting into this.

In one way or another, vulnerability and control featured in all the intimate narratives outlined during the research. What interviews also exposed is that tindering is a journey that tugs at understandings of one's desires and how they are to be prioritised. They, furthermore, reveal tensions between thinking of Tinder as less-than real (and, therefore, less desirable) - and yet as enabling certain desires. Sylvester's story is illustrative of this. The Fifty-two-year-old music producer started his Tinder adventure by looking for a woman who would address all his selection criteria: never married, childless, of Catholic faith, self-sufficient, patient, understanding and preferably still of childbearing age. 'If things work out, I would settle down. Get married, have kids …', he said to me at our first meeting over coffee in Sea Point (an affluent coastal area of Cape Town), where he had suggested meeting. At that point, he had met with one woman from Tinder, with whom he had chatted about recording her singing. At that point, he was not sure whether he would be interested in more than a professional relationship but left it open as an option. 'I'm sorry to say that, but her singing was *horrible*', Sylvester said grimacing. He interpreted this as a form of dishonesty that ruled out any continuity. In his disappointment, he deleted the app. During an interview five months later and upon returning from his travels to Spain, Sylvester explained having changed his approach to Tinder rather drastically. It was not about finding someone who matches his checklist anymore or even someone he may become romantically involved with. Rather, he had started using Tinder as a tool to learn how to engage with individuals more broadly. Like Phoebe, Sylvester tried to keep his expectations in check and embraced that Tinder meetings (even though generally considered 'dates') may not follow a 'traditional dating route' in the way he had initially imagined. It meant less pressure of becoming physical, as well, since he had not had sexual contact with anyone else for years, apart from a sex worker he described as once having had a shameful entanglement with. At least he was meeting people, Sylvester said over a Sunday breakfast we shared in a busy café in Sea Point. 'It sounds terrible, but even if I won't necessarily find *the one* on Tinder, it's better than nothing.', Sylvester remarked with an apologetic laugh.

Frequently, participants said they were seeking to patch their loneliness via Tinder. Thirty-three-year-old Aidan, a British-South African divorcee living in the northern suburbs and originally from Johannesburg, declared this to be the motivator for downloading the app. At our first get-together, he went ahead and ordered a vegan pizza for us to share along with two soymilk cappuccinos and declared I would be vegan for the afternoon (without enquiring if I, perhaps, already happen to be one). He described how he had become interested in philosophy after his divorce. After his

girlfriend had fallen pregnant in their early 20s, they got married as per their parents' expectations. The pair ended up buying a house and having another child. Aidan recounted how stuck, unhappy, and consistently frustrated he had felt in his marriage. The divorce felt like a liberation; he started working out, reading non-fiction, and learned to live a vegan lifestyle. Beyond these practices, Aidan was questioning all kinds of things that he had taken for granted. Not least of all, he was challenging the concept of monogamy, which he, at length, offered bio-evolutionary explanations for throughout the first 15 minutes of this first meeting of ours. It felt like -splaining[80] at its best, whether out of the assumption that I would have no knowledge of the subject or because this demonstration of knowledge made him feel more confident in the interview set-up. After relaxing a bit in the presence of me and the audio-recording phone between us, Aidan softened his efforts to tell himself, which seemed somewhat rehearsed or, in the very least, accompanied by tension. 'I'm actually a bit lonely,' he murmured, looking down at his half-eaten piece of pizza, adding that he wished he could just have a 'cuddle buddy' so as not to have this exploratory stage of his life disrupted whilst still receiving physical comfort. In later interviews, Aidan suggested that he would be quite happy to be in a committed relationship again but that he had not found anyone that is a 'good match', outlining his past online approaches for me to comment and give advice on. Ideally, he said, he would end up with the woman he had an affair with at the end of his marriage but who had, herself, remained in her marriage after his divorce. They were still speaking daily and 'telling each other everything', as he put it. One major indicator for being a 'good match' in the sense of a connection (temporary or longer-term) was a clear sign of mutual interest for Aidan, without which he would not dare to take the step of suggesting a physical date. Even where loneliness is merely patched, affinity in any form comes with the risk of rejection and hurt. Yet, tindering was often a way to cushion blows and avoid 'real' rejection. Tom, the postgraduate biology student with the humorous Tinder profile, for instance, reflected:

> The fact that I can talk to multiple people at once makes it so different. If I can talk to like 10 people and one person doesn't reply to my message in the middle of the conversation, I don't get this 'why didn't you reply, did I say something stupid' or like 'what's going on?' … it doesn't feel like that at all. It's light-hearted and there's a lot of people, right. Whereas when you're at a party and you're having this great conversation and you're like, wow, this is amazing and then they just walk away from you [laughs] you you're, like, I guess you're not obligated to talk to me because we don't

[80] Referring to something being explained (often by men to a women) in a condescending, overconfident and often simplifying manner, assuming the other person has no knowledge about the matter.

> know each other but that was weird, right. That can mess up your whole night.

Bill, Michelle's partner with whom she had recently 'opened up' their relationship, described the tensions involved in getting back into the 'dating game' being in his 40s and after years of being in a monogamous relationship:

> It's easier on the app. Guys are afraid of rejection. It also depends on your situation. So, we went out with the idea of me trying to pick up a girl. As a concept, I thought it would be easy for me. But I'd actually forgotten how to do it real-time. How we met it also … different. I can't remember the last person I picked up in a real environment. But even then, getting rejection, it's fine. You're the cherry on top, I have the package at home. I don't *need* you, actually. I'd *like* to get to know you better maybe.

Explorations of self in a non-place

In the stories above, dating (app) journeys were rationalised as serving individual needs and forming part of an explorative process. Navigating them becomes a juggling act of extending one's realm of experience by activating technologies of the self (within the confines of Tinder's limited format) and risking being hurt as a side product of the app's neoliberal market logic, including the apparent exchangeability of experiences. Ideally, this means stretching oneself towards desired experiences in ways that provide a feeling of being equipped to deal with the many ambiguities that intimacy entails.

Expectations of intimacy have drastically changed in 'modern relationships' as framed by Illouz (2018). Writing about emotions and consumption in *The End of Love*, the author explains that love as an identity-establishing element is on the decline and that sexualised individualism has been stretched to its limits. Emotions become commodities; relationships are readily entered and quickly left. At least at first glance, this true for many Tinder encounters as they involve the curbing of expectations while treating experiences as quintessentially transitory with a potential to be extended and spill over into something more 'real' (more on this in **chapter 6** under the term 'add-on friendship'). This approach reveals Tinder dating to, initially, be treated as an experiential space, which may be considered as a container for encounters that are *entzaubert*, less 'real' and authentic - but also easier to agentively navigate than 'organic' offline encounters. The underlying assumption is that meetings arranged via the app are liminal in that they offer an opportunity for a process of exploration without having to commit to anything *specific* and being too concerned about potential futures. This creates the impression of a space in which actions have few consequences. Despite Tinder users' dismissal of representations made up of blanket elements,

there is a prevalent idea that the self can be expressed in its essence when seeking to meet *certain* individual needs. The idea corresponds with the hypernormalised framing of swiping culture with its seemingly infinite opportunities as fuelling hedonist tendencies in an endless search for something better and complete in public discourse. Along these lines of thinking, the Tinder space (online and, to some extent, offline) is conceptually turned into a non-place, designed to be a frictionless passage to something more meaningful – as opposed to places, which are often seen as being relational and concerned with a linear process of identity formation. And yet, I found Tinder experiences to implicate more than the strategic fulfilment of individual desires without any regard of how the other person may be affected along the way. According to Augé (1995), the paradox of non-places is that anyone can feel 'at home' in them, regardless of their actual background, because they are equally alienating to everyone. Interactions on Tinder are indeed McDonaldised, deceptively simplified and reduced to singular essences in some ways. Likewise are experiences often treated as liminal in order to avoid pain. Nevertheless, I am arguing that Tinder, even when considered a non-place, can be a resource in facilitating human interaction when acknowledging that experiences are only makeable to a degree. The narratives that came up when spending time with participants laid bare how the various expectations of 'authentic' intimacy, including feeling acknowledged beyond profiled essences, become manoeuvred.

Tweaking and being tweaked by liminal intimacy

Tinder was frequently opted for as a tool to sort-of-date and have a sort-of-intimacy that lacks definition in its early stages. Despite careful or even calculating tindering styles and expressed convictions that hurt is more avoidable online, research participants' stories demonstrate that Tinder is not necessarily a 'safer' version of intimacy and that some kind of 'fall' and pain are not escapable. Confined to a non-place, Tinder experiences are implied to be relatively uninformed by the past and potential futures, but accounts suggest otherwise. In these, embodied memories formed a barrier to the makeability of experience and the usage of Tinder as an agentively navigated extension of the self, as was the case for Sylvester and others.

In some interviews, the motivation to download Tinder was getting over another person. Arietta, a 27-year-old postgraduate Public Health student and burlesque dancer of British descent, for instance, went onto Tinder for the first time after her first long-term relationship had ended. She was not ready for a new ongoing relationship yet but craved an intimacy-of-sorts, she retrospectively reasoned whilst hunching over her cappuccino during our first meeting at a bistro in Cape Town's city centre. She had come to meet me here after work but stayed in a quieter part of the southern suburbs in a shared house. What she mostly winded up finding on Tinder were

unimaginative advances. One great Tinder encounter had stood out for her, which had evolved from a coffee date to spending the entire weekend together. The man in question moved abroad not long after that. Again, the expectation was that intimacy to be found on Tinder is, at least initially, liminal, rendering it possible for Arietta to keep her emotions at bay or stay in control of them. This did not do much towards cushioning the blow when her date, with whom she became intimate on a surprisingly deep and comfortable level, was no longer available for an extension of the experience. In this case, the notion of Tinder as a producer of liminal pleasures held up - but still turned out to be saddening. For Arietta, Tinder also offered a platform to dip her toes into exploring her sexual attraction to women, which she was not sure how to navigate offline. It was an 'option' that lay mostly dormant, though, because she was not especially progressive about it at the time and felt reluctant to initiate intimacy with a woman. Even though Arietta used the potentialities of Tinder to take a step away from the familiar under a tactical maxim, the very encounter she considered 'successful' was the very one in which she had let her guard down.

'Yoh, I don't know how many times I deleted and downloaded Tinder,' explained Akhona, who, the first time around, downloaded the app to get over someone she had never met in person but was involved with for years. Tinder was a source of self-worth when she needed it: 'For me, if I feel sad and lonely and I just want to feel like people like me [laughs].' I drove 50 minutes out of Cape Town to meet the 24-year-old Environmental Science undergraduate student for coffee in the student town of Stellenbosch. Akhona had grown up in a rural area in Mpumalanga (a province in eastern South Africa) and moved to the quaint student town Stellenbosch two years prior, experiencing a freedom she had never had whilst living with her family in close quarters. Instead of telling me about her Tinder dates, Akhona leaned conspiratively across the table, putting her red-framed glasses in place and started reminiscing about meeting someone at the age of 19 on the then-popular media platform Mixit. There were no pictures or biographies available on it, and she never got to meet this ominous young man, as he was living in a different province. The distance, however, did not hamper the intensity of their relationship:

> We would talk about the deepest things, and we would vent to each other, we'd share … I value someone for how they make me feel and not about their physique and touch. It made me understand how strong emotions can be. We had such a strong bond, in a way that we could sense each other.

'Five years later,' she exclaimed loudly with a gesture that almost made her hot chocolate slop over her cup, 'I'm still hung up on this guy!' Her sharp laugh was followed by her sinking back into her chair with a headshake as though disappointed with herself. Her heart was aching with longing for

the first time when her Mixit boyfriend broke up with her after six months of near-constant chatting: 'that was the first time I felt *so* hurt, and I didn't understand because he wouldn't explain to me why. He stopped talking to me, and I always tried to find out *why, why, why*.' The two of them got back in touch later on and had been texting and talking on the phone ever since. At one point during the five years of them knowing one another virtually and upon both having become more mobile, Akhona eventually suggested meeting. He declined but continued contacting her, especially in situations when he was not feeling well, like after a breakup. Akhona said she does not mind it and explained that she could feel when he is in pain in any case and enjoys feeling able to make him feel better.

Tinder, then, was meant to be a means to finally get over her ongoing love. The first young man Akhona really liked from Tinder she met a few times and assumed they were in a relationship. When they saw each other, they would engage in non-penetrative sex after spending some time together chatting and eating and, perhaps, watching a movie. She found herself in a phase in which she questions the rules, beliefs, and taboos she knew from the cradle and with which her sexual activity as well as her interest in women were in conflict. However, Akhona clarified that she was not yet ready for penetrative sex but might decide that she might want to engage in pre-marital it (before marriage) at another point in time. When her Tinder boyfriend suddenly disappeared without a trace and stopped taking her phone calls and messages only to change his phone number, Akhona was so disheartened that she declared from now on only wanting to date women, which she, after deleting and re-downloading Tinder, had started hesitantly exploring via the app.

Revelations

As the online and the offline are often wrongly seen as separate experiences, meeting in person becomes stylised as the 'moment of truth' (Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). Illouz (2012) refers to this as a cultural practice of disappointment. She ascribes this to the absence of the physical body at the first stages of online dating and a strong focus on the rational (information-thick 'internet imagination' versus information-thin 'anticipatory imagination', inspired by the presence of a body and its subtle language). With Tinder, information has become thinner and dependent on the imagination. Tinderers are used to moving between technology and corporeality, hybridising their bodies, but the anticipatory element (which Illouz links to the presence of physical bodies) often becomes dampened. However, desires to escape surprises, disappointment or humiliation cannot be circumvented via the digital (which does *not* equal an absence of bodies) and were experienced by participants in one form or another. This is because hurt and disappointments are not reserved to corporeality. Motivations to use Tinder, as outlined above, seem straightforward and in line with

a strategic, individual-centred approach to a form of dating that leaves many of its variants initially undefined. Given the 'moment of truth' stylisation, there are bound to be disappointing encounters that influence ways of imagining further.

Bill, for instance, was interested in a woman from Hermanus with whom he had established a promising rapport online. They cultivated witty, flirtatious conversations over weeks, and both were excited to meet finally. He drove 120km to visit her, just to find that she was heavier than anticipated and that he felt no attraction towards her. Matthew, too, disregarded the geographic proximity factor that makes Tinder so convenient. The 23-year-old (born in the southern suburbs to an English father and a Portuguese mother) explained he was only looking for something casual to address his physical intimacy and comfort needs via Tinder (he emphasised missing 'cuddles' as opposed to being in a relationship). Yet, he found this person intriguing enough to make the journey to Stellenbosch one evening to meet her. Matthew was disappointed when the date turned out to be rather dull. Suddenly, they had not much to talk about anymore, and he wished she would make more of an effort to maintain a continuous conversation. They still ended up having sex at her place and he drove back the same night.

As a result of these disillusioning encounters, Bill was reluctant to drive further out for a date and invest too much (in terms of expectations and finances). He ought to be rather convinced to trade a Tinder date for an evening with Michelle, he said. Matthew winded up meeting women via Tinder that he had already known through his friendship circle and university, thus minimising the risk for disappointment. Both are not exceptional in adopting economic income-output rationale along their tindering journey. Tinderers employ different strategies in guiding their experiences into desired directions. When it comes to face-to-face encounters, Athena suggested putting forward one's most positive side to increase the likelihood of a date being enjoyed by both individuals, including asking many questions and listening attentively. Even when topics are kept light and conversations flow, other aspects of communication also determine how a date goes and whether there will be physical intimacy or a second date. For Athena, a vocal and fast speaking person, it was being on a date with a woman who was slow- and soft spoken that was a 'turn-off'. For her housemate and best friend Johana, it was going out with a French man whose spoken English turned out to be much less eloquent than in writing.

In an attempt to 'play it safe', Tinder daters frequently adopted the policy that it is better to dampen one's enthusiasm and develop strategies to approach dating in ways that render encounters relatively frictionless – whether it is by reducing the search radius, by putting on a friendly smile

on a date or doing a quick online research on the prospective candidate. In some cases, in which the imagination is allowed to flourish, this caution gets thrown out of the window. At our first interview over breakfast next to her centrally located office building in town (and after declaring her determination to keep her feelings in check), Phoebe told me about a man she had matched with who lived in Durban via the dating app Bumble.[81] In the year that they had been chatting, she had not seen him in person, but they did have common friends. The quality of their connection astounded her:

> We were chatting ever since. And like … I'm a big words person. And I've never met someone who has such a way with words. We skyped a couple of times as well. And on paper …. He's like perfect. In text … the citations he uses. And he's now planning to come down to Cape Town to meet me. The thing is, it slightly freaks me out that it hasn't faded … we really have a surreal amount in common. It makes me suspicious …. The only thing I can find wrong with him is that he has a Durban accent [laughs]. Which is like … I don't know if you know that accent. When we skyped first it was like ahhh … so I arrived at the conclusion that we should meet. I just really don't want to get into a long-distance situation. But if he really turns out to be as amazing in practice as he is on paper … I'll be shocked [laughs].

When I met with Phoebe six weeks later, she told me how the story had unfolded. To be sure, her suspiciously perfect match had flown to Cape Town to meet her in person, a decent 1 272 kilometres out of his way. He booked himself into a hotel for the weekend, and they had a perfectly enjoyable day and entertaining dinner together, followed by what she described as 'good sex'. Regardless, there was something simply amiss for her, and she told him over their last dinner together that she would prefer for them to establish a friendship than to invest in something 'romantic'.

