

**Love Apptually: An analysis of how heterosexual users construct,
negotiate and use dating apps**

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on one of the newest trends in the dating arena; mobile dating apps. An internet-facilitated matchmaking service where one can search, initiate, and form connections via an electronic device or smartphone. It has been argued that gender and sexual scripts are a central way in which social actors make sense of themselves and their experiences and behaviour. Similarly, scholarship has identified that social life and technology are mutually constituted. As such, the influx of these new technologies arguably raises important questions about what this means for the construction of gender and sexual scripts, as well as the ways these are entangled with intimate relations and personal life. This study draws on data collected from participant diaries and semi-structured interviews with current and former users of dating apps, to explore how heterosexual users go about constructing, negotiating, and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice in their everyday lives. The central argument of this thesis is that the meaning ascribed to dating apps and correct use of dating apps, including ways of managing the risks associated with their use, rather than being a highly individualised activity, was highly communitarian.

Key words: Gender; Heterosexuality; Intimacy; Technology.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mum, Rowan Whitaker. Thank you for always believing in me when I haven't believed in myself.

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1 Chapter 1: Introduction

Technology has become a popular means through which people mediate their lives, including their intimate lives (Jamieson, 2013; Beasley and Holmes, 2021). Social media platforms have become a popular way for friends, couples, families, work colleagues, to maintain their relationships with one another, both up close and at a distance (Holmes, 2019; Abel, Machin and Brownlow, 2021). There is also evidence that people initiate and develop romantic relationships via social media platforms, which has led to the popular phrase ‘sliding into your DM’s’¹. Nevertheless, there has also been the proliferation and diversification of online technologies that have been developed specifically to facilitate the initiation and development of interpersonal relationships. It is these online dating technologies that will be the focus of this thesis. Specifically, one of the newest developments in online dating technology: dating apps (see Appendix A).

An outstanding 300 million people use dating apps worldwide, with the global dating app revenue coming in at £5.61 billion in 2021 (Curry, 2022). This has led some to claim that dating apps have heralded a ‘digital revolution’ that is altering the dating landscape (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017:272). The film *Love Actually* (2003)² centres around a series of serendipitous moments that are intended to show the audience that love is always around us and the chance of falling in love could happen at any moment. With the advent of dating apps, as well as other communication technologies more broadly, it is difficult to imagine that Hugh Grant’s character (the Prime Minister) did not just find his love interest, Natalie, on Facebook rather than knock on every door in the Wandsworth area of London to find her. Equally, now it might be that the character Colin, who had no luck finding love in London, would not have moved all the way to America to find love. Instead, he might simply download a dating app.

It is the contention of this thesis that whether, and in what ways, dating apps are altering the way people initiate and develop relationships is an important area for sociological inquiry, rather than simply being determined by their popularity. Nevertheless, more and more people are reportedly meeting people through dating apps, suggesting that Love Actually is all around (Anderson, Vogel and Turner, 2020). In this thesis I will contribute to understandings of the impact of dating apps on social life through looking at the ways heterosexual dating app users

¹ DM stands for direct messenger and the phrase ‘sliding into your DM’s’ refers to someone who privately messages someone via direct messenger on a social media platform with flirtatious or romantic intentions.

² Love Actually is a romantic comedy set in London during the lead up to Christmas. There are 10 storylines, all centred around different kinds of relationships, some of which end up being shown to be interlinked.

go about negotiating and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice and the ways this speaks to theorizations of gender, sexuality, technology and intimacy.

This introductory chapter will begin by offering a brief background of the history of online dating technologies, before discussing in detail the development of dating apps, including how they work and social attitudes towards them. I will go on to discuss the motivations behind this research and how the distinct nature of dating apps presents a unique opportunity to explore themes of gender and sexuality, intimacy and the relationships between technology and social life. This will pre-empt an outline of the aims and objectives of this study and the ways this thesis hopes to contribute to current gaps in scholarship.

1.1 Background

Before delving into a discussion on dating apps, it is first important to set the scene and situate them within the broader history of mediated dating more broadly. However, the sheer amount of technologies and technology-facilitated ways of searching, initiating and developing interpersonal relationships are extraordinary and discussing them all is beyond the scope of this study. This brief overview of the development of dating technologies will compromise only those which have been identified as being relevant to this study and in helping the reader understand the context in which dating apps have emerged. This is important as it will illustrate what is old, as well as what is new and distinct, about dating apps. It is through understanding this that a discussion can be had about the questions these new technologies raise.

1.1.1 Lonely Hearts Columns

As early as the 17th century, personal advertisements have been found to have been published in the lonely hearts column section of many pamphlets, newspapers and magazines (Beauman, 2011). These personal advertisements were largely anonymous and typically consisted of a simple tagline which could contain general information such as the first name, gender, status, or employment of the person making the advertisement. This was usually followed by a brief description of what the person was looking for, followed by a brief description of themselves, as well as a way of contacting the person if they were interested in the advertisement.

Early personal advertisements in the 1600-1800's were usually matrimonial advertisements written, mostly by men, with the aim to find an appropriate person to marry (Quiroz, 2014). Given the historical period they were published in, these advertisements were concerned with social class, material/ financial wealth, and character (Quiroz, 2014). For example:

...A Gentleman Desirous of Marriage. Gentleman, 25 years of age, and of a healthful constitution, is desirous of latering his condition, by marrying a young lady (or widow who has no child) and can make a Jointure proportionable to a fortune of 8000 or 10000... (Cocks, 2009:3)

The content and character of personal advertisements therefore reflect the historical and social context in which they have been written. Patterns of migration, the rise in death as a result of war, as well as changes in attitudes towards marriage, employment and equality contributed to the diversification of personal advertisements (Beauman, 2011). From the 1900s they were found to have diversified to include those looking for a myriad of intimate relationships. No longer were they primarily for the use of men seeking a wife. Women, as well as men, began writing and looking for husbands, affairs, casual sex and companionship. They have also been utilised by men seeking interpersonal relationships with other men (Beauman, 2011). The platform in which they have been advertised also diversified from the 1980's onwards to not only include printed media, but video advertisements sent to match making services for onwards distribution to their clients, and internet personal advertisements (Quiroz, 2014).

Nevertheless, Quiroz (2014:18) notes how 'personal advertising, in all its variations, has also contained an element of secrecy regardless of the period in which it has occurred'. This secrecy, she explained, stemmed from the stigma and taboo that is often associated with resorting to personal ads to find love (Beauman, 2011; Quiroz, 2014). This is reflected in the name, 'lonely hearts columns', which is suggestive that the kinds of persons expected to use these ads might be those who are lonely, desperate, isolated or possess unattractive personal qualities. It has been proposed that the intention behind including these advertisements in printed media in the first place was to boost sales as people would gain much entertainment from reading and laughing at people's hopeless attempts (Beauman, 2011). They have also historically been seen as a threat to conventional morality and encourage deviancy as they have 'sheltered those on the edges of law and morality, such as gay men and women, lurking lotharios and adventurous single girls' (Cocks, 2009: 4). This suggests that gender and sexual norms have in some way shaped the fact that lonely hearts columns existed at the periphery of conventional dating, with representative surveys conducted in the 1980's and 1992 finding that only 1% of Americans had met a romantic partner via a personal advertisement (Finkel et al., 2012).

1.1.2 Online Dating Websites

Online dating websites began proliferating in the 1990s and were designed specifically to help people meet and find romantic partners. Kiss.com is reported to be the first of these sites and was formed in 1995, followed later by sites such as Match.com in 1995, Guardian Soulmates

in 2004, and e-Harmony in 2005. Dating websites can be accessed via web browser on a computer or laptop and most worked on a subscription basis whereby users would pay to access its services. On most online dating websites users can compose a dating profile, which can include pictures, as well as a description of their personal attributes (height, hair colour, weight, etc.) hobbies, interests, relationship goals, employment, and familial status (i.e., widowed, divorced, has children, etc). There were differences, however, in how different dating sites presented users to one another. Finkel et al. (2012) have provided a useful way of categorising the different kinds of online dating sites. This includes (1) online personal advertisement sites, (2) Algorithm-based matching sites and (3) smartphone-based dating applications (which will be addressed later in the chapter).

Online personal advertisement sites, as indicated in their name, closely resemble personal advertisements found in lonely hearts columns. Guardian Soulmates (see Appendix A), in particular, represents somewhat of a hybrid between the two as users could choose to advertise their profiles across the Guardian publications, as well as their website. Further to the profile setup process described above, these websites rely on users browsing and self-selecting other profiles that are available on the website database. Users can do this using a range of filters such as location, personal attributes, income, age, gender, and sexual orientation to name a few. Some examples of websites that originally³ offered this self-selection service include Match.com, Ok Cupid and Plenty of Fish⁴.

Alternatively, other dating websites work on an algorithm match-making basis whereby the information provided by users, usually in the form of a compatibility questionnaire, is used to match you with other compatible users. e-Harmony is a well-known example of a website that operates on this basis. Undoubtedly, there are numerous other categories of websites that could be mentioned, including those that cater to niche populations such as Uniform Dating or JDate. Equally, a number of these sites might not fit into just one category, as many of the sites mentioned above have since made it so that they offer both self-selecting and algorithm-based services. However, these categories represent the general trend in dating website services.

The stigma that was associated with lonely hearts columns was found to also initially apply to online dating when they were first introduced (Finkel et al., 2012). However, over the years, the stigma associated with online dating has been said to lessen. In 2006 the Pew Research Centre found that 29% of Americans viewed those who used online dating as desperate

³ I say originally because I will go on to explain how these websites have gone on to develop, change and diversify their services.

⁴ I provide details on these various online dating sites and dating apps in Appendix A.

(Madden and Lenhart, 2006). By 2013, this had reduced to 21% (Smith and Duggan, 2013). This reduction in stigma is also reflected in usage statistics, with Smith and Duggan (2013) finding that 11% of internet users had personally used an online dating site such as Match.com, e-Harmony, or OK Cupid. Moreover, as recent as 2019, 3 in 10 Americans reported that they had used an online dating website or app (Anderson, Vogels and Turner, 2020).

Their growing popularity has attracted attention from many scholars from several disciplines, who have attempted to understand their impact on how, mostly heterosexual adults, meet, date and develop relationships. As will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, research has predominantly focussed on understanding how relationship development on online dating websites is different to relationships that are initiated in person. Topics relating to impression management, self-presentation and risk reduction have been raised as salient matters to the ways online dating may be impacting heterosexual dating practice (see Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006, Whitty, 2008).

1.1.3 Dating Apps

With the advancement in mobile phone technology and the increasing tendency to ‘appify’ a range of services, the most recent development in the online dating arena is dating apps, which began being released in 2007 and were only accessible via an app on an internet-enabled, portable device. Nevertheless, dating apps are not simply online dating websites condensed into an app format. Dating apps incorporate geo-location software, which is used to show profiles of users within a certain proximity of the user. This has led some scholars to refer to dating apps as location-based real-time dating (LBRTD) (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2015).

Some of the first dating apps to introduce this feature were Skout, Grindr and Scruff, which were apps targeted and used by the LGBTQ community, as well as men seeking sex with men. A common feature of these dating apps is the ‘grid’, which is a scrollable page that consists of a list of scaled-down dating profile pictures of other users, which users can click on to reveal the full dating profile (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). These pictures are ordered by geographical distance, with the profile of the person in closest proximity to the users being first on the grid and those further away featuring further down the grid. Only those who have been online in the last hour show up on the grid (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2015).

It was not until the release of Tinder in 2012 that dating apps were specifically targeted at those looking to establish heterosexual relationships. Tinder, and the wave of dating apps that followed it, did not work on a grid basis like Grindr or Skout. Rather, Tinder is famous for

gamifying online dating through its use of the swipe logic (David and Cambre, 2016). On Tinder, dating app profiles are presented to users like a stack of cards and users can choose to swipe left to ignore the profile or right to match with the user. Only profiles where both users have swiped right will end in a match and users are only notified when they get a match, not when they have been ignored. Profiles are still shown on a proximity basis and users can set filters around how far of a search radius they would like, the gender of the person they are searching for, as well as the age range they wish to see (David and Cambre, 2016).

Dating app profiles are far more limited compared to that of online dating websites. Most dating apps are image focussed and allow users to upload up to 6 profile photos. It is these photos that take centre stage on the grid or the deck of cards, and it is only when a user clicks on the picture that they will be directed to the full profile. This is not a mandatory step and users can swipe without looking at the full profile. The full profile will also consist of a “bio” section, where users are largely restricted to a specific character or word count. On Tinder, for example, users can only write up to 250 characters in their “bio”. A minimum word count is rarely required (Ward, 2017).

Dating apps upgrade their features regularly as new dating apps attempt to keep their unique selling point (USP). Currently, it is common to find that many dating apps allow users to link their other social media profiles such as Spotify so that other users can compare their music taste. Similarly, some apps offer users the chance to answer questions about themselves on their profile such as their ideal date scenario or their star sign, although not to the same extent as online dating profiles. As such, the process from setting up an account, to creating a profile and being in a position to start browsing the grid or swiping should be an incredibly easy and speedy process⁵ (Bumble, 2022).

Most dating apps also allow users to swipe, match and chat for free. Although, some have put a swipe limit of 100 swipes a day in place. Users can also upgrade from basic dating app features by opting for one of the optional subscriptions available. For instance, Tinder offers users a number of subscriptions on a tier-basis, which offer their users a range of features that are not available on the free version (see Figure 1).

⁵ I will explore the difficulties of profile construction in chapter 5.

Features	tinder	tinder+ [®]	tinder <small>GO</small> [™]	tinder <small>PLATINUM</small> [™]
Match. Chat. Meet.	●	●	●	●
Unlimited likes		●	●	●
Unlimited Rewinds		●	●	●
Passport [™] to any location		●	●	●
Hide advertisements		●	●	●
*5 Super Likes per week			●	●
*1 Free Boost a month			●	●
See who likes you			●	●
New Top Picks every day			●	●
Message before matching				●
Prioritised likes				●
See the likes you've sent over the last 7 days				●

Figure 1: Tinder Subscription Tiers

Another way in which dating apps are distinct to online dating websites is their unparalleled popularity worldwide. Tinder is the dating app giant, with as many as 75 million active users across 190 countries and available in 40+ languages (Iqbal, 2022). Not only can you now find hundreds of dating apps available to download in the App Store, catering to every possible preference, but their popularity has also led online dating websites to make their services available in App form.

It is not only their popularity that is interesting, however, but who they are popular with. Dating websites have generally been most popular amongst older age groups, with 48.6% of Match.com's users being within the 30-49 age cohort and 26.5% being over the age of 50 (Match Media Room, 2022). This has perhaps contributed to the stigma mentioned earlier, that users of online dating websites are desperate, as gender and sexual scripts often position those, but especially women, above a certain age and uncoupled in this way (Carpenter 2015; Beasley and Holmes, 2017). Comparatively, Tinder is most popular among the 18-24 age cohort, who make up 35% of their user base (Iqbal, 2022). A further 20% of their user base comes from the 35-44 age cohort and the over 55 age cohort only makes up 10% of Tinder's user base (Iqbal,

2022). Their user base makes them distinctive because, not only have they attracted a different, notably younger, user base, but this is perhaps reflective of how these devices do not attract the same stigma associated with forms of mediated dating that came before them.

One of the most striking articles to be published about dating apps was Jo Sales' (2015) Vanity Fair article titled '*Tinder and the Dawn of the "Dating Apocalypse"*'. This article addressed a number of concerns that were circulating at the time around the ways dating apps were contributing to an increase in hook-up culture⁶ as its core attributes of mobility and proximity, alongside its game like design, were argued to make it a tool that made casual sex easy. So much so that dating apps are commonly referred to as hook-up apps in mainstream media and academic scholarship (Albury, 2017; Duguay, Burgess and Light, 2017; Petrychyn, Parry and Johnson, 2020). Over time, discourse around dating apps has diversified to include concerns around sexual health (Kelsey, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2017; Sawyer, Smith and Benotsch, 2018), personal safety (BBC, 2020; Gillett, 2021), and addiction (Orosz et al., 2016; Vine, 2018). Consequently, the stigma that has been associated with online dating has not so much been about that the people who use them are desperate, but about the quality of the relationships and the risks that can come from these hook-up apps (Ward, 2017). There are also positive discourses. For instance, dating apps like Tinder also now have sections on their website dedicated to promoting success stories of people who have formed relationships and are now celebrating 'Tinderversaries', 'Tinder Weddings' and 'Tinder babies' (Duguay, 2017).

All of the above serves to illustrate how dating apps have become something of a dating phenomenon that, according to popular discourse, have drastically altered the ways in which people meet and date. What's more, the debates that circulate around dating apps concerning their impact and dangers are also of sociological concern. The following section will explore the significance of dating apps further and situate the motivations behind and the aims and objectives of this research more specifically.

⁶Hook up culture refers to the growing participation in, and normativity of, casual sex or hook-ups. Casual sex or 'a hook up' are very ambiguous terms and have been found to mean different things for different people. For instance, some people may think penetrative sex is a hook up, whereas other may see other forms of sexual activity that do not involve penetrative sex as a hook up (Currier, 2013). Generally, however, it refers to people who are not in a romantic relationship with one another engaging in sexual activity on a casual or one time basis. Hook up culture has been found to be very common among college students (Currier, 2013). Dating apps have been said to be a tool that people use facilitate casual sex, however, research is showing that reducing dating apps to mere hook up apps is not appropriate and that people use these apps to achieve various goals (Timmermans and DeCaluwe, 2017). This will be explored in Chapter 4.

1.2 Research Motivation and scope

My interest in dating apps as an area of sociological study began whilst completing the second year of my undergraduate degree in 2015. This was around the same time as the Sales' (2015) article was published and the time when I had begun to notice that Tinder had become very popular among my cohort. This was illustrated by the fact that, as a single student, I was encouraged by all of my friends to download Tinder so that I could 'have some fun'. I followed their advice and set myself up on Tinder and began swiping. I was immediately overwhelmed by all of the matches I had accumulated in such a short space of time, as well as how many of them I had seen or known on campus. I continued to use Tinder, or what I thought was using Tinder, for a few weeks before I deleted the app because none of the conversations on the app had amounted to anything. I communicated this to a female friend of mine, who informed me that I was using Tinder wrong. I had been trying to have long conversations with people and try and get to know them when these apps were to have fun interactions and hook-ups. This was not something that I felt comfortable doing and so I redownloaded the app because all my peers had the app, but I did not use the app again for a very long time.

At the time, I was curious as to whether the claim made by my friend was in fact true and that this was the only reason people would use dating apps. These interests culminated in an undergraduate dissertation that focussed on university students' motivations and perspectives of Tinder, the results of which revealed that motivations were as much about boredom as they were hook-ups. As I continued my studies by doing my master's degree, the modules I was studying at the time, encouraged me to rethink the significance of the statement made by my friend that I was using Tinder 'wrong'. Specifically, Science and Technology Studies (STS) highlighted that the meaning and use of a technology is not inevitable, it is rooted in social processes, as social life and technology are mutually constituted (Pinch and Bijker, 1984; Makenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Schyfter, 2009; Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). This highlighted that the belief that I was using Tinder wrongly was a normative notion and one which was worthy of exploration and explanation, rather than acceptance.

The discourse that Tinder was for casual sex and was subsequently altering the ways people meet and date are also matters pertinent to Gender and Sexuality research. It has been argued that gender and sexual scripts are a central way in which social actors make sense of themselves, their experiences and their behaviour (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Richardson, 2015). Gender and sexual norms have been found to influence the nature of heterosexual dating and relationships practice, with research finding that heterosexual men and women have

traditionally engaged in gendered patterns of behaviour (Jamieson, 1988; Jackson and Scott, 2010). Nevertheless, gender and sexual scripts are socially constructed and subject to change. As such, the popularity of dating apps among heterosexual adults and within heterosexual dating practice arguably raises important questions about what this means for constructions of heteronormative gender and sexual scripts.

This thesis combines both these interests in STS and gender and sexuality studies by exploring how heterosexual users negotiate, build and ascribe meaning to dating apps and dating app practice. This study sets out to understand how users come to understand what correct use of dating apps is and the ways that gender and sexual scripts are enacted, negotiated and/or subverted in this process. Dating apps are a relatively new phenomenon and so research that explores the impact of dating apps on gender and sexual relations is still emerging and developing, thereby making this study important, timely and relevant.

It was mentioned earlier in the chapter that a distinctive feature of dating apps is their mobility. Their mobility warrants a focus on the everyday as their ability to be accessed on the go, at any point in the day, and at any location where there is access to the internet, pushes dating apps into the realm of everyday life. This potentially changes the relationship that users have with these technologies and raises new questions as to their impact on heterosexual dating practice. Existing research has been good at exploring the mutual construction of gender and technology by looking at the ways that gender is reflected in the design and affordances of dating apps, and the ways this has served to construct gender in particular ways (MacLeod and McArthur, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of literature that focuses on users' everyday negotiations of dating app meaning and practice and the ways this speaks to broader conceptualisations of gender, sexuality, and technology.

Dating apps have also emerged at a time when important discussions are being had as to the state of intimacy in the modern age, with many claiming that ideals of commitment are waning in light of social and technological change (Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012; Jamieson, 2013). As such, the prevalence of hook-up culture, which is often said to be further facilitated by dating apps, speaks to these broader debates concerning the state of intimacy. Existing research has begun to explore whether there is evidence of declining ideals of commitment among dating app users and reflected in dating app practice (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017; Hooff, 2020; Bandinellu and Gandini, 2022; Bergstrom, 2022). Intimacy and personal life has been found to be shaped by gender and sexual norms and so this thesis intends to also explore the ways dating app practice has influenced their negotiations, practices and views of relationships, dating and intimacy more broadly (Jamieson, 1988; Holmes, 2019).

Social constructionist understandings of gender, sexuality, technology and intimacy, as well as current gaps identified in existing literature, have therefore been central to the development of the aims and objections of this thesis, as laid out below.

Aims

1. To explore the ways heterosexual men and women negotiate and ascribe meaning to dating apps and dating app practice.
2. To explore in what ways users understand dating apps and their dating app practice to have influenced their practices and views of relationships, dating, and intimacy.
3. To explore how heterosexual users' articulations of their everyday experiences of using dating apps might inform understandings of gender and sexuality and the relationship between technology and social life.