Designed distance and degrees of realities

I visited Joseph at his home in the northern suburbs of Cape Town on a warm Capetonian spring day. The single storey house he stayed in was spacious but dark, amplified by the heavy décor that seems to have remained the same since before his grandmother, the house owner, moved to a nursing home, including the hefty cross hovering over the old fridge in the kitchen. After we had coffee on the veranda overlooking the untamed garden, Joseph took me to his computer station,

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[81] She explained that this match happened because there are fewer people on Bumble than on Tinder. As her radium was not restricted, she ended up seeing profiles that were rather far away. I assume this to be changing as Bumble's popularity seems to be increasing.

where he said he spends most of his time. Turning on the big flatscreen, he commenced to show me a 'game' he was playing. Its storyline consisted of his avatar attending a party, and the goal of the game was to flirt with avatars with female attributes[82] and choose different kinds of scenarios that can lead to sexual acts between the characters displayed on the screen. Immersive virtualities via these avatars render boundaries between what is real and what is imagined almost indistinguishable.

In apparent contrast to the fantasy-fuelling online practice Joseph was tending to, three research participants reported shaving attended so-called 'authentic relating games'[83]to cultivate face-to-face interactions strategically. Here, exercises and games are used to teach and facilitate skills like curiosity and empathy to foster deep, meaningful interpersonal connections. It is a response to a sense of loneliness that has become associated with modernity and the use of digital technologies that are sometimes used to initiate connections that are deemed 'real' but can also contribute to social isolation in varying degrees. Why go out on a potentially disappointing date if one can have an immersive, predictably satisfying experience to one's personal taste at home, one might ask. Against this backdrop, Rantanen's words resonate: 'So here is one of the paradoxes of mediated globalization: at the same time as it connects people, it also distantiates them.' (Rantanen 2005:10)

As I have repeatedly highlighted, there is no way to clearly distinguish between the 'virtual' and 'reality', nor are such dichotomous, categorical distinctions beneficial. The Tinder rabbit hole illustrates how experiences ranked more-or-less-real are all subject to distortions, especially when different desires are at play. Nevertheless, the circumstance that research participants made this distinction is revealing as to the contradictory, multi-faceted desires, and experiences they were trying to make sense of. Fantasies turn into corporeality, and experiences associated with the 'real world' feed into encounters rendered possible through digital extensions of self. I experienced an interesting moment myself a while back in my birth town Offenbach (Germany), when I locked eyes across the aisles at a supermarket with a man whom I found instantly attractive. We smiled at each other a few times and kept averting our gaze again. The flirt was left at that, not least, because I was accompanied by my father, who was busy picking out items for dinner and because the man I was eyeing was in the company of a child. The experience reminded me of a metaphor that I had sometimes used in my interviews to find out more about what is associated with face-to-face

[82] I am not sure about same-sex relationships being part of the set of options.

[83] They were attended through the online platform meetup. Available: https://www.meetup.com/en-AU/Authentic-Relating-Cape-Town/ (5 May 2020). (Meetings were hosted online during the Covid19 lockdown).

encounters. It involved meeting at the supermarket and two people discovering their attraction while grabbing for the last cucumber.[84] Some participants would laugh and explain that this seemed unlikely, with some adding that a technology-inspired generation would surely lose the skills needed to respond in a situation like this and turn the brief locking of eyes into a continuous dialogue. When I was back at the apartment, I opened Tinder in the hopes of finding this mysterious supermarket man I had felt so drawn to but quickly dismissed swiping for him as a silly exercise. Even if finding him this way had been possible, I was unsure whether I wanted things to turn into something more 'real' and concrete than this little fantasy.

Where the use of Tinder is concerned, a feeling of control in terms of the degrees of produced 'reality' seemed to be of significance. Before our interview, Lucas sent me a long WhatsApp message, detailing the ways in which he had been rejected at length and in detail. The 35-year-old hobby photographer of Dutch descent worked at his father's construction company in a small town, relatively remote from the Cape Town city core. What he sent me was an excerpt from a blog entry of his entitled 'my 10 worst Tinder dates'. Reading through it left me with a sour feeling in my gut, and I was curious to meet this young man with the rather flattering Tinder pictures and short biography simply referencing his profession as a photographer. I took the 50-minute drive to meet him in the small local shopping centre's parking lot, where he greeted me nervously. He spoke little in my car on our way to the only café in the area. The first thing I noticed, apart from his fidgeting, was his stutter and avoidance of eye contact. After we talked for a while about his dating experiences and expectations and him expressing his frustrations, he told me about a woman he matched with on Tinder and with whom he had been talking for months on an almost daily basis. Lucas's match had explicitly no intention of ever meeting in person but wanted to purely cultivate a relationship online, as a result turning liminality into permanence. The 'limitation' did not bother him, he explained, as he enjoyed having someone to talk to. I suspect that the distance even had its appeal in that it precluded the painful moments-of-truth he had already experienced.

26-year-old economics postgraduate student Noemie, who had been freshly out of a long-term relationship, explained that she had to be in a particular mood to chat to a stranger on Tinder. When I met her for the first time at the quaint-but-hip bohemian café unexpectedly popping up in an otherwise quiet street of the southern suburbs, her style stood out to me. With her hair partially shaved down to about 1mm, her fishnet top loosely framing her body and highlighting

[84] As an example, for meeting someone doing everyday tasks and as an alternative to meeting through friends, matchmakers or work.

rather than concealing her bra, she conveyed a certain confidence or confrontationalism (or both). Her kind smile softened this first impression that lures one to such conclusions. For the most part, she enjoyed 'browsing' the app but would make herself hold back with her swipes as matching made her feel obliged to respond to messages that may follow. The occasional feeling of wanting to take the first step of relating by looking through Tinder profiles did not mean that she was ready to take a further step towards a potential corporeal encounter (with chatting, exchanging numbers, and arranging a concrete date being the prerequisite). She decided to keep the potentialities the app might contain on hold when she was in an uncommunicative mood to not 'waste' opportunities. Realities were thus rationed to fit the right time.

Besides the physical date, geography is another 'rational' factor conceptually linked to a linear understanding of Tinder dating (swipe.match.date). The app's GPS-base ought to ensure easy, frictionless ways for individuals to come together, just like Kavya Trehan in the advertisement clip, who smoothly glides through urban streets from one implied swipe-choice to the next with a casual smile on the lips. Bill, Matthew and Phoebe are not the only examples of geographic transgressions when something 'real' surfaces. People I know also had their international Tinder matches (thanks to Tinder Gold) visiting them from abroad, dropping all emotional guards. The distance would allow for a different pace and for fantasy to fuel excitement and desire. Permitting for this fantasy to play out may be a deciding factor for disappointment as the most common occurrence on Tinder is that the face-to-face 'date' part never happens. Given the room to imagine, intimate conversations may suddenly endure, languish, stop, or run parallel with others.

In any of the above cases, beginnings, growths, and endings of intimacy may be experienced quite differently (also diverging between the different parties involved) and cannot be pinpointed by looking at app-chat timestamps, at what was said, or strategic approaches by themselves. While the excitement often fizzled out after or even before meeting, the openness to an experience in which the 'moment of truth' becomes stylised to its maximum is telling. Agreeing on a certain timeframe for getting to know one another during the visit increases the stakes further. This shows the complexity and non-linearity of needs Tinder does not cater for, imbued with different references that individuals are keen on learning to decode, using different strategies and extending themselves in various ways. Assumptions of the hedonist, causal, goal-oriented intentions of Tinder dating disregards the multi-dimensionality of experiences, the normalcy of distortions and madness and the fuzziness of selves that will play into all kinds of experiences - online and offline.

Emotional disjunctures: seeking safe enchantment

Illouz (2012) argues that 'emotional reign' has become common practice in contemporary dating. The idea leans on Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic reign' and refers to one party's ability to control emotional interactions. Removed from known social frameworks regulating courtship, Illouz says, emotional reign has become unstable. Consequently, this means that romantic love, individuality, and notions of self-worth are continuously negotiated on an unsteady stage. Only 'successful' interactions with others manage to produce a sense of the self as having worth, meaning that there is recognition of the self through others' approval on a cognitive and emotional basis. For tinderers, the absence of an instructive social framework when tindering can be simultaneously enticing and daunting. Dating is already a thoroughly precarious practice – the selection of whom one may decide to let trustingly, intimately close is an often rigorously executed, fragile process, even where one describes the desired outcome of the connection to be 'casual'. It is fragile because one might not come out a winner in the habitualised game of achieving emotional reign – a gamble in which there are only losses or gains. Additionally, worth on Tinder is attributed instantly instead of in a cumulative process, putting oneself at the direct evaluative mercy of relative strangers. As a result, care is invested in camouflaging this vulnerability and effort required not to seem 'desperate' or 'inflexible' when tindering. These investments insinuate a strategically sound approach as market principles become applied to emotions. My findings convey that the caution with which Tinder users approach intimacy is also due to them finding themselves betwixt and between desiring intimacy and fantasy – between feeling understood, accepted, and cared for on the one hand, and free to continue desiring and reinventing the self on the other. Having these conflicting needs forms part of the human condition, but they become more difficult to negotiate in an environment like Tinder that normalises binary choices and reduces all relationships to the narrow framework of 'dating'. Similarly to Illouz, Raiti (2007) asserts that a form of 'stable instability' is sought to be produced in response to a disposability of relationships, which means disembedding emotions to create one's place within an unstable realm of emotional choices. This is inspired by Giddens's (2013) idea of 'distantiated identity', referring to an alienation of time and space in globalising settings, creating a context in which identities become threatened. While emotional reign and distance do play a role in zero-sum notions of intimacy (encouraged through Tinder's yes-or-no paradigm), it would be too quick to assume that there is a shared acknowledgement that intimacy facilitated via quick swipes has simply become reducible to market logics fabricating people-on-demand: Click. Intimacy. Scroll. Sex. There are multiple ways in which people deal with the emotional instability and disjunctured emotions produced through Tinder and similarly organised dating practices. It is also misleading to assume that an apparent removedness of tindering from

more familiar and well-studied frameworks of intimacy means that there are no frameworks at all. What Illouz (2012), Bauman (2013) and Raiti (2007) do rightfully maintain is that, in a disjunctive world, intimacy and love are no longer experienced as linear and that experiencing time non-linearly affects how the world is seen. The growing instability characterised by placelessness, distantiated identities and ontological insecurity, therefore, as Raiti stresses, requires researchers to adopt a non-linear view of affection as well.

Throughout my fieldwork, various examples came to the fore, showing how Tinder dating is approached with a distantiated view, which may be ascribed to the notion that experiences in a non-place like Tinder follow a logic that can be reduced to formulae. Indicative of ways to distance oneself was a language of economics. Bill, for instance, claimed that swiping and chatting with too many people would 'steal' quality time from him which he could spend with Michelle, with whose company he is satisfied in predictable, comfortable ways. This is in response to unpredictability and a need for strategies of distortion in wooing women, some disappointing Tinder dates, and an overall lack of matches for the fit-looking, neatly dressed man, who was already part of an intimate couple. Noemie made sure not to 'waste' swipes and 'loose' matches due to being in the wrong mood. So did Tom, with the awareness that his Tinder rating will be impacted if he were too generous with his thumb movements. Other participants, as well, referred to the time-consuming aspects of Tinder with its addictive motion features as being disproportionate to the outcomes, its repetitive imageries and conversations, which, more often than not, either suddenly discontinue, fizzle out or lead to mediocre dates. Considerations and evaluations were made about whether efforts were worth the payoff and how to maximise the latter.

Nevertheless, while this indicates a logical, rationalised approach to Tinder dating, user behaviour is much more difficult to discern than through a mathematical balance. This is evidenced in the continuous cycles of deleting and re-downloading Tinder, regardless of economic logic and frustrating or uninspired encounters implying malinvestment. Arietta described how the disappointment of sudden discontinuations of online conversations – notwithstanding her own decidedly distantiated approach and 'low expectations' invested into Tinder dating – was slowly but surely gnawing away at her confidence and how the accumulation of small rejections of this kind facilitated a somewhat disengaged, apathetic dynamic. Fed up with this, she would delete the app occasionally, only to download it again eventually. In other words, my participants were striving for a rationalised approach in making sense of themselves in relation to others but, at the same time, stubbornly sought to be enchanted through the very medium presenting them with a large array of unenticing experiences. Conflicting behaviour was often conductive of this.

Miguel serves as an example for this. Having dated his high school sweetheart in the USA for years, their Christian families expected more of a commitment, and he felt obliged to propose marriage. Amid the stressful wedding preparations and increasingly unpleasant arguments between the couple, Miguel decided to end the relationship. He turned to a friend when processing his emotions, and their conversation turned into what he described as an 'emotional rebound'. Spending lots of time together, Miguel developed feelings for her and, after a few weeks, their relationship had become sexual. When he found out that the person he was relying on for comfort was having another similarly intimate relationship not disclosed to him, he was unforgiving. The tone in which Miguel talked about the betrayal carried irony and bitterness. He turned to Tinder to find someone to spend time and go out for a meal or a walk with. He expressed wanting to hold off on engaging sexually, despite his plan to 'save himself' for marriage already having been interrupted. Miguel usually had a good rapport with women on Tinder; he described himself as well-read, eloquent, and showed a tendency to respond to questions in witty anecdotes. One of the stories carrying a more serious undertone involved a woman he had matched with in Cape Town and with whom he recounted having an unusually great connection. They met and spent a couple of months seeing each other regularly, reading poetry together and developing intimate insight jokes before she went away for a holiday. At that point, something changed – he did not hear from her even upon her return to Cape Town. When he went to her office to surprise her with flowers and her favourite chocolates, he was told that she had left early. Calling her, she said she was not 'in the mood' to talk to him and when he cornered her to meet in person and tell him what was going on, she said that she wanted things to 'cool down'. Miguel felt deceived:

> 'I was angry because I asked "yoh, is this okay". Because I *knew* we were going fast. And I kept asking you: "is this okay". And you said: "I love it, give me more. I love the intimacy; I love the affection; I love the vulnerability". And these were *her* words. And I was telling her, "these were *your* words!"'

He shook his head in anger. Interestingly, his attitude had been much lighter when he previously told me another story in an anecdotal manner. It was about a date he had been on in New York after the big breakup with his fiancé and the 'emotional rebound'. Miguel humorously described the situation as an actual nightmare, with the woman seeming 'completely disinterested' due to her monosyllabic answers to his questions and him carrying the conversation singlehandedly. To his surprise, she wanted to continue the date with a walk in Central Park after they had finished their coffees. To him, the silence that accompanied their walk was deafening, and Miguel was counting down the minutes for the date to finally end. When they said their goodbyes, she said she had

enjoyed herself and would like to see him again. To my question of how he responded, Miguel, with a sarcastic laugh and eye roll, said 'Thank you – blocked!', making a gesture with his figure of blocking someone on the phone screen.

The quickness with which he dismissed his date based on her silences and the determination with which Miguel decided to literally suspend an experience with the physical act of blocking a contact hardly seems surprising considering how Tinder dating tends to be (not entirely unjustifiably) portrayed. However, it came across as an especially strict response for someone who has sought to cultivate intimacy over time before and who had suffered the experience of being suddenly shut down, even if what he was mainly looking for at that point was a light-hearted distraction from the past. It could be interpreted as a mere result of the irrational overtones of standardised and rationalised structures á la McDonalds. Calculations serve to make human actions and formal bureaucracies run efficiently, but, as Ritzer (2013) observes, often take a less efficient and irrational turn. This is more or less what Weber (1976) foresaw when introducing the idea of the 'iron cage of rationality' in which standardised approaches and categories trap, dehumanise and reduce people to cogs in the wheels of society. Tinder can be interpreted to be such a consistently turning wheel, discouraging pause and hesitance and, at the same time, unwillingly producing reluctance. Yet, conflicts like the ones outlined show that there is more to the politics of truth, authenticity and embellished realities forming part of a relatively new architecture of communication via Tinder.

Archambault (2017), writing about uncertainty and efforts to live fulfilling lives in Inhambane (a small city in southwest Mozambique), points out the role of obfuscation for this purpose, enabled and enhanced by mobile phones. Referring to young people specifically, she says that mobiles are used to experiment with ways of relating. They fuel conflict and jealousy but can also serve as a means for pretence, which is not unimportant in a city where respectability and propriety are of great significance. Phones, she shows, have had their impact on regimes of truth, hiding 'ugly' truths whilst maintaining other, more palatable ones. They serve as technologies of ambiguation and concealment (for instance in cases of infidelity) and may maintain authenticity and respectability in relationships by mitigating dissonances between 'truth' and falsehood, by creating alternative truths and covering up sources of conflict. When it comes to tindering, 'reality' and authenticity as visions are equally subject to new explorations, involving techniques of both opacity and transparency, openness, and retraction. Participants of this research attributed value and magic to romance, summed up in the commonly used terms of 'authenticity' (also substituted with the terms 'organic' and 'genuine') - glorified as the ultimate essence in establishing intimacy. Calls for

something less predictably clandestine, concealing, or opaque (all substances that make the very surface upon which the self becomes extended on Tinder) to be able to achieve meaningful enchantment are not always consequently followed through with. This is because Tinder's concealments and essentialising distortions also made Tinder a desirable place, one in which pain seems to be circumventable and where vulnerabilities can be dressed up – ironically often at the expense of pleasure.

The de facto unpredictable murkiness of dating experiences created anxiety and avoidance as well as contradictory practices. Tinder was frequently removed from phone screens because the distorted connections it helped producing did not meet expectations of clarity and ease. Deleting the app was also a retort to unmet desires and the short fallings of the safety and predictability that standardisation is meant to entail. Upon each re-download, approaches were modified, at times in ways that would render them less likely to achieve desires for meaningful connections. Sometimes, the obscure nature of relationships could play out; sometimes, it was refuted as 'lesser'. The latter response facilitates the idea of bodies being discrete units of individuality, a 'body proper', as conceptualised by Lock and Farquhar (2007). Given the 'right' take and 'the' right match, the yearned-for outcomes would have to follow suit. Employing an economic mode while investing less and having a distant attitude to avoid disappointment constitutes what I interpret to be a false maximisation of self, meaning that there is a disregard for the circumstance that pain and pleasure are not separable antonyms when it comes to intimate experiences, and that there is no ultimate truth called authenticity. Occasionally, as I have shown, modified self-extensions also allowed for an embrace of pain as an ingredient of pleasure. Epistemological uncertainties under the banner of 'inauthenticity', reflecting larger economies of distrust in Cape Town, may foreclose possibilities but are, in some cases, also productive of new imaginings.