Objectives

- Draw on a combination of logbook style diaries and qualitative semi-structured interviews with current or past users of dating apps to gather their perspectives on, and everyday mundane experiences and practices of, using dating apps.
- To recruit participants across different stages of the life course as to gather a diverse set of perspectives and experiences.
- Utilise qualitative thematic analysis techniques to identify and draw links between participants' everyday perceptions, experiences, and practices and wider social and cultural processes.

The next chapter goes on to provide a review of the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the study of dating apps. It outlines the constructionist theoretical framework adopted in this study, as well as highlights gaps in current literature on dating apps. This will serve to contextualise this research and the research questions, which will also be outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 outlines the data collection methods that were utilised for this research. I address the rationale behind the choice to combine log-book style diaries and semi-structured interviews and the ways in which they are attentive to a social constructionist approach. This pre-empt a step-by-step outline of the actions taken, or not taken, during the data collection process. Such as an overview and reflection of the recruitment process, my sample of participants, the data collection and analysis process and the ethical considerations made.

Chapter 4 is the first of four data chapters that present the findings of this thesis. Throughout this chapter I demonstrate the high degree of normativity displayed in the meanings participants ascribed to dating apps and in their use of them. Namely, that dating app use should be casual and low-stakes. This will be the first step in illustrating the ways in which we can, and should, start thinking about dating app use as a social institution (Kusch, 2005).

The following chapter goes on to explore in more depth the ways that correct dating app use was shown to be a collective achievement. This is demonstrated in the ways participants described how they learnt to use dating apps ‘correctly’ and how they constructed and managed a good dating app profile. However, to construct and manage a good dating app profile required a lot of time and labour from participants, and this time and labour did not always lead participants to their desired results. Therefore, this chapter also begins to unravel how participants’ own talk of their dating app practice and experiences contradicted the ways they had framed the normative use of dating apps as casual and low-stakes.

Chapter 6 goes continues to exemplify the labour involved in dating app use. Namely, the perceived and experienced risks and risks of violence associated with dating apps and the safety strategies used (or not used) by participants to manage these risks. I frame these findings within the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987) and draw on feminist scholarship into violence against women (Stanko, 1990) and the concept of Domestication (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013) to help understand the ways these findings connect with understanding violence against women more generally. Here, I revisit the claims made by participants that dating apps are convenient and low effort, especially for women.

The final data chapter offers an explanation for why participants continue to use dating apps, despite the fact that they require a lot of time and labour and often fail to give them the results they aspired for, such as dates and hook-ups. I propose that using dating apps to date has become a social institution for dating and for enabling coupledness. That is, the use, and continued use, of dating apps stems from the constraining forces of heterosexual coupledness.

I conclude the thesis by outlining the theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions this thesis has made. I also go on to highlight topics that were touched on in interviews, but which could not be addressed in this thesis with sufficient depth and suggest areas where I think future research should explore further.

2 Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The task of this study is to explore how heterosexual dating app users go about negotiating and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice, as well as the ways in which this speaks to experiences of the sexual in the age of technology mediated intimacy. By its very nature, then, this study is situated across several areas of research, including, gender studies, sexualities research, feminist research and STS. It is, therefore, beyond the scope of this thesis to address each of these in any great depth. Instead, this chapter will aim to provide a broad overview of the relevant theoretical literature that has shaped the conceptual orientation of this thesis, which has offered useful theoretical and conceptual tools in completing this thesis, and the debates within these areas of study that this thesis wishes to contribute towards. It will also offer a review of the ways in which existing empirical research has attempted to conceptualise heterosexual perspectives, experiences, and practices of online dating and dating apps to set the scene about what is known about dating apps thus far. It will highlight current gaps in the literature and, where relevant, will set out how my research aims to address these gaps.

This thesis falls, broadly speaking, within a sociological tradition called social constructionism, rather than aligning itself with any one theoretical position. Social constructionist approaches to the theorization of gender, sexuality, and technology are, however, not unified and encompass a diverse set of approaches, positions, and perspectives (Brickell, 2006; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Richardson, 2015). Again, as a matter of relevancy and clarity, I have been purposefully selective in what social constructionist literature this chapter addresses. This chapter begins by addressing social constructionist approaches to the theorization of gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality. This section focusses on two of the most influential approaches to the study of gender and sexuality: sexual script theory and queer theory. The following section considers the social constructionist theorizations and conceptual tools of STS. Namely, the social construction of technology, mutual shaping perspectives, domestication, and the performative theory of social institutions.

Section 3 engages with relevant theoretical debates within the study of intimacy and personal life and the ways they have bearing on understanding wider contextual claims as to the utopian and dystopian impact of modernity, including, but not confined to, technological advancements, on intimacy (and within this gender and sexual relations). The remainder of the chapter provides an overview of relevant existing empirical work on online dating and dating apps. The theme

of risk dominates much of the existing empirical literature. Risk, in this sense, refers to a broad set of risks relating to sexual health, self-presentation, safety and security. A key critique I make of this current literature concerns its socio-psychological, borderline essentialist, bias, which, in turn, limits its scope for understanding the impact these technologies are having on constructions of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, I also draw attention to more recent advancements in dating app research that is more attentive to issues of gender and sexuality and engages critically with more sociological analysis of gender, sexuality and technology. It is this literature that I situate my research and wish to contribute to.

2.2 Social Constructionist Theorizations of Gender and Sexuality

As addressed above, this thesis takes a broadly social constructionist approach, within which is a ‘matrix of overlapping perspectives that converge with and diverge from each other in various ways’ (Brickell, 2006: 87-8). Despite the diversity of positions within this approach, most of those who adhere to or sympathise with this tradition will generally treat meaning and much of what we see as objective reality, as socially produced and share the common goal of exploring how a particular way of defining something came to be and why (May and Nordqvist, 2019). It, therefore, moves away from essentialist views of the world, which see structures, orders and relations as pre-given, natural or fixed. Preferring, instead, to show the ways they are embedded in the social, cultural and historical context and, therefore, open to change. Such claims have had important consequences for how we understand gender and sexuality. Up until the 1960’s, it was theories of biologists, medical researchers, psychologists and sexologists, drawing on Freudian frameworks, that dominated the study of gender and sexuality. These approaches largely promoted essentialist understandings of gender categories such as man and women and (hetero)sexual desires as innate, fixed and given (Jackson and Scott, 2010).

Social constructionist approaches have since, and in various ways, been applied to the study of gender and sexuality and have been extremely influential in challenging these essentialist conceptualisations of gender and sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2010). The differentiation you find across social constructionist theorizations of gender and sexuality, then, concerns the extent to which gender and sexuality is socially constructed, as well as how it is socially constructed (Richardson, 2015). For instance, material feminist thinkers would agree that categories of man and woman, and the divisions between them, are socially constructed, but would also stress that we must remain attentive to the ways these social inequalities have material effects on the lives of women (Jackson and Scott, 2010). Others, however, would go as far as suggesting that even something such as sexual desire is socially constructed (Gagnon and Simon, 1973).

Another differentiating factor in theorizations of gender and sexuality, are the ways in which the relationship between gender and sexuality has been understood (Richardson, 2015). My choice to group gender and sexuality together in this discussion, then, is not without its complexities, which need attending to. Richardson (2007) identifies five trends in the way that the relationship between gender and sexuality has been theorized. In general terms, the first relates to naturalist approaches, such as psychoanalytic approaches mentioned earlier, and their tendency to follow a principle of consistency and failing to challenge the relationship between gender and sexuality at all. Instead, their essentialist understandings unproblematically conflate gender and sexuality, reinforcing both as natural facts of life. Within Sociology, however, there are those, such as materialist and interactionist feminist approaches, who assign gender priority over sexuality. In other words, sexuality is seen to derive from gender. To the other extreme then, sexuality has also been assigned priority over gender, with sexuality determining one's gender and gendered subjectivities. We see this emphasis in postmodern and poststructuralist approaches (Richardson, 2007). I go on to discuss these two approaches in more detail later in the chapter. Alternatively, others have found it useful to treat gender and sexuality as analytically distinct, arguing that consideration needs to be given to the ways that gender involves non-sexual relations and how sexuality cannot be reduced to gender (Jackson, 2012).

Recently, a new approach to the theorization of the relationship between gender and sexuality has emerged, one which allows for more complex accounts of how gender and sexuality are related to each other (Richardson, 2007; Jackson, 2012). It is also where the affinities of this thesis lie. Jackson (2012:45) outlines four intersecting levels or 'facets' to the social construction of gender and sexuality:

...the structural, at which gender is constructed as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality institutionalised, for example, by marriage, the law and the state; the level of meaning, encompassing the discursive construction of gender and sexuality and the meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction; the level of routine, everyday social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted within localised contexts and relationships; and finally, at the level of subjectivity through which we experience desires and emotions and make sense of ourselves as embodied gendered and sexual beings.

Subsequently, Jackson (2012; Jackson and Scott, 2010) suggests that the ways sexuality, gender, and heterosexuality intersect will vary depending on, and within, the four intersecting levels addressed above. Thereby, promoting that 'how gender and sexuality are interrelated becomes, then, a matter for exploration rather than being decided in advance' (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 15). Similarly, Richardson (2007) draws on the metaphor of a shoreline to

conceptualise the relationship between genders and sexualities as ‘patterned fluidities’. Like the connection between the sea and the shore, the connections between genders and sexualities are dynamic, multi-layered, ever-changing, and context driven. Such multi-directional approaches to the intersection between gender and sexuality are useful as they allow researchers to account for non-sexual aspects of gendered lives and experiences and vice versa (Jackson and Scott, 2010), thereby overcoming the issues evident in the debates around the relationship between gender and sexuality, as outlined above.

2.3 Poststructuralism: Foucault and Queer Theory

Poststructuralist theorizations and philosophies are thriving approaches to the study of gender and sexuality. Poststructuralist thought is strongly associated with the work of Foucault (1981) and his ground-breaking text the *History of Sexuality*. Foucault (1981) was highly critical of psychoanalytical and wider essentialist approaches to sexuality. Specifically, those operating within a Freudian framework where there was a tendency to adhere to a repressive model of sexuality which argued that humans repress their ‘natural’ sexual urges and libido, and it is through repressing these aspects of our sexual urges that we come to develop sexual desires (Jackson and Scott, 2010).

A key theorist who has contributed to much thinking in this area, especially conceptualizations of heterosexuality, is Judith Butler (2002). Butler (2002) proposes a performative theory of gender whereby ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Butler, 1990: 25). Equally, the stability of heterosexuality ‘is dependent on ongoing, continuous and repeated performances of normative gender identities, which produce the illusion of stability’ (Richardson, 2015: 15). In other words, social actors are in a continuous process of becoming heterosexual. It is through acts of saying and doing heterosexuality that the category of heterosexual is produced. By seeing heterosexuality as something that social actors are achieving and producing through their discursive actions, rather than something that is done, Butler (1990) avoids conceptualising gender and sexuality as fixed. Rather, gender and sexual performances can change over time, as discursive practices change.

Despite the influential contributions that this ‘cultural turn’ has had to the study of gender and sexuality, poststructuralist and Queer approaches have, however, been criticised by material feminists for their tendency to prioritise the power of discourse and focus their analysis at the level of abstraction, at the expense of exploring the material inequalities affecting the everyday

empirical lives of men and women (Plummer, 2000; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Richardson 2015).

2.4 Sexual Script Theory

An integral contribution to the theorization of sexuality comes from Simon and Gagnon (1986), who applied interactionist principles to the study of sexuality and sexual conduct. Their ideas pre-date that of Foucault, but they shared the same dissatisfaction with the repressive hypothesis and primordial drive claims that were circulating among psychoanalytic and biological approaches to sexuality at the time. Arguing instead that all sexual conduct, including sexual desire, is socially constructed (Jackson and Scott, 2010). Central to their argument is that sexual beliefs and sexual conduct are learned interactions. Social actors do not simply innately know what is sexual and how to be sexual, meanings and symbols are central to any understanding of sexuality as it is the meanings and symbols constructed around sexuality that provide social actors with cues on what is, and how to be, sexual (Simon and Gagnon, 1984; Simon, 2003).

Gagnon and Simon (1973) developed a set of conceptual and theoretical tools to help researchers explore the everyday sexual lives and meanings of individuals (Richardson, 2015). Indeed, rather than seeing sexuality as something special, Gagnon and Simon (1973) emphasised that we must make sense of sexuality in everyday experience (Jackson and Scott, 2010). They drew from a dramaturgical model to assert that there are three distinct, yet interrelated, dimensions that guide sexual conduct: cultural scenarios, and interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts.

Cultural scenarios are the socio-cultural/historical narratives that are provided by social institutions such as religion, family, and education, as well as other cultural resources such as the media, which social actors use to make sense of sex and sexuality (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). In other words, they provide the who, what, when, how, and why of what is appropriate or inappropriate sexual conduct (Richardson, 2015). Simon and Gagnon saw gender and sexuality as simultaneously analytically distinct, yet interrelated and ‘argue that the sexual self is developed on the basis of the prior construction of a gendered self’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 15). In this way, Simon and Gagnon have been celebrated for their ability to link the sexual self to a wider social context (Jackson and Scott, 2010).

This also makes their approach particularly suited to study the ways gender and sexuality intersect with other factors such as age and the life course. Indeed, scholarly work looking at personal life (May and Nordqvist, 2019) and sexual life (Plummer, 2010; Carpenter and

DeLamater, 2012) across the life course have highlighted how cultural narratives have provided temporal scripts or a social clock ‘that provide a road map for what kinds of things should happen at what point in life’ (May and Nordqvist, 2019: 88). Work from scholars such as Plummer (1995; 2010) have linked age as a significant social category when thinking about the sexual and sexual stigma. Plummer (2010) highlights how what is deemed appropriate sexual practice changes depending on one’s stage in the life cycle and alters the kinds of sexual stories people can tell. Or perhaps, more importantly, the stories they cannot tell. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that Gagnon and Simon (1973) did not present these cultural scenarios as something that mechanically determined sexual conduct, they are simply utilised by sexual actors to guide sexual conduct. This becomes clearer in their description of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts.

Interpersonal scripts are social actors’ interpretations and adaptations to these cultural scenarios. Simon and Gagnon (1986) understand that one script does not fit all, and their concept of interpersonal scripts is intended to account for how social actors can and will interpret, adapt, and negotiate sexual conduct to fit the situation or context they are in, and through interaction with others. In this way, Simon and Gagnon (1986: 41) recognised that social actors are not cultural dopes who blindly and unconsciously follow pre-established sexual norms or scripts, rather social actors continually produce and shape these scripts.

Furthermore, it is here that Simon and Gagnon (1986) recognise that sexuality is political, in that one’s social status (i.e., gender, ethnicity, class, age, etc.) may influence the kinds of scripts that are enacted. Indeed, in line with the symbolic interactionist position, Simon and Gagnon balance the issue of structure and agency quite well. They afforded individuals agency in how individuals interpret and produce meaning, whilst also recognising the ways ‘human agents are constrained by structural rules, by material resources, and by the structural processes connected to class, gender, race, ethnicity, nation and community’ (Denzin, 2004:82).

Scripting at the intrapsychic level, concerns an individual’s internal dialogue or thoughts about sex and sexuality in relation to both of the above (Simon and Gagnon, 1984). For Simon and Gagnon (1986), it is not enough to say that sexual practice is socially constructed, they stress that the very desire to engage in certain sexual conduct is also bound up in the social. Intrapsychic scripts, then, are not our unconscious psyche as psychoanalysts would propose, they are described as ‘a socially based form of mental life’ (Gagnon, 2004: 276 cited in Jackson and Scott, 2010:15). The internal conversations social actors have with themselves reflect a reflexive process whereby they make sense of their sexual desires and at the same time modify sexual meaning.

The conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, as addressed above, have been central in shaping the aims and objectives of this study. The justification behind this research project stemmed from a recognition that gender and sexual meaning and practice are subject to change. Namely, that the introduction of new technological ways of negotiating our intimate lives warrants an exploration of whether, and in what ways, this may have influenced heterosexual users' perceptions, experiences and practices of relationships, dating and intimacy. The research questions that this study aims to explore also share an interpretive centre in that they focus on the ways users actively construct, interpret and produce meaning and practice through everyday interaction with others, both in person and through dating apps (addressed below). To achieve this, the focus will be on users' mundane dating app routines and practices, and their interpretations and negotiations of these. The focus of the analysis will be to engage with current constructionist debates within gender and sexuality studies as it will explore the ways heterosexual users' interpretations of dating app meaning and practice speak to wider understandings of gender and sexuality. Unlike Queer approaches, however, the analysis will be rooted in everyday empirical lives of participants, and will focus less on the level of abstraction because, as I will show later in the chapter, there is a need for more qualitative analysis where the voice of the participants takes central stage.

When interactionist approaches speak of social interaction as having a key role in the construction of gender and sexuality, they are largely referring to face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, nowadays, the advancements in digital communication technologies mean human interaction is also mediated through technology. Indeed, digital communication technologies complicate what is meant by face-to-face interaction. For instance, software such as Zoom allows people to speak face-to-face, whilst also being geographically dispersed. However, some elements of in-person face-to-face interaction are said to be lost in technology-mediated communication such as visual cues. This has led some to argue that 'mediation is impoverishment' (Baym, 2010), which is something that I go on to discuss in more detail later in the chapter in the context of the key debates circling online dating and dating apps. For now, I highlight this issue to illustrate that when considering the ways individuals construct gendered and sexual meanings and practices through social interaction, attention must be paid to the role technology plays in this process.

2.5 The Social Construction of Technology

Much like theorisations of gender and sexuality, the social constructionist turn in STS emerged out of a dissatisfaction with overly deterministic accounts that saw technology and

technological change as following a natural ‘innovative’ trajectory and the design or functionality of technology as having *a priori* role in determining its subsequent meaning and use (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999). Subsequently, several approaches have emerged that attempt to explore the more complex relationship between technology and social life, that account for both the social and material processes involved, and which go beyond dystopian or utopian theorisations of technology.

Nevertheless, much like social constructionist theorizations of gender and sexuality, these approaches are by no means unified. They are better described as running along a continuum, with technological determinism on one end and social determinism on the other. Along this continuum, there exist differences in how people privilege the relationship between the social and technical, as well as nuanced differences in the focus of studies. For instance, some have focussed their attention more heavily on the role society has on the design and innovation of technology (Pinch and Bijker, 1984), whereas others focus their attention more closely on users of technology and the ways they are embedded in everyday life (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1992; Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). This section will address some of the approaches that have offered useful conceptual tools for this thesis. This thesis adopts a user focussed approach and is interested in researching dating apps in the context of participants’ everyday lives by exploring the meaning that users ascribe to dating apps and their use of them. This thesis is less interested in the design of apps beyond that of which users speak of and make sense of it. As such, the conceptual tools addressed below are typically located in the middle to later end of the continuum and privilege the role of the social and the everyday.

2.5.1 Mutual Shaping of Technology and Social Life

Broadly speaking, mutual shaping perspectives on the relationship between technology and society are located in the middle of the continuum (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). These approaches generally adhere to the notion that technology and society are mutually or co-constructed (Wajcman, 2010). Rather than privileging either the technological or the social, ‘the broad social shaping or constructivist approach treats technology as a sociotechnical product—a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organisations, cultural meanings and knowledge’ (Wajcman, 2010: 149). Two major traditions have been influential in the development of mutual shaping perspectives: The social construction of technology (SCOT) and the Performative Theory of Social Institutions (PTSI).

The SCOT perspective was developed by Pinch and Bijker (1984), who were heavily influenced by the notion of ‘symmetry’ from the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK). Indeed, Pinch and Bijker (1984:406) stated that the job of any sociological approach to technology is to treat the success of an artefact as ‘the explanandum, not the explanans’ and that it is only through treating technology as socially constituted that researchers can understand why technologies are successful. Whilst their focus was on the social construction of the bicycle, their application of ‘interpretive flexibility’ to technology has been influential in highlighting the ways that various ‘relevant social groups’ may use the same technology for very different purposes, and ascribe different meanings to technological features than intended by designers (Pinch and Bijker, 1984). Thereby also demonstrating that technological innovation and the trajectory of technology has its roots in social relations.

I also see the continued relevance of SSK approaches to the study of technology, albeit beyond the components which Pinch and Bijker (1984) employed. Specifically, the PTSI, which can be applied to treat a technology’s function and normativity as ‘generated by rather than generative of usage’ (Schyfter, 2009). Kusch (1997) observed the existence of what he called artificial kinds. Artificial kinds have empirically verifiable qualities that can be observed, but their ontological status stems from self-referential activity and formative intentional actions. Technologies can be thought of as artificial kinds as many have material aspects such as their design and characteristics, as well as processes associated with them (Schyfter, 2009). The conceptual tools laid out by Kusch (2005), then, can help consider how the use of a technology is a social institution and socially constituted. That is, it is conventional, normative and collectively constituted (Kusch, 2005). In this way, the design of a technology alone cannot determine the meaning that will be ascribed to it or how it should be used (Schyfter, 2009). Rather, it is through collective social processes of self-referential practice (i.e., seeing how others use technology, how others talk about how you should or should not use technology) and formative intentional action (i.e., actively using a technology) that shapes the function and use of a technology. By the very token that action is generative, this also leaves room for agency and change in meaning and practice, as a particular meaning or notion of correct or incorrect practice is only sustained as long as the collective sustain it.

As such, I am in agreement with the likes of Schyfter (2009), that the conceptual tools adhered to by the PTSI can go beyond understanding technological innovation and interpretive flexibility. Namely, that the components of the PTSI can be employed to understand the meanings, functions and use of a technology. What’s more, although those operating within the PTSI did not make this explicit link, their core tenets have a great affinity with interactionist

approaches. Indeed, both approaches share an adherence to notions of performativity, meaning as a collective achievement, and a focus on everyday practice. Therefore, interactionist approaches to gender and sexuality, as well as technology, could be appropriately used alongside one another as a conceptual tool for exploring each element, as well as their relationships with one another.

The SCOT⁷ approaches have been criticised by feminists for their gender blindness (Wajcman, 2000). Namely, Wajcman (2000: 452) has noted that ‘the problem with a primary focus on ‘relevant social groups’ in the process of technological development is how to take account of those actors who are routinely marginalized or excluded from the network’ (Wajcman, 2000: 452). These criticisms have been levelled at STS more generally, as gender was often ignored as being an aspect of the social. Early feminist research was critical of how technology was, and is, often associated with men and masculinity, both in terms of how it is often unproblematically assumed that men are naturally the ones who should be making technology and who were more competent at using them (Wajcman, 2010). Feminist approaches to technology, however, demonstrated that ‘the construction of men as strong, manually able and technologically endowed, and women as physically and technically incompetent’ was bound up with constructions of gender and gender relations (Cockburn, 1983: 203). For instance, gender and sexual divisions of labour have been illustrated as influencing women’s involvement, specifically their lack of involvement, in the design and innovation of technology, as well as their appropriation and use of technology (Wajcman, 1991). Namely, women’s involvement has historically tended to be located far lower down, in the peripheries, of the design process and women’s use tends to be limited to domestic products.

At the forefront of feminist thinking on technology is Judy Wajcman (2010), who combined feminist and STS ways of thinking to create a technofeminist perspective. Technofeminism operates within the co-construction paradigm and is concerned with understanding how women’s identities, needs, and priorities are shaped by, and shape, technology and technological change (Wajcman, 2010). In other words, ‘This means that gender is important

⁷Actor Network Theory (ANT) has also been criticised for neglecting the issue of power and inequality. Through focussing on the networks of actants (human and non-human) that shape the direction of technological design and use, ANT have been accused of missing gender power relations as women are often excluded from decision-making and user networks (Wajcman, 2000). Whilst ANT approaches have been highly influential to the theorization of the relationship between technology and social life, their approach falls very much in the middle of the continuum between technological and social determinism (Latour, 2007). This study situates itself within approaches that privilege the role of social processes in constructing meaning and use of technology. It is also interested in the ways users interact with and negotiate meaning and use of dating apps within heterosexual users everyday lives. As such, approaches from the likes of SCOT, PTSI and Domestication were more adequate conceptual tools in which to frame this study.

in the social construction of technology and technologies are important in the social construction of gender' (Berg and Lie, 1995: 345). Technofeminism's main contribution has been its emphasis on moving away from highly dystopian or utopian approaches to technology and technological change, which either overemphasize the destructive or emancipatory nature of technology. Wajcman (2010) does recognise that technology can play a part in creating new meanings (i.e., Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant see pp.32), however, she has also witnessed the reinforcement of gender and sexual inequalities. These debates feature heavily in empirical research into online dating and dating apps, which will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter.

2.5.2 Domestication of Technology

Domestication approaches to technology are also relevant as they specifically focus on how technology comes to be a taken-for-granted aspect of our everyday mundane routines (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 2002; Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013; Hartmann, 2015). The concept of domestication is most often associated with Roger Silverstone and his research exploring the domestication of ICT and communication technologies within the home (Haddon, 2007). Advocates of the domestication approach also support the notion that there is nothing inevitable about the ways technologies come to be embedded into people's everyday lives. Rather, the use of the metaphor 'domestication' was purposeful as it described the process of how some technologies move from being 'wild' objects that appear and feel strange in people's everyday lives, to being 'tame' objects that have been house-trained, much like a pet, and integrated into people's everyday structures, routines, and values (Berker et al., 2006; Haddon, 2007). Notably, it affords user agency in the domestication process and avoids painting technological consumers as victims of the designs of technologies. Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1992) recognised that by the time a technology comes to be physically accessible to everyday consumers that advertisement and marketing strategies may have imbued these technologies with symbolic meaning. However, they assert that domestication at the individual level plays an important role in reinforcing, as well as subverting these meanings (see also Baym, 2010).

Silverston, Hirsch and Morley (1992) set out four processes to describe the acceptance, rejection, and (non)use of technologies in people's everyday lives. These were appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion. In a later appraisal, Carter, Green and Thorogood (2013:349) outlined each of these stages as follows:

...appropriation is the work that is done to move an artefact from being merely a potential commodity to one that is actually taken possession of by an individual or household – when it is made physically and symbolically accessible; objectification relates to how an artefact is given a place and role within an aesthetic environment of the household; incorporation is the ways in which an artefact is used and fits into the temporal routines of household life; and conversion is the process whereby the users within the household may come to define the relationship between the artefact and the wider environment and social world.

Carter, Green and Thorogood (2013) drew on these to explore the domestication of the electric toothbrush within the home and within people's everyday healthcare practices. Likewise, most domestication research looks at the appropriation of technology and media within the home. The mobile phone, however, meant that technologies and media were not confined to the home and this mobility was seen as impacting the ways technologies and media were being integrated into people's structures and routines (Haddon, 2007). This led some to question the applicability of domestication approaches to understanding domestication outside of the home. Nevertheless, recent scholarly work from Haddon (2017) and Ling and Haddon (2017), has demonstrated that domestication approaches can be extended to the realm of mobility. This reinforces the continued relevance to studies such as this which are focussed on technologies that are mobile and permeate both public and private worlds.

This study situates itself among, and engages with, the above approaches to the study of technology and social life, and sees them as useful conceptual tools, because they share a focus on the use and meaning of technology within everyday life. This study is user focused and aims to explore the meanings heterosexual users ascribe to dating apps and dating app practice in their everyday lives. The theoretical tools provided from the PTSI and SCOT align with these goals as they argue that the design or materiality of a device cannot determine how it is used or the meanings ascribed to it, only users can. What's more, they offer analytical tools in which to demonstrate the ways meaning, normativity and function of a dating app is a social and collective achievement. Likewise, domestication approaches help problematise the ways dating apps come to be used and situated in people's everyday mundane lives as something that is worthy of exploration and explanation. They not only focus on mundane routines, but also mundane technologies and the ways smaller, everyday technologies should also be the focus of research. Thus, framing dating apps as a key site in which to explore gender and sexual relations.

Feminist approaches from researchers such as Wajcman (2010) help bring issues of power and inequality into the spotlight and emphasise that as much as technology can have a transformative capacity on gender and sexual relations, what is also important to consider is what does not change and what this can also tell us. This has been important for shaping the

focus of this research, which is not interested in making either dystopian or utopian claims as to the transformative role of dating apps in changing gender and sexual relations, but in exploring the nuanced ways in which heterosexual meaning and practice is reflected, reinforced, negotiated and/or subverted through the use of dating apps.

2.6 The Social Impact of Technology on Intimacy and the Self

Before delving into the current debates concerning the state of intimacy and personal life in the era of digital intimacies, it is first necessary to outline what is meant by ‘intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1999). This thesis subscribes to a constructionist and relational view of intimacy and personal life as laid out by those such as Jamieson (1988), Smart (2007) and May and Nordqvist (2019). Intimacy has been highlighted as being at the centre of personal life, including family, friendships, communities, sexual and/or romantic relationships, and marriage, to name a few (Jamieson, 1988; 1999; 2013; 2022). Nevertheless, ‘the ways and degrees of being intimate vary enormously within and between human societies’ and across time (Jamieson, 1988:7). In other words, intimacy has a social origin and cannot be recognised without also considering processes of inequality, power and social change (Jamieson, 1988; 2022). This departs from psychoanalytical accounts that saw childhood as a key site where one’s sexual and personal relationships with others are determined. As a matter of relevancy to the aims and objectives of this thesis, I will focus my attention on literature that centres around the nature of intimacy, courtship, and heterosexual relationships.⁸

There are, however, contradictory debates regarding the nature of intimacy in the modern era (Jamieson, 1988; Smart; 2007; Baym, 2010; May and Nordqvist, 2019). Not unlike other periods of historical change and advancement (i.e., enlightenment, industrialism etc.), rapid advancements in digital technologies have raised several concerns about their social impact on our relationships with others and social connections (Baym, 2010). Notably, initial reactions to such changes have been conflicted, lacking in nuance, and flooded with technological determinism⁹ with public opinion and scholarship making utopian or dystopian predictions on their effects on social life (Jamieson 1988; Baym, 2010). Unsurprisingly, then, postmodern theorizations concerning the transformational power of modernity and technology on the nature

⁸ This is not to suggest that other forms of intimacy such as between a parent and a child or that between friends do not intersect in important ways, or that the theorizations set out below do not have implications for same-sex relationships but to simply narrow the focus of my discussion in a way that is relevant to this thesis.

⁹ I refer back to the issue of technological determinism that was outlined earlier in the chapter. Both dystopian and utopian discourses that emerge alongside digital transformations and advancements can be said to be reflective of deterministic outlooks on the influence technology can have on social life and social actors incapability to resist this.

of intimacy and personal life, have also tended to be overly optimistic or overly pessimistic (Jamieson, 1988; Gross 2005).

A key player in these debates is Anthony Giddens (1992). Giddens (1992) proposes that, as a direct result of modernity, a transformation of intimacy is underway whereby traditional processes of romantic love, and the unequal gendered power relationships that this form of intimacy produces, is being replaced by ‘confluent love’ and ‘the pure relationship’ (May and Nordqvist, 2019). ‘Confluent love’ and the ‘pure relationship’ are a form of what Jamieson (1988) refers to as ‘disclosure intimacy’, which is a fragile form of intimacy that is premised on mutual disclosure and mutual satisfaction (Giddens, 1992). Simultaneously, Giddens (1992) makes rather bold claims regarding the impact of social change on gender and sexual order (Jamieson, 1988; 1999)¹⁰. According to Giddens (1992), modernity has destabilised structures of power and inequality that have previously sustained intimacy and heterosexual relationships. Now, heterosexual men and women are free to construct and participate in relationships which are centred around gender equality and sexual autonomy (Jamieson, 1998). By this, Giddens suggests ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ to be fragile. This is illustrated, according to Giddens (1992), by increasing divorce rates, changing family/living structures, the increasing number of women entering the workforce, and changing norms around casual sex.

Nevertheless, the increase in divorce rates and the number of people living alone has led other theorists of social change to make more pessimistic claims. For these writers, modern relationships and intimacy are becoming more and more defined by marketisation, commodification, and consumption (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2007; Turkle, 2011). For instance, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), like Giddens (1992), subscribe to the idea that society is increasingly individualised, which is the idea that tradition does no longer have the same impact on behaviour and that individuals have the reflexivity to act for themselves. This, they argue, has resulted in a decline in people’s willingness to commit to long-term relationships; ‘Love knows no grace, however, nor does it stick to vows or keep contracts’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:113).

Bauman (2003) made similar claims in his book *Liquid Love*, albeit he is somewhat more explicit about the impact that communication and digital technologies, such as online dating sites, and now presumably dating apps, have had on intimacy and personal life. Namely, digital dating technology is said to be simultaneously a symptom and the cause of ‘excessive concern with individuality and the compulsive consumption incited by the market forces of late

¹⁰ The criticisms of which I shall address shortly.

capitalism' (Bauman, 2003:34). In other words, digital technologies like dating apps make love a 'commodified game' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017; Bandinelli and Gandini, 2022) or recreational activity whereby where people are 'seen as largely disposable as one can always 'press delete' (Bauman, 2003:65). Indeed, Bauman (2003) accuses and condemns technology for reducing the amount of effort involved in searching for love and for providing social actors with a plurality of choice, which he argues only works to undermine notions of commitment.

Similar capitalist conceptions of sexual and romantic relationships are echoed by Illouz (2007; 2012). Illouz (2012:242) places online dating sites at the centre of her analysis and argues that they reflect, and reinforce, a cultural condition whereby the search for a partner has become subject to a consumer logic which is 'cognized, both more rational and emotional, and more tightly dependent on tastes'. Illouz (2012) maintains, that this stems from the fact that technologies such as online dating sites offer their users unbound freedom and choice over who they can, and should, love. This 'architecture of choice' is said to reduce people's capacity, especially men's, to commit to love as they are encumbered by doubts, distress and questions as to whether they have found the best possible love option (Illouz, 2012).

As such, Illouz (2007; 2012) arrives at a somewhat different conclusion to Bauman (2003). Rather than digital dating technologies encouraging a more efficient market in which to search for love, they demand far more emotional and symbolic work and effort from their users. Firstly, because users are continuously engaging in sexual competition and must engage in self-presentation practices that enable them to compete in the sexual marketplace (Illouz, 2007). Secondly, because a significant amount of deliberation, assessment and consideration informs users matching decisions. With less traditional norms to refer to, users are overwhelmed with 'ontological insecurity and meaninglessness'¹¹ (Illouz, 2012:59).

Despite the existence of these conflicting sociological debates concerning the state of intimacy in the modern era, they all 'converge around an image of late modern intimacy as detraditionalized' (Gross, 2005: 287). I would, therefore, now like to turn to some existing empirical research into online dating sites and apps which has explicitly¹² considered these sociological debates surrounding the social impact of online dating on intimacy and heterosexual courtships in the context of online dating (see Jamieson, 1988; Barraket and

¹¹ This debate concerning the efficiency, or lack thereof, of dating apps is one that becomes relevant across the analysis chapters of this thesis.

¹² I say 'explicitly' because a significant amount of empirical literature on dating sites and apps inadvertently contribute to the debates and discussions around the transformation of Intimacy without necessarily acknowledging this as the core aims of their research. This research will be addressed later in the chapter.

Henry-Waring, 2008; Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010; Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017; Hooff, 2020; Bandinelli and Gadini, 2022; Bergstrom, 2022).

Heino, Ellison and Gibbs (2010) research identified that marketplace metaphors such as ‘sales pipeline’ and ‘market worth’ were a salient part of users’ talk and practice on online dating sites. Despite there being some exceptions, their participants were found to equate online dating to a form of ‘relationshopping’. For instance, they spoke of marketing themselves through their profile (or resume) and compared consuming others’ profiles to looking through a catalogue (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010). Factors, such as the ability to control one’s self-presentation and selectively ‘filter’ by age and race (as well as other categories) when searching dating profiles¹³, were identified as being a significant part of users’ equation of online dating to an online marketplace. Moreover, Bandinelli and Gandini (2022) reinforce the claims of Illouz (2007;2012), concluding that dating has never been so difficult. They frame dating apps as a ‘technology of non-choice’ as they found that dating apps did not make dating more efficient. Instead, they were found to produce ontological uncertainty and insecurities (Bandinelli and Gandini, 2022). Indeed, a significant amount of ‘hermeneutic’ or interpretive labour was required of users to be able to be successful in interacting with others on dating apps.

Alternatively, Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) found that, whilst there was some indication that consumer logic influenced the perspectives and practices on online dating sites, ultimately, they found that online dating sites simultaneously transformed and reinforced traditional norms. This included gender norms, as men were still expected to initiate contact with women. This led them to conclude that more critical interrogation of existing theorization is needed and that further theoretical inquiry is necessary to understand the complexities of the impacts of digital technologies on intimacy and personal relationships (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008).

Subsequent research looking at dating apps has generally also found that claims by the likes of Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007;2012) were not reflected in user practice. Indeed, Hobbs, Owen and Gerber (2017) found that the perspectives and practices of users of dating apps did not suggest that ideology around monogamy, commitment and romantic love were in peril. Indeed, far from finding that the ‘architecture of choice’ facilitated through dating apps was having a disabling effect on commitment, their participants felt ‘that the technology merely enhanced their desires and abilities to find a date or suitable life partner’ and pursue meaningful relationships because it gave them more viable options to do so (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017:282).

¹³ I will discuss this later on.

Similarly, Hooff (2020) indicated that the higher failure rates of romantic connections facilitated through Tinder and the number of hook-ups were simply more visible as a result of technology, rather than being demonstrative of an overall decline in commitment. Furthermore, the use of dating apps was found to ‘reinforce conventionally gendered hierarchies, as participants’ interactions and experiences continue to be framed by heteronormative scripts’ (Hooff, 2020:124-5). This has led authors such as Bergstrom (2022) to suggest that the more appropriate conclusion is that ways of committing are changing, rather than a lack of commitment. Namely, that the couple norms still persist, but heterosexual dating practices are becoming ever more privatised and less immersed in broader social activity, interactions, and spaces (Turkle, 2011; Bergstrom, 2022).

The above empirical literature points to the pertinence of Jamieson’s (1988;1999; 2013) criticisms towards (post)modernist theorisations around the transformation of intimacy. Jamieson, along with other feminist and personal life authors (see Richardson, 2000; Smart, 2007; Scott and Jackson, 2010; May and Nordqvist, 2019), are critical of both utopian and dystopian approaches to intimacy, but especially concepts such as ‘the pure relationship’, which Jamieson (2013:17), argues ‘lives more strongly in talk about relationships than in relationships as they are lived’. Namely, Jamieson (1999) is highly critical of the rather naïve claims made by Giddens regarding the emancipatory effect social change is having on the gender order and ideals of romantic love. Rather, Jamieson (1988; 1999; 2013) demonstrated through an in-depth exploration of empirical research that focusses on the everyday, microlevel, interactions and practices of heterosexual couples, that social change and digital technologies are reinforcing, as well as creating new and innovative ways, of reinforcing traditional gendered power dynamics and inequality.

This also speaks to the claims that a decline in romantic love and commitment is underway. Not only do women find it difficult to leave abusive relationships, but marriage, cohabitation and civil partnership surveys illustrate that long-term commitment and marriage are still valued by a large majority of heterosexual couples. Indeed, whilst marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in the UK in 2019 were found to have fallen to their lowest on record since 1862, this was largely accounted for by the increasing number of couples cohabiting (Officer for National Statistics, 2019). These recent decline in marriage rates and increasing rates of cohabitation do not necessarily equate to a decline in commitment (Jamieson et al., 2002). Jamieson et al. (2002) found that most couples entered into cohabitation with their partner with the view that this was a permanent arrangement and demonstration of their commitment.

These criticisms concerning the changing nature of heterosexual relations and intimacy, raise several important questions in relation to my research, and have loosely informed the aims and objectives, as well as the approach, of this research. They emphasises the need for more empirical work that looks into people's everyday negotiations of intimate relations, and which is more attentive to gender, power and inequality. Dating apps present a new site in which to explore gender and sexual relations. The unique conditions in which intimacy is negotiated, enacted and formed through these apps is worthy of further sociological exploration, including questions such as: how do social actors negotiate intimacy in the age of dating apps, what does the creation and unprecedented uptake of dating apps say about ideals of love and coupledness, in what ways do user perspectives and dating app practice reflect and contribute to debates on the transformation of intimacy.

Given the empirical focus of the above theoretical traditions and debates, what will follow is an overview of key empirical literature in the field of dating technologies. Dating technologies encompass such a broad array of technologies and have received scholarly attention from a wide array of disciplines. As such, it is beyond the confines of this thesis to cover them all in any exhaustive detail. Rather, I will focus on empirical research into online dating sites and apps and, as will become apparent, how they speak to the discussions raised above.

2.7 Risk: health, disclosure, and uncertainty

2.7.1 *Sexual Health Risks*

The large majority of research into dating apps comes from a sexual health perspective, most of which has focussed on dating app use amongst men seeking sex with men (MSM) and on exploring the impact dating apps are having on the transmission of HIV/AIDs (Landovitz et al., 2013). Albeit to a lesser extent, research has also explored the impact of dating app use on sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and unwanted pregnancy among heterosexual dating app users (see Shapiro et al., 2017; Sawyer, Smith and Benotsch, 2018; Mignault et al., 2022). This research found a positive association between dating app use and increased risky sexual behaviours. It is also important to be critical of this research. This is because it pathologises users as sexual risk takers and labels them as having low sexual disgust sensitivity, at the expense of non-users who are presented in a more positive light. This research also largely fails to consider how the social repercussions of contracting an STD or unwanted pregnancy may be different for men and women.

This leads me to the broader issue with the concentrated amount of sexual/health-based research into dating apps, which is that it comes at the expense of research that aims to address the more relational aspects of dating app use. Sexual practice and sexuality cannot be captured solely through numbers and statistics. Neither can sexual practice and sexuality be reduced to issues of sexually transmitted diseases. Further research is needed which explores the more relational aspects of dating app practice, especially since, as I will address shortly, hook ups and casual sex have not been found to be the main motivation for using dating apps.

2.7.2 Self-Presentation, Uncertainty and Self-disclosure

The ways heterosexual adults construct an online self has received a substantial amount of scholarly attention (see Hogan, 2010; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Indeed, an extensive amount of research has explored self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies employed by users of various online communication platforms such as online chat rooms (Whitty, 2002), video games (Parks and Roberts, 1998), online dating websites (see Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts, 2011; Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011) and, more recently, dating apps (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2015; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Ward, 2016; 2017). This topic has received salient scholarly attention because the design and functionality of different online communication platforms have been argued to alter the ways users can manage their self-presentation and self-disclosure compared to face-to-face interactions (see Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011). There are both subtle and overt differences between different online communication platforms which make it difficult, and arguably inappropriate, to generalise how self-presentation and self-disclosure manifests across all online platforms. I will now go on to discuss some key research in this area which has a bearing on the aims and objectives of this research. Nevertheless, so much of this literature comes from a socio-psychological perspective and so I will go on to discuss the ways the focus of this literature has played a role in the justification for a more sociological and constructionist approach in this study.

2.7.3 Computer-Mediated Relationships

The internet was identified as a space where interpersonal relationships were being built and maintained, albeit it was not initially intended for such social purposes (Baym, 2006). For instance, early research identified that virtual relationships were being formed via online virtual reality platforms (Parks and Roberts, 1998), news groups (Donath, 1999), and chat rooms (Whitty, 2002), to name a few. Computer-mediated relationships can be described as relationships, be it romantic relationships or friendships, which are initiated, formed and

maintained online. One particular practice that caused some stir was cybersex, which raised the possibility of the decline of skin on skin sex, although it has since been found that cybersex will not be threatening the primacy of skin on skin sex anytime soon (Jamieson, 2013).

The majority of research into computer-mediated relationships has been focused on comparing them with relationships that have formed face-to-face (Merkle and Richardson, 2000; Baym, 2006). Indeed, the virtual nature of these relationships has caused some debate regarding the quality and authenticity of such internet-facilitated relationships compared to face-to-face relationship development (Baym, 2006). Many studies adopted a 'mediation is impoverishment' approach and concluded that computer-mediated-communication (CMC), and any relationships facilitated via these means, were inferior to face-to-face relationships (Baym, 2010). Indeed, the lack of visual, non-verbal cues, face-to-face interaction, and physical proximity were believed to foster weak and disembodied connections because they inhibit personal self-disclosure which has been argued as essential to relationship development (Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

Such views have since been heavily criticised for drawing conclusions about CMC relationships based on traditional understandings of face-to-face relationship development and self-disclosure cues, and not attempting to apply these to online spaces or consider different or novel forms of relationship development and self-disclosure in these spaces (Baym, 2006). Research which has avoided such omissions found that users described the relationships they developed in virtual space as supportive and built on reciprocal trust, honesty and commitment (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Therefore, CMC relationships, like relationships that evolve face to face, 'can be weak or strong, specialized or broad, committed or casual, idealized or well grounded' (Baym, 2006: 45).

Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by the lack of visual and non-verbal cues within these spaces also led researchers to question whether users were being honest about their identities. This was because such affordances allowed users to exercise more control over their self-presentation than was found to be possible in face-to-face interaction (Parks and Roberts, 1998). One concern in particular was that people could construct an alternate online gender identity (Parks and Roberts, 1998). This has been referred to as 'gender switching' and describes the act of constructing (either via an avatar or self-description) a gender identity online that is different to the gender that one identifies as, and performs, in offline contexts¹⁴ (Parks and

¹⁴ In their original text, Parks and Roberts (1998) describe gender switching as presenting themselves differently to their biological sex. I have purposefully referred to this here, instead, as constructing an identity that is different

Roberts, 1998). However, once again, research did not wholly support such claims. A survey completed by MOO¹⁵ users found that the majority of users had not engaged in ‘gender-switching’ and, if they had, did so for less than 10% of their time online (Parks and Roberts, 1998).

Nevertheless, another important question that arises from the above scholarly concern around ‘gender switching’, is why the possibility of gender fluidity is perceived in such a negative manner? Alternatively, cyber feminists such as Sadie Plant (1997) took somewhat of a technoutopian approach and proposed that digital technology could hold liberatory power and transform gender relations by allowing users to play with, and blur, their gender. Thereby challenging essentialist notions of gender as a fixed and stable category. These views are also echoed by Donna Haraway’s (2006) *Cyborg Manifesto* which argued that digital technologies can be utilised for feminist performances as they offer the chance to reimagine and destabilise dualities such as gender and the cultures and practices that surround them. Plant’s (1997) optimism has since been undermined as research has continuously found that ‘the possibility and the fluidity of gender discourse in the virtual world is constrained by the visceral, lived gender relations of the material world’ (Wajcman, 2010 :149). In other words, whilst digital technologies do offer these possibilities, abandoning learnt cultures and practices that are so embedded and valued in everyday life is not as simple. This is perhaps why Parks and Roberts (1998) participants only engaged in gender play 10% of the time.

Further research has also pointed to how anonymity, far from producing deception, can also have a opposite effect and encourage a more honest presentation of self and self-disclosure (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2003; Joinson, 2007). Opening up about yourself could pose a social risk as thoughts, feelings and beliefs may not always be reciprocated, especially if they go against social norms. Social psychologists have posited a disinhibition effect, whereby anonymity reduces the social risks surrounding self-disclosure as one can benefit from the lack of repercussions that being behind a screen affords¹⁶ (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2002; Joinson, 2007). Indeed, it has been argued that ‘just as people spill their secrets to strangers seated beside them on airplanes, the anonymity of online interactions makes some people more willing to disclose and foster new relationship formation’ (Baym, 2010:102).

to the gender identity one identifies as offline as the former represents an essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality. The essentialism evident in much early research into computer mediated dating, is a criticism I address later in the chapter.

¹⁵ For clarity, a ‘MOO’ is text-based online multi-player virtual reality system.

¹⁶ It is worth acknowledging that the Disinhibition Effect, as well as encouraging honesty, can also foster negative interactions such as online harassment and bullying. I go on to discuss this later in the chapter in the context of dating apps.

The above debates concerning in person versus online self-disclosure speak to wider debates concerning the transformation of intimacy, as addressed earlier in the chapter. Giddens (1992) idea of the pure relationships is premised on a version of intimacy that is developed as a result mutual self-disclosure. What we know about online dating sites is that they offer more of a chance for self-disclosure. Nevertheless, as Jamieson (2013) shows, disclosure intimacy is not the only important kind of intimacy. Other forms of intimacy, such as practical expressions of care, are salient in personal relationships.

As such, computer-mediated relationships raised several important questions and concerns for researchers. They challenged physical proximity and visual cues as defining features of relationships and allowed people to reimagine what forms relationships could take. The views and arguments surrounding computer-mediated relationships developed greatly in a short space of time and moved away from the initial pessimism that dominated earlier studies. Nevertheless, much of this computer-mediated research addressed above is located within socio-psychology and most of their insights were gathered via online surveys, which is somewhat ironic given the pessimism that some of the studies had towards online communication. Consequently, qualitative insights aimed at exploring interpersonal and relational aspects of relationship development online were severely lacking at this stage. These questions, however, were renewed with the introduction of online dating sites, and research in this area does better at addressing the qualitative insights that were lacking up until this point.

2.7.4 Mixed Mode Relationships

The early 2000's marked the production of online dating websites. Unlike online chat rooms, online dating websites were specifically designed to facilitate romantic relationships and connections, which was argued to place more emphasis on the potential for future in person interaction (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006). This has been referred to as 'mixed mode relationships', whereby users begin their relationship online and then progress the relationship into an offline context (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Not unlike scholarship on computer-mediated relationships, much of the research into online dating websites is socio-psychological and concentrates on understanding the nature of relationship development, self-presentation and self-disclosure in these spaces compared to face-to-face setting (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Whitty, 2008), rather than addressing how these issues relate to broader social and relational issues.

The majority of research in this area attempted to assess the applicability, and adapt, Goffman's (1978) principles on self-presentation to an online dating context (see Ellison, Hein and Gibbs,

2006; Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008). Goffman's (1978) dramaturgical model on self-presentation and social life posits that people are always engaging in impression management when they interact with others and that, as social actors, our choice of self-presentation is based on expectations of what performances and roles are appropriate in different contexts and with different audiences. This is what Goffman (1978) refers to as 'front stage' performances, and he argued that successful or appropriate front stage self-presentation was integral to social interaction and relationship development because the combination of expressions given via verbal communication and (sometimes unintentional) expressions given off via non-verbal communication, help others determine whether they wanted to pursue interacting, associating, or developing relationships with that person.

Online dating websites, then, were an interesting research context as they offered new possibilities for self-presentation and self-disclosure that were distinct and sophisticated compared to the other platforms that had come before them (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). For instance, users could construct a dating profile which included photographs, a description of themselves, answers to questions surrounding appearance, hobbies and relational goals and the option to interact with other users via asynchronous messaging. This meant that users had limited visual and verbal cues in which to manage their self-presentation online, and to assess the self-presentation and self-disclosure of others using these spaces. This was argued to be conducive for 'selective self-presentation' as users could take advantage of the control these aspects of the design offered and engage in strategic impression management (Whitty, 2008).

Nevertheless, the potential for future in person interaction has been credited for creating a tension amongst users who wish to make themselves as desirable as possible by enhancing information about themselves and their physical appearance in profiles, but also be accurate enough as not to disappoint people in person (Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008; Hancock and Toma, 2009). Therefore, the novel design and functionality of online dating websites raised new questions surrounding self-presentation and self-disclosure.

The majority of research undertaken in this area found that users aimed to balance an 'ideal' yet 'authentic' self by engaging in minor and subtle forms of self-enhancement such as, for example, misrepresenting one's height, weight, and income by small, potentially undetectable amounts. This included using editing software, flattering lighting and angles to enhance, rather than lie, about one's appearance entirely or stating that they were an avid hiker, when they had only perhaps done a few hikes in their lifetime (Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008; Hancock and Toma, 2009). These subtle forms of deception were deemed more socially acceptable because they were based on the kind of person users strived to be like in the future and so were

not necessarily lies, but future versions of themselves and promises to their imagined audience (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011).

Similar patterns were also identified in the ways users of online dating websites would manage self-disclosure with matches. Research found that users engaged in strategic and staggered self-disclosure (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006; Guadagno, Okdie and Kruse, 2012). Once again, the intention for future in person interaction and pursuing long term romantic goals was significant to how much users disclosed to other matches and how honest they were in their disclosure (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006; Guadagno, Okdie and Kruse, 2012). Interestingly, whilst positive self-disclosure was associated with having greater success with initiating their desired relationship goals, honest self-disclosure was found to have a detrimental effect on this (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006).

Another significant factor that was found to impact the speed and degree of self-disclosure, was users' degree of certainty and confidence that the matches they were interacting with were being honest. Despite the self-report data mentioned above suggesting that users' self-presentation strategies on online dating websites reflected similar self-enhancement strategies that people engage in offline interactions (Goffman, 1978) and that deception was often minor, deception was a major risk that users attempted to mitigate in these spaces (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011). The kinds of concerns identified as being relevant to users were personal security issues such as scammers (Whitty, 2013), privacy concerns around the visibility of personal data, being recognised by people they know who they may not have wanted to know they were using these sites, and misrepresentation relating to identity, appearance, and intentions (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts, 2011; 2012). Notably, Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2011) found that their participants interpreted the above risks associated with online dating websites as the same as those they would face if they were meeting people via more traditional means. The differences, then, seem to stem from the methods by which users are able to manage these risks.

Online spaces have been identified as offering limited or different opportunities for information seeking compared to in person (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). For instance, if someone dated someone at work or that was a mutual friend, they could rely on the assessments of their work colleagues and friends to reduce concerns they may have had about misconceptions or their personal security. However, matches on online dating sites can be complete strangers and have little, or no, connection with users existing network. Therefore, several academic projects have endeavoured to explore the information seeking or risk

management strategies employed by users of online dating websites (see Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011).

A number of information seeking strategies were identified such as checking public records, Google search, drawing on open-source information on other online/social platforms, tracking IP addresses, direct questioning during the conversations they had with matches online, talking to someone over the phone, and assessing matches profiles (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts, 2011; 2012). Indeed, users were found to have developed a set of sophisticated techniques or rules for assessing the credibility and trustworthiness of other users. This prior work notes that the lack, or absence, of opportunities to provide a detailed profile and rich social cues, led users to treat the information and cues they could provide, and receive, with further importance as this was their only way of making and assessing a good 'pre-match impression' (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Elsewhere, this has been referred to as 'cognitive misers', who are those who try to get as much information out of as few cues as they can (Baym, 2010). Coupled with the fact that users are afforded far more control over their self-presentation in online sites, it was found that the smallest of details such as the choice of pictures, language and timing of messages, were strategically selected by users to craft their own, as well as assess others, dating profiles (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). This led Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) to conclude that users ultimately construct their profile and engage in self-presentation strategies that are in line with the norms of use of dating websites.

This body of research has, therefore, extended existing socio-psychological debates on relationship development and impression management online, by demonstrating that people do not just lie because they can. Rather, people lie because it helps them achieve something. Lies do not necessarily stem from disinhibition, they can be strategic. This departs from deterministic and pessimistic ideas of technology and considers ways that technologies and technological use both shape and are shaped by social practices (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999).

Nevertheless, there is a lack of research which looks at the phenomenon of online dating from a sociological perspective. For instance, a noticeable gap across this literature, is the very limited attempts to look critically at self-presentation, self-disclosure and constructions of intimacy through a gendered lens. This is surprising given that research has confirmed that the internet was in fact a site where gender norms are practiced and reinforced (Wajcman, 2010). An exception to this was Toma, Hancock and Ellison (2008), Whitty (2008) and Guadagno, Okdie and Kruse (2012) who found gendered patterns of misrepresentation on online dating profiles. For instance, women were found to be more likely to use outdated or enhanced photos

to exaggerate their looks and minimise their weight, whereas men were found to exaggerate their socio-economic profile and their height (Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Similarly, Barracket and Henry-Waring (2008: 159) identified that online dating practices ‘mirrored hetero-centric traditions of dating and courtship’ as men were found to typically make the first move online.

Nevertheless, in most of these studies, gender was a peripheral focus. Very little effort was placed on engaging critically with gender or feminist theory to interpret and analyse their findings. Rather, Toma, Hancock and Ellison (2008) and Guadagno, Okdie and Kruse (2012), drew on socio-psychological, evolutionary psychology and essentialist theories on gender to contextualise their findings, thereby treating gender differences in self-presentation as stemming from natural gender differences and personality traits.

2.7.5 *Dating Apps*

There is a small body of research which speaks to heterosexual experiences and use of dating apps (see David and Cambre, 2016; Ward, 2016; 2017; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017). The new features of dating apps once again presented new opportunities for self-presentation and self-disclosure (Ward, 2016). Shrock (2015) created a typology for the communicative options available through mobile media such as smartphones, which included: portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. These categories, as well as others, are also applicable to dating apps and are a useful way of categorising the distinct features of dating app design that shape opportunities for self-presentation and self-disclosure.

2.7.5.1 *Multimediality*

Multimediality refers to the increasing sophistication of the cameras and messaging software of mobile technologies, which have made communicating via text/messenger and photo sharing increasingly common (Shrock, 2015). These communicative affordances have been identified as having the power to impact the nature of communicative practices and thereby self-presentation (Shrock, 2015; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017). Both text based and photo sharing methods of communication are offered by, and utilised on, dating apps. On one hand, the increasing quality of cameras on mobile phones, which can allow for better quality pictures and free and accessible editing software, alongside instant messaging software and the ability to link other social media accounts such as Instagram to one’s dating app profile, has the potential to allow users to engage in more sophisticated self-presentation (Ward, 2016; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017).

However, notably, most dating apps¹⁷ also limit opportunities for self-presentation (Ward, 2017). For instance, Tinder, quite notably, limits the profile to a 500-character bio and up to 6 photo uploads (see Appendix A). Different dating apps vary in how much information they allow users to include in their profile, with dating apps like Bumble and Hinge allowing users to include prompts on their profile (see Figure 2). However, compared to the online dating profiles discussed above, dating app profiles have been argued to have far less cues, and the cues that are available have been highlighted as being centred more on imagery and the visual, rather than verbal or textual content (David and Cambre, 2016; Ward, 2016; 2017). This is largely because profiles are presented to users like a deck of cards whereby the picture takes centre stage. There is some information included on the card, such as the person's distance from you, name and age (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, users must click on the profile to expand the profile and read the other information included in the profile bio.

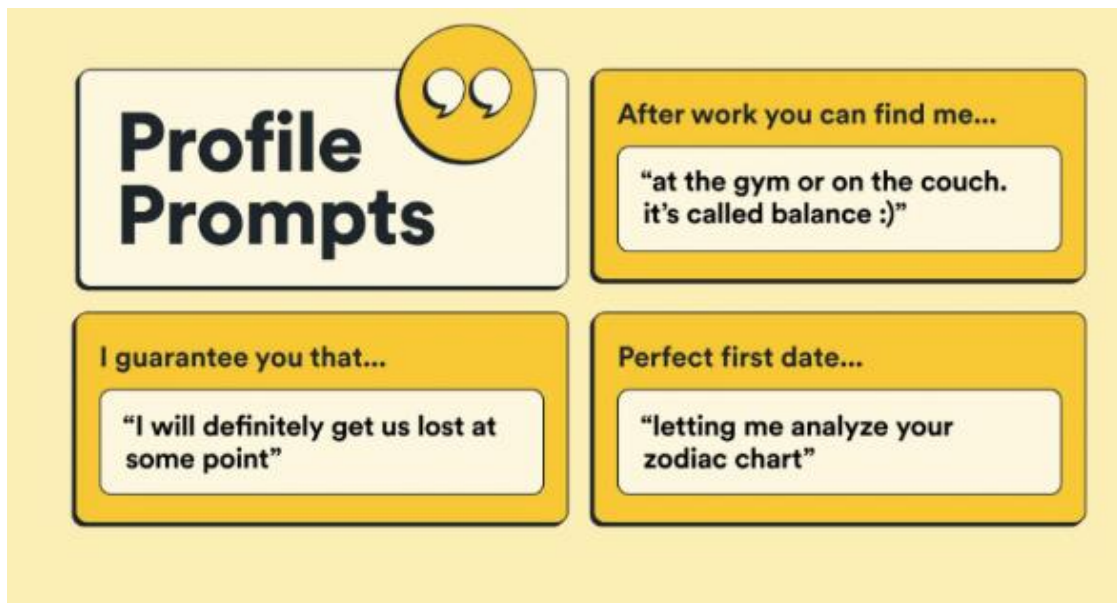


Figure 2: Bumble Profile Prompts Example

¹⁷ I say 'most' because dating apps have a unique selling point which is reflected in their design and therefore some dating apps offer different opportunities for self-presentation than others.

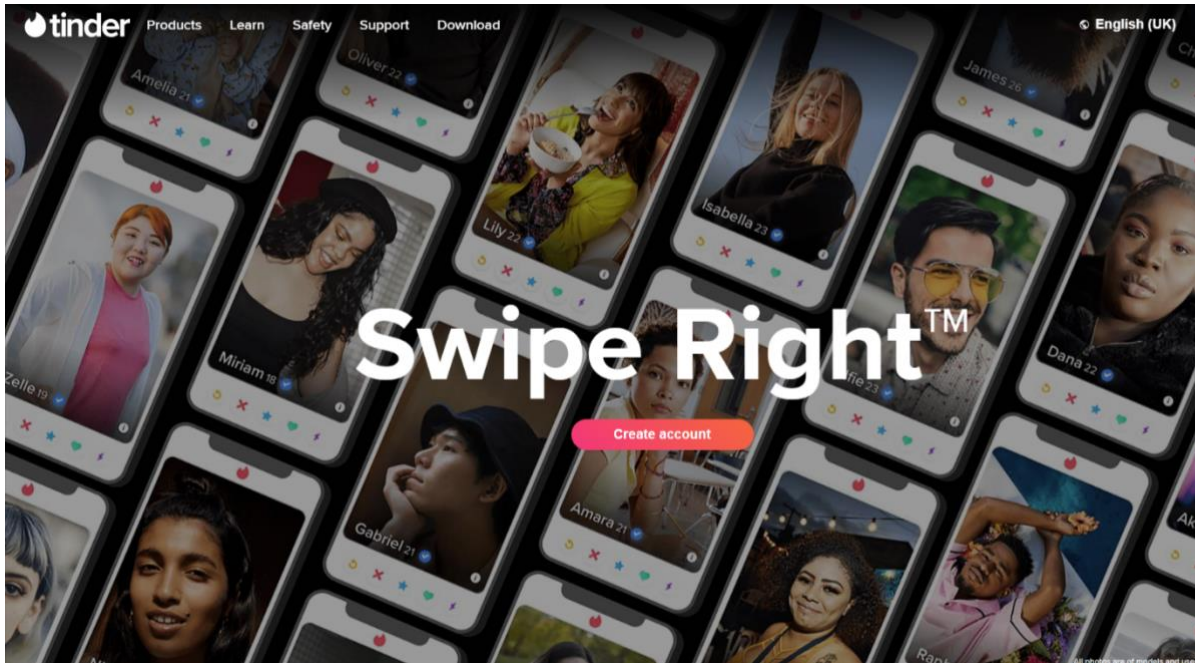


Figure 3: Tinder Website Homepage

As such, the distinct nature of the methods of communication on dating apps raises questions around self-presentation and self-disclosure such as what form does self-presentation and self-disclosure take in this environment? And how do users assess the presentation and disclosure of other users? (David and Cambre, 2016). The small body of research that has explored issues of self-presentation on dating apps has found that, in some ways, patterns of self-presentation among heterosexual users mimic that of online dating websites in that users still aspire to construct an ideal, yet authentic, profile (Ward, 2016; 2017). Moreover, forms of deception continue to remain small in magnitude (Markowitz and Hancock, 2018). Research coming from a more socio-psychological perspective has found that heterosexual users with higher self-esteem are less likely to engage in deceptive self-presentation (Ranzini and Lutz, 2017). Motivation of use has also been identified as a factor that influences users' self-presentation, with those with relational motives being found to engage in more authentic self-presentation (Ranzini and Lutz, 2017).

However, due to the distinct nature of dating app design, the strategies users utilise to construct an ideal yet authentic profile were different in some ways. Namely, heterosexual dating app users are said to rely less on the text-based features of dating apps, and rely more heavily on the visual elements of theirs, and others, dating app profile (Ward, 2017). This led some, largely media reports, to suggest that this means users have to put less effort into their profile (Marcus, 2016) and that self-presentation on dating apps is far more superficial.

2.7.5.2 *Locatability and Proximity*

Another distinctive feature of dating apps is the method by which users search and match with other users. Unlike online dating websites, where users typically complete a matchmaking questionnaire about their hobbies and interests, which is then used to select and present relevant profiles, dating apps filter what profiles are presented to users by age, sexual preference, and distance. Indeed, dating apps require users to allow their location data to be shared with the apps so that the Global Positioning System (GPS) can be utilised to present profiles of matches who are within users' set search radius. It is the responsibility of users then, to look and assess profiles and swipe left or right to indicate whether they would or would not like to match with. As such, as well as there being less cues on the profile itself, users are given more control over who they match with, which presents somewhat of a counterintuitive combination for users.

An element that warrants consideration, is whether and how filtering matches by location may increase the chances of unintentionally seeing people on the app who are known to users in 'real life', or seeing people that you match with, or don't match with, in real life. Again, these factors may increase chances of face-to-face interactions, and therefore the nature of self-presentation. This has been argued to potentially increase the onus for users to meet up in person, which, as has been discussed above, has been found to have a significant impact on the nature of self-presentation and self-disclosure (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs., 2006).

2.7.5.3 *Portability/ Mobility*

Unlike dating websites, mobile dating apps are not accessed via the web. They are an app that can be accessed via a smart phone or internet enabled portable device. This is also a significant development as mobile phones can be used anytime and anywhere. This introduces an element of portability, which has the potential to impact the nature of use, including the time, location and length of use. Recent research into dating apps, however, has found that dating apps have mobilised intimacy and allowed for dating app use to be deeply interwoven with everyday movements and practices (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2015) Additionally, Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) found there to be a social nature to dating app use, whereby users will use dating apps collectively with friends or take over their friends dating apps to swipe and message matches. For a short period of time, Tinder introduced a feature called Tinder Social, whereby users could create a group with their friends and interact with other groups on Tinder (Crook, 2016), suggesting that dating app use involves another form of portability. Portability in this instance refers to the portability between users and the movement away from dyadic use (Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2021). However, themes of portability and mobility have mostly

been considered from the perspective of MSM and for users of gay dating apps such as Grindr and on the ways it has impacted on the gay community (see Crooks 2013; Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbot, 2015; Race, 2015; Davis et al., 2016; Miles, 2017; Wu and Ward, 2018). As will be addressed in the Methodology chapter, the data collection tools utilised in this study were specifically chosen with the mobility of dating apps in mind and this research hopes to contribute in some ways to understanding how the mobility and mobility affects heterosexual dating practice.