The 'Tinder body' is composite, even as part of a non-linear non-place where relating tends to be both gamified and strategized and where feelings are treated as a scarce currency. Cautiously moving beyond fears in a desire to connect, tinderers render themselves vulnerable to hurt, with manners of relating becoming continuously modified. Thus, bodies and the modes they find themselves in are anything but discreet, even on a platform like Tinder. Arietta, for instance, shifted between a distant take to Tinder dating to creating a deliberately provocative profile including pictures taken from burlesque shows to weed out anyone who is not 'open minded' according to her understanding of the term, but ended up receiving offensive messages degrading her to a sexual object and made some alterations again declaring what responses she will not tolerate in her profile (thereby putting Tinder's obscuring essentialisms to work for herself). Tom changed his approach

to Tinder when looking for something more committed, just to revert again when realising that he could not find anyone that would fit his rather precisely imagined prototype of a clever, witty woman who is light-hearted and into math (a concrete fantasy of a 'perfect woman' similarly to Sylvester). Tom decided to embrace Tinder's distorted realities, at least until he would move to the USA, where he imagined greener pastures. When gaining the impression that her directness on Tinder was interpreted as neediness by men, Johana altered her strategy to looking for simply 'a fun experience' that might evolve into something ongoing. She also used the clichés that Tinder magnifies as a resource for conversation and reflection with Athena and other friends (as we will see in the following chapter) and in cultivating a sense of herself detached from stereotypes. The persistent and adaptive approaches can be understood as a careful way to re-enchant the practice of tindering. In Weber's sense, *entzauberung* (disenchantment) is a rather unidirectional process of modernity, depriving it of moments of magic. Jenkins (2000) adds that both enchantment and re-enchantment are responses to modernity and offers the definition below for the term:

> Enchantment conjures up, and is rooted in, understandings and experiences of the world in which there is more to life than the material, the visible or the explainable; in which the philosophies and principles of reason or rationality cannot by definition dream of the totality of life; in which the quotidian norms and routines of linear time and space are only part of the story; and in which the collective sum of sociability and belonging is elusively greater than its individual parts. (Jenkins, 2000:29)

While disenchantment has been a stimulus to (re)enchantment, Jenkins (2000) says, enchantment has its own disenchantments, with the two being obverse. I argue that this comes to light through Tinder dating practices, in which individuals approach dating thoughtfully but find themselves on a journey navigating contradictions and complexities, opacity and lived experience. The app's usage resembles what Nyamnjoh[85] (2019) refers to as *juju* when establishing a link between the magical and digital technologies more broadly. Seen as a way of harnessing purported advances, Nyamnjoh argues, the digital sphere is not dissimilar to a world of witchcraft where presence is simultaneous and multiple. Dating here is meant to work as a magical, goal-specific potion like those Alice consumes to adjust herself to certain situations in wonderland. Tinder users extend and shrink themselves not simply to fit certain moulds but also to extend the self beyond them in search of enchantment, thereby redefining realities. However, as my findings show, approaches of various sorts do not produce formularised outcomes. The promise of a complete experience of instant,

[85] Inspired by novelist Amos Tutuola and the fantasy-fuelled journeys he described.

passionate magic, visualised in Tinder's flame logo is, rather, an ongoing (and never complete) process of becoming in conversation with others.

FIGURE 15: COMPARISON OF OLD (LEFT) AND NEWER LOGO FROM 2017 (RIGHT) REDUCED TO THE MERE FLAME. AVAILABLE: HTTPS://WWW.UNDERCONSIDERATION.COM/BRANDNEW/ARCHIVES/NEW_LOGO_FOR_TINDER.PHP (6 MAY 2020).

Ghosting or exiting the rabbit hole

Alice's journey may have been illogical and a distorted experience – but it was a linear one. Each step and experience added to her process of becoming, up until the end of the tale, when she hazily returns to her normal life. Non-linear, liminally-conceptualised Tinder experiences may leave one with equally hazy, surreal memories, with my participants sometimes struggling to recollect the details of past dates. Contributing to this are trends of ending encounters in ways that suggest a lack of accountability in the form of variations of ghosting. These feed into arguments that new media technologies render their users numb to pain - also, for instance, in the context of violent video games or cyberbullying, making way towards a 'generation me'. However, interpretations of how an apparent lack of empathy relates to the relevant technologies vary. Even if the causality between a lack of empathy and certain kinds of behaviour were established, the question of how precisely this is responded to and engaged with by individuals remains unanswered.

Seeing the need to engage with the meanings behind new dating vocabulary, psychotherapist Perel developed the following chart:

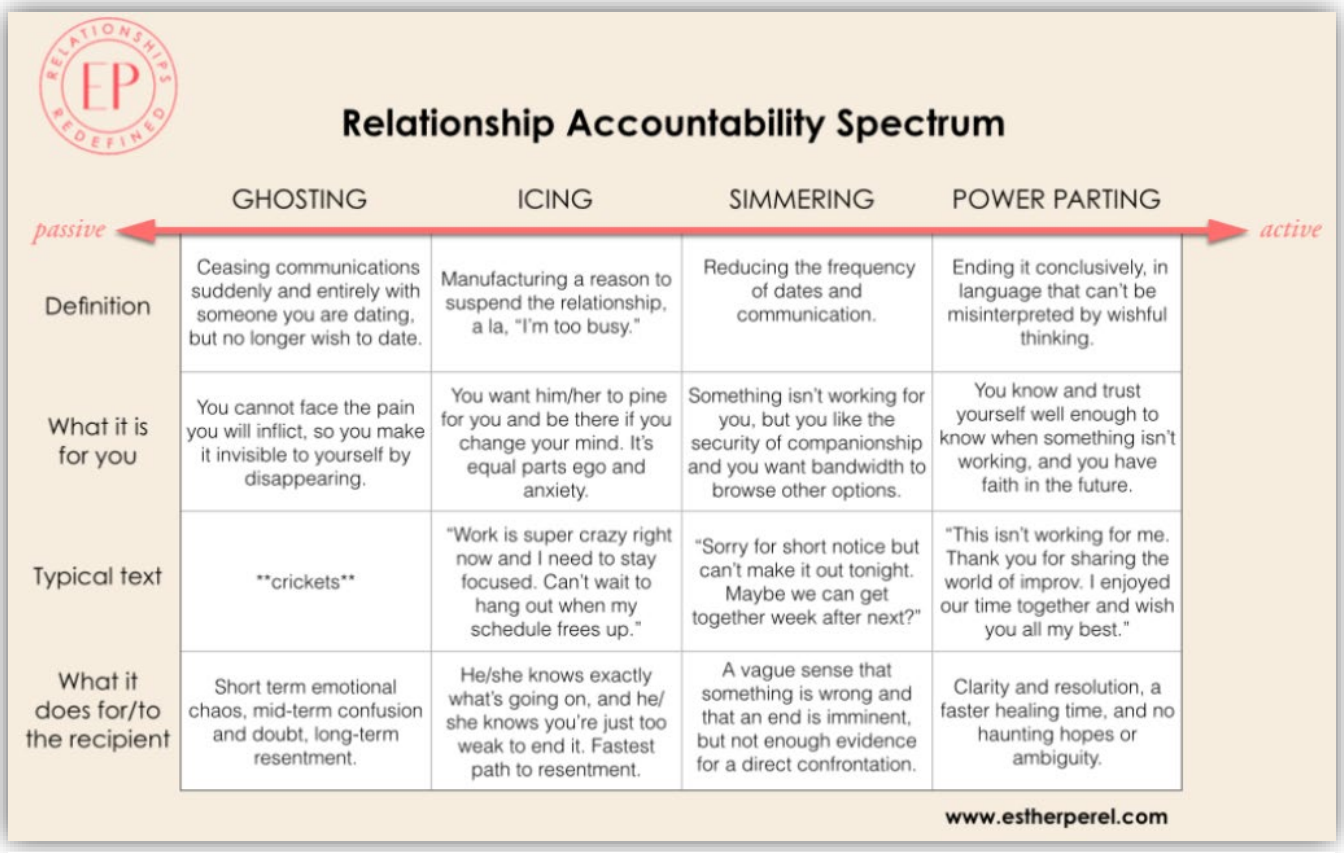

FIGURE 16: HTTPS://ESTHERPEREL.COM/BLOG/RELATIONSHIP-ACCOUNTABILITY (7 APRIL 2020).

Based on my observations, I would like to add 'fizzing'[86] as a common category to this chart, meaning dating someone for a few months and the relationship then 'fizzling out' without a breakup conversation. While ghosting is one-sided and leaves one person to wonder what they have done wrong, fizzing means that both people involved simply stop putting in the effort to contact the other and thereby maintain relationships that have involved regular meetings, communication and sexual contact. This may be due to people simply not 'feeling it', having met someone else or simply the result of 'low-stake-investments', like Nick, who found himself in a relationship with someone as a result of having gone on several, to him, mediocre dates in the absence of 'better options'. While fizzing is a more gradual development than ghosting and seems to be mutually causal, one person may be waiting for the other person to contact them first, and it can very well involve hurt feelings.

[86] Term coined by an author of the magazine, Men's Health. Available: https://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/a29413391/fizzing-breakup-dating/ (7 April 2020).

Looking at phenomena like ghosting, heavily normative sociological traditions of framing intimacy are inviting to fall back on. Santore (2008) criticises dual claims and suggests a Durkheimian understanding of individual interest and social obligation. The author advises considering self-development and collective ties to be potentially mutually reinforcing. It is, indeed, easy to reproduce binary theoretical patterns when looking at Tinder as a dating tool. Especially since, unlike other social media platforms, it is not one to facilitate notions of 'imagined communities', a term coined by Anderson (1991) referring to solidarities that reach beyond face-to-face contact. In these 'imagined communities' based on similar interests, people may never meet in person but can still share a sense of identity and belonging. This sharedness might be based on a notion of being part of the same nation as in Anderson's theory, or of a gaming group in which each person takes part in an online reality from their respective living rooms whilst communicating with each other through their computers – one of the main ways in which Joseph socialises. By all appearances, the acknowledgements of levels of humanity when tindering seem to be taking a toll and removed from a shared sense of identity. Does the outward agency in controlling emotional proximity and distance and the liminal approach to dating mean that Tinder becomes a place of othering and that its users view their own self as cumulative and 'real' while placing others somewhat in opposition? This would explain why research participants understood themselves to be acting authentically when tindering while broadly reducing other users to a lesser level of realness. I have heard many variations of stories about shutting someone down and being shut down. It seems to be acknowledged as built into contemporary dating practices and expected when getting to know someone, specifically if there are no common friends, other ties or shared commitments involved. Individuals who consider regular dating as being a part of being single are bound to have experienced many shapes and forms of ending relationships, like Miguel, for instance.

Thinking about the ostensible carelessness and lack of clarity with which shared experiences sometimes come to an end, I also felt inclined to look at my own dating behaviour. I started using Tinder (before my PhD research endeavours) at the age of 28 when 'dating' (in the sense of going on official dates) for the first time in my life after having been in three consecutive long-term relationships since I was 15 years old. It quickly became evident to me that I had a lot to assess about the social practice. Not infrequently, I felt overwhelmed with the speed of Tinder and its 'options' and had to set myself limits as to how much energy I could invest and still be able to enjoy the dating experience. Having more than one conversation at a time, as Tinder users often

have, would soon make me feel disengaged[87]. Like my participants, I would have phases or moments when I was keen for conversations and even spontaneous meetups without exchanging much information. I went on one evening beach walk with someone about an hour after matching and chatting back and forth for a bit. My date picked me up outside my apartment block, and we drove 15 minutes to the nearest beach. After the sun had set, he asked me if I would like to go for a drink and said I was tired and wanted to go back home to rest. Until then, I led the conversation and found him to be immature (like Miguel, I had made up my mind about the situation rather quickly). This overall not unpleasant man whom I had no romantic interest in whatsoever contacted me afterwards a few times with me making offering brief replies and excuses for not being able to meet. These, I thought, made my stance rather clear. I would not hear from him for a few weeks and assume for my silent message to have come across, just to find a 'hey, how are things' message in my WhatsApp again. At some point, I simply stopped responding. After all, he seemed to only invest marginally more into this one-time encounter. A year later, while ordering a takeaway coffee at a local coffee shop, I suddenly identified him as the person taking my order. When this identification had taken the form of awareness, I offered him a smile of recognition, which he brushed past, avoiding eye contact for the rest of the transaction. The experience left me with questions about my general self-perception as a caring and honest person and acknowledging that these categorical judgments are never simply true, especially in social contexts that many people clearly find challenging to navigate and that involve rendering oneself vulnerable to different degrees.

The phasing out of connections without an explanation is not a new phenomenon, but the normalisation of 'ghosting' in its various forms has been furthered and rendered easier by 'block' functions. This brings to mind Locke's notion of 'psychological hedonism', which stipulates that human beings are bound to avoid pain (vice) and seek pleasure (virtue).[88] In a fast-paced, partially digitised romantic life, can meeting pain with a mask of silence (much like in the various degrees of 'ghosting') and ritualised distance be interpreted as intuitive responses geared towards self-preservation and not, as it tends to be, a consequence of globalised standardisation patterns? Gauging this question, my argument is twofold. Firstly, the experiences shared with me are not

[87] Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist who works for Match.com, speaks of a 'cognitive overload' when confronted with more than 9 dating options, disabling one to choose at all. https://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_technology_hasn_t_changed_love_here_s_why (23 February 2021).

[88] This idea is also prevalent in Buddhism. It is posited that this cycle of avoidance and attraction is suffering in and of itself, as it clouds minds and results in pain.

necessarily different from meetings of a more conventional stance. People tend to observe, take caution, and engage with their potential intimate counterpart before venturing on a date or falling in love. Tinder is thus not as divorced from other kinds of encounters (associated with a higher degree of humanity) as it is often portrayed to be. The extensions of the self, used to enhance certain aspects, may change, or fade along the way or lose their magic upon a closer look.

Nevertheless, having access to the app, the options it contains and promises to produce, constantly ready at one's fingertips, leads to an amassing of dating experience (and the internal instabilities they bring with them) in ways that would not occur for many without extending the self via the online sphere. Secondly, like Santore (2008), I would like to discourage a view that reduces intimacy to forms of rationalised market exchanges with self-fulfilment and risk-minimisation being at the centre-stage. Zero-sum interpretations of intimacy have led to individualism in intimacy being 'viewed as a direct drain on solidary sentiments in relationships, while pleas for solidarity are labelled a wolf in sheep's clothing' (Santore, 2008:1214). I encourage a look at Tinder dating practices and the inclusion of technology in intimate matters more generally speaking, as affections experienced non-linearly and not as something with an inherent, causal moral decline attached. Neither do the same aspects of the dating journeys apply to each user. Experiences must be considered part of the broader, ongoing lived reality of a person, who cannot truly be essentialised to a mere tinderer - even though I use the term in this dissertation for simplicity and lack of a better term incorporating the practice and the human. While techno-social dynamics certainly create dependencies in the form of 'full-time intimacy', as Raiti (2007) puts it (which manifests in tinderers' habitual swiping practices anywhere and at any time) and by involving new versions of old phenomena including an array of uncertainties, emotions do not become simply reduced to economic market principles. Instead, I maintain, dating and using technologies as means to relate intimately form part of a process of becoming.

In the practice of choosing someone to spend intimate time with, emotion and rationality are conjoined (rather than dichotomous), as are phantasies and realities, pains, and pleasures -with cultural contexts playing a fundamental role in determining the nature of this intertwinement. As Nyamnjoh formulates it, 'people are both, rational and irrational, thoughtful and passionate, active and passive, depending on the context, the relationship in question and the issues at stake' (Nyamnjoh, 2018:2). No person or action can be reduced to be just one, it follows, and the use of a particular technology does not alter that circumstance. Considering the popularity of dating apps today and looking at love and desire as a social practice rather than a moral disorientation, I find it crucial to introduce a more nuanced debate about codes of conduct. For me, this includes

acknowledging, as Raiti (2007) has, that intimacy becomes a segment in a complex sphere of relationships and events. In a disjunctured, nonlinear world of distortions, love is bound to be experienced as fragmented, lacking linearity and coherence even when it can be apparently produced 'on demand'.

Summary conclusion: fabricating meaning

The chapter started by revisiting the metaphor of the rabbit hole, showing that online and offline are equally subject to distortions. Tindering is a practice in which overlaps of the promises of technology and 'reality' become evident. Desires meet at the nexus between the biopower of Tinder's interface with its pre-selections and a pursuit of intimacy that edits out negative or ambiguous feelings. The app provides a sense of agency and autonomy but simultaneously produces an ontological sense of vulnerability, especially when reduced to liminal experiences. I have described the uncertainty and confusion as to what is 'real', and the disorientation produced when wanting both predictability and fantasy. These penetrate notions of romance that continue being promoted in advertisements and Hollywood movies and, instead of makeability, rather zoom in on the fantastic and coincidental. The 'stable instability' (Raiti, 2007) fabricated through these tensions then becomes hypernormalised, not just as a discursive narrative in the previously outlined ways, but also as phenomenologies.

Tinder appears to allow for a circumvention of pain but, evidently, fails to produce more predictable or painless experiences - nor does its reliance on essences as clear-cut truths make for more satisfying existences. Attempts to simplify interactions, to focus on one's own desires in extending the self and numbing oneself to rejection may be plausible consequences to a type of dating that is as fast-paced, reliant on neat divisions and game-like patterns as on Tinder. They may be a way to obscure what is already distorted until it becomes unrecognisable - and then recognisable again. Tinder experiences are imbued with contradictions, at least as much as any other human encounters. Participants' stories show that even where connections were understood as 'casual' and where Tinder was used to try and minimise vulnerability, the process of seeking intimate connections (both offline and online) always carries a potential for pain and pleasure alike. Regardless of efforts to consume intimacy painlessly and tendencies of idealising sleekness, there will be experiences of pain, disorientation and incoherence of various kinds involved in all sorts of different dating scenarios, even when using ostensibly strategic dating tools. This risk of pain and losing out in games of emotional reign, even though seemingly reduced by the nature or rather design of the app, and the emotional distances it seems to afford, does not keep tinderers from re-downloading Tinder upon its deletion and continuing in their search for meaningful intimacies.

Even Tinder exchanges may be more consequential than initially visible: relationships develop, patterns are broken, distortions are embraced, and the self is extended in myriad ways throughout the interrupted-but-continuous usage of the app.

Dating, I argue, is a process of moving in conversation with others, with or without digital extensions. Facilitating intimacy via tools like Tinder does not simply result in numbing and an unlearning of accountability, even though many Tinder dating experiences flag themes of feeling carelessly rejected. These rejections can be simultaneously more wordless and blatant than other forms of romantic encounters would allow for without being socially marked, for example, in the case of having met through friends or at work. Yet, I maintain, the ethics of relating are learned and re-learned in this fast-paced space in which a lot remains unspoken or is reduced to code ('I'm very busy these days' signifying 'I don't want to continue this relationship', or 'let's Netflix and chill' meaning 'let's have sex').

Repertoires and desires shift and change throughout Tinder journeys. As illustrated in this chapter, study participants continuously redefined what expectations and proximities made sense to maintain with every encounter. For instance, when realising that their search for 'the perfect woman' left them with no matches, Tom and Sylvester unlatched their criteria from their understandings of 'dating'. Although many of the people I conversed with claimed that it is illogical to expect too much from a Tinder date or to allow oneself to get wounded by its accumulated and sometimes subtle or gradual experiences of rejection, participants' narratives told another story. Tinder connections are not as liminal as they may come across. They become part of one's fabric and constitute an embodied reverberation in encounters yet to come – even when experiences are treated as completed, done with, or not attributed 'realness' to.

Chapter 6
Cyborg god/desse/s between phallus and freedom?

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I discussed how corporeal experiences, enmeshed in the digital (and vice versa), become distorted and how linearity, time, and place factor into Tinder intimacies. I also addressed how Tinder is used to navigate uncertainties and how maximisation calculations do not always add up. Although the app was persistently used by research participants and valued for the sense of autonomy it (sometimes) provided, experiences were not, in fact, easily guidable, rendering obvious the multilateral nature of intimacy facilitated via the app. Moving beyond the app's ontological constraints as a producer of a certain kind of intimacy becomes an agentive push-and-pull of different forces, also involving the app's framework of uniformity and pre-selection algorithms. The ambivalence of tindering, which conceals some things and reveals others, can open new spaces to negotiate relationships and debate intimacy.

Given tinderers' concerns about authenticity, the role of trust becomes pertinent. Its weight in the (now seemingly sexually liberated) post-apartheid setting of Cape Town, in which 'essences' continue playing a major role, will be discussed against the backdrop of participants' virtual/corporeal dating experiences in the following. In this environment, it stands to question whether inhibitions and contours of social (and gendered, racialised and classed) scripts can be reimagined. Avenues of extending the self beyond the familiar and into the unknown within voltage fields of sameness and difference in Cape Town are thus at the heart of the discussion. The chapter examines whether Tinder reinforces rigid identities and to what degree it offers a space for emancipation and agency. It chronicles the use of Tinder as a tool for self-expression and empowerment – and as concurring with social norms.

The vast arrays of dating experiences narrated by study participants bring various challenges to the fore. The non-continuous, non-unitary experiences produced via Tinder, I suggest, become manoeuvred in the form of a dance, as rarely anything is constant in the process. I adopt and extend upon Haraway's (1991) theories on technology and gender and the cyborg figure as an ontological model within terms of hybridity. Additionally, the idea of 'add-on friendships' is introduced as a way of navigating an eroticised Tinder sphere. The final sections of this chapter critically investigate assumptions of egalitarianism as a consequence of 'modern romance' and scaffolds it with a theoretical perspective.

Before I continue, however, I want to acknowledge that the discussion, to a great extent, leans on the analysis of heterosexual dating dynamics. Although touching on them, my interview questions were not specifically geared towards aspects of gender, race, and class. Upon further data analysis and deep into the writing process, I felt compelled to dedicate an entire chapter to the topic due to its weight and relevance, especially in the South African context. Doubtlessly, the discussion could have been enriched by interviews grappling with same-sex dynamics further, but these were discussed in much less depth in the semi-structured and decidedly participant-guided interviews. It is thus up to future research to expand on my contemplations.

Situating phenomenologies

'What makes Tinder dating different is that you have to tolerate ambiguity,' Emily explained to me when talking about attraction. One must be patient and dig. She added: 'Meeting organically is like a shop where everything is laid out nice and clear as opposed to everything being one rail and you have to look at everything.' Neither the crowded rail nor the apparently clearer layout consist only of information like the other person's data points and instant knowledge of whether and how one desires them. As the previous chapters have shown, a lot is underlying the (bio)politics of selection and communication, dating and mating via Tinder. 'Digging', therefore, also incorporates a grappling with these forces whilst attempting to connect with relative strangers. Power and agency, here, are not as a causal phenomenon. Rather, in line with Foucault, they are historically situated. I have dedicated ample space in this dissertation to an analysis of notions of authenticity in dating. It is now time to think about how the perceived cultivation of sameness on Tinder and concurrent freedoms of extending the self may interlink with a culturisation of difference.

In cities, people do not only live and walk amongst strangers; they also date strangers. What does this mean in the context of Cape Town, with its multitude of social divisions flowing over into a 'born-free' generation who has not experienced the apartheid era? The fenced-offness of the urban sphere that I have described elsewhere for a suburb in Cape Town (Junck, 2019) is referred to by Bauman (2013) as voluntary ghettos and the developments within them as mixophobia.[89] This is something the author considers to be a normal side effect of increasingly liquified societies, lacking predictability in the face of accelerated change. In Cape Town, pace and inputs have become severely accelerated since the end of apartheid and the consequent opening to the finance-driven rationales of global markets. Cape Town's well-guarded physical spaces overlap with the guarding of emotional spaces make for a sui generis place to investigate trends of relating. As tools

[89] Also evident in my work on suburban Cape Town (Junck, 2019).

promising agency in the search for diverse, hedonist experiences, it is tempting to look at technologies like Tinder as means to extend oneself beyond mutating constraints. Yet, being essentially a different avenue of the social, everyday convolutions are not excluded from this space of simultaneously neat and vague categories. Moreover, non-democratically so and as previously outlined, Tinder has been criticised for promoting certain kinds of connections over others, for instance, through deleting the profiles of trans people (Duguay, 2017) and via its internal rating systems (Lanzing, 2019) - placing clear limits on said autonomy. Thus, Tinder constitutes a crucial platform for observing manifestations (with a question mark) of social change.

There are assumptions that intimacy develops linearly with time, away from gendered schemas as means for organising relationships and towards egalitarian, deliberative negotiation, alluding to re-configurations of gender and gender rights. However, these assumptions tend to gloss over, rather than carefully examine, the extent and nature of such shifts. After the official end of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the implementation of what is said to be one of the most liberal constitutions in the world (also regarding gender rights) in 1997, experiences in the only relatively recently institutionally freed context like Cape Town ought to be looked at more closely. In Stadler's (2018) view, Hollywood-inspired notions of love have played their role in masquerading old gender norms and social arrangements, specifically where they are linked to marriage. Seeing love only as emotional attachment and not as social practice renders it difficult to understand choices as circumscribed by larger political, economic and institutional policies, even as love sometimes transgresses such norms and regulations. Thinking of erotic love as a mere natural and linear force of overwhelming passion that just happens to a person (exempting it from both personal and political scrutiny), rather than looking at it as a socially mediated and culturally defined experience, turns blind eye turned towards larger policies attributing different degrees of humanness to differently classified bodies (based on markers understood as fixed), as well as individual agency. There is also the capitalist idea at play that individuals are responsible for their own happiness, as outlined by Cabanas and Illouz (2019), adding a lot of pressure to romantic experiences and confusion regarding the mutuality of accountability.

Chapters 1 and 2 offered a concise insight into how discourses on sexuality have developed in recent history. In 2019, South Africa made the global news with the already mentioned protests against gender-based violence after a row of brutal attacks on women and the rape and murder of 19-year-old UCT student, Uyinene Mrwetyana, in a suburban post office. It was the proverbial last straw to break a systemic camel's back in terms of the continued impact of gender-based violence on women's everyday realities in South Africa. I attended a march to parliament where hundreds

of people gathered in an attempt to push the President of South Africa to react to the epidemic of violence with chants and signs reading protest slogans like 'my body is not your crime scene', capturing expressions of how heavily the ambience of aggression acts upon individual bodily experiences. Protests spread across the country's spaces of multiple divisions and created a moment of togetherness for those aching for the same kind of change. Yet, when I stopped at a red light the other day and noticed an electricity box covered in advertisements for a 'Dr Kim' who offers 15-minute abortions amongst love potions and penis enlargement, I was once again reminded of how my research observations and interviews are part of a very privileged backdrop with all kinds of accesses and how much this ethnography as an in-depth, small-scale study is forced to reduce to peripheral observations.

With moments of togetherness being rare and women feeling failed by the state,[90] a tendency to rely on our own narrow frames of reference when relating to others remains intact. At the same time, what came across in my interviews were different layers and conflicts, linked to ideas of gender and race, rising like ghosts from apparently liberal frameworks of being and manifesting in practices of relating. As such, they are embedded in the next few paragraphs, emphasising how Tinder offers a useful tool when rebelling against islands of similarity and sameness – wanting variety and difference. They also show that transcending the familiar and safe is not necessarily what follows.

Voltage fields of sameness and difference

I have outlined how my participants would sometimes change their approach to tindering and highlighted some of the intricacies imbued on the practice. The accounts shared with me, furthermore, laid bare conflicts where intentions, desires and intergenerational expectations collide, producing decisions between the familiar and the strange.

Leaning back into synthetic leather couch cushions and tilting her head, Sophia talked about her agency in going on dates while taking occasional sips of her white wine at the bar where we met for our interview. When the 27-year-old, working for an NGO on climate change issues, downloaded Tinder, it was after coming out of her first long-term relationship. Having been with one person for years, she wanted to find out what she intuitively feels attracted to and to try and date people whom she felt were different from what she was used to and from herself. Yet,

[90] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/06/south-africa-faces-national-crisis-of-violence-against-women-says-president (3 May 2020).

throughout her exploration of the unfamiliar via Tinder, she found herself increasingly appreciative of shared commonalities, especially with regards to ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

Sophia recalled a Tinder date who intrigued her with a vague quality of the unfamiliar. He was less educated, from a poorer area and classified as Coloured. As they were sitting in the backyard of the southern suburban house she shared with friends, their bumpy conversations made her wonder whether inviting this stranger into her most private, personal space had been a good idea. Not only was the conversation lacking flow, but it also turned into directions she found uncomfortable. Eventually, two of her housemates returned and briefly introduced themselves. 'He [the date] became totally obsessed with the idea that they were gay and together, and he kept asking. It was all he was talking about, and it … it was completely bizarre and uncomfortable!' She was relieved when her date finally left after she had indicated multiple times that she was tired – a hint that fell upon deaf ears, so to speak.

The person Sophia eventually ended up dating was someone with whom she shared the same ethnic and class background and concern for environmental issues and other topics they could relate through. They re-met on Tinder but had previously come to know each other at the University of Cape Town, where he was her tutor in her first year of studying Political Sciences. When she became a tutor herself a couple of years later, the dynamics of their relationship changed. Still, it never moved beyond professional distance. Matching on Tinder, their engagement with one another changed yet again. They were casually going out for a few weeks while she was still seeing someone else. When he frequently visited her when she recovered from a knee operation, their engagement transformed into an affectionate and exclusive form of relationship that led to the termination of her other sexual relationship.

Most of the Tinder dates she had been on in her more exploratory phase, Sophia recounted, had simply lacked something. She recalled her nervousness when entering these arranged meetings, usually at a bar or café: 'It is exciting, but it also feels weird, meeting a complete stranger for the first time. I think it's because it's an official date. You're nervous and evaluate each other … you wonder what they see, what he thinks about you, you know. How do I come across?' Looking for the unfamiliar comes with thrills and different levels of discomfort for Sophia. The conversations on her dates were sometimes more and sometimes less tense and interesting, usually with no attempts to flirt and establish physical contact on either side. Therefore, she could not tell what the potentialities of these encounters were. 'Except for one guy, he just came right out and asked me at the end of the date if I want to hook-up,' she added chortlingly. Looking at her and noting

her kind smile and attentiveness, I wondered whether the lack of attempts to take on flirtatious approaches and turn the Tinder meetups into the kind of charming date that most of us would be familiar with from Hollywood movie scenes (and assuming this is what is therefore often seen as desirable) reflect fears around rendering oneself open to the unfamiliar and thus vulnerable and open to rejection.

'Good-looking friends with the option to buy'

Tinder offers a handy exploration tool when looking for the right cocktail of commonality and difference. For Sophia, this experience incorporated exploring casual sexual relationship via Tinder to transcend the familiar. Unfamiliarity and creating access to what seems to be beyond reach were aspects of the dating app that were also highlighted as tempting by other participants. The app allows for a play with agency when deciding what roles to take on. Changing approaches may also offer insights into what one may be looking for on Tinder and beyond, a question I asked at the beginning of all first interviews and that participants found challenging to answer. The ideal tindering outcome was open-ended, a friendship with the potential for more, an 'add-on friendship', if you will.

Emily (introduced previously as someone looking for the 'right' tindering approach to avoid a certain kind of relationship) explicitly stated in her profile that she was looking for friendships. When I enquired about it, she explained:

> Yeah, the thing with connecting online is that you never know what you're going to find. And it seems more likely if two people connect that it's a friendship rather than a relationship. Relationships don't have as much criteria. And chemistry isn't one of them [laughs]. There's so much disappointment …

When I asked her about a specific date that was 'great but lacking chemistry', as she put it, and whether it could not have led to a friendship, she responded:

> Friendships take work and I don't want that many new friends. I think with friendships it would have to be worth it, there also has to be a feeling that we're comfortable enough to form a friendship.

It may seem as though friendships are easier to aspire to on Tinder, at least as an official reply to the question of what one is looking for – something app users are usually quick to ask since it is not built into the profile itself. Emily's response suggests that friendships have more assessment criteria than the casual Facebook use of the term indicates. It also seems as though the term 'friendship' as it is used in the context of Tinder contains hopes for an erotic component.

When I started the interview process, my very first meeting was with Willem in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. I met him at a coffee chain in a shopping centre near his work, as he had suggested. My curiosity to meet him increased as I was trying to find my way through the arcade's disorientingly similar passages. The man who later identified himself as Afrikaans had only one Tinder picture showing him and a boy of about ten years of age whose face was digitally scratched out and who had not offered any descriptions of himself in his biography. Our online contact had been limited to an introduction before he announced that he was deleting Tinder and sent me his contact number. When I saw him standing at the escalator, nervously looking around, my previous impression was confirmed that this person, dressed in loose grey suit pants and a shapeless, pastel-yellow shirt, did not look 38, as his Tinder profile said, but rather in his mid-to-late-40s. Having settled down with our coffees in a small joint, the divorcee explained that he prioritises his son over dating and that he had only recently gone back onto Tinder after previously deleting it. He did not use any profile picture out of fear of being recognised by someone he knows the first time around. Two of the women he matched with started asking him to send money for airtime and cover costs for work commutes. Willem started feeling taken advantage of and was finally disillusioned when, on his first corporeal Tinder date, the woman in front of him started talking about a married man she was still having an affair with. At the time of the interview, Tinder was meant to serve as a gateway back into the dating game once again, as he had only been on one other official date since his divorce four years prior. Willem clarified that he is looking for a 'proper woman', someone with high moral standards and who is not just after his money. In response to my probing what kind of relationship he was hoping to find on Tinder, Willem replied:

> That's a hard one, hey. I don't actually know myself. I think everyone is looking for a relationship, but they won't say it too quickly because you will scare the person off. If you're telling a lady I'm looking for a relationship, they'll say that's too fast. So when they ask, I say I'm looking for a friendship that may develop into something more.

Aidan's and Willem's ideas of 'properness' are rather far apart. Yet, Aidan (the divorcee whom I have described as celebrating his newfound freedoms) responded to my question of what he is looking for on Tinder was somewhat similarly to Willem's but more straightforward:

> I suppose what I'm looking for is companionship. I could say good-looking friends with the option to buy […]. So that's why I'm saying I'm looking for friends. And unfortunately, my penis wants them to be good-looking [laughs].