2.8 Motivations

Another distinct feature of dating apps is their popularity. As addressed in the introduction, dating apps have exceeded the popularity of earlier forms of mediated dating by drastic amounts, with dating apps like Tinder having as many as 300 billion users worldwide. Another exceptional aspect of this popularity, is their unprecedented popularity amongst younger demographics. Indeed, the biggest group of users belongs to the 25-34 user demographic, followed closely with the 18-24 age group. This has led to many claims around the declining, even non-existent, stigma surrounding dating apps and online dating more generally (Anderson, Vogels and Turner, 2020). The popularity of dating apps, therefore, prompts the question, why are dating apps so popular when earlier forms of mediated dating were not and have long had a stigma associated with them and their users. Correspondingly, a small body of research has attempted to quantify and categorise people's motivations for using dating apps.

Timmermans and DeCaluwe (2017), developed the Tinder Motivation Scale (referred to as TMS henceforth). This was the product of four independent studies exploring the motives of Tinder users in Belgium and the United States. They found there to be as many as 13 motivations along the TMS. Motivations relating to entertainment and curiosity were found to be the strongest motives in two of the four studies, leading Timmermans and DeCaluwe (2017) to suggest that users are not exclusively looking for relational/sexual outcomes on Tinder, other motives included travel, friendship, self-validation. These findings are generally corroborated by other studies, which have also found there to be a diverse set of motivations for using dating apps, most of which do not necessarily have anything to do with sex or dating (see Sumter, Vandenbosch and Lightenberg, 2016).

This is interesting as earlier research into online dating websites did not explicitly address user motivations. Rather, user motivations were presumed to be, or treated as, more transparent, with most literature assuming that user motivations were to date and find a relationship. Given that motivations have been identified as impacting use and self-presentation strategies (Ranzini and

Lutz, 2017), the above research would also benefit from further qualitative research which unpacks these categories further.

Ward (2017) has offered some insight into this by finding that entertainment is a more socially acceptable motivation to use dating apps, suggesting that, contrary to recent claims, traces of stigma still attach themselves to dating apps. Consequently, this also calls into question the TMS. Indeed, is entertainment a core motivation, or is this the most acceptable motivation to report? Either way, this area of research would benefit from more in-depth qualitative research, such as this study, which explores user motivations, as well as how they may change over time. Much of the research on motivations has been conducted in the Netherlands and in the spirit of recognising that dating and intimacy norms may be different across space and cultures, this research has been conducted in the UK and offers some insight into the experience of dating apps from a small sample of people living in Britain.

Themes of self-presentation, self-disclosure and motivations make up most of the research into dating apps, and very little of this research has engaged critically with issues of gender and sexuality beyond comparative analysis around motivations and forms of deception. Nevertheless, a burgeoning body of research has emerged which has begun to explore the ways gender is constructed on dating apps and the intersections between dating app technology, risk and normative understandings and expectations around gender and sexuality. This research, therefore, aligns more closely with the aims and objectives of this research literature and is what the next section will explore.

2.9 Intersections between technology, gender and risk

Deception, uncertainty and authenticity were identified as significant themes in existing literature and intersected with users' impression management and self-disclosure strategies. Dating apps raise new possibilities for deception, not only because of the increased control that users have over their self-presentation, but also because of the integration of GPS technology which introduces privacy and personal safety risks (Duguay, 2017). Dating apps have attempted to mitigate these concerns in their design (Duguay, 2017). Notably, Tinder initially required users to log in with Facebook in order to set up an account (Duguay 2017). This has since changed, and users can now log in via email or phone number. However, the integration and importation of one's Facebook profile with one's dating app profile was argued to be part of Tinder's strategy to construct and establish authenticity (Duguay, 2017). Not only does this allow users to assess their social media presence more broadly, but it can also be used to see mutual friends and assess the authenticity of users on that basis (David and Cambre, 2016).

Framing authenticity in this way has been argued to be problematic as platforms like Facebook, and dating apps, have traditionally had heteronormative designs whereby gender and sexual identities must be categorised into male or female. Similarly, Macleod and McArthur (2019) found that dating app design, specifically gender identity categories, constructed static and binary constructions of gender. This led Dugay (2017: 36) to argue that ‘Tinder’s discovery settings enforce normative values that delineate what identities are identifiable, datable, and ultimately authentic’. In other words, only certain forms of authenticity can be validated in these spaces, and non-normative identities are limited from attaining claims of authenticity, ultimately resulting in the reinforcement of normative notions of gender and sexual identities..

Several dating apps have begun introducing various forms of verification methods. For instance, Bumble instructs users to take a selfie of them doing a certain pose, as a way of verifying that users match their profile pictures and are a real person, rather than a bot (see Figure 4).

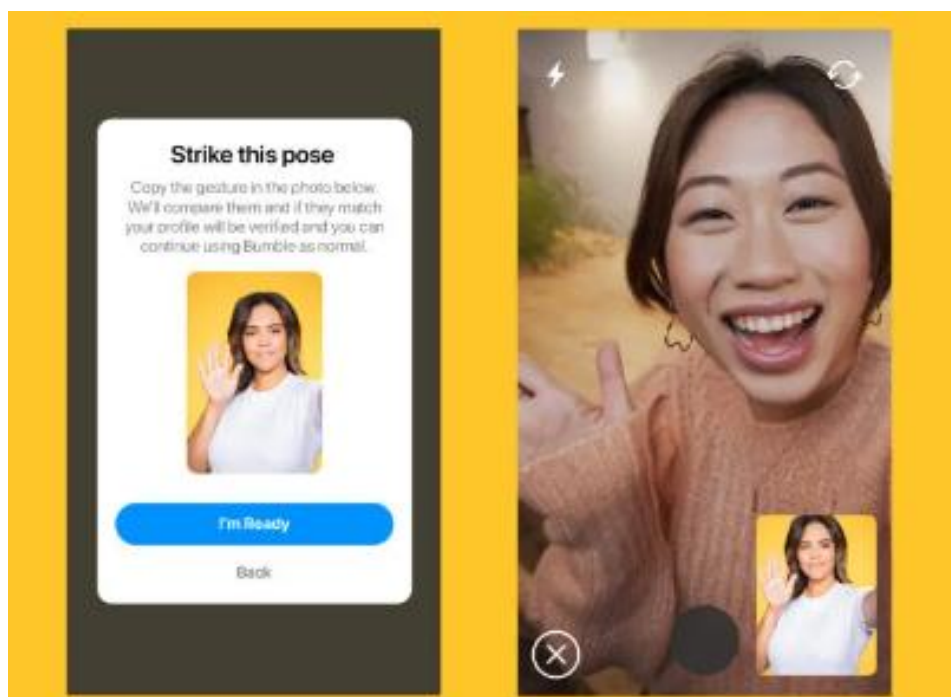


Figure 4: Bumble Photo Verification

Nevertheless, despite recent efforts to counteract the “oversights” in previous stages of dating app designs, the concerns raised by Duguay (2017) remain salient. Indeed, whilst users who identify as LGBTQ now in some cases are afforded the ability to choose a category that is reflective of their chosen identity, these newer verification methods that have been implemented ask users to disclose names, social media profiles and selfies.

Bumble, in particular, has received scholarly attention due to the apps “ladies ask first” design, which is ‘geared towards engineering social changes related to equality’ (Bivens and Hoque,

2018: 442). Claims such as these have important implications on the relationship between technological design and constructions of gender and sexuality. Some studies are critical of Bumble's claim 'to shift old-fashioned power dynamics, which is not reflected in practice (Young and Roberts, 2021:11). For example, Young and Roberts (2021) found that, in practice, women making the first move gave women more safety from online harassment as the design concept was more likely to filter out men who engaged in harassing behaviour. However, this was also accompanied with tensions between women's internalised gendered behaviours and expectations around how men should be the initiators in a dating context. Similarly, Pruchniewska (2020) found that women had a 'harm prevention mindset' when using Bumble, but that navigating Bumble with this mindset required a large amount of additional labour from women.

As such the above scholarship demonstrates that, despite these attempts to integrate authenticity, safety and equality into the design of dating apps, risk remains a significant concern for heterosexual women on dating apps¹⁸. This highlights that whilst designer intentions can be built into the design of a technology, the design alone cannot determine the ways that this is interpreted, negotiated and adopted by users. Rather, expectations and understandings relating to heterosexuality and gender have been shown to influence the ways risk is experienced by heterosexual users, with online sexual harassment and abuse disproportionately affecting women and women's dating app practices. This reinforces the relevance of the approach taken within this study and the choice to focus on users interpretation, meaning and negotiation of dating app practice and explore the social and relational processes surrounding dating app meaning and practice.

2.9.1 Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

As highlighted above, safety has been found to be a concern for heterosexual women using on dating apps. This is not unsurprising given that online spaces such as social networking sites (Mergarry, 2014), online gaming (Jane, 2016; Salter, 2018; Suzor et al., 2019), and now dating apps (see Hess and Flores, 2018; Gillett, 2018; Waling and Pym, 2019) have been identified as being 'conductive spaces' for the reproduction of old, and the manifestation of new, forms of violence against women (Kelly, 2015). The above section addressed how there exists a disparity between design intentions and user experience when it comes to managing safety on dating apps. This section will explore the burgeoning body of literature which has tried to understand

¹⁸ Risk has also been found to be a concern for LGBTQ groups. Here, I am referring to research into understandings of risk among LGBTQ groups that goes beyond the sexual/health-related risks around HIV prevention.

how dating apps 'have created new avenues for the conduct of established forms of abuse', as well as given rise to new and distinctive forms of violence against women (Gillett, 2018: 212). This literature is relevant to this study as it explores how heterosexual users experience and negotiate dating apps.

Effort has been placed into creating new literacies and terminologies which account for the ways violence against women manifests in online spaces (Mergarry, 2014; Powell and Henry, 2017; Henry and Powell, 2018; Jane, 2020). Given the rapid pace at which new technologies are emerging, definitions of violence against women online remains quite a contentious and confusing topic (Mergarry, 2014). There are numerous terms which have been used in recent scholarship to account for the range and nature of gendered and sexualised hostility, harassment and abuse online. Jane (2020) provides a useful summary of these. Some examples of which are 'gender-bile', gender-trolling', 'rapeglisch', technology facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) and 'cyber violence against women'. Most feminist scholars, however, agree that gender neutral terms such as 'trolling', 'flaming' and 'online harassment' alone are insufficient as they do not adequately address how the forms of violence which disproportionality affects women in various online spaces is often highly sexualised and gendered, in both its extent and impact (Henry and Powell, 2015; 2018; Jane, 2020).

The concept of TFSV, as devised by Henry and Powell (2015; 2017; 2018), is useful for conceptualising gendered violence online. It is a term that encompasses a broad set of abusive behaviours that are facilitated through digital technology, including online sexual harassment, gender- and -sexuality based harassment, cyber stalking and image-based sexual exploitation. (Henry and Powell, 2018). They also adopt a narrow understanding of sexual harassment as referring to 'uninvited sexual attention online' and distinguish between four different types of online sexual harassment: sexual solicitation, image-based harassment, gender-based hate speech and rape threats (Powell and Henry, 2017: 198).

A small, yet significant, body of research has been conducted which explores the gendered and sexual online harassment that is experienced by adult, predominantly straight, women on dating apps. Currently, the predominant discussions in this area have been discerned, not by speaking to users of the apps themselves, but rather, by analysing social media accounts that are increasingly becoming associated and interrelated with dating apps; public shaming sites such as Bye Felipe and Tinder Nightmares (see Shaw, 2016; Byron and Albury, 2018; Hess and Flores, 2018; Gillett, 2018). These sites invite users of dating apps to publicly share images and

screenshots of conversations/ interactions on dating apps which are considered rude, harassing and, in some cases, threatening or abusive.

Analysis of these sites converges in terms of the types and character of abuse that these sites illustrate women face and experience. The first being, what the literature describes as, rejection violence (Shaw, 2016). This is when a man sends a woman a message on the instant messenger feature of a dating app and when the woman does not reply (for whatever reason), the male match then responds and reacts by sending abusive and threatening behaviour. However, responding to men on dating apps has not been found to prevent women from being victims of harassment and abuse (Thompson, 2018). Indeed, these social media sites suggest that, for women, it is too common for the first and initial message to be a 'groan inducing' or 'crude and dirty' pick-up line' (Hess and Flores, 2018; Thompson, 2018).

The messages received by women commonly depict 'hyper-sexual declarations', 'objectification around consumption' (Hess and Flores, 2018), 'not hot enough discourses', and a 'missing discourse of consent' (Thompson, 2018). This is said 'to reveal a marketised logic in which a woman's "worth" in the online sexual marketplace is rooted in patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty and sexual propriety' (Thompson, 2018: 71). As such, far from being harmless, these forms of harassment and abuse have been characterised as 'Toxic Masculine Performances' (Hess and Flores, 2018) that reflect men's sense of 'sexual' and 'aggrieved' entitlement (Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018; Waling and Pym 2019; Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018). This is somewhat of a harsh illustration of the ways dating app technology and dating app practice intersects with cultures of gender and sexuality to find new ways of policing and silencing women's sexuality and reasserting masculine power and control (Thompson, 2018).

Another trend that has been identified is a form of image-based sexual violence: 'the ubiquitous dick pic' (Paasonen, Light and Jarrett, 2019; Waling and Pym, 2019). This is where women will receive an unsolicited image of a man's penis, either via the instant messenger feature of dating apps (although Tinder has restricted image sharing on the app), or via other social media platforms that matches exchange with one another (Paasonen, Light and Jarrett, 2019; Waling and Pym, 2019). Additionally, one could also consider the unsolicited and unwanted request or demand for sexual imagery, or 'a nude', from men to be considered part of this form of sexual violence.

Recent data from a national survey commissioned by Bumble in 2018 found that 1 in 3 women had received an unsolicited nude image at some point in their lives (The Buzz, 2022a). Equally, Pew Research Centre found that 57% of women aged 18-30 had received a sexually explicit

message or image they had not asked for on dating websites and dating apps. Whilst it is not confirmed what percentage of this accounts for sexually explicit images specifically, it still suggests that unsolicited ‘dick pics’ are a ubiquitous issue faced by many women on dating apps (Anderson, Vogela and Turner, 2020). It is surprising, then, that relatively little scholarly attention has been given to this issue (Vitis and Gilmore, 2017; Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018; Waling and Pym, 2019).

These public shaming sites have been described by some as examples of ‘feminist discursive activist sites’ (Shaw, 2016), ‘Feminist Digilantism’ (Jane, 2016), and ‘counter publics’ (Salter, 2013) because they highlight the prevalence of, respond to, and challenge the online harassment and abuse experiences by women on dating apps¹⁹. This is because their creation represents the aims of ‘transforming individual harm into a collective one’ and fuelling discursive political action (Fileborn, 2014: 44). Their creation is reflective of the fact that current legal intervention is unsatisfactory and dating app companies are failing to enforce the terms and conditions that set out appropriate behaviour on their apps effectively. It also points to the ways that women are collectively challenging the meanings of these abusive practices as a political action. Foucauldian inspired theories have been utilised to argue that the visibility and exposure these sites produce, holds disciplinary power (Shaw, 2016; Hess and Flores, 2018). These sites invite (mostly) women to collectively ‘laugh at, scorn, and ridicule’, as well as discuss, compare, and challenge, the dating app interactions that have been posted on these sites (Hess and Flores, 2018: 1086). Therefore, these sites have been highlighted as normative battlegrounds whereby appropriate and correct conduct is being negotiated.

Therefore, this literature reinforces how timely and appropriate the aims and objectives of this study are, as it highlights that relational and collective processes are involved in the norm making practices on dating apps. Despite this, the arguments outlined above warrant questioning and criticism. Indeed, I am somewhat critical of the power these sites have been suggested to have on challenging toxic masculine performances on dating apps and on achieving justice more broadly, primarily because ‘harassment is in the eye of the beholder’ (Fileborn, 2014:38). Recent research has demonstrated that a false dichotomy exists between ‘real’ and ‘online’ harms, whereby women were less likely to recognise harassment facilitated through and on technology as sexual violence against women (Henry and Powell, 2015).

¹⁹ These resemble sites such as ‘Hollaback’, which was an online space where women could share their experiences of, and seek justice against, the street harassment they experienced in everyday life (Fileborn, 2014). Or the #MENCALLMETHINGS and #METOO movements (Mergarry, 2014).

Moreover, whilst these sites offer researchers the opportunity ‘to focus on experiences that have largely escaped the critical gaze of researchers and the public’ (Gillet, 2018:214), their analysis is limited to what can be observed on these sites. Indeed, first-hand narratives from both straight women, but also straight men, are largely missing. This criticism is not intended to undermine or question the harsh reality that women do face and experience an un-relented and incomparable amount of abuse from men online, and that these everyday experiences of abuse should be made visible and problematised. Rather, the point being made is that more research is needed which actually speaks to, and gathers, women’s’ everyday experiences of harassment and abuse, in order to fully understand its real and felt affects. This is also needed so that research can go beyond assumptions and speculation as to why men engage in harassing and abusive behaviour on dating apps, and attempt to grasp men’s motivations, justifications and interpretations for their engagement²⁰. Without these accounts, research in this area risks promoting a monolithic understanding of men and their behaviour (Beasley, 2015; Haywood, 2018).

An exception to this is Gillet (2021), who explored straight women’s experiences of intimate intrusions on Tinder and the safety work that women strategically employed to mitigate these fears of violence. This research drew on Kelly’s (1987) continuum of violence to highlight a number of safety work practices such as analysing dating app profiles, social media stalking, carefully selecting a setting in which to meet with matches, as well as ceasing use altogether (Gillet, 2020). This research departs from the more socio-psychological analysis of risk addressed earlier in the chapter. Further research is needed which looks critically at how safety work is managed in relation to dating apps. This study hopes to expand on Gillet’s (2021) research by looking at the range of offline and online risks associated with dating apps from the perspective of users themselves. It will also build on this existing work by looking at the safety practices of heterosexual women dating apps users, in a UK context, as well as exploring the perspectives and experiences of men.

2.10 Aims & Objectives: filling the gaps

The empirical literature addressed throughout this chapter demonstrates the need for more research which explores the social processes through which heterosexual dating app users go about negotiating and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice. Existing research has suggested that self-presentation strategies are shaped by the norms of that

²⁰ Albeit it is worth acknowledging that finding a sample of men to openly admit and discuss their engagement in TFSV online in interview would be difficult.

(online) space (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Whilst earlier research has acknowledged this to be the case with online dating websites, a scarce amount of research has attempted to explicitly address how the norms of online dating use are agreed upon in the first place. Heterosexual users of dating apps who set their search criteria to the opposite gender are only likely to see profiles of the other gender. The expected dyadic use of dating apps between users of the opposite sex also raises questions around how users learn the rules and expectations of dating app use (Byron and Albury, 2018). For instance, how users learn norms surrounding choice of pictures, what to write, or how and when to message.

Research that has looked at the design of dating apps like Bumble is a good illustration of how the design of dating apps does not necessarily determine the expected use and norms of these devices. Rather, it suggests that, irrespective of the intentions of the design of dating apps, users adopt and negotiate the meaning and use of these device. If the design cannot account for the meaning and use of a technology, we must look elsewhere. This study has emerged out a need to explore the social processes that are involved in heterosexual users norm-making practices by focussing on the voices of users themselves and the ways they negotiate and construct the meanings and use of dating apps in their everyday social practice.

Some existing research has offered an insight into the social processes involved. Online dating website users have been found to take a dynamic approach to their profile and regularly adapt their profile based on responses from others profiles and observations they made during their time using these sites (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011). Ward (2017) also identified this to be the case with mobile dating, as users were found to adjust their profile in response to self-presentation strategies they witnessed whilst looking at profiles on the apps. Byron and Albury (2018) have also suggested that users develop personal rules and strategies via forms of social surveillance such as the public shaming sites mentioned above and through in-app interactions. Nevertheless, these studies have focussed on how the dyadic nature of dating app use makes norm-making a far more individualised process.

Nonetheless, the social nature of dating app use, as demonstrated by Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) and the existence of public shaming websites, raises interesting questions around whether collective use and processes exist and the ways they may impact on how users learn and agree on the norms, rules and expectations of dating app use. The ways that user experiences have been shown to be gendered also makes gender and sexuality a salient lens through which to explore the collective nature of dating app use and meaning, including the ways gender and sexual meaning and practice shape, and are shaped by, the use of dating apps.

One experience that has been found to be gendered is online sexual harassment on dating apps. However, it has been highlighted that a gap in the current scholarship focussing on TFSV on dating apps is women's everyday experiences of harassment and abuse, including women's safety management practices. This thesis hopes to contribute to understandings in these areas by exploring the range of offline and online risks associated with dating apps from the perspective of both male and female users.

There is also some debate as to the impact social change, including new dating technologies, are having on the intimate lives of heterosexual men and women. Dating apps are an interesting site in which to explore intimate life as themes of efficiency, equality, and commitment surround these apps with existing empirical research finding that these apps are perceived as casual, fun, dating tools (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017). This thesis, therefore, hopes to engage critically with how participants talk of their dating app use and how this speaks to current discussions on the state of intimacy in the modern age. In the following chapter I will go on to discuss the methodology that was utilised in order to achieve these aims.

3 Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I framed this research as a social constructionist account of gender, sexuality, and technology, which aims to explore the ways participants articulated understandings of themselves as dating app users and the meanings that they invested in their everyday, routinised, mundane use of dating apps. This includes a specific focus on one of the ways that this can reveal the ways that gender and sexual meanings are constructed alongside, and through the use of these devices, and vice versa. This chapter addresses how a qualitative methodology, drawing on semi-structured interviewing, alongside logbook style diaries, offers a methodological approach that is attentive to a social constructionist approach, as well as the aims of this research.

Some advocates of social constructionism argue that qualitative methods are the only appropriate way of seeing and interpreting the world through the eyes of their participants (Carter and Fuller, 2015). Indeed, the defining motive of qualitative research methods is that they are ‘directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories’ (Snape and Spencer, 2003:3). Qualitative interviews have been highlighted as being particularly suited to constructionist research on gender and sexuality and, I argue, technology (Wiederman, 2015:15). This affinity stems from their ability to access the meanings shared by a particular group, in this case dating app users, whilst also accounting for difference and the ways individuals and groups will articulate and interpret meaning in distinct ways (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This defining characteristic is significant for this research as it acknowledges that the meanings participants construct around gender, sexuality and technology are not fixed. Rather, they are located within a particular social and cultural context where physical and social objects, as well as situations, are defined based on the individual meanings participants ascribe to them. Moreover, these meanings are continuously reproduced, modified, subverted, and abandoned based on their interactions with others (Blumer, 1969).