For those participants who had clear gender preferences, these were reflected in their app parameters. Thus, there were often not only preferences in terms of gender, but it was also apparent that the air of eroticism factors into all kinds of relationships on the self-stylised 'world's hottest app. The term 'friendship' on the platform implies a potential for 'add-ons' in the form of sexual intimacy and even a committed relationship. Meanwhile, other spaces were dedicated to different 'kinds' of encounters, even if there may always be an underlying potential for 'add-ons'. Sylvester was a member of various groups on the platform Meetup.[91] Similarly, Willem started attending Couch-Surfing[92] meetings to get in touch with new people and showed a couple of (female) tourists around Cape Town. Johana and Athena organised regular dinners to unravel potential new friendships, inviting people they had come across and found interesting. Tinder as an eroticised medium thus merely adds to a repertoire of means to connect.

The one who waits: catching and freeing gendered selves

Popova (2019) notes the possibility of destructive impulses and emotional carelessness where disposable affinity turns into a bitter experience. Many of my interviewees associated this kind of behaviour with maleness and frequently verbalised assumptions of gender-specific behaviour. They were also voiced by those participants who simultaneously pointed out the problematics of such generalised inferences; those who were aware that, to borrow from Butler (2011), masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed and performed. According to Butler, the sexed body thus often serves as an alibi for conscious or embodied behaviour, and gender is essentially both object and subject. This also means that normativity can be negotiated, perhaps in a way that Archambault (2017) describes. Outlining her research findings in Mozambique, she paints a vivid picture of how phones are used among youth as a new register through which gender relations and ideas of masculinity and femininity can be reworked. It also serves as a tool to channel and redistribute economic resources. She shows how mobile phones allow choosing what not to know about intimate partners and family with their capacity to conceal. Archambault (2017) argues that this can be both conservative and transformative – validating and subverting patriarchal authority over young women's sexuality especially. Regarding Tinder in Cape Town, I found that, where there had been disappointment, there may be a tendency to reduce dating to certain (gendered) formulae. The bubbly, confidence-epitomising and seemingly never-shy-of-words Johana (the previously introduced economics PhD student living with Athena in a

[91] An online service connecting people with similar interests.

[92] A social networking sites arranging homestays and hangouts.

trendy part of the southern suburbs) decided to adjust her expectations of Tinder dating after she went on a date with someone who she 'really hit things off with'. They had a friend in common but arranged to meet for an official date only after matching on Tinder. Johana described how they spent hours talking at a bar and how they both expressed astonishment that such a great date could be the result of swiping on an app, which, they both said, had never produced an exceptional encounter like this for them before. She captured their mood as a desire to scream out: 'Thank you, Tinder!'. The date came back to her place; they had sexual intercourse, and he left the next morning. To Johana's surprise, she did not hear from him in the days to come. Eventually, he responded to one of her messages, skipping over a question she had asked him and simply stating that he was on his way to the airport for a trip (smiley face). The emoticon irritated Johana because she wanted but could not decipher its meaning. Upon not hearing from him again after this, she started convincing herself that something bad must have happened to him. 'It can't be that I misread the situation and that he's just not into me,' she said in a tone thick with irony, poking fun at her own response to the experience. Her description of trying to stay away from her phone while waiting for him to get in touch with her was difficult to listen to and probably would be for anyone who has been in a similar situation before. Johana would purposefully leave her phone at home or put it into 'flight mode' to try and bracket the longing for a sign from the one who had charmed her at least for a little while – just to end up changing the mode back when yearning got the better of her.

After the mutual friend had contacted the vanished date and asked him why he had fallen silent, he sent Johana a message explaining that he should prioritise work and his mental health over dating for the time being. She wished him 'good luck with that'. The laugh that accompanied that final statement about the Tinder-date-gone-hurtful sounded bitter but satisfying in that she got a word into the finale of their encounter. The scarring experience led to her decision to go on dates 'for the sake of the date' – the date being an end within itself. The idea is to minimise long-term visions and expectations and thus reduce the likelihood of being disappointed. 'I want to have fun,' she exclaimed, meaning going on a 'great date' and having a 'good conversation'. Even though Johana said she wanted something 'casual', she emphasised with her chin tilted up and self-mocking pride: 'I have high standards, and the guy has to make an effort to sell himself. I have a lot to offer. And guys suck [her roommate vociferously agrees]. So, I should at least get a fun evening out of it.'

Johana and Athena talked about dating behaviour they considered typically male exhaustively while we were sitting around their large kitchen table. Heterosexual dating, they explained, is all about

keeping the upper hand, creating emotional distance, and fostering a 'casual' attitude. Dating becomes a contest of who is more apathetic and in control of their emotions, with women being immediately seen as clingy if they contact the man first after sex. Therefore, Athena professed, she decided to focus her dating energy on women now, for 'with women, it's play time, not a competition'. Even a rejection or the discontinuation of a relationship, she explained, can be kind and beautiful, even if painful, with a woman. She described how she and her last girlfriend broke up and ended up talking for hours, sharing tears, and telling each other how much they are appreciated. She contrasted this experience to that of a rather dramatic breakup she had with a male ex-boyfriend.

Gendered aspects and the inhibitions certain assumptions produced were also embedded in concerns about safety when meeting male tinderers, specifically where anticipated responses to rejection were concerned. Noemie (the economics postgraduate with the confrontational/confident look from **chapter 5,** who had put me in touch with Johana and Athena) was freshly on the Tinder market and had also decided to exclusively go on dates with female swipers. Her long-term relationship with a man had recently crumbled with the loss of a shared friend. Noemie's sense of security and freedom was linked to ideas of femaleness, which were themselves rooted in experiences that involved men responding unpleasantly when their advances were not met with enthusiasm. With her Tinder search parameters set to 'female', Noemie felt safer and able to approach matches openly and enthusiastically without necessarily expecting a date to take a romantic turn. Athena and Noemie described themselves as attracted to people regardless of their gender identity while still being able to guide preferences when it seemed appropriate (because 'men suck' in Athena's case, or because men are, perceived as potential predators as was the case for Noemie). Both used visual markers and eloquence to determine who is open-minded and thus a potential dating candidate who reflects their self-image as progressive, independent women. Moreover, despite acknowledging the fluidity of sexual identities and desires, there were specific attributes associated with maleness.

Of course, particular gender-coded responses are not an automatism to be taken for granted, and the responses they triggered left some of my male participants frustrated and adapting their Tinder approach. Sylvester's initial way of describing himself was centred around his catholic upbringing. When evaluated by women on Tinder, he noted: 'There's a stereotype of thinking from a female perspective about guys being *one* thing. And I hate that as a guy that I have to go convince women that I'm not a stereotype.' 'It's exhausting to show them [women] that you're not a perpetrator,' he added, and that even before getting to aspects of compatibility and attraction. He suggested

implementing a rating system indicating decency and gentlemen-like behaviour to have other peoples' experiences ease such inherent suspicions. Tom noted that to convince women that he is 'not psycho', he had to think twice about how to approach someone on Tinder. He recalled having matched with a woman on Tinder who was only in Cape Town temporarily. Delighted by her profile, unusually close to his checklist, he wrote his match a long poem. 'It was supposed to be funny,' Tom asserted, 'but after she didn't reply, I realised that it could also be interpreted as fucking creepy.'

Insights of this kind are very relevant to how and if conversations unfold. On the structural side, however, the fast pace and binary categories of dating apps like Tinder neither encourage the detection of nuances, nor do they take aspects of intersectionality into consideration. As Bivens and Hoque (2018) point out, even Bumble, the purportedly feminist dating-app counterpart of Tinder, fails to challenge gender categories, its design hinging on homogenous visions of the male body, epistemologically fixed by certain configurations of masculinity. The app is also based on a taken-for-granted cisnormative and heteronormative framework. The fact that only women are able to initiate the first conversation after mutual right-swipes occurred implies the need for a safety mechanism, and that technology may be able to provide women with control in that respect. The app's composition also implicates that only heterosexual, cisgender women (likely middle or upper class as they would have to have access to a smartphone and steady internet) are worthy of safety mechanisms while all other users are left at risk. The rigid gender categories apps like Tinder and even Bumble reinforce have more to do with function (the matching of profiles) than with identity, MacLeod and McArthur (2019) argue. Where such algorithmic operationalism of platforms intersects with the construction of subjects, the authors add, identities become standardised at the expense of user control. They also influence how and why identities, including an understanding of gender, become implicated in these technologies' concepts and functions. Consequently, capacities to understand the self as fuzzy and complex become reduced.[93]

While gender certainly plays a role (it is perceived to be, so it does), I grew particularly interested in the aspect of temporary or disposable affinity, which was often closely associated with careless, male behaviour. Johana interpreted the dynamics that painfully affected her temporality and forced her into the position of being the one waiting to be the result of gender roles being engraved onto patterns of the dating game. Even short-lived relationships do not have to be superficial,

[93] Also see David and Cambre (2016) on the app Grindr.

meaningless, or accompanied by a sense of deceit per se, but 'Tinder hook-ups' were frequently mentioned to be disappointing in that very way. What Johana experienced with her Tinder date may be experienced in offline relationships too.[94] Indeed, almost everyone, as Popova notes,[95] has experienced some form of disposable affinity with an aeroplane seatmate or perhaps with a fellow patient at the dentist's waiting room. Closeness can be quickly followed by distance. It is also a phenomenon deeply associated with app-mediated dating, as the dictionary-worthy terminology around ghosting implies, rendered infinitely easier with communication tools and a lack of common social ties. Experiences of a shortfall of acknowledgement, understanding and compassion left their marks on many study participants. They influenced their attitude towards dating further, often by relying on confining identity categories or, to get back to Warnier (2007) and his understanding of socialites based on exchange, a singular essence. The paradox here is that the very lack of definitions on Tinder (with underlying inegalitarian app processes being rendered invisible) and the apparent openness to various kinds of intimacies, cloaked within a language of 'casualness', does not produce an equal footing.

'It's my money!'

Like most of the other male participants (even at our interviews), Anthony was insistent on paying the bill on a date. The born-and-bred Capetonian from one of the wealthier southern suburbs with neatly kept hair explained what a good date would look like as he was sitting stiffly opposite me in the bar where we met for the interview. His only Tinder profile picture showed him water-skiing, and his biography was a mere one-sentence long. Anthony's short laughs rhythmically accompanied our conversation, which mainly focused on how his last long-term relationship had slowly transpired. When one of Anthony's Tinder matches, upon them having decided on a time and location for their first date, sent him a text message saying: 'looking forward to you buying me dinner', he was disappointed:

> I was like, okay, I *really* don't have a problem going on a date and paying for drinks and dinner. But … offering to pay like part of it …? I had that twice and there was just this expectation to support her through the night. Does it happen all the time that you have like free nights? If you offer to pay, I'll say no, I pay. But this … If you insisted to pay, I'd let you pay like half maximum. But don't expect everything like on a golden platter. You just *killed* the very first part of it [dating].

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[94] Find multiple examples for this in Nyamnjoh's *Married but Available* (2009).

[95] https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/20/amin-maalouf-identity/ (7 May 2020).

The relevance of resources, how and when they are employed by whom, offer an interesting aspect of fast-paced, eroticised Tinder encounters. Where the initiation of dates is concerned, gender roles are rather clearly defined as per my interviewees. 'In my culture, the man makes the first move. If I match you, I'll talk to you first,' Joseph explained. 'Men get upset if you pay on a date,' Phoebe expounded as something that had revealed itself to her while exploring 'heteronormative dating', as she put it, via Tinder. One of her dates did: 'I just happened to have the right change for the coffee …' she said sarcastically, shrugging her shoulders. The gendered and loaded question of who pays the bill came up frequently in interviews. As a precautionary measure, Enrique would chat with a potential date for at least a week before meeting. 'It's my money!' he said, adding, 'I'm just assuming that role [of paying on dates]'. He thus tried to produce a feeling of having a good understanding of the person's likes and dislikes before spending his time and money on someone he does not think he has enough in common with. Yet, there was also Tom, who, being a 'broke postgrad student', expressed having no problem splitting bills or having his female dates pay them. On the first Tinder date he nervously went on and ended up thoroughly enjoying, Tom found himself pleasantly surprised by her taking the initiative to get (and pay for) the second round of drinks at a bar mostly frequented by students and travellers. In fact, he will not go on a date with someone who expects a fancy dinner, 'unless they are willing to pay for it', Tom said, smiling cheekily.

Playing douche

Throughout their Tinder experiences, my participants Willem and Lucas, both raised in quiet towns in the northern suburbs of Cape Town, took conscious measures in adjusting their courting performance. 'I think women just don't want a nice guy like me,' Willem hypothesised. His second corporeal Tinder encounter was with a woman he had grown fond of online and established an ongoing rapport with before meeting. I saw him for our first interview a day before their first date, and Willem was both very nervous and enthusiastic about the woman for whom he had reportedly deleted Tinder – an act psychotherapist Perel (2007) declares to be the ultimate declaration of affinity in 'modern dating'. They did like each other, he explained to me at a later interview, and continued meeting for a couple of months. When her ex-husband, who had previously left her for someone else, appeared in the picture again, she decided to take him to the very family wedding she had originally invited Willem to as her 'plus one'. Meeting with Willem again at a golf club in the northern suburbs a few months downstream, he had, once again, gone through the process of deleting and re-downloading the app following the disappointing experience. He had also started experimenting with online conversations and explained to me during one of our interviews that he found pretending to be nonchalant and distantly aloof to be what women respond to much more

positively. A remark from one woman he had been chatting with online, critically asking him why he was always so quick and eager to respond to her messages, only confirmed his understanding of what is expected from him as a man in the dating game. He found his consequent adjustment of behaviour to 'pay off' (note the economics-inspired choice of language) in the form of increased expressions of interest. He reported to have recently started chatting with a veterinarian, whom he was charmed by, and they quickly started exchanging lots of messages throughout the day, including music clips that resonated with them in specific moments.

Lucas played with the same strategy. Once we sat down for our interview at the small-town café that we had driven to in my car from the shopping centre parking lot, he started telling me about what he laughingly described as a 'social experiment' involving 'acting like a douche' in online encounters with women after all the meticulously archived disappointments he had experienced. Once he changed his approach, Lucas reported, online responses radically changed with women suddenly appearing keen to meet with him and even initiating dates themselves, something that had never happened to him before. Nevertheless, the 'douchey' persona Lucas adopted online could not be convincingly carried into the corporeal space (which may be why he was happy to cultivate a relationship purely online). 'It's just not me,' he reasoned, even though his narratives revealed pleasure when temporarily having the upper hand in the dating game, taking on emotional reign and an expression of emotional capitalism when avoiding hurt (see **chapter 5**). These tactics resonate with the principles of an established phenomenon called 'pick-up artistry', a term coined by a group of self-identified dating coaches who refer to themselves as a 'seduction community' and who are part of a $100 m industry.[96] Hoisting an aggressive masculinity and portraying women as objects to be dominated, these 'coaches' or 'self-help speakers' problematically turn domination acted out by embodying particular kinds of gender roles into a 'game' or 'artistry' that has very little to do with seduction.[97]

Exploring the 'other' with different senses

As I have shown, although there is a reliance on categorical thinking encouraged by the app design and the selection of a variety of dating candidates presenting themselves in summary format, wooing and being wooed via Tinder was not experienced unilaterally. Still, some ideas of gendered roles were recurringly referred to by study participants. These were embedded in Tinder dating

[96] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/05/pickup-artists-teaching-men-approach-women-industry-street-harassment (3 May 2020).

[97] Also see Lewis's (2016) critique of the 'cosmopolitan androcentric subject' and argument for a rights-based feminist lens in addressing divergent subject positions.

approaches in different ways and sometimes reflected in how attraction via the app was determined. Attraction was often said to be difficult to gauge without knowing someone's voice, smell or body language, especially as people represent themselves online in the most flattering light. In that regard, Nick (the architect who wanted to experience intimacy without the risk of 'falling') distinguished between meeting women and men, the latter of whom he had only recently extended his sexual radar to. Perhaps because of the lack of social scripts available to him, he found it more difficult for him to determine attraction to men without physical proximity.

Phoebe's more strategic approach helped her find what she called a 'balance match' or 'falling in love with someone on purpose'. Going on dates with men was new to her, but, apart from the mere gender aspect, she intended to strategically circumvent her pattern of being 'instinctively attracted to mildly unstable people [laughs]. So intellectually what's missing is stability … But I'm trying to assess I can … how much stability I actually need … I guess.' Being usually the one who 'loves more' in relationships, she decided to avoid diving into relationships, especially in this new dating terrain – where she not only was to meet someone classified as male but also through a digital dating platform. Instead, she rationalised, moderated her realities, and tried to maintain emotional reign. In this novel context, Phoebe found ways to maintain a feeling of being in control, channelling conversations in ways she felt comfortable with and establishing clear boundaries before meeting (apart from the man who came to visit her from Durban). Even though she revealed the contrast between rationality and emotion, her reflections on kissing were indicative of a desire to experience fantasy-fuelled realities that are neither one nor the other: 'Kissing on the first date … then there's a lack of anticipation. There's that fantasy about a person, sometimes it's an avalanche … and then there's no chance to feel that uncertainty and that desire, I guess.' Uncertainty and the potential for pain are integral of any intimate experience, whether they are considered more-or-less 'real' (realness being understood by participants as guided by emotions and spontaneity rather than rationale and calculus). Yet, for Phoebe, the feeling of control when navigating dates with men via Tinder represented a welcome decrease of vulnerability.

Self-critically, Phoebe dissected her strategic dating approach: 'I think we're arseholes in a romantic context in a way that we're not allowed anywhere else. Like the education this and that, are we going to have lots in common.' She added:

> I've met a lot of brilliant people. That's, like, the coolest thing. And a lot who have lots of stuff I'm interested in or other stuff that doesn't work … and that like gradually builds the spectrum of what works and what doesn't. The problem with Tinder is that it's so … not superficial, but so ...calculating. You start with a lot of things

> that when you met the person organically wouldn't be deal-breakers you like 'no, wait … [grimaces].