3.2 Methodological Rationale

Qualitative interviewing encompasses a broad set of methodologies. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method chosen for this research. The primary characteristic that made semi-structured interviews an appropriate data collection tool, is their flexible,

exploratory, and evolving capacity, which are vital characteristics for meeting the aims and objectives of this research. Semi-structured interviews are celebrated for their ability to balance structure with allowing participants to contribute and have an active role in determining the themes and topics that are relevant to the issues under discussion (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This research is ultimately exploratory as qualitative research into dating apps is still relatively under-researched, especially when it comes to the ways that gender and sexuality are constructed on and through these devices, despite their growing popularity as an object of research. Therefore, it was integral that I adopted an interview structure that accommodated these exploratory aims.

Adopting a semi-structured design can allow a breadth of topics to be covered and it can also allow researchers to reach a level of depth and nuance on their research topic. The ways meaning is constructed are too complex to be grasped solely through the use of quantitative or closed questioning techniques. Rather, semi-structured interviews and the use of qualitative and probative questioning techniques allow researchers to gather thick, complex and nuanced descriptions of the meanings, perspectives and experiences of participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). It was the goal of this research to gather a rich data set that captures the complex, nuanced and contradictory meanings, experiences, and perspectives that participants constructed around dating apps and their dating app practice.

I am researching themes that could be considered private and sensitive in nature, such as dating and personal relationships. Participants may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or hesitant speaking and disclosing matters in their personal lives. Furthermore, initiating, seeking and forming romantic relationships can be an emotionally and physically painful experience. These concerns become even more of an issue for older adults, who may have experienced a breakdown in their relationships or lost a loved one. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews makes them especially appropriate for studying sensitive topics as they allow researchers to adopt a reflexive approach to interviewing by being prepared to change the structure and content of the questions as appropriate (Lee and Renzetti, 1993).

This research also drew on a method developed by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) called the diary, diary-interview method, (DDIM). It is worth mentioning that this method goes by several names. For example, it has also been referred to as the solicited diary (Jones and Woolley, 2015), participant diaries (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005), research diaries (Lewis, Sligo and Massey, 2005), and qualitative diaries (Fitt, 2018). Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) initially developed the DDIM to assist them during their ethnographic fieldwork: they wanted a way of

observing behaviour that was inaccessible solely from participant observation and when strong observer effects were likely (Latham, 2003). Since then, the DDIM has been used to assist in a wide variety of social investigations, most prominently within ethnographic research (see Burgess, 1981). More recent modifications of the DDIM within health Sciences (see Elliott, 1997; Kenten, 2010; Bartlett, 2012), disability research (see McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2019), research with young children (see Burke, 2005) and human geography (see Latham, 2003,2013; Middleton, 2010) have shown how the flexibility and adaptability of DDIM lends itself ‘not only with an ethnographic approach, but a participatory one as well’ (Bartlett, 2012: 1718). As I will explain below, in light of this, I endeavoured to make my methods ‘dance a little’ by modifying the DDIM to fit the aims and objectives of this research (Latham, 2003).

The rationale for utilising a combination of logbook diaries and semi-structured interviews was to integrate the mobility and embodied nature of dating app use within the research design (Hine, 2015). Previous research has shown that the increased portability and accessibility of computing systems and new social media has blurred the distinction between online and offline worlds, thereby making the practice of using social media a routine embodied practice that is largely unconscious and forgettable (Beer, 2008; Farman, 2013; Latham, 2013). According to some theorists, we have entered into a culture of pervasive computing where the technology of today is pervasive, not because of its visibility, but precisely because of its invisibility (Farman, 2013). Instead of buttons, windows, scroll bars, and icons, the computer systems we now interface with are easy and basic, requiring minimum or even no effort to use. Mobile dating apps are a perfect example of this. A simple swipe right or left with perhaps a few taps and clicks and you have a match and a potential date for the weekend. For this reason, Bolter and Grusin describe new technologies as ‘interfaceless interfaces’, which are becoming increasingly popular and pervasive precisely because of their invisibility (Bolter and Grusin in Farman, 2013:7).

Proponents of symbolic interactionism have also addressed how advancements in communication technology are redefining how interactions and shared meanings occur (Carter and Fuller, 2015). Indeed, if meanings emerge from interactions with others and are continually renegotiated through everyday, routinised, or habitual interactions with others, it is important to consider the ways participants assign meaning to dating apps and their use may be impacted by the very platform by which they are used (Blumer, 1969). Primarily, how the issues I have raised above surrounding the invisibility of use and routine may affect the ways participants are able to talk about their use and meaning-making practices.

The concern, then, with relying solely on retrospective ‘talk-based’ methods, such as semi-structured interviews, is that participants might not necessarily remember their everyday mundane and routine use of dating apps. As Latham (2013:101) quite simply puts it ‘it is unreasonable to expect people to reliably remember the frequency and ordering of activities that they usually carry out routinely and without a great deal of thought’. Rather, participants may be more likely to recollect the more memorable instances of their use, the best and worst parts of their dating app use, which is problematic given that this research is concerned with exploring everyday meanings and practices. Therefore, by simply asking participants to actively take notice and keep a log of the when, where, how, and why of their dating app use over a short period of time, the hope was that completing the diary would make visible to the respondents their app usage in their everyday lives (Kenten, 2010). Fitt (2018) refers to this reflective process as ‘noticings’ whereby participants become more aware of their actions, so much so that they can discuss them more comprehensively during interviews. This argument is reinforced by Elliot (1997) who claims that participant diaries encourage participants to reflect on actions, practices, and feelings in a way that makes participants more likely to be just as prepared for the interview as the researcher.

It could be said that knowing that you are attending an interview on the topic of dating apps might encourage participants to reflect on their use of dating apps, which puts into question the relevance and value of the diary method. I will go on to demonstrate below how the log book diaries enabled reflexive conversations concerning participants dating app use which was invaluable to the research. However, another way in which log book diary methods were intended to complement semi-structured interviews, was to help develop and build rapport with participants.

Similarly, other methodological approaches such as ‘walk-through methods’ (Light, Burgess, and Duguay, 2018; Ferris and Duguay, 2020) and ‘Media Go Along methods’ (Jorgensen, 2016) have been recently developed in an effort to answer the call for more digitally and mobility centred research that is needed for research into devices like dating apps. User-led walkthroughs and media go-along methods are similar in that both involve observing research participants using their devices and asking them to give verbal and visual tours of their (dating) apps and use (Ferris and Duguay, 2020). Such approaches are said to offer a more user-focussed insight into the symbolic, cultural, and social interpretations in relation to apps and their use.

As such, it is pertinent to address why diaries were chosen as the accompanying data collection strategy instead of the methods outlined above. Ignoring the fact that COVID restrictions would have likely inhibited this possibility anyhow, and whilst I can appreciate the methodological

benefits of drawing on such methods for dating app research, the main reason such methods were avoided in this case centred around ethical concerns around un-consenting third-party dating app users. As the proponents of these methods acknowledge themselves, it would be difficult to negotiate and obtain consent from those other users who are unaware that their data and profiles were being shown and used for research purposes. Equally, whilst I will address later that a ‘reactionary effect’ was not wholly avoided with the use of diaries, it is questionable as to whether such walkthroughs or go-along methods that involve my presence would have prompted participants to edit, alter, or decontextualise their thoughts and use of these apps from their typical everyday interactions with the app.

Furthermore, elements of these methodological approaches were present in interviews. Participants often got their apps up during interviews to show me their profile, a functional aspect of the devices that they were talking about and their thoughts on them. Indeed, the very fact that participants felt willing and comfortable to do this during interviews was an interesting analytic element in itself.

3.3 Recruitment and Sample

My anticipated sample was shaped by the aims and objectives of this research. However, the restrictions placed on recruitment and data collection in light of lockdown measures, meant that the actual sample was also loosely shaped by practicalities of access and time constraints.

3.3.1 Target Sample

3.3.1.1 Heterosexuality

This project aimed to speak to the meanings, experiences, and practices of heterosexual dating app users and heterosexual dating app use and so it was appropriate to recruit and speak to individuals who identified as heterosexual. As such, I framed my recruitment around those who felt they could speak to heterosexual dating app use, meaning and experiences.

Given the theoretical complexity and diverse expression given to constructions of sexuality and gender, both on and offline, this research concentrated primarily on current users and former users of sites promoting contact between heterosexual men and women. Tinder was one of the first dating apps to cater to heterosexual dating, as most dating apps before this (e.g., Grindr) catered primarily to men seeking sex with men (see Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbot, 2015; Brubaker, Annany and Crawford, 2016; Corriero and Tong, 2016). More recently, however, identifying an app that caters solely to heterosexual use is rather complicated because most

dating apps, including Tinder, have now (and rightly so!) updated their ‘I am’ and ‘searching for’ settings to include more than simply ‘male or female’. For instance, Tinder announced in their 2016 ‘everyone is welcome’ campaign and corresponding hashtag #alltypesallswipes that users in the UK, Canada, and the US will have up to 40 gender categories to choose to promote inclusivity for transgender and gender-nonconforming groups (O’Malley, 2016). As such, I did not place strict restrictions to recruit people using specific dating apps. Only that it must be a dating app used on one’s phone, but this did not discount those who used multiple forms of mediated dating platforms.

The dating app companies used by participants in this study were very diverse and largely age dependent. Tinder is the most popularly used dating app across the UK and so it was unsurprising that a few participants, mostly belonging to a younger age cohort, solely used Tinder (Iqbal, 2022). Most participants, however, used multiple dating apps at once such as Bumble, Tinder, and Hinge. In some cases, participants used niche dating apps catered to their interests such as Happn, Graze, Veggly, and Muddy Boots (see Appendix A). Older users, however, were more likely to use a mixture of dating apps and dating websites (both websites now in app form and web-based versions) like Match and E-Harmony.

3.3.1.2 Current and Former-Users

I aimed to recruit current, as well as former users of dating apps. Existing research has illustrated that the binary of user and non-user is not as simple as those who use technology and those who do not, there are varying levels of adoption and use of a technology (Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford, 2016). What’s more, the category of user or non-user is not fixed but is often cyclical in nature, all of which makes the process of defining a user or non-user of dating apps rather complicated, especially when it comes to recruitment (Wyatt, 2003; Baumer et al., 2013; Brubaker et al., 2016). In recognition of this, as well as the practicalities of ensuring that I spoke to people who could help me answer my research questions, I did not place strict boundaries around what I classed as a ‘current user’. However, I did advertise that I wanted to speak to current users who had used dating apps for 3 months or longer. This length of time was deemed appropriate as it would be enough time for users to develop some perspective on using dating apps and gather a set of experiences of using the apps, which could ensure that they would have something to say about dating apps in interviews. By speaking to those who had very recently begun using dating apps I ran the risk of gathering a surface-level understanding of dating apps and their use and failing to grasp the mundane, everyday aspects of their use.

Moreover, in recognition of the fact that current users are not the only group that can ascribe and shape the meaning and use of a technology (Wyatt, 2003), I decided to include non-users of dating apps within my sample²¹. More specifically, former users of dating apps. Wyatt (2003) identified four categories of non-use: resisters (never used), rejectors (those who stopped using a technology), excluded (denied access), and expelled (stopped using involuntarily). For the purposes of this study, former users were identified as those who had previously used dating apps and had, for some reason, decided to stop using them, either temporarily or permanently. This group were included in the sample because they could speak to how users interact with an app to negotiate and reshape its meaning. Alternatively, those who had never used dating apps or had been expelled from them could potentially not reveal much beyond assumptions around their meaning and use which are not based on their own interactions with these devices, but perhaps that which they have inferred from popular discourse²². Given that the purpose of this study was to speak to those who could speak to the meaning and use of dating apps and the ways one can interact with dating apps, complete non-users were excluded from recruitment. Including these categories of non-users would have potentially run the risk of gathering assumptions around dating apps, rather than experiences and perspectives formed via interaction with dating apps.

3.3.1.3 Age

Plummer (2010:170) highlights the significance of age as a social category when thinking about the sexual and the social and how ‘age for human animals is never simply a biological process, and every human culture also experiences age stratification, generating social expectations and roles that are geared to specific ages’ (2010:170). Plummer’s (1995; 2010) insights are relevant to the current discussion as they show how age can shape the kinds of stories people tell, but perhaps more importantly the stories that we cannot tell. One concern I had was whether cultural and symbolic systems that surround mobile dating apps, and the sexual politics surrounding aging, make dating apps a story that older generations cannot tell; perhaps because they are unaware of it, but also because of the stigma, cultural expectations, and roles around aging and

²¹ There is an active discussion in science and technology studies about how non-users matter. Namely, STS have previously been criticised for their tendency to focus too heavily on the user and neglect the important insights of non-users (Winner, 1993). Namely, if we only speak to ‘relevant’ social groups (i.e., users) we risk only painting half a picture of technology as non-users offer an equally valuable insight into the construction, meaning, and use of a technology (Wyatt, 2003). This debate, however, is not salient enough to this study to warrant a full exploration here.

²² As has been addressed earlier in the thesis, the issue with relying solely on popular discourse is that they have a tendency to emphasise either utopian or dystopian ideals around the impact of technologies on social life that can reinforce deterministic understandings of technology. Moreover, this does not always reflect the everyday realities and nuances of their use and impact, which this project sought to explore.

sexuality. This may be why less research has focussed on users belonging to older cohorts, with most research focussing on those between the ages of 18-35 (see Sumter, Vandenbosch and, Ligtenberg, 2016; Newett, Churchill and Robards, 2018). However, there is evidence that suggests that use amongst older populations is increasing steadily (Tankovska, 2021)²³ and so by only speaking to certain age groups there is a risk that stereotypes around ‘sexless’ older people will be reinforced and only a partial picture gathered as to the meanings and experiences of dating apps. As is addressed in Chapter 4, dating apps were perceived to be a ‘younger person’ tool and so by speaking to users outside of the typical 18-35 age category I was able to gather a diverse range of perspectives and experiences of using dating apps.

Upon reflection of the above considerations, it was decided that the criteria for my sample were to be men and women, above the age of 18, who self-identified as heterosexual and were either current or former users of dating apps. Within this, however, I had more specific aims of actively recruiting a sufficient number of participants across different age cohorts to be able to gather a diverse set of experiences and perspectives. I also wanted to avoid having an unbalanced proportion of men and women as it was important to be able to gather rich data about both heterosexual men’s and women’s dating app use and experiences. All of which were a consideration when shaping my recruitment strategy, which I go on to discuss below.

3.3.2 Recruitment Strategy

It was predicted that recruiting individuals to take part in this study would pose difficulties on several levels. Firstly, this research could be considered sensitive as it is asking participants to discuss facets of their intimate lives, which is a topic that is typically considered be in the realm of the personal and private. Sensitive topics such as this can make recruitment difficult as people may be more hesitant to discuss these topics openly with someone they do not know (Lee and Renzetti, 1990). Age may also be a significant intersecting factor here as expectations surrounding aging sexualities may contribute to further feelings of hesitancy (Plummer, 2010; Carpenter and DeLamater, 2012). This, coupled with the pragmatic issue of there being less people in older age cohorts who use dating apps, lead me to anticipate that older cohorts may be harder to reach than younger dating app users. I accounted for these anticipated difficulties in my recruitment strategy by implementing phased and targeted recruitment. Albeit the realities of the research process meant that this process was far from linear, which I will address below.

²³ This is further evidenced by the fact that a number of ‘senior’ specific dating apps have been released, catering solely to older users such as Lumen, Silver singles etc.

3.3.2.1 Social Media

Hamilton and Bowers (2006:825) advise that when attempting to recruit online ‘the researcher needs to select the most appropriate Internet site to place an announcement of the study so as to optimize the chance of recruiting individuals interested in that specific research question’. I, therefore, began recruitment by creating a dedicated Facebook and Twitter account where I posted regular calls for participants in stages. Alongside Facebook being one of the most popular social media sites in the world, Facebook has been deemed a feasible site for recruitment because several dating apps prompt users to register via Facebook and for their Facebook data to be integrated into their dating app profile (Duguay, 2017). This meant that current and past users of dating apps may be accessible via Facebook. I posted recruitment calls in relevant public Facebook groups (e.g., dating groups and university groups). I always ensured that I sought appropriate permission from the group administrators.

Twitter was a helpful recruitment source as the use of relevant hashtags and through those sharing my posts, my posts could be visible to a large number of people. During the recruitment process, I stumbled across numerous Twitter accounts that had been created solely for the purpose of posting about their dating app experiences. Whilst this was an unexpected finding, this knowledge retrospectively illustrated the appropriateness of Twitter as a site to recruit for dating app research, especially, as I will show, for accessing older age cohorts.

To aid the recruitment of different age cohorts, I created posters and did calls for participants for specific ages. My fear was that by saying I wanted to speak to anyone over the age of 18, older cohorts may assume this did not include them. However, by asking for participants in specific age cohorts, I hoped that this may act as further encouragement for those cohorts to come forward as their views would seem valuable. In total, and across six months, I was able to recruit 26 respondents via social media.

3.3.2.2 Dating Apps

The next phase was to recruit participants via the source themselves: dating apps. Previous studies looking at dating apps have utilised this method successfully to recruit a diverse sample (Blackwell, Birmholtz, and Abbott, 2015; Corriero and Tong, 2016; Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Ward, 2017). Drawing on insights from these studies, I created profiles on several popular dating apps. Bonner-Thompson (2017:1616) cautioned future researchers that ‘it is important for researchers using apps for recruitment to fully consider the potential readings of their bodies and their parts in profile pictures. Despite attempting to engage in ‘boundary-making’ [...] the

sexualised nature of this online space often shaped the way my body was understood'. In keeping with this advice, I decided to not include a picture of myself on the research profile. Instead, my profile picture consisted of a Newcastle University Logo with 'Participants Wanted' written in big letters. This also served to help ensure that I did not mislead other users and they would know the true intentions of the profile as a dedicated research account, rather than a dating profile, which was also a significant distinction to make. This was also rearticulated in the bio where I explicitly stated the intentions of the profile and the research more broadly.

I encountered several problems during this phase of recruitment. The first was that new authenticity measures implemented on dating apps meant that several apps required me to verify my profile by including a picture of my face in my profile picture. Furthermore, despite being very explicit about the purpose of the profile, I almost instantly received messages of a sexualised nature containing sexually explicit requests, which led me to question whether it was appropriate, for my own sense of safety, to continue using this method of recruitment. However, before I was able to make this decision, I woke up the day after setting up these profiles to find that all of them had been blocked by the companies themselves. I was not able to recruit any respondents via this method. This setback coincided with the UK entering its first lockdown, which led me to place more emphasis back onto social media recruitment and convenience sampling via my personal contacts.

3.3.2.3 Personal Contacts and acquaintances

I was initially hesitant to draw on my own personal contacts during the recruitment process because interviewing friends and acquaintances can impact the interview both positively and negatively (Cotterill, 1992; Oakley, 2016). Indeed, whilst knowing the person you are interviewing may do a lot of the rapport building work for you, it can also result in a number of matters to be assumed and a lot of the richness and depth being lost from the interview. However, when it became apparent after 6 months that my social media posts were no longer yielding much attention, and in an effort to mitigate any further setbacks to my project than had already occurred as a result of COVID, I posted my recruitment call on my personal social media accounts and asked friends and acquaintances to share my posts. I was able to recruit a further 3 participants this way, none of whom I had interacted with at any great length personally.

Initial contact across all three of these recruitment settings was initiated by respondents themselves either via the comments sections, instant messenger, or via the email I had included

in the recruitment posters I shared. The recruitment process was far more than simply a process of gathering participants to take part in the study, it was also where the rapport-building process and development of the ‘conversational partner’ relationship began (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). During initial contact with prospective participants, I always offered to have a phone call or email conversation to go over the nature of the research, what would be involved, how the data I collect may be used, as well as a bit of information about myself.

3.3.3 *Actual Sample*

I utilised the above recruitment methods until I was satisfied that the main themes that had been identified throughout the interview process had been addressed with sufficient richness and depth. This amounted to 29 participants, which allowed me to gather a rich, diverse, and complex set of perspectives and experiences. As is addressed in Chapter 8, there were some topics that were touched on in interviews but were not discussed in enough depth to sufficiently address them within the main themes identified or develop them as further themes within this thesis. Moreover, there were differences between my target and my actual sample (see Table 1) and areas where my sample could have been improved if practicalities would have allowed. As demonstrated in table 2, the sample was heavily weighted to women (20/29) and younger cohorts, with most participants falling into the 25-34 age category. Market research suggest that in the UK men outnumber women on Tinder by almost nine to one (Ogury, 2018). As such, the higher proportion of women in this study may have stemmed from my positionality as a female researcher, which may have negatively influenced the appeal from men for taking part in this research as they may have been more hesitant to speak about intimate matters such as dating to a woman. It was far more difficult to recruit older participants. Far from undermining the research, however, this served to reinforce the significance of age as an analytic category when looking at dating app research and sexuality research more broadly, which I address in Chapter 4. The 25-34 cohort make up the biggest percentage of dating app users, followed by the 18-24 age cohort, so my sample is representative of the dating app user base (McClain and Gelles-Watnick, 2023). To continue to explore these topics and to address these gaps in my sample would require time and resources to conduct several more interviews that were not available to me due to the restraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it was decided that it was appropriate to stop the data collection process at this stage and work with the rich data I had collected thus far.