Despite the plausibility of her approach, Phoebe relied on her senses when determining attraction through her body, also telling her that she was only attracted to men at the time. 'I think going on a Tinder date is almost like creating a little shared world. And you see how that affects you. You go home, and you see what is the hangover from this date … am I up, am I down … am I tight, am I loose.'

Contrary to Phoebe, Emily embraced giving up control and being wooed by men via Tinder for a change. She embraced the ease with which dates happened: 'usually I'm the one asking out and checking in …,' she said, referring to her using Tinder to exclusively meet women, as she used to. The very pace that was indicative of the plain-sailing way the dates were arranged via Tinder did not glide into corporeal experiences for her. Having only dated women her entire adult life without much considering a potential attraction to men, Emily found herself one day kissing a man she knew. She explained this confidingly in our second interview at a cosy restaurant in the city centre of Cape Town, covering her face with both hands as though embarrassed. On a night out with people from her salsa dance group, Emily let herself be drawn in by her dance partner further and further. She described him slowly moving his hands along the side of her body during their shared dance, letting them glide up to her neck and, finally, asking her for a kiss, which she leaned into. From there, the attraction grew with each encounter, and every dance shared. Something, however, soon felt off in her relationship with the older photographer, who had never been in a long-term relationship before. He continued insisting on comparing her delicate figure to the models he worked with, commenting that she could be even more delicate despite his knowledge of the eating disorder had she struggled with a few years back. Eventually, the relationship ended, and Emily turned to Tinder to explore dating men further, just to find that none of her keen dates appealed to her senses - one of them being a sloppy kisser and the other having an odour that did not speak to her.

Also often iterated to me, mostly by my male interviewees, were assumptions that women are ordinarily not open to something explicitly 'casual', a preference that female profiles frequently emphasise. Presumably, this is because men tend to be attributed the passionate portion of intimacy, while women supposedly take on a caring part. Musing about the concept of 'casualness', Phoebe thoughtfully amplified:

> I'm always mildly fascinated by causal sex … what is that supposed to be. There's nothing really quite casual sex, you're revealing your

> vulnerabilities. I'm worried about the emotional kickback in retrospective. I showed this person my vulnerability … I don't drink anymore, having sex with someone completely sober for the first time is a hell of an experience. Few people do. I find it fascinating that culturally we have accepted that we numb ourselves to make this easier. It's a very conscious choice, it's amazing. I think it's a shame generally that we numb ourselves to the vulnerable parts of life.

'Casualness' can be read as counteracting vulnerability and a sense of precarity, especially when relative strangers are encountered through an eroticised tool and by means of extending the self. It is also a keyword for a continuous, never finite sport and the responsibility of maximising one's 'happiness'. While it was pointed out that casualness is cultivated on Tinder, complexities of experiences were dissected as incorporative of various facets of being, not as only characterised by the selected sets of oppositions that the public discourse on Tinder tends to highlight.[98]

Enrique emphasised that he was not looking for a casual sexual affair and felt attracted to women on a similar intellectual level. Stimulating conversations (or what Phoebe referred to as 'word porn') were also highlighted by many participants to be an important factor in feeling attracted to someone, including Bill and Aidan. However, for the latter two, a lack of such a connection would not be crucial for a sexual experience, and they both had their theories on women being less able to have 'casual' sexual relationships than men. Bill explained as follows:

> I think it's because women are … women I think find it harder to regulate their emotions when it comes to a relationship with a man. And I think it comes down to … I assume this is what you're studying, but it is my suspicion that you as a woman you *receive* the male … without sounding weird, you let the men *into* you, it's allowing them into your space. Whereas a guy, I don't actually allow the woman into my space. I think that's why women get much more emotionally attached than men.

Aidan resisted my enquiries of whether he was looking for casual sex after he declared monogamy to be incompatible with human nature and, yet, explaining that there is a difference between men and women, for 'as a woman, she's a victim of her own emotions'. Embracing his freedom following his divorce and exploring his sexuality (after a marriage in which his desire was mostly

[98] It ought to be taken into consideration that a large part of my sample was university educated and emphasised that it was important for them that a potential intimate partner would be on a similar intellectual level. Those participants had a tendency to 'intellectualise' and dissect dating in an analytical manner. Nevertheless, most of the interviews would be on an anecdotal, conversational level, so my focus owes to what aspects of dating were zoomed in on and where the language used in the interviews changed.

channelled into a long-term affair) became tied up with intellectualism for Aidan. 'I suppose I'm looking for someone who is into philosophy', he said, elaborating that someone with an open mind would be less likely to think link sex to commitment and practice what he called 'mate-guarding', which he described to be a mechanism of evolution to be overcome. His thinking was more categorical when I enquired about his gender preferences:

> Leah: Are you only looking for women on Tinder?
>
> Aidan: Are you asking if I'm bisexual?
>
> Leah: I'm asking you what experience you're interested in.
>
> Aidan: I'm not really wired that way, unfortunately. Unfortunately. … I think it's different for women. I think sexuality is a spectrum. Men will fall more on one side of the spectrum and women more in the middle. They're more fluid, definitely. You'll have more friends that are women who've tried and not many male ones. As I read a lot of things and as I become more accepting of [lowers voice] homosexuality and transsexuality and all the kinds of oppressions people go through … I was eventually able to watch Brokeback Mountain. You know, I was of the view that's disgusting, homosexuality, gross. That disgust. So … eventually I got over this … stupidity and when I watched it, I thought the first love scene was really sweet [laughs]. And after that, we went to some market and I saw some men holding hands and I wanted to go to them and say: I accept you [laughs]. Which I know, if I was a gay man … it would be very condescending, very insulting. It's like if you see a black man and you say … you're human too. Of course, I'm human, what the fuck.'

Aidan was struggling with conflicting ideas of what it means to be a 'real man'. Anxieties around precarious manhood that may fuel such conflicts are also referred to as 'fragile masculinity'.[99] In many ways, there is an ongoing power struggle between realities and idealised imaginings of the self. Aiden wanted to see himself as an open-minded philosopher and resist embodied stereotypes around manhood. Willem and Lucas both employed newly acquired, gender-specific 'knowledge' to achieve imagined connections, while Phoebe and Emily extended their way of knowing experientially by exploring a romantically unfamiliar gender via Tinder. Maalouf (2001) wrote that everyone's identity comprises several elements that are not clearly restricted to the particulars set down in official records. Only by acknowledging our identity's multiplicity, the writer says, can we begin to simultaneously own our uniqueness and fully inhabit our ties to our fellow human beings. Participants often acknowledged that gender and gendered experiences are not reducible to a singularity, a certain format or essence, despite relics of fixed ideas of gender roles lingering - even when they were associated with a conservativism that some actively worked to distance themselves

[99] See DiMuccio and Knowles (2020) on the significance of the underexplored phenomenon in the political realm.

from. There were apparent contradictions between ideas of oneself and lived experiences. These nuances and contradictions of experiences of sexuality come to the fore when prompted (by Tinder, on dates or by me) to describe the self holistically. Going back to Bill and Michelle, the couple would read polyamory literature like 'sex at dawn' and 'the ethical slut', which points out such nuances. They would also verbalise their concerns in couple therapy and experiment with threesomes, including other women and swinging with other couples. While those experiences turned out to be not ideal for different reasons, there was an awareness of sexuality being not one or the other. Regardless, Bill would hold on to the idea of women being somehow intrinsically sexually different from men in very concrete ways. As did Aidan, even though some of his evolutionary theories of maleness conflicted with him maintaining a trusting friendship with the women he used to have a long-term sexual affair with.

Regardless of the egalitarian appearance of some relationships and sexual encounters, there clearly are remains of the 'other gender' as a fixed idea persisting in one way or another. Perel (2007, 2017) found that some of the most tenacious gender stereotypes, besides being false (the likes of men wanting more sex than women and women being more monogamous than men), also constitute barriers to relating in their polarity. In Cape Town, relationships are located in an untidy fusion of epistemological frameworks, informing the shape of corporal intimacies. I have discussed more obvious shifts after the official end of the apartheid regime and the concurrent abundance of 'information' around sexuality that had been previously tucked away behind guidelines of conduct labelled 'proper' and 'respectable' in **chapter 2**. This implies that, what happens in the bedroom, stays in the bedroom and that extending oneself in any way beyond conceptual legacies of properness (or *ordentlikheid* in Afrikaans) is not a smooth endeavour (see Ross, 2015; Salo, 2018). The guiding frameworks of descent and indecent behaviour is still more apparent among people who identify as Afrikaners (see Joseph, Willem or Lucas, for instance). Yet, they were also experienced by participants who considered themselves particularly liberal and were striving to break with their parents' norms of good conduct, for instance by Akhona, Athena, Arietta and Phoebe. This could be in the form of matching with someone who has different, gendered expectations (in terms of paying the bill in Phoebe's case or regarding the sexualisation of bodies in Arietta's case). Tensions were also produced by not feeling able to share experiences with family (for Akhona and Athena, this applied to their relationships with women and sexuality more broadly).

While somewhat simplifying, I liked Phoebe's description of a 'Victorian hangover'. While gendered and otherwise structured expectations are not a mere residue of colonial times, the

'hangover' implies that there is not necessarily a permanence to epistemologies. At the same time, it highlights that experiences (pleasant or unpleasant) are subject to forces beyond one's own decisions. Nevertheless, there may be ways found to 'remedy' the hangover – in some ways and constellations. As a result, there are, like in Spronk's (2012) account on sexuality and young professionals in Nairobi, struggles to belong (also informed by intergenerational conflicts), which lead to the creation of unique lifestyles. Unlike in Spronk's observations, this study's participants seldom managed to move beyond narrow and limiting categories of ethnic, regional, and religious belonging. The tenacity of gender stereotypes and their reflection in some of the dating approaches, which will be outlined in the following section, are worth noting when understanding gender to be an act resulting from, reinforcing, and being reinforced by societal norms rather than being an artefact – a way of thinking that is strongly influenced by Butler's 'gender trouble' (2011).

Self-extensions, their obstacles, and limits

There are clearly limits, uncertainties and hesitations linked to attempts to 'democratise intimacies' in Gidden's sense as a level playing ground. I have shown this to be the case for intimacies in Cape Town, especially in lieu of what could be interpreted as Tinder's dictatorial tendencies in terms of binaries and gendered roles adopted when dating is initiated. The app's asserted biopower, masked by a game-affiliated front, penetrates - and is contained by individual and social bodies. Tindering knowledge is sourced in experiences, shared in conversation with online platforms usually offering very gendered advice instructing men how to 'pick up' women on Tinder. For many of my participants, Tinder remained a tool to explore wants and likes, despite their disassociation from the app. While it objectifies, it also creates subjectivities. It is productive as well as repressive and operates in a sideways fashion across social relationships as opposed to power being unopposedly forcing itself down towards user behaviour. Foucault says that 'the irony of this deployment [of sexuality] is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance' (1980:159). Although Foucault embraces sexual libertarianism, he emphasises how discourses of sexual liberation themselves may be the result of deploying sexuality as the operator of new regimes of bio-power. Said holds true for the discourse on tindering as an essentialising way of being while it is, in fact, a constantly challenged tool of self-extension, only possible through a constant exchange.

Conflicts and contradictions experienced among participants via different senses when stretching themselves towards new encounters (online and offline) were not reserved to understandings of gender, which were sometimes fixed and sometimes fluid. Rather, extensions of the self often incorporated a back-and-forth between internalised moral frameworks and breaking free from them. Different variables pushed themselves to the forefront at different times in the process.

Joseph, or instance, described his first Tinder profile, which he eventually deleted after becoming frustrated with a lack of matches, as 'more liberal'. He changed his approach to keeping his morals upright, as he put it, essentially wanting '[...] a lady in the street, a freak in the bed'. His ideal match would have to be someone 'prim and proper' enough to bring home to his parents and to take to church, as he put it. His inner conflicts regarding himself as a sexual being also came to the fore when swiping profiles online. Joseph claimed to dislike revealing pictures on Tinder but admitted to swiping for them, excusing himself with a nervous laugh, saying: 'I'm weak!'

Sylvester (the catholic music producer) offers a good example for the layeredness of conflicts with internalised morals, taking the form of gendered, racialised and classed encounters and incorporating the shifting of positions. As a result of his new approach, he had met with what he depicted as a variety of women of different cultural, social, and racial backgrounds within those few months. Self-made and from a historically strategically disadvantaged area (and raced as 'Coloured'), he never thought that he might one day date someone who is black and, on top of it, foreign. It is something that simply never occurred to him before using Tinder in a more casual manner (meaning not specifically for 'dating'), he explained. Sylvester's newly adopted method of extending himself more generously brought him in contact with a woman from Malawi, with whom he unexpectedly shared a pleasant evening and kiss. It was his first in years and a big relief to him. 'It was easier,' he elucidated, 'because she was leaving soon. I did not even feel uncomfortable holding hands in public. I enjoyed it. There was less expectations ...' Apart from an overall receptiveness to it, perceptions of time and space play a role in terms of when and where attraction can flourish. Recounting the kiss, Sylvester compared his feeling to a television show, in which participants are blindfolded and explore their attraction to a stranger by relying on their senses. The blindfold metaphor avails itself to describing both an allure of the unknown and Sylvester's employment of the digital in reducing the weight of categorical thinking and the restrictions it comes with. He perceived this to be a burden from his upbringing and the result of a national historical baggage that all South Africans have to learn how to carry.

At one of our later interviews, Sylvester reported being involved with a woman from Zimbabwe. Economics (tightly associated with class and race in South Africa) play a significant role in the matrix of variables at play for him. Sylvester is self-sufficient and takes financial care of his mother and sister, who now live with him in the southern suburbs. He wanted to avoid ending up feeling responsible for an additional person in his life. Nevertheless, if he were to feel strongly enough about someone, Sylvester was quick to add, it would not much matter how self-reliant someone was. This new Tinder encounter, who embodied someone he had never seen himself becoming

intimate with, worked as a house-sitter, as he remarked with a tone of slight disapproval. Sylvester was not initially erotically drawn to her, but when she invited him to the house she was taking care of, they shared a kiss and lay in bed together naked for a while. It felt reassuring but not necessarily sexual for him – an experience he tried to reserve for a situation in which he feels safe and confident about the bond. Sylvester found himself making use of Tinder in exploring nuances of his self, adding layers to it. He would reach out towards the unfamiliar to comfortable degrees. Tinder offered an opportunity for openness and sharing when detaching the idea of meeting someone from meeting 'the one' – a person with a very particular set of qualities for a particular kind of relationship. Instead of the image of the future he had refined over time, Sylvester could focus on the moment, rely more on his senses and, even if only momentarily, escape tight moral frameworks stipulating what is 'proper' and what is not.

What comes to the fore where the self is transcended is the body and the humanness it is attributed to. Questioning its existence as a bounded entity, Butler wrote:

> We can think about demarcating the human body through identifying its boundary, or in what form it is bound, but that is to miss the crucial fact that the body is, in certain ways and even inevitably, unbound – in its acting, its receptivity, in its speech, desire, and mobility. It is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as its very vector. In this sense, the body does not belong to itself. (Butler 2016:52-53)

Even with a metaphorical blindfold, there were counterforces to continuous acts of extending the self and its experiential realm. I was aware that my questions around gender and cultural preferences were categorical themselves and loaded with controversial and potentially unjustified assumptions on my part. Yet, they could not be left unasked in Cape Town as a charged social milieu. I let my initially consternated participants (except for one participant) elaborate on the topic of cultural and racial preferences and explain their stance.

Tatenda was that exception. I met him at a different café in the same shopping mall I had met Willem in the northern suburbs. Tatenda was quick to address the topic of inter-cultural dating, which he understood as defined by skin colour ('black' and 'white'). The 28-year-old had only lived in the northern suburbs for three weeks when we first got together. He was originally from Zimbabwe and lived in an informal settlement of the diverse city of Johannesburg, after moving to South Africa and before coming to Cape Town to study. In the northern suburbs that he was still settling into, there were constant reminders of his 'blackness' and an assumed cultural

difference based on visual markers. The insurance company he worked at next to pursuing a postgraduate business degree was especially saturated with this topic for Tatenda, as he was the only person of a darker skin colour who was not a receptionist, cleaner or 'tea lady', he said. 'People also assume that I only got this job because I'm black,' he added, referring to the, amongst some South Africans, controversial *Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003,* which seeks to redress the inequalities produced by the apartheid regime in the form of a programme that selects job candidates based on the race that was – and continues to be – attributed to them. Going onto the platform Tinder (initially in Johannesburg), Tatenda intended to conduct 'a little social experiment', as he put it, to see if he would match with 'white girls'. He met with one German woman working for an NGO who fit that category. 'She picked this very white place and we were talking about race and stuff and dating different people. But people around us were staring so it was uncomfortable.' In his new living environment in the northern suburbs of Cape Town, he had drastically fewer matches than in Johannesburg. Tatenda would like to meet new people and try new things, he asserted, like hiking (a leisure activity Cape Town is known for, albeit one for those with free time and access to the mountain). On one occasion, I ran into Tatenda at a documentary festival at which we had watched the same film entitled 'female pleasure' and to which he had brought a Tinder date. Part of his extension of the self included disassociating himself from what he referenced as conservativism. 'I used to be homophobic,' he recounted. He also described himself as standing out among his friends as someone who grants his sister the liberty of dating. 'People I know are surprised that I let my sister date who she likes. She wants me to get along with this guy she's with; he's a comedian. My friends don't really get it because in my culture, as a brother you're supposed to be protective [also meaning sexually constricting].'

Where the rest of this study's participants were concerned, my forward probing about cultural and racial preferences was accompanied by visible discomfort. I would usually be presented with justifications along the lines of cultural difference – a differential idea that Tatenda both challenged and reproduced. Clear preferences for similar cultural backgrounds were also quickly defended by participants as being generationally pre-determined. Aidan remarked that he simply could not bring someone with a darker skin colour home to his parents. Joseph reported the same. He had been on a date with a 'Coloured girl' whom he kissed but claimed to have not contacted again out of concern about his parent's reaction.