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Recruitment Method	Location of Participant	Location of Interview	Interviewed in lockdown (Y/N)
1	Alesha	F	18	Facebook	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
2	Mary	F	21	Facebook	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
3	Harry	M	21	Facebook	Newcastle	In person	N
4	Annabelle	F	21	Facebook	North East	Zoom	Y
5	Roxy	F	23	Acquaintance	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
6	Jeff	M	24	Acquaintance	Newcastle	In person	N
7	Betty	F	24	Facebook	North East	In person	N
8	Lydia	F	24	Facebook	Newcastle	In Person	N
9	Samantha	F	25	Facebook	London	Zoom	Y
10	Alan	M	25	Facebook	Liverpool	Zoom	N
11	Rose	F	26	Facebook	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
12	Stephanie	F	27	Facebook	NorthWest	Zoom	Y
13	Jennifer	F	27	Facebook	Newcastle	In person	N
14	Aidan	M	27	Facebook	Newcastle	In person	N
15	Megan	F	27	Facebook	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
16	Rebekka	F	28	Facebook	London	Zoom	Y
17	Lynn	F	28	Facebook	Newcastle	In person	N
18	Sally	F	28	Facebook	North East	Zoom	Y
19	Maisy	F	Early 30's	Facebook	Dover	Zoom	Y
20	Darcy	F	36	Twitter	North East	Zoom	Y
21	Amelia	F	38	Acquaintance	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
22	Georgia	F	41	Twitter	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
23	Eleanor	F	42	Twitter	Scotland	Zoom	N
24	Grace	F	42	Twitter	Newcastle	Zoom	Y

25	Ben	M	44	Twitter	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
26	George	M	44	Twitter	Newcastle	Zoom	Y
27	Sean	M	52	Twitter	Greater London	Zoom	N
28	Peter	M	55	Twitter	North East	Zoom	Y
29	Justin	M	55+	Twitter	Cumbria	Zoom	Y

Table 1: Full breakdown of sample

Gender	Number
Male	9
Female	20

Table 2: Breakdown of sample by gender

3.4 Diary, Diary-Interview (DDIM)

This was a mixed-methods investigation consisting of logbook diaries followed by semi-structured interviews. Prior to attending the interview, participants were asked to fill in a logbook style electronic diary for 1 week prior to the interview, where they were asked what dating app(s) they used that day, the time(s) of day their use occurred, how long their use was, where they used their apps and how they accessed their dating apps (see Appendix B). The logbooks were emailed to participants each day. Emailing the diary each day to participants meant that I was interacting with them each day leading up to the interview. Arguably, this helped enable a rapport-building relationship. Furthermore, I entered into the interview with a snapshot of what dating app(s) each participant used, and their dating app use that previous week, which acted as a nice ice breaker to begin the subsequent interview.

In practice, the diaries fulfilled their methodological purpose (see pp.53-5). Many participants described how completing the diary had left them surprised by the nature of their use, either because they had assumed that they used their dating apps more or less than they did. For instance, one participant was surprised to find that they used their dating apps in the morning, which was something they had not realised until completing the diary. Other respondents found completing the diary allowed them to identify how their use had changed over time. Indeed, a few respondents commented on how their diaries would have looked different if they had completed them a few months earlier.

As such, these reflections, and others of the kind, led to nuanced discussions and findings around participants' routinised use of dating apps that turned out to be fundamental to the analytical themes explored throughout this thesis. If participants had not completed the logbook diary, it is questionable whether they would have been as attuned to the nuances of their use and whether these key themes would have been identified.

Methodological literature warns that diary methods can become a burden for participants as they can be time-consuming. Research diaries are also not in people's typical daily routine (Elliott, 1997; Jones and Woolley, 2015), albeit daily logbook style trackers such as My Fitness Pal are increasingly common, and this raises other concerns around the 'first-day effect' (Corti, 1993). This is where participants begin the week very dedicated and thorough in their diary-keeping, but as the week goes on they forget, put less effort, and in some cases simply withdraw from the process completely, thus impeding the richness of the data (Jones and Woolley, 2015). It was based on these considerations that the decision to make the diary electronic and have a semi-structured, 'event based', logbook style structure.

Moreover, following advice from existing methodological literature (see Corti, 1993; Elliott, 1997; Jones and Woolley, 2015; Filep et al., 2018) the diary was made as convenient for participants to completed as possible. The diaries were accessed electronically so that they could be filled in on the go and from different technological platforms. The hope was that this would also negate or limit the number of cases of 'the first-day effect', which is where engagement with the diary slowly dwindles as time goes on (Sheble and Wildemuth, 2009; Kenten, 2010; Filep et al., 2018). As such, a link to fill in the electronic logbook was emailed to participants each day. This ultimately acted as a reminder for participants to fill in their diaries, but it also ensured that the rapport building relationship was maintained. Email was chosen because it was seen as the most inclusive method of communication across different age cohorts.

Upon reflection, both the participant burden and the first day effect were largely avoided in this study. When asked how they found filling in the diary, most participants expressed that the diary was 'easy' and did not take much time to fill in. One participant even went as far as to say that it was 'fun' and another admitted that he copied my diary questions and continued to log his use for an extra week just out of curiosity. Moreover, every participant successfully completed the diary for 7 days, with only a handful of occasions where the diary was completed the following day.

Lee (1993) highlights that another potential drawback of diary methods is that they can cause a ‘reactivity effect’ whereby people become aware of their behaviour and because of this decide to change it. Although this was a rare occurrence, it is worth addressing the minor examples where the reactivity effect appeared to have occurred for participants. For instance, Betty realised how much she used her dating app to procrastinate and so made a concerted effort to reduce this. The opposite effect seemed to happen to Lydia, who was made aware of a dating app she had never heard of before (Badoo) as a result of filling in the diary and seeing the list of dating app names, which she then downloaded and proceeded to use throughout the length of the diary. Therefore, the diary also influenced and amended Lydia’s typical dating app use.

3.5 Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

7 out of 29 interviews were conducted in person²⁴ (see Table 1). The majority of these interviews were conducted in a booked room on Newcastle University Campus. Interviews lasted anywhere between 40 minutes and 2 hours. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how participants constructed dating apps and their dating app use by gathering a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the symbolic, cultural and social interpretations, meanings and perspectives participants used to make sense of their experiences (Punch, 2013). The main themes addressed during interviews related to participants’ first knowledge and/or interaction with dating apps, their understanding of normative dating app meaning and use, the risks and benefits associated with, and experienced, with dating apps, and the broader impact of dating apps on dating and intimacy more generally.

I constructed and employed an interview guide to assist with the substantive section of the interviews (see Appendix C). The interview guide consisted of a series of columns outlining the themes I wished to discuss during the interviews and an accompanying row outlining the core areas I wished to explore within that theme. A review of the extant literature, as well as a consideration for my research questions, helped develop the interview guide. I chose to devise a set of themes, rather than a list of questions, because this was more in keeping with the exploratory and flexible nature of the research aims and the responsive interview model. Indeed, having themes was more appropriate as it allowed me to customise questions for each respondent based on what each participant could and wanted to speak about (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). No respondent will have the same experience or view about dating apps and it was important to accommodate for and capture this nuance by having a flexible questioning

²⁴ I use the term ‘in person’ to refer to interviews that were conducted face-to-face in the physical presence of one another as Zoom Interviews, which I address later in the chapter, were still considered face-to-face, albeit in a virtual capacity.

approach and style. There was also a third column that I used during interviews to bullet point areas and topics raised by participants about that theme or new themes that emerged from participants' responses.

I purposefully arranged a rehearsal interview with a mutual friend of mine who was a dating app user in order to test the utility of my first iteration of the interview guide. No further interviews were arranged until I had transcribed and reflected on, in conjunction with my supervisors, the quality of the questions and themes addressed. This led to a further 2 iterations of my interview guide before I commenced with further interviews. Nevertheless, as will be addressed further later in the chapter, I treated the interview guide as a 'living' or 'rolling' document that I adapted throughout the data collection process and in response to the needs of the study itself. I did not set out to address every single theme in every interview and some themes were explored more in some interviews than others. Also, I often diverged from the guide in response to the topics and issues that were raised by the participants' themselves throughout the interviews, which is a known benefit of semi-structured interviews (Ritchie, 2003; Lune and Berg, 2017).

Open-ended questions and probative questions were asked to provide participants the opportunity to tell their stories and to encourage their own voices to come through the data (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). I actively listened to what was said, as well as what was not said or any inconsistencies in participants' responses, as what is not said is often equally relevant and valuable to obtaining a rich and in-depth understanding of phenomena (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). I then drew on these observations to ask probative follow-up questions to encourage participants to expand or clarify their accounts in a way that ensured a level of depth and breadth to the data collected.

In line with the responsive interview model, before I concluded the interview, I always offered participants the opportunity to raise anything that they felt should have been spoken about, that had not, or any areas they felt we did not touch on in enough detail. As well as continuing to address any further topics with the participant themselves, I also considered the emergent topics raised by participants at this point and used this information to inform future interviews and the interview guide.

The above methodological approaches and procedures were employed throughout the data collection process. However, the platform and location of semi-structured interviews altered early into the data collection process because of the COVID pandemic²⁵. What follows is a

²⁵ A more detailed discussion of in person interviews takes place in the ethics section located later in the chapter.

discussion of the adaptations that were made to how semi-structured interviews were conducted, as well as a discussion of the impact this had on the data collection process.

3.5.1 Zoom Interviews

As the logbook diaries were electronic, lockdown restrictions had little effect on disseminating and retrieving the diaries, although the contents of the log books and participants' dating app use were influenced. I had always planned for both in-person and Zoom interviews. The reason to include Zoom interviews from the offset, prior to any awareness of COVID-19, was to aid recruitment by enabling a cost-effective and easier way of recruiting participants beyond the geographical limits of the North East. Nevertheless, lockdown restrictions in the Spring/Summer of 2020 limited the remainder of data collection to Zoom interviews only. Until that point 3 interviews, out of 10, had taken place via Zoom. This was significant as existing methodological literature suggests that using video conferencing software such as Zoom to conduct interviews can change the nature of the interview in ways that the interviewer must consider (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Some key challenges and considerations identified and accounted for in this study related to issues around rapport, ethics, confidentiality (which I discuss later in the chapter), and absenteeism/democracy (Lo Iacono et al., 2006; Deaking and Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2016).

3.5.1.1 Building Rapport

Given that in-person semi-structured interviews are somewhat of a 'gold standard' in qualitative research, a concern was that online synchronous interviews via videoconferencing software would impact the researcher's ability to build an intimate 'research partnership' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and gather the in-depth responses which are integral to qualitative research, as well as the aims and objectives of this research (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). This concern stemmed from the fact that a lot of visual cues are lost in online interviews as it is usually only the head and shoulders which you can see and technical issues like time lags and freezes might mean that the visual cues that are possible are missed (Lo Iacono et al., 2006). This might create a 'disembodied interview' where responses become cold and mechanical and function more like a structured interview. In accordance with existing research, what might be considered 'bad rapport', or a 'disembodied interview' seemed to be just as likely to occur with face-to-face interviews than it did in Zoom interviews I conducted (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Overall, Zoom interviews elicited rich in-depth data and were a complementary data collection tool, albeit there was some trial and error involved.

For example, during one of the first Zoom interviews I conducted the software froze completely, which led the participant to end the call. In this case, they did ring me back using a different technological platform and we were able to continue the interview. However, with future interviews, I ensured that I arranged a protocol with the participant for understanding whether they were actively dropping out of the interview or if connection issues had caused the dropout and, if this was the case, how to arrange to re-enter and continue the interview. Moreover, whilst silences have been highlighted as quite valuable during face-to-face interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) the time lags that sometimes occurred during Zoom interviews were sometimes misinterpreted. There were times when I interrupted participants because I thought they had stopped talking when in fact it was a time lag. Unfortunately, on a small number of occasions, this led participants to forget the point they were making, which could have been a valuable addition to the discussion. Similarly, from some participants' perspectives, my purposeful pauses were misinterpreted as the software freezing, which disrupted the flow of the conversation.

3.5.1.2 Democracy and Absenteeism

Seitz (2016) highlights the importance of thinking about your sample when using Zoom Interviews as a data collection tool. Familiarity and comfortability with internet technologies and software might differ by age, with older adults perhaps seen as less likely to be tech-savvy and familiar with videoconferencing software. This would be problematic given that one of the aims of this research was to speak to dating app users across different age cohorts. Nevertheless, the link between older age and technophobia is often an ageist assumption and it was also appropriate to assume that those who are using dating apps, despite their age, would have some familiarity and comfortability with using new software, which proved to be the case. Similarly, it is important to note that comfortability and familiarity with videoconferencing software grew rapidly during the lockdown as it became integral to how many families and friends communicated (Sherman, 2020).

Zoom interviews also rely on having access to technology such as a phone or laptop, which may not be possible for everyone, especially those with less financial resources, which may have been heightened during lockdown as a result of job losses and furlough pay rates. Nevertheless, Zoom requires no sign-up or subscription fees and can be used on mobile phones, which most households have access to in the UK.

3.5.1.3 Flexibility

As addressed earlier in the chapter, one rationale for utilising semi-structured interviews was the flexibility they afford. However, this flexibility was also advantageous for addressing the change and complexity posed by COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions on the nature of dating and intimacy in the UK. I was conducting research during the early stages of a pandemic on a scale that had never been experienced in my lifetime or that of the majority of the participants that took part in this research. It was unclear if, or how, the pandemic would influence the nature of the data I would collect as well as the meanings, practices, and perspectives of participants in relation to their dating app use. Rubin and Rubin (2005:12) emphasise that ‘an interview is a window on a time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time’. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to respond to and address the pandemic during interviews, as well as explore and adapt to emerging issues raised by participants about how the pandemic had influenced their relationship and experiences with dating apps.

3.6 Framework Analysis

A framework analysis approach that draws on the analytic hierarchy outlined originally by Ritchie and Spencer in the 1980s (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) was applied to analyse the qualitative data gathered from interviews and to help develop a set of relevant themes identified within the data set. Spencer, Ritchie, and O’Connor (2003:213) describe this analytical structure as:

...a form of conceptual scaffolding and refer to it as the analytic hierarchy. The hierarchy is made up of a series of ‘viewing’ platforms, each of which involves different analytical tasks, enabling the researcher to gain an overview and make sense of the data.

It is therefore quite a systematic approach to analysing qualitative data as it sets out 5 interconnected stages, or ‘viewing platforms’, that guide the researcher from initial data management, developing descriptive accounts, and then through to developing explanatory accounts (Spencer et al., 2013). They advise, however, that these stages are not meant to be treated as a linear step-by-step process and instead ask their readers to envision these platforms connected like a ladder that researchers can move between iteratively.

Framework analysis was deemed an appropriate qualitative analytic method for epistemological and practical reasons. Although the framework analysis approach is not necessarily tied to a specific epistemological approach or position (Gale et al., 2013), it is congruent with the

constructionist stance adopted in this study and the aims and objectives of this project more generally. This research was exploratory and the various stages of the analytical hierarchy allow researchers to balance depth and breadth by developing both descriptive accounts that focus on emergent themes in the data as well as developing explanatory accounts that allow broader levels of abstraction to be made. Framework analysis encourages researchers, regardless of whether they aim to make descriptive and/or theoretical levels of abstraction, to stay close and true to the raw data and participants' own language (Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor, 2003). Given that the primary focus of this research was to capture the myriad of interpretations, meanings, practices, and perspectives of dating app users, it was important that my analysis took an inductive approach and remained grounded in the raw data.

On a practical note, the majority of methodological texts on qualitative thematic analysis can be very generic and the actual steps on how to physically undertake thematic analysis is invisible in empirical studies. Consequently, qualitative data has been described as 'an attractive nuisance' (Miles, 1979), perhaps especially for a novice researcher such as myself. However, the framework analysis hierarchy sets out a very useful step-by-step guide on how to conduct qualitative analysis that can be helpful for student researchers, although, as already addressed, these steps should not, and were not, treated as a mechanical linear process. What follows is a discussion of how I applied framework analysis, including an account of the messy, iterative, and overwhelming nature of the analysis process.

3.6.1 Phase 1: Data Management and Familiarisation

The first stage of the analysis began with familiarising myself with the data (Spencer et al., 2013). Spencer et al., (2013) do not provide a specific method for conducting the initial familiarisation with the data, however, I treated analysis as an ongoing process throughout the data collection process (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 13). I organised my interview schedule so that I could transcribe and examine each interview immediately after it was conducted and before the next interview took place. This allowed me to simultaneously immerse myself in the data and assess the appropriateness of my interview guide, including my skills as an interviewer, to help inform future interviews.

As previously mentioned, I purposefully transcribed all of the interviews I conducted myself, as this is known to help familiarise oneself with one's data and be in keeping with the qualitative tradition more generally (Crabtree, 1999). However, when I had completed, transcribed, and examined 10 interviews individually, I conducted a preliminary analysis of the data collected thus far as a whole. This was intended to help identify initial themes arising from the data, that

were both expected and also unexpected, to help inform the remainder of the interviews. Nevertheless, this stage also coincided with the introduction of lockdown measures in light of COVID-19, where it was necessary to take time to assess and adapt my data collection strategy in line with new ethical standards and the limitations placed on my ability to conduct in-person interviews going forward. This preliminary analysis was not as rigorous as the formal analysis process that was conducted at the completion of all 29 interviews. It consisted of reading each interview and identifying areas of interest that were recurrent across the data set that were relevant to my research questions and framing them within a theme. The themes identified during this initial stage were, self-esteem, local sexualities, generational sexualities, and effort, which remained very pertinent to my analysis but look somewhat different from the finalised themes discussed later in the thesis. This preliminary analysis was an essential step in ‘getting to know’ my data and was useful for understanding how COVID may have impacted my data and whether it was necessary to analyse the data collected after lockdown differently, something which I touch on later in the chapter.

Having completed and transcribed all 29 interviews, I once again familiarised myself with the data by reading and listening to audio recordings of the interviews numerous times. I then went about identifying and reviewing themes. This involved reading each transcript and making initial notes of any minor or substantive attitudes, behaviours, views, practices, and emerging concepts. At this stage, I did not try and attempt any level of abstraction and instead created codes based on the language participants used themselves (Spencer et al., 2013). It was not until I had a rough idea of all the areas of interest and felt comfortable with my data, that I made a more rigorous attempt to identify main categories and develop a ‘manageable index’ (Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor, 2003; Spencer et al., 2013). This involved identifying links between the areas of interest or codes I had identified and grouping them in hierarchal categories and subcategories to make a thematic framework (Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor, 2003; Spencer et al., 2013). This allowed me to get a sense of the depth and breadth of each theme.

I then systematically applied the index I had created to each transcript. This process was quite ‘messy’ and the process of applying labels highlighted some adjustments and refinements needed to be made to the initial index. Some categories were merged as they were intrinsically linked, and others were removed altogether as they were deemed as areas that were perhaps too sparse to address with any confidence in this project but areas in which future research could explore.

When I felt confident that the index I had created and applied to the transcripts was as refined as it could be (at this stage), I worked on sorting data into themes through the use of a Thematic

Matrix (see Figure 5). This involves ‘summarising the key points of each piece of data – retaining its context and the language in which it was expressed – and placing it in the thematic matrix’ (Ritchie, Spencer, and O’Connor, 2010: 231). I used Word to create a matrix where each subtheme was given a column and each participant had a separate row. I then worked by theme and read through each transcript and populated each subtheme with what data was relevant to each sub-theme from each transcript. The data I entered was a balance of direct quotes from participants and summaries of what had been said, or a mixture of the two (Spencer et al., 2013). In some cases, I also included some analytical or interpretive observations. For each entry, I noted the corresponding page reference and line number(s) of where this was found in the transcripts, as well as made notes on the context of the quotes so as not to disembodify the quotes from the context and risk miss-interpretations later on in the process.

Once I had ‘completed’²⁶ the matrix, I then went about creating a thematic chart, which is where you summarise each piece of data into a more manageable format (Ritchie, Spencer and O’Connor, 2003). I entered these summaries alongside the indexed data by adding a blank column at the end of the thematic chart and took care not to duplicate what was in the transcript whilst also ensuring that the richness and context of the data was not lost in how I summarised the data (see Figure 6).

This was an extremely time-consuming process, however, by the time this first stage of the process was (presumed)²⁷ over, I undoubtedly felt incredibly familiar with my data and confident as to the richness of the data I had collected.

²⁶ I have put ‘completed’ in inverted commas because, as addressed, framework analysis is not a mechanical or linear process and it was the case that I ran back and forth between these different analytical processes and stages, which I will go on to discuss.

²⁷ As I will address shortly, this was not the end of stage 1.