In response to my question about preference, Michelle explained:

> I don't think I could ever be with a black woman. For me, I like someone that's tanned … but I've never crossed the cultural boundaries, I've never met with someone Indian or … Chinese …. I don't know why.
>
> Leah: And in terms of white South Africans?
>
> Michelle: English. So Bill is Afrikaans, but you don't hear it. But if someone is full-on Afrikaans and they struggle with English then I don't know …. But maybe if someone had a Spanish accent.

Johana and Athena also found 'cultural barriers' to be too significant to be dating someone who was differently raced in South Africa, even though both had been on dates with people from European countries, in which case cultural difference seemed to matter less. Interestingly, Athena would rebel against gender norms by extending themselves beyond heteronormative paradigms, but racial lines within South Africa specifically are constructed boundaries they did not seem to have thought of crossing.

Akhona, the Stellenbosch student who grew up in a rural area in Mpumalanga, professed how using Tinder had made her take note of things about herself:

> And oh, what I also realised is I'm really not a big fan of international people from other African countries, which is sad. I think it's my upbringing. Because my family, they used to say a lot of negative things, I think that's still in me. Which is wrong! These are things I don't want to have but I they're there. And, actually, the two people I met one was from Uganda and one from Nigeria, I had already made up my mind.

The dissatisfaction with experiences that simultaneously lack predictability and enchantment were guided by the platform and its parameters, and by already embodied, essentialising distortions. While this may be true in any other context, these experiences may be exaggerated in quite particular ways in South Africa through the use of digital technologies. Generational disjunctures of how intimacy and relationships are understood and lived out were described along various lines in my interviews. Athena, for instance, was musing about how her parents would react to her having a relationship with a woman that was not monogamous at that point in time. The concept of polyamory alone would overwhelm them, being from a small-town context and Christian family, she explained. Akhona wanted to explore dating women on Tinder regardless of her family's opposition to same-sex relationships but was less sure whether she was ready to challenge the embodied moralism of no-penetration-before-marriage, even though we thought she might want to. Sylvester's strict catholic upbringing had instilled inner conflicts with his sexuality throughout his life and rendered being intimate with women a stressful and conflict-ridden process. Willem is

part of the same generation. While he grew up in a suburb dedicated to 'Whites' by the apartheid regime and Sylvester in an under-resourced 'Coloured' area, they shared similar ideas and desires for a 'proper' woman.

Travis also felt he could not share aspects of himself with his parents, whom he described as 'conservative'. He had moved from in a well-off area in Johannesburg to Muizenberg, a beach town of the Cape Town Peninsula after finishing high school and was now (at the age of 23) working freelance as a videographer. He felt certain that nothing he did was ever to his father's (and, by extension, his mother's) satisfaction. I mentioned in the methodology chapter that I experienced Travis as very open and curious about relationships. In fact, we often discussed the theories of philosopher Alain de Botton together, whom we are both fond of (I later gifted him a book of his). Especially with his recent medical diagnosis and treatment with bipolarism, Travis thought he could not approach his family. 'For them, mental health is not a thing,' he explained. Especially as a male, he is meant to display resilience. At the same time, he was confined by the religiously-inspired expectations his parents had placed upon his body. He recalled his mother finding condoms in his room when he was visiting their home in Johannesburg at the age of 21 and taking it upon her to hide them from him, as though the mere absence of the condoms was reassuring of his abstinence. Travis decided to challenge the stoic male restraint he attributed to his father and cultivated an emotional openness with his first long-term girlfriend, whom he had met during my fieldwork. However, this disassociation from a particular kind of defensive manhood did not keep him from being insecure about his physical presence when he witnessed more muscular men flirting with her at the gym where she was doing CrossFit[100], a practice she had introduced Travis to. In this sense, despite Travis's resistance towards the known and affinity towards differently organised relationships, his body still reflected ideologies of power and their representational symbolic implementations. It shows that, in the words of O'Neill (1985:51), 'just as we think our society with our bodies so, too, we think our bodies with society'.

All this study's participants found ways to continuously position themselves in ways that were rupturing and compliant with social dictates. Joseph realigned himself with what he thought was 'right' in the form of rigid filtering as well as fantasising about 'a lady in the street and a freak in the bed'. His main criterion to find a suitable woman and marker for compatibility was the Christian faith, as he emphasised in his profile positive, and which he associated with positive

[100] A trademark, high-intensity fitness regimen.

character traits. At a later stage of my fieldwork, Joseph reported having indeed met a woman at church camp. Raiti (2007) argues that some cosmopolitans experience disjuncture in ways that make the stability of 'traditional, structured' life seem unsettling. (I find the already mentioned traveller figure on Tinder to be symbolic of the ideal cosmopolitan, representing such desired instability through the (Tinder-) marketable character traits of flexibility, mobility, and adventurousness – though not rootlessness). At the same time, Raiti says, Victorian ideals of linearity continue permeating emotions, which, in one form or another, is the case in postcolonial, post-apartheid Cape Town. The air of freedom promoted by Tinder complicates rather than simplifies one's role in wider-reaching systems. However seemingly straightforward and standardised, customizable technologies still require situating the self within a plethora of choices incorporating various degrees of strangeness. It is not surprising that emotions will be disembedded in the process to some degree. Yet, as Raiti emphasises, one will still seek to gain stability within this unstable realm. So did my participants in their relentless search for intimacy whilst economising on their continuously changing emotional capacities.

Tinder as a platform produces ontological tensions by being hyperfocused (in providing an apparently endless source for intimate options) and by hypernormalising what are established as characteristics of a fast-paced, eroticised manner of getting to know near strangers. It encourages confining categories of self while allowing for exploration and ambiguity concerning the desired 'kinds' of relationships and commitment levels. Additional distortion is produced by the pushes and pulls of a constant negotiation between the comfort of the familiar, and desires to let fantasy roam freely. Things become even more complex when considering how the matrix of 'cultural knowledge', intricately intertwined with economic realities and intergenerational difference (and similarity) plays into a decision-making process that is understood to be subjective and catering to individual happiness. The metaphorical blindfold comes off and that possible sensualities move far into the distance, despite the allure of digital technologies and their ability to connect. Even the 'born frees' of my participants described themselves as less than free, even while exploring connections via a tool that promises extensions beyond the comforts of the familiar. The next section critically discusses assumptions about the emancipatory development that Giddens (2013), among others, has associated with 'modern dating'.

Bound in a spiral dance

At the beginning of my research, I was inclined to read Tinder dynamics through the lens of a concept Giddens (2013) coined as 'plastic sexuality' when describing malleable erotic expression as they emerged in late modernity in different places. According to Giddens, this flexible sexuality

transcends modernist notions of fixed sexualities, defined by biology, ruled by the phallus and associated with various binaries (normal versus perverse; heterosexual versus homosexual; etcetera). It also affects both individual choice and social norms. Plastic sexuality, Giddens claims, is autonomous, emancipatory in its potential rooted in its disengagement from reproductive sex. It thus is said to evolve parallel to the 'pure relationship', a prototype of a new form of intimacy. Consequently, the emphasis on 'phallic sexuality' becomes reduced. This relationship backdrop, according to Giddens, offers an opportunity for individuals to express erotic wants and needs and develop alternative, more nuanced sexual identities. Erotic expressions then become closely tied to individual notions of self.

While Giddens (2013) acknowledges some limitations of this process, he has been criticised for his exaggerated positivism and failure to address the persistence of gender and class inequality (for instance by Jamieson, 1999), hampering lifestyle choices and self-expression. In a review on Giddens's concept of plastic sexuality, Hawkes (2007) refers to various queer scholarship works in pointing out that there has been a weakening of the 'sex/love' bedrock of heteronormative relationships. The findings she refers to illustrate that romantic couplings of the heterosexual norm have, to some degree, been replaced with more flexible and agentic friendship networks that may or may not include sexual intimacy. Within these new social terrains (Tinder being a potential source), new forms of intimacy can be negotiated, which transcend former normative distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual relationship patterns and priorities. I found some Tinder engagements to reflect the shifts described by Hawkes. However, I softened my 'plastic sexuality' gaze on Tinder encounters when observing the pervasiveness of gender roles,[101] manifesting, for instance, in practices like initiating conversations, paying on a date and 'playing douche'. These offer orientation points for Tinder-related (online and offline) courting practices and a somewhat stabilising habitus within a disorienting context. There is reluctance when leaning into a 'transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals', as Giddens (2013) admits, even where digital tools like Tinder are used to transcend the familiar and the self in selective ways. Perhaps this is due to the eroticised, flame-producing nature of experiences that Tinder encourages. It may also be tied to what Phoebe calls a 'Victorian hangover' when approaching intimacy in Cape Town.

[101] I, once again, must emphasise that these interpretations rely on narratives of heterosexual relationships. While many of my participants had dated people identifying as the same gender, what they focused on in the interviews were experiences with the former.

Amin Maalouf (2001:13) maintains that: 'while there is always a certain hierarchy among the elements that go to make up individual identities, that hierarchy is not immutable; it changes with time, and in so doing brings about fundamental changes in behaviour.' He adds:

> But it is just as necessary to emphasize that identity is also singular, something that we experience as a complete whole. A person's identity is not an assemblage of separate affiliations, nor a kind of loose patchwork; it is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound. (Maalouf, 2001:26)

The body as a vector responds to vibrations of a drum, triggered by an array of desires, senses, temporalities. It plays off other influences as well, such as ideas of romanticism, ideologies of freedom and (somewhat stabilising) confines of the 'phallic rule', referring not only to ideas around gender, but also to a dearth of acknowledgement as it pertains to the multiple facets of human experience. Relationships can therefore neither be argued to have been freed from a 'phallic rule', nor can they be said to have become liquefied to an indiscernible degree (Bauman, 2013) or that love as 'we' know it (specifically the kind that has been talked about under the umbrella term 'modernity') is ending, as Illouz (2018) put it.

There is a palpable desire experienced by tinderers for aspects of democratised encounters in line with Giddens's (2013) 'plastic sexuality', allowing a sense of freedom to set the scene afresh for each swipe-induced, novel encounter. This reputedly democratic aspect of Tinder can both hamper or facilitate expressions of one's desires since there appear to be no strictly outlined roles and scripts to follow, which may be why tinderers are willing to adjust themselves to certain categories online. Not only do binary gender categories have to be picked, but, as I have repeatedly mentioned, apps also allow only for descriptions of the self in certain formats, ignoring the compositeness and layeredness of identities (see Nyamnjoh, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2019).

Tinder as a tool of self-exploration and as a marketing podium for particular kinds of eroticised encounters framed along binary lines makes for an ambiguous social setting. That becomes especially clear when relationships produced through it are read within the matrix of social factors that they are reflective of, including continued dictates of the phallus as a synonym for fixed understandings of gender and other identity categories. The confluence of digital and corporeality becomes a place of embodied memory. As a mere physical space, Sak (2016) says, the digital realm embraces acts, tools, and objects of remembering. Informed by memory, identity becomes continuously handcrafted. Both the affordances and limits of the digital in understanding and

defining the self have been highlighted throughout this chapter. Despite the outlined confines, the nature of intimacies is still to be manoeuvred after every match. The allure of autonomy renders exploratory experiences ongoing, despite moments of hesitation due to disillusionment, a sense of meaninglessness and desires to avoid pain.

Initially ambiguous relationships may unfold while journeying along different paths, painted with an array of potentialities, and hurdled with risks of disappointment. Chan (2018b) found ambiguity or *Aimei* to be a major gratification of dating-app users in China. *Aimei* is produced simultaneously from the app's architecture, user interpretations and the actual practices of users who juxtapose its benefits to the delineations of, for example, marriage platforms. It is precisely because of their lack of *mudixing*, roughly translating to purposefulness, that dating apps are so popular among Chinese young adults, the author explains. Chan interprets this ambivalent attitude – desiring a relationship but not committing to expectations – to reflect neoliberal market logic that has become embedded in everyday life. The ambiguities of dating apps and the variety of experiences linked to them are, as I have shown, challenging for users, despite their allure and potential. They were also challenging for me as the researcher studying relationships produced through Tinder in step with other app technologies. As a distorting rabbit hole, the dating app is difficult to wrap one's head around, more so when considering aspects of gender, race and class add additional intersectional factors relevant to phenomenologies of tindering.

When thinking about technologies, questioning whether they succeed in bridging boundaries or whether they are breaking them, Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' is insightful. Haraway (1991:180) ends her writing with the words '[I would] rather be a cyborg than a goddess'. With this statement, she refers to the cyborg figure representing technological-human hybridity as a feminist counter model to a technophobe goddess. The latter is a central metaphor of ecofeminist thinking of the 1970s and 1980s and is, Haraway criticises, tied to nostalgic narratives of matriarchal, pre-historic times. Her understanding of the figure of the cyborg, on the other hand, embodies the promise to break free from dualisms of industrial times (culture/nature/woman/man, etcetera). With its fictional elements, the cyborg is not just a monster, she asserts. Rather, it is a nifty lens through which to challenge dichotomies and fractured identities. To further the feminist debate, Kronberger (2019) expanded Haraway's imagery to that of the cyborg-goddess by incorporating apparent dualisms and treating them as mutually entangled. This entanglement stands for a diffractive reading of cyborg and goddess, reflected in a metaphorical ritualistic dance meant to allow for intersectional and postcolonial extensions of the symbolic figure of the cyborg-goddess. I understand the conflicts some of my participants experienced and the murkiness they navigated

to constitute a multiply coded cyborg-god/ess dance. In the improvised, adapted fashion of extending the self and exploring others through a 'thing' called Tinder, experiences are not limited to specific, essentialised bodies, nor is there a clearly outlined path. What is more, the biopolitics (or biopower) of Tinder, attributing not only different worth to bodies but influencing who may match with whom, can be interrupted in different ways, not least of all by pressing the 'delete' button. Just like pressing the download button, this constitutes an act full of new imaginations and essences to be shared – not in the sense of essentialising, as can be the case with Tinder profiles, but rather along the lines of Warnier (2007) and the 'pot king' of Mankon as creating balance in exchange with others.

Summary conclusion: shifting the narrative

The interviews and observations that inform this dissertation highlight the pervasiveness of social frames of reference that tend to reduce identities to a set of fixed attributes regarding gender, race and class. Study participants expressed a clear desire to face the self and others as multi-faceted. Reductive sentiments (often located outside of the self) would be described as a counterweight in the process of exploring via technologies like Tinder. Extending oneself toward the unfamiliar and fantastic means rendering oneself vulnerable with an accumulation of negative experiences, increasing reluctance and selectiveness. Falling back on Nyamnjoh's (2017b) words once more, tinderers would reach for the stars with their feet firmly on the ground. Especially so when the freedom is taken to experience sexualities more fluidly than conventionally encouraged, one runs the risk of allowing for intimacies that become too momentous or painful. Breaking free from reluctance and a reliance on the familiar is not necessarily easy. Like Goffman (1956:315), I understand gender (along with other fixed markers of identity) to be the opiate of the masses.[102] This makes having access to the figurative emergency exit of the rabbit hole when stretching oneself beyond the familiar reassuring – 'creeps' can be blocked, parameters adjusted, or a break from the pressures of the erotic instantly commenced with the 'delete' button. To an extent, cyberspaces, therefore, allow for the re-setting and active fabrication of dating experiences and the potential spreading of some forms of intimacy to thousands of internet users through digital applications. It may also provide opportunities to start afresh when power relationships or notions of self within them feel askew by navigating the rabbit hole on a refreshed (or not-so-refreshed) quest. Aspects of such agency and limits in breaking free from sexual scripts came to the fore in

[102] Even though religion as a particular social framework referenced by Karl Marx when using the same saying in referring to the effects of its modes of oppression also continues to play a significant part in the embodiment of certain gendered/racialised/classed roles.

the stories shared with me. They echo Butler's description of bodies as vectors in the worlds they are up against when they claim agency: 'I am already at the hands of the other when I try to take stock of who I am. I am already up against a world I never chose when I exercise my agency' (Butler 2016:53).

New forms of fast-paced, technologically guided dating produce copious of experiences, likely increase deliberate caution and lead to disappointment when holding on to romanticised and explicitly amorous ideas. Perceptions of Tinder as an initiator of intimacy are rooted in an attachment to romantic notions of spontaneous encounters and immediate emotional responses in the form of an erotic spark or even flame. Constant companions of insecurity and hesitance increase challenges and produce temporalities that may amplify a lack of accountability towards others. Nevertheless, desire and its anticipated corporeal effects remain the fantasy aspired to - thus the continuous re-downloading of the app and changing strategies.

In some regards, relationships are becoming democratised with formally equal rights for people of all genders, colours and creeds that can be claimed, as exemplified par excellence in the South African Constitution, which is, however, not always satisfyingly applied (emphasised, for instance, in protests against femicide). The freedom exercised in Tinder advertisements by female users specifically who make agentive, intuitive choices, is aspirational, and the technology itself, indeed, grants a sense of autonomy. There are, across markets, more female users than male ones, providing them with the faculty of eventual choice between Tinder 'options'. Nevertheless, processes of democratising relationships (claimed by tinderers but not actually facilitated by Tinder) depend on human interactions, are gradual, partial and all but a predictable evolutionary process. The kinds of experiences that become possible also depend on embodied memories, including individual experiences as well as historical and family narratives, as I have shown in this chapter. Exploring what lies beyond them requires an ability to understand the self and others as incomplete and composite and fuzzy and a willingness to provide others with the opportunity to explore some of these nuances. Experiences being frequently both less predictable and less enchanting than desired furthermore means that they become embodied in a process of contingency with individuals and their bodies being inseparable from the complex fields of influence around them - rendered even less transparent by technologies and their voluntary and involuntary consumption.

My findings show that intimacy is not transformed to a degree in which it becomes liquified in line with Bauman (2013), rendering the need for freedom and security in 'modern dating' irreconcilable

or in a way that leads 'love as we know it' to end á la Illouz (2018). Rather, it constitutes a confluent, ongoing process. The hypernormalisation of the stable instability produced in Tinder encounters renders it necessary for individuals to continuously rediscover and renegotiate intimacy, trust, ethics of engagement, and themselves in the vector of a relationship and as its vector. Thus, individuals find themselves bound in a spiral dance incorporating the strange and the familiar, the fantastic and an unstable footing.

Chapter 7
Taking stock of intimacy, tinderness and diffracted wholeness: Some conclusions

Recapitulation

This ethnography set out to provide insight into what constitutes the embodied and tacit knowledge underlying experiences of using Tinder in Cape Town. It grappled with questions of the relation between the app as a 'thing' and people and between the latter. Against the backdrop of rapidly changing, accelerated space-crossing realities, how are bodies perceived and shaped? What connections and extensions of the self become possible?

Chapter 4 described Tinder as a particular kind of rabbit hole, one that is treated as though it is a container of a singular essence. I started with a discussion of visual Tinder representations and how they are perceived as cliché-ridden, since their evaluation constitutes the first step in traversing online and offline contexts. While some study participants explained that the content of mini biographies was important to them, Tinder and similar dating apps are still largely based on the visual, more so than information-heavier online platforms. (In the latter, frozen, distorting poses must be more laboriously underpinned with information and lengthy conversations.) Through demands of concrete-yet-vague summaries of the self, notions of the real and the unreal become distorted, leaving their imprint on embodied Tinder habits and experiences. Being via Tinder extensions becomes an art of the kind Foucault describes as 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [or humans generally] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (1986: 10). Foucault refers to the Greco-Roman tradition and the maintenance of ontological order and beautiful shape. The balance between their own becoming and marketed ideals is something Tinder users have to constantly straddle. Even though the platform is advertised as a space of autonomy and freedom and is tempting as such, notions of makeable experience become hypernormalised as uniform, less-than-real and as lacking authenticity. Paradoxically, the very standardisations that are meant to be simplifying (along the lines of Tinder's match.chat.date mantra) are met with tindering fatigue.

Instead of deleting Tinder for good, it is obstinately used to extend the self in a desire for

(re)enchantment whilst also avoiding painful experiences, as **chapter 5** shows. Encounters that are already considered to be lacking realness are approached as liminal experiences, and strategies are adopted to explore intimacy in supposedly safe ways. Through attempts to circumvent pain (ironically, sometimes at the expense of pleasure), understandings of Tinder as a place of artificiality and makeability become hypernormalised on a phenomenological level, as well. Regardless, dating as a conversation with others remains suffused with a stable instability and, thus, a risk of being hurt. It also involves all kinds of senses, including memory, hampering overly strategic dating approaches. Instead of being formattable, encounters are, rather, informed by previous experience and subject to unpredictability. Still, time and space on Tinder become obscured in particular ways. Although the app is GPS-based and convenient for quickly arranged encounters, proximity is not always what is most appealing. Furthermore, the 'moment of truth stylisation' when meeting for the first time produces pressures and unrealistic expectations, for some leading to retreat or the cultivation of intimacy across distances. Occasionally, however, as the chapter showed, self-extensions via Tinder do allow for an embrace of pain as an ingredient of pleasure.

Tinder as a platform associated with 'modernity' and its implied liberties could be an environment that renders a freeing from the phallus in Giddens's (2013) sense possible – in my analysis, this imagery involves all confining identity categories. **Chapter 6** shows the pervasiveness of social points of reference that tend to reduce identities to a set of fixed attributes regarding gender, race, and class. Far from being a platform of liberation, Tinder is a social avenue reflective of broader frameworks. Participants' desires to transcend social boundaries were echoed with an extension of the self beyond them in some respects. Stretching oneself towards the unpredictable also means shifting one's view of the world and oneself within it to a degree. Nevertheless, this does not reduce Tinder and similar platforms to tools that birth a posthuman reality freed from the categorical distinguishing of bodies. My findings show that there is no single thing called Tinder or tindering. Tinderers habitually and carefully maintain balances and make sense of discrepancies between opacity and lived reality, smooth fantasies, and experiences of pain. Manoeuvring Tinder as a rabbit hole housing distorted (false) dualisms, Tinder users are both obedient and disobedient in complying with simplifying formats and their corresponding potions.

Research contributions

Miller and Slater (2000) say that, contrary to descriptions of older literature on the internet, 'online' is not a monolithic space. Instead, it is numerous digital technologies used by a variety of people. Understanding how these are understood and assimilated through an ethnographic approach is,

therefore, crucial. Studying Tinder, it becomes clear that using the platform, much like 'Second Life' described by Boellstorff (2015), creates meaningful interactions, despite a hypernormalised image of superficiality. These extend beyond the digital context itself. In cultivating them, intimacy plays a key role. This dissertation illustrates what intimacy as a crucial, trust-based ingredient for all kinds of relationships (not just 'romantic' or sexual ones) may mean for tinderers. The focus on intimacy is also meant to provide an alternative to the misleading focus of public debates on technologies as either decreasing or increasing collective humanity. Dealing with the intricacies of relationships, it adds to an insightful body of literature (including the works of Cole and Thomas, 2009; Hunter, 2010; Spronk, 2012; Salo, 2003, 2010, 2018; Archambault, 2017; Drinka, 2019) on intimacy in Southern African settings.

I criticised the reliance on ideas of 'modernity' when discussing contemporary practices of intimacy (for example by Illouz, 2018; Bauman, 2013) for their inclination to perpetuate conceptual binaries and tell a unilinear story. Tinder is often considered to represent a certain kind of modernity, linked to understandings of morality, instead of a way of knowing. Such assumptions divert from more subtle trends around notions of reality and ways of building trust and intimacy. The primary anxiety accentuating the discourse on social media, Miller et al. (2016) point out, is that shallow, inauthentic online relationships may displace deeper offline relationships. Their evidence on Facebook usage (covering 11 volumes) suggests that online relationships are, in fact, another aspect of the same offline relationships. Instead of being symptomatic for an increase in mediation, social media reveal the mediated nature inherent in communication and sociality, including face to face communication.

Fast-paced change should not go acknowledged, but its socialities cannot be confined to categories of either-or, digital or physical, fantasy or reality. Indeed, the radical hope reflected in persistent tindering practices emerges precisely from the contradictions of love as a means of imagining and creating new social worlds. Like Boellstorff (2015), this ethnography delineated questions of what is real, challenging the crediting of physical experiences with a higher degree of authenticity. It also drew out interdependencies, vulnerabilities and the need for conviviality (see Nyamnjoh 2017b, 2019). Embodied subjectivities were described, along with Butler's (2016) lines of thought, as vectors when seeking agency in worlds one cannot fully create or choose, and as responding to an array of desires, senses, temporalities. The more insights are gathered on digital experience and flexible understandings developed of what it means to be intimate in contemporary contexts, the more illusions about digital extensions of the self as lacking either reality or humanity will, hopefully, become backgrounded.

In this dissertation, I attempted to capture some of the multisensory experiences of tinderers, their ways of knowing, practices, memories, and imaginations, which Pink's (2009; 2012; 2016) theories have given weight to. Researching Tinder as a tool for self-extension in establishing intimacy thus required me to spend time with study participants to attend to the cultural and biographical specificities and categories through which knowing and experiencing via Tinder was conceptualised. While this endeavour may seem ambitious and broad, it is a needed step in sketching out experiential dimensions that are often disregarded in public debates.

Technologies offer merely one way in which we constantly extend ourselves and reach beyond what is known and, therefore, do not contradict any search for the authentic. This ethnography offers valuable insights into possibly larger trends of relating digitally, sceptically, and imaginatively. It is also an encouragement for an interdisciplinary rethinking of ethics and ways of knowing – regarding the employment of increasingly relevant digital technologies and the very ideas of scholarship. Like tinderers' extensions of the self, I would like to see more conceptual extensions in conducting research and more compelling ways of doing ethnography. This involves moving beyond evangelical social science towards more inclusion of the 'ethnographer-self'. Digital ethnography in this work has been described as a mindset that requires an openness to improvisation (namely 'ethnography as jazz'). Like Pink et al. (2016), I want to invite readers to not only consider theorising digital worlds in new ways, but also to re-think how 'we' (as anthropologists especially) have understood pre-digital practices. My thoughts shall thus serve to join Pink et al. (2016) in challenging concepts that have traditionally defined the units of analysis that ethnographers went out to study. That means moving beyond translating traditional concepts and methods into digital research environments and rehashing ethnographic–theoretical dialogues in order to seriously consider what digital ethnography practice and, indeed, ethnography practices more broadly mean.

The aspects of deception, chicanery and social habits that have become associated with platforms like Tinder, inviting dehumanising behaviour trends, should be more than sufficient to spoil the dating game as socially practised via apps. However, such risks do not appear to be considered great enough to tarnish the intrigue of Tinder and decrease its usage. Even though it turns out that pain cannot be circumvented and that experiences treated as less than real come with a flair of disillusionment, the app is persistently downloaded. To me, this tenacity indicates three things: 1) Regardless of the hedonist behavioural disregard of humanness frequently associated with the app, it is still acknowledged to aspire to fantasy-fuelled desires. 2) Although pain is sought to be avoided, it is ultimately accepted as a part of pleasure and the risk of getting involved with relative strangers.

Even when navigated with caution, dating is a precarious and thrilling process of opening oneself up to the unknown. 3) There is a willingness to grapple with the hierarchies that are furthered by the app design. Both aspects, the promise of freedom and autonomy by the marketers of dating apps and the precarity produced in a hyperfocused, fast-paced, on-cue dating environment, are interwoven in convolute ways in the study context and part of an anti-hero's journey. So are pain and pleasure.

There is a museum of broken relationships in Zagreb, Croatia, filled with items representing love stories that have failed to last.[103] These make little sense outside of the narratives they reflect, but they remain existent in some form - just like the embodied memories of tinderers. The hesitations and silences they are wrapped in are worth looking at more closely. While this study tried to produce an idea of the sensual, of how online and offline relate when establishing intimacy (without giving the impression of two separate worlds), I intend to invest more time concentrating on the nuances of online experiences in future research. I want to gain a more detailed impression of trust and well-being among users of digital applications, which, in many ways, reinforce the uncertainties generated through broader social frameworks. With intimacy being a central theme to our humanity, all kinds of love stories, successful and unsuccessful, corporeal and digitally experienced, are worth being documented.

Theories expanded upon

I extended Stempfhuber and Liegl's (2016) metaphor of the rabbit hole as a space of distortion and argued that tindering is a journey that is not unilinear. Rather, it is a challenging and sometimes problematic anti-hero's journey, the corporeality of which I aimed to outline while relying on Csordas's understandings of embodiment (1994; 1999; 2000). Contributing to the distortions is the McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 2013) of Tinder as a place of consumption (despite its user-created content suggesting more creativity and freedom). Following the public discourse on Tinder and looking at Tinder profiles reveals a strong sense of standardisation. The app's selection processes imply control and calculability, while its pace, by design, facilitates the illusion of efficiency and makeability. The latter is contradicted by the perception of Tinder as lacking authenticity, undermining romantic desires.

Foucault's (1988) idea of technologies of the self was central to my interrogation of how the self is enhanced when tindering and manoeuvring challenges of being across socially and digitally

[103] http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20180626-the-museum-preserving-the-memories-of-broken-hearts (8 May 2020).

encrypted spaces. Beyond Foucault's thoughts on subjectification, I incorporated the role of digital technologies as materiality into the discussion. Study participants did sometimes stretch themselves beyond the unfamiliar. Yet, Giddens' (2013) theory of plastic sexuality and liberated relationships remains problematic when looking at gender dynamics and understandings of race/class. Instead, encounters with the unfamiliar, something Tinder is valued for, are riddled with hurdles informed by internalised distinctions of bodies.

My findings overlap with Illouz's (2018) theory of avoidance in that there is often reluctance when approaches to dating shift and change. However, this ethnography also shows that weariness does not necessarily lead to disengagement, as Illouz suggests. Furthermore, I do not understand avoidance to be necessarily negative. The almost routine deletion of Tinder, hesitance, or even apparent stillness in participants' approach to intimacy does not equal non-action. Susan Sontag (1969) wrote that silence is a form of speech and an element in a dialogue. In the same sense, stillness is a form of action and element in advancement, even if this is difficult to fathom in contexts where busyness and productivity are worshipped. It is easy to mistake stillness for an endpoint, as Tocqueville observes, especially after periods of upheaval (which are bound to happen where dating is part of a lifestyle). The gift of such periods is that they offer an opportunity to pause, reflect, heal and, perhaps, question certitudes as the seemingly sure foundations of complacency. For moments of pause and stillness may enable users to reach beyond the horizon, toward new territories of truth, flourishing and beauty.

It is truth not as universal, eternal or binding but as situated knowledge that I think of when acknowledging my participants' drive for authenticity and wholeness as well as its contingency. While disorienting, this imagined, fantasised, enchanting notion of truth allowed for a move away from being habitually captured and create new truths – as Sylvester did when, at the age of 52, he opened himself up to dating someone with whom he had never envisioned himself. With authenticity and reality in question, the idea of trust comes to the fore. I believe that, for meaningful encounters to materialise (even if it is a form of temporary affinity), a willingness to experience and explore must coincide with an atmosphere of trust. In my understanding, this experiential trust has as much to do with a reliance on the senses, counter-balancing the rationalisations and rigid categories technologies seem to impose, including McDonaldised notions of happiness and eroticised encounters, as it has with adjusting the social lenses one applies when engaging with others. Both aspects are also involved when dealing with the hypernormalised aspects of dating apps, such as ordinary fears around precariousness, with interdependences between multiple ways

of being – online and offline, reality and illusion, rational and intrinsic – culminating in corporeal experiences.

Beyond the app

'The medium is not the only message. It is the power of the desires of tinderers as well as the politics embedded in platforms and wider social contexts that are essential in producing realities. Reciprocities between power and desire either cohere into a vicious circle of socio-political stasis or open up onto complexity, as Deamer (2018) said about Curtis's documentary *Hypernormalisation*. Commonly reproduced, hypernormalised perspectives reducing media like Tinder to be either carriers of possibility, freedom, and agency or, on the contrary, as confining one to a particular kind of contained world that is calculating, superficial and lacking depth, are limiting when exploring the ways in which the digital and social become intertwined. They fail to acknowledge not only individual experience, but also how this experience is at play with dynamics of biopower. Such limiting views of relationships between individuals and technologies do not capture the complexities, ambiguities, silences and nuances they carry and can be dangerous in that they distract from the workings behind the seemingly superficial on a structural level.

Tinder may not exist forever. Theoretically, the app could vanish from the market tomorrow. When one medium fades, there will be another, just like newspaper searches for intimacy were replaced with faster, digital means that leave more variants undefined. Nevertheless, although dating via Tinder initially seems to be less outcome-driven and more intuitively guided than, for instance, dating websites (assuring a maximum of commonalities) and rather characterised by a certain aloofness, such apparent behaviour trends should not invite a jump to the conclusion that app users seek only meaningless encounters. Even fleeting experiences with apparently little of 'emotional weight' being shared leaves their imprints and should not be readily dismissed as trivial in line with hypernormalised ways of thinking of the app. The notion of tindering being a certain 'kind' of eroticised experience disregards the multiplicity, non-linearity, the co-occurrences and shifts where needs and experiences are concerned and facilitates a sense of collective *entzauberung* - disenchantment. At a time when digitisation cannot be unimagined, the focus should not be merely reserved to one form of intimacy or one app, for that matter. Different technologies, including the bodies represented through them, merge, resonating off one another and creating hybrid fusions in a constant movement.

Limitations and relevance of the study

I must, once more, stress that my sample is not representative of Tinder experiences but rather offers a glimpse into the experiences of individuals. As outlined in the methodology section, my

positionality as a young, European-foreign, 'White', educated female certainly impacted my sample, as any kind of positionality would in one way or another. Being visible on a platform dedicated to eroticised encounters may mean that those initially visible aspects through my online profile explicitly dedicated to research were read in different ways. One's presence as a researcher is always subject to interpretation and must be cautiously navigated. Being an ethnographer and thus having had the opportunity to engage with my research participants over a couple of years had the advantage that relationships could develop and grow the roots of mutual trust. What is more, motivations to participate in the study were manifold, as they would be in any ethnographic research. The snowball recruitment approach I eventually included in my methodology put me in touch with well-educated females specifically. As an ethnographic, small-scale study, my work cannot (and did not aim to) capture the extent of the cultural diversity that is Cape Town. What it does is offer is a highly relevant analysis of Tinder usage more broadly and an understanding of some of the current tensions along gender, race and other dimensions that come to the fore when tindering in Cape Town. I have mentioned that, within the last few years, the image of the Tinder dating app itself has changed from being a mere 'hook-up app' to a device known for various kinds of experiences, including long-term relationships and marriages. It appears that such digital means steadily gain relevance in the production of socialities, which should encourage scholars of the humanities to continue investigating related practices and experiences. In Cape Town, the makeup of profiles was reported to have changed in that there is an increase of 'Black' and 'Coloured' people compared to a couple of years ago. Additionally, plans to render the internet more accessible to all South Africans may extend possibilities for extended connections more widely. Nothing is whole or inexorable regarding Tinder intimacies, and it would be worthwhile conducting follow-up studies in local settings, as well as in other under-researched contexts.

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