SAFETY/RISK	1.1 - 'Inherent risks' of using dating apps / frustrations	1.2. Victims and Perpetrators	1.3. Responsibility	1.4. Safety Blanket	1.5. Impact
<p>No. 1, Alan Male, 24, Ex-user Straight, Newcastle</p>	<p>Russian Bots [p.4] Alan is very conscious of the risks women face in dating settings such as unwanted attention, but also the specific risks on dating apps such as creepy unsolicited sexually explicit messages and harassment [p.5; 6;7;9;10; 19] 'But if I was being honest I would be like yeah you're going to get a cesspool of creepy men, if you're a woman' [p.7]— when I asked Alan what he would tell someone who was thinking of starting dating apps, the advice he offered was gendered due to the different experiences he feels men and women experience regarding the risk. This highlights the severity of the experiences of creepiness women face. He did not start off with basic advice on how it works, but how they would experience it.</p>	<p>'I just don't want to add to the sort of creepiness that it feels like the average woman will experience anyway' [p.6] – Alan was very conscious about the creepy things women experience in their lives and put effort into not contributing to these or 'being that guy'. Alan mentioned the various ways he has learned and become conscious of how women experience 'creepy' behaviour from men such as Facebook, Reddit and friends who share their stories and screenshots of such behaviour. [p.6-7]. For Alan, who perceived himself as having a low success rate on Tinder in terms of matches and meet ups, sees being creepy on dating apps as too risky. It would have ruined his already low chances [p.7]. Alan characterises the kind of person (man) he would expect to be engaging in this kind of behaviour such as the 'nice guy' or 'the chad'. This brings masculinities into the mix and brings nuance to understanding men's views of men who engage in this kind of behaviour [p.8].</p>	<p>Alan does highlight that he has taken responsibility to first of all 'not be that guy' who is creepy to women but also that he has taken it upon himself to intervene when he has seen such behaviour in clubs or in public [p. 6]</p>	<p>'Tinder just does all that. Like it's specifically designed for other people to like meet up that way...it felt like I wasn't annoying anyone or like creeping anyone out, which was always like a bit nicer I guess in that sense [p.4] – For Alan, the fact that tinder is a dating app makes him feel like he can't be a creep by approaching a girl. It is a safety blanket for being rejected but also from being that 'creepy' person who gives women attention they don't want, which is something Alan associated with hook-up culture in clubs etc. Being on the tech means assumed consent? 'I was a creep on Tinder someone would just un-match me and it was just like ok shit whatever. It feels kind of bad but I'm not putting them in a position where I'm like physically there robbing up against them and they're trying to get me to leave and I'm not getting the hint or whatever. It's very easy to take the hint when someone just un-matches you or whatever' [p.5] – The experience of creepiness is different online, easier to get out of it. Are the risks as serious online?</p>	
	<p>'I went on female... on my female friends Tinder accounts and would send sexually explicit messages to their matches just as a joke and like, you know, most of the time they knew. So, they clearly even like to an extent had an idea that the average female would not be talking like that, if that makes sense. They were like 'oh yeah your friend is clearly on your Tinder account'. Whereas if I was on a male account sending flirts, they would probably assume they're just a creepy guy, if that makes sense' [p.9/10] – This is a very interesting experience that Alan describes and potentially highlights how appropriate gender scripts and expectations play a part in shaping who is the perp and who is the victim but also people's perceptions of</p>				

Figure 5: Thematic Matrix

SAFETY/RISK	1.1 - 'Inherent risks' of using dating apps / frustrations	1.2. Victims and Perpetrators	1.3. Responsibility	1.4. Safety Blanket	1.5. Impact	Thematic Summary
<p>No. 1, Alan Male, 24, Ex-user Straight, Newcastle</p>	<p>Russian Bots [p.4] Alan is very conscious of the risks women face in dating settings such as unwanted attention, but also the specific risks on dating apps such as creepy unsolicited sexually explicit messages and harassment [p.5; 6;7;9;10; 19] 1.1.2. 'But if I was being honest, I would be like yeah you're going to get a cesspool of creepy men. If you're a woman [p.7] - when I asked Alan what he would tell someone who was thinking of starting dating apps, the advice he offered was gendered due to the different experiences he feels men and women experience regarding risk. This highlights the severity of the experiences of creepiness women face. He did not start off with basic advice on how it works, but how they would experience it.</p>	<p>I just don't want to add to the sort of creepiness that it feels like the average woman will experience anyway' [p.6] - Alan was very conscious about the creepy things women experience in their lives and put effort into not contributing to these or 'being that guy'. Alan mentioned the various ways he has learned and become conscious of how women experience 'creepy' behaviour from men such as Facebook, Reddit and friends who share their stories and screenshots of such behaviour. [p.6-7]. For Alan, who perceived himself as having a low success rate on Tinder in terms of matches and meet ups, sees being creepy on dating apps as too risky. It would have ruined his already low chances [p.7]. Alan characterises the kind of person (man) he would expect to be engaging in this kind of behaviour such as the 'nice guy' or 'the chad'. This brings masculinities into the mix and brings nuance to understanding men's views of men who engage in this kind of behaviour [p.8]. 'I went on female... on my female friends Tinder accounts and would send sexually explicit messages to their matches just as a joke and like, you know, most of the time they knew. So, they clearly even like to an extent had an idea that the average female would not be talking like that, if that makes sense. They were like 'oh yeah your friend is clearly on your Tinder account'. Whereas if I was on a male's account sending filthy, they would probably assume they're just a creepy guy, if that makes sense' [p.9/10] - This is a very</p>	<p>Alan does highlight that he has taken responsibility to first of all 'not be that guy' who is creepy to women but also that he has taken it upon himself to intervene when he has seen such behaviour in clubs or in public [p. 6]</p>	<p>Tinder just does all that. Like it's specifically designed for other people to like meet up that way...it felt like I wasn't annoying anyone or like creeping anyone out, which was always like a bit more I guess in that sense [p.4] - For Alan, the fact that Tinder is a dating app makes him feel like he can't be a creep by approaching a girl. It is a safety blanket for being rejected but also from being that 'creepy' person who gives women attention they don't want, which is something Alan associated with hook-up culture in clubs etc. Being on the tech means assumed consent? 'I was a creep on Tinder someone would just un-match me and it was just like ok and whatever. It feels kind of bad but I'm not putting them in a position where I'm like physically there robbing up against them and they're trying to get me to leave and I'm not getting the hint or whatever. It's very easy to take the hint when someone just un-matches you or whatever' [p.5]. - The experience of creepiness is different online, easier to get out of it. Are the risks as serious online?</p>		<p>Risks relating to sexual harassment and abuse are a 'woman's problem' Masculinities and Femininity influences expectations and likelihood of engaging in TFSV. Women's presence on dating apps implies assumed willingness and consent TFSV is not as bad as VAWG in person.</p>

Figure 6: Thematic Chart

3.6.2 *Phase 2: Descriptive Accounts*

The next stage of the analysis process involved moving beyond data management to developing descriptive accounts and interpreting the data more generally. The aim of this stage of the analysis was to understand the range of experiences, meanings, interpretations, perceptions, and practices that participants discussed in relation to dating apps. It also aimed to help understand whether and why there were any associative links or differences within and across the data set, and the significance of these similarities and differences more broadly. Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor (2003) offer a brief suggestion as to what they believe can be helpful for undertaking this process. This includes applying detection, categorisation, classification, and then typologies to the charted data. The outcome of these processes are then suggested to be added to the matrix in new columns.

However, I began by printing off my matrix and using different coloured highlighters to label parts of the data that appeared to relate to the same phenomenon. I then grouped these categories together by creating a mind map, where I created different bubbles for the different aspects of the experiences and meanings that participants expressed in relation to that issue. This allowed me to not only visualise the range within a category, but also draw associative links between the different mind maps when certain areas overlapped across one or multiple maps (see Figures 7 and 8). In these instances, I asked myself whether the categories themselves needed to change or whether the ways in which they linked were analytically significant. I then found it useful to write down on pen and paper my interpretations of what I had found at a more conceptual level. This was a very iterative and messy process and I often found myself moving between the mind map, writing, taking time to simply think about what I had in front of me, and then adjusting the categories I had created into broader more abstract headings.

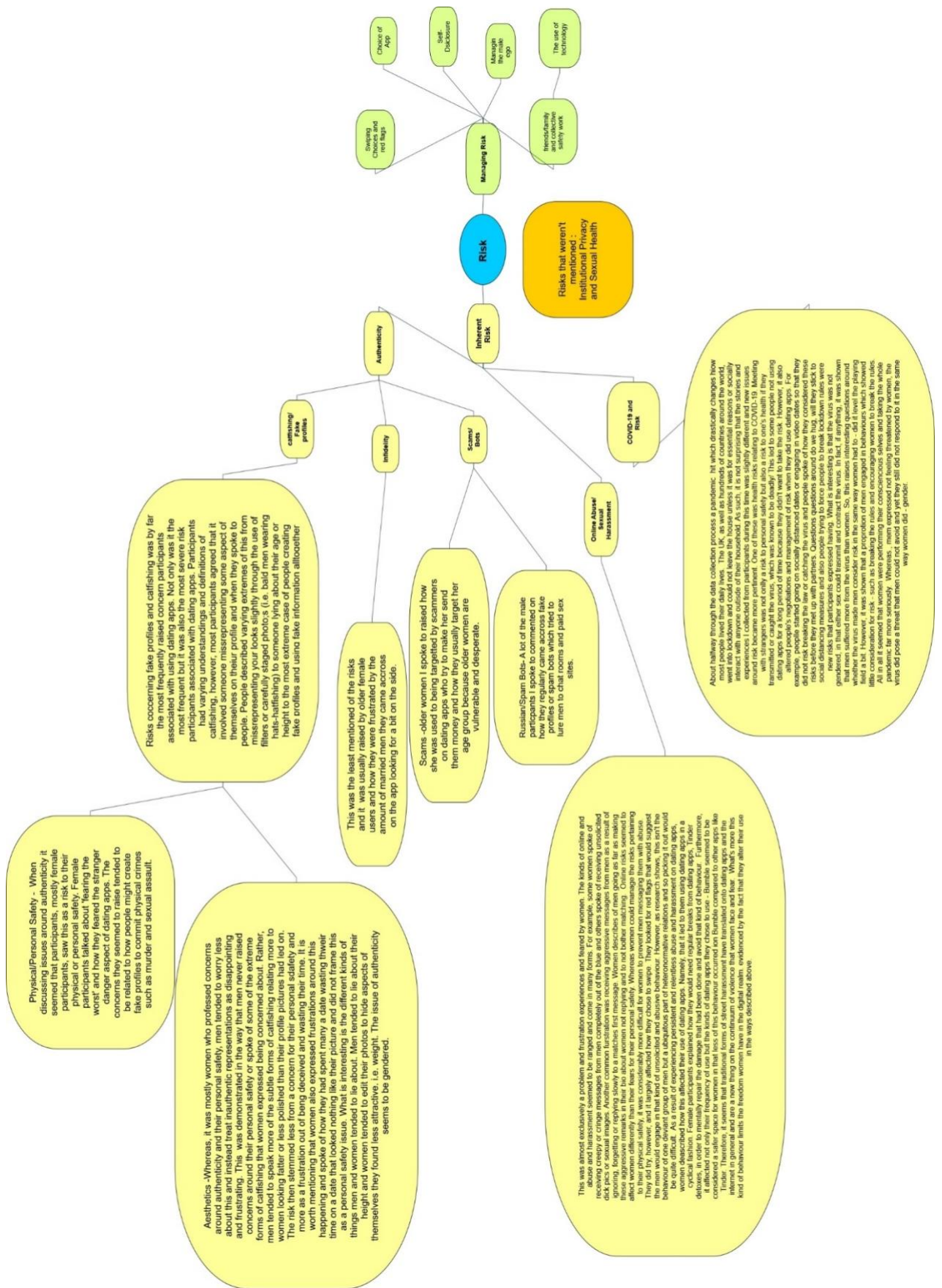


Figure 7: Mind Map Analysis A

RISKS OF PLAYING THE TINDER GAME

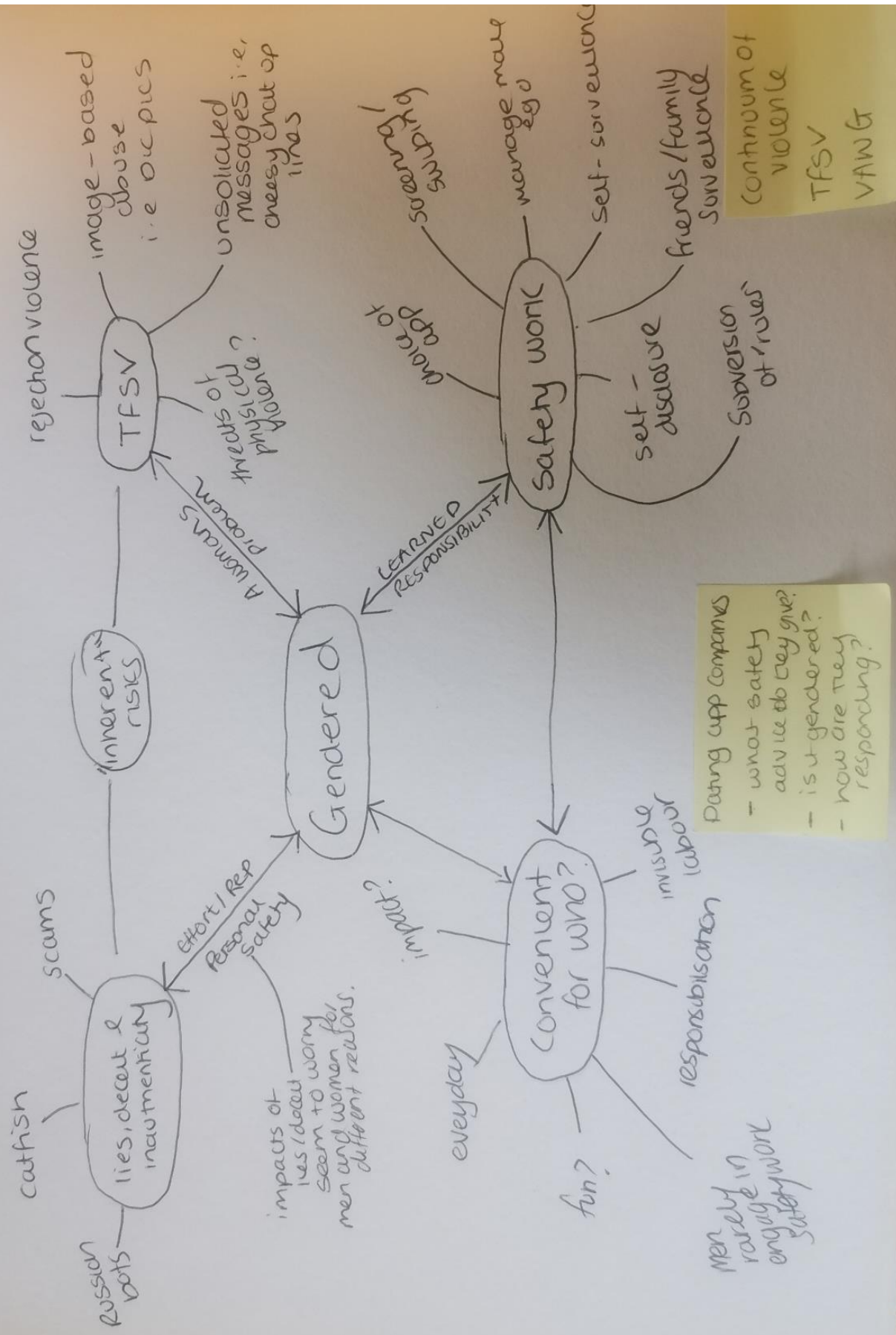


Figure 8 : Mind Map Analysis B

3.6.3 Phase 3: Explanatory Accounts

I took a bottom up approach in the way that I developed explanatory accounts. I began with the kinds of explanations that participants had given themselves (i.e., what dating apps were for?). However, I also noticed that gender and age appeared to be significant in shaping particular views and experiences and so I also related, explained, and compared my findings using other relevant empirical literature and theoretical frameworks (i.e., gender often intersected with age to shape how dating apps should/were used). There were some cases where explanatory accounts were missing from participants' own accounts and where I made inferences based on looking across the picture that my data had produced. With these descriptive accounts and the beginnings of my own explanatory accounts I then reconciled them against extant theory to see where they confirmed or challenged theories of gender and sexuality and STS.

3.6.4 What about COVID?

I did not handle the data collected before and during lockdown differently in the sense that I applied the same codes, and input the data into the same thematic matrix and chart. This was because, whilst the pandemic did alter the ways in which participants spoke about dating apps and their use, upon reflection this did not necessarily serve to raise new themes altogether. Instead, this served to further reinforce, expand, and diversify the themes that had already been identified. However, throughout analysis and the write-up process, I did take special care to ensure that I knew what time period my interview data related to so that I could ensure that I was interpreting the data in the correct context and not 'pushing the data'.

3.6.5 Writing up

White, Woodfield, and Ritchie (2003) emphasise that the writing process is not separate from the analysis process, it enables the researcher to continue their 'journey of interpretation'. On one hand, writing about my data, or sometimes the fact that I could not write about my data, encouraged me to take a step back and continue to explore my data. Nevertheless, it was also the case that the writing process allowed me to reflect, reassess and interrogate my findings further.

3.7 Positionality

I am a white, heterosexual, woman and I have been an on and off user of dating apps for a few years now. Prior to conducting this research study, I completed an MA where my dissertation project looked at the construction of gender equality on Bumble. My experiences as a

heterosexual dating app user and researching Bumble ultimately furthered my interest in conducting qualitative research to learn more about the experiences of heterosexual dating app users. I entered into this research project with the hope of developing an understanding of the ways in which heterosexual dating app users experience and negotiate intimacy in the culture of digital dating. Nevertheless, as I designed this project and planned interviews with participants, in which I would seek to engage them in discussions about their experiences and perceptions of dating apps, I was cognisant that my positionality as a white, heterosexual 26-year-old woman may influence recruitment as well as the topics, conversations, and responses from participants (Bourke, 2014). What follows is a reflection on the ways my positionality may have affected the research process, both positively and negatively, and the steps I took to create a space that was conducive to making all participants feel comfortable to share their thoughts and experiences.

3.7.1 Interviewing Women

I expected that being a woman who has used dating apps would aid me in connecting well and building rapport with female participants who were near to me in age because we might share gendered understandings and experiences which may make them feel more at ease during the interview (Oakley, 1981;2016). This was largely the case, highlighted by the fact that it was generally far easier to get in-depth and detailed conversations flowing with female respondents and for female participants to make remarks to the effect of “you know what I mean?” or “as a fellow woman, you’ll understand”. However, existing research stresses how sharing similar gender socialisation and critical life experiences can also be ethically problematic. Namely, Duncombe and Jessop (2012) highlight how developing inauthentic or ‘fake’ research friendships to encourage rapport, trust, and disclosure raises ethical dilemmas as it muddies the boundaries between informed consent and coercion. As such, I ensured that I managed the interviews I had with female participants in a way that ensured I was developing a ‘conversational partner relationship’ and not leaning into ‘fake friendship’ territory. For instance, when there were cases, as described above, where female participants stated ‘you know what I mean?’, I politely asked them to confirm what they meant as not to presume that we had the same interpretation or understanding and maintain that professional boundary.

Feminist scholarship also emphasises that being a woman is not enough and how gender intersects with ethnicity, age, class as well as other factors, to shape power relations and hierarchies (Riessman, 1987; Skeggs, 1995; Phoenix, 2013). White women (and men) were overrepresented in the sample, with only one female participant identifying as mixed race. This

may mean that the stories, perspectives, and themes raised are predominantly gathered are largely missing racialised perspectives and an understanding of how gender intersects with and through other social categories such as race (Richardson, 2015).

I did, however, interview women who were both younger and older than me. On one hand, interviewing those who are older may balance the interviewer-interviewee power relationship as older groups are seen societally as holding superiority and wisdom, especially when it comes to matters of intimacy. However, I was also concerned that this may be counteracted by the sexual stigma surrounding aging sexualities (see Plummer, 2010; Carpenter and Delamater, 2012), which may make older users less likely to participate in the research in the first place and also make older women less comfortable talking about sensitive matters such as dating and intimacy during interviews.

During interviews, age differences were not ignored and several participants grouped me as a member of the 'younger' groups to which they compared their use and experiences to. In fact, a number of older participants engaged in what could be called reverse ageism (Simpson, 2014) whereby a number of assumptions were made about the sexual promiscuity of myself and other younger dating app users, to which I did not react or challenge as I did not want to close off discussions or rapport.

3.7.2 *Interviewing Men*

In everyday life, men and women enact gendered identities that they deem appropriate depending on factors such as where they are and who they are with. The interview setting is no different and cross-gender dynamics can shape the interview in different ways than it might for same-sex interviews (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001; Pini, 2005). Consequently, as a heterosexual woman, I had to contemplate what it might mean to probe and examine the experiences of straight men. Pini (2005: 204) asserts that when reflecting on cross-gender interviews, researchers must consider 'who is asking whom about what and where'. This research explores topics such as dating and intimacy more broadly, which are topics that have been found to make heterosexual men engage in more pronounced gender identity work during interviews (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). Some examples of this which have been raised in existing methodological literature include sexual hustling (Gurney, 1985; Green et al., 1993; Pini, 2005), power imbalances caused by men taking control of the interview (Smart, 1984; Horn, 1997; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011) and sexism and vulnerability (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). I was exploring dating apps, which have been argued to be a space where constructions of gender and heterosexuality are pertinent and where there exist both subtle and explicit

disparities in men's and women's use and experiences of using these apps (Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Gillett, 2018; MacLeod and McArthur, 2019). It is against this background that displays of masculinity throughout the data collection and analysis process need to be viewed.

Throughout the course of interviews with male participants in this study, a variety of masculinities were enacted. There were some minor incidents where a small number of male participants spoke of women in a derogatory or sexist manner. For instance, one male inferred that a lot of women on dating apps were overweight and had bad taste and tattoos. However, for the most part, it felt as though my position as a woman generally encouraged male participants to edit and limit their language and how they spoke of certain topics. A number of male participants, sometimes at several points during our interview, would make statements like '*It sounds terrible but...*' or '*This sounds pretty bad but...*' and then usually proceed to talk about experiences or thoughts they had about women and their actions on dating apps. This communicated to me that they were perhaps worried that I may get offended by what they were saying. It is debatable as to whether these precursors would have been deemed necessary if they were interviewed by a man. In such instances, I maintained professionalism and did not react in a way that would either show judgment or agreement in the hope that it would simultaneously reassure male participants that they could speak candidly, whilst also hoping to avoid reinforcing the opinions that male participants expressed (Arendell, 1997; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011).

There was also a tendency for male participants to minimise their negative experiences on dating apps by making statements such as '*women have it far worse off than men*' or '*I'm not sure I'd be on a dating app if I was a woman*'. This was usually followed by a discussion of their awareness of the harassment and abuse that women typically experience on dating apps. I do not doubt that male participants were genuinely sympathetic to the experiences of women, however, it is also important to consider whether male participants would have made these caveats to their own experiences if they were speaking with a male interviewer.

This being said, I do not wish to suggest that the discussions I had with the men I interviewed were not revealing or that my positionality as a woman only hindered the interviews. As will be discussed in chapter 5, several of the men that I interviewed opened up about feelings of rejection that they experienced throughout the course of their dating app use. Specifically, they described how difficult they had found it was to get matches and responses from women on dating apps. Heterosexual masculine performances are often associated with being competent when it comes to engaging with women, especially when in the presence of other heterosexual

men (Grazian, 2007). Subsequently, it is possible that male participants would not have been as comfortable revealing information about their perceived lack of success engaging with women on dating apps to a male interviewer as they may have worried that such remarks may put forms of masculinity at risk. It is arguable that being a female interviewer made it more likely for male participants to disclose such vulnerabilities because my position posed less of a risk in this sense.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for all stages of the fieldwork, as described above, was granted by Newcastle University prior to beginning data collection. Several ethical considerations were highlighted and considered at various stages of the research process. Firstly, recruiting participants online raised concerns about my physical safety as a researcher. A risk when recruiting online, via any platform, is that the anonymity that these sites afford means I can be approached by ‘fake profiles’ or by those whose intentions might not necessarily be to take part in the research²⁸ (Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008; Toma and Hancock, 2010). Furthermore, the barrier that communicating via a screen affords, is the potential for unsolicited behaviour²⁹ (see Mergarry, 2014; Hess and Flores, 2018; Jane 2016). As such, I had to consider that I could be approached by people with little interest in the research itself, and who may harass, waste my time, or who may cause me harm. To manage these risks, I always attempted to arrange a telephone call with participants before the interview. This allowed me to get an, albeit initial and potentially artificial, sense as to the intentions of the participant³⁰. Participants also had to fill in an electronic logbook diary for 1 week before the interview took place and it was my hope that this would be too much effort for someone to complete if their intentions were not genuine.

Prior to lockdown restrictions, I arranged for all interviews that occurred in person to take place in a public place such as a bookable room on Newcastle University campus. I ensured that if I was not familiar with the location of the interview, that I visited these venues/spaces beforehand to ensure some level of familiarity with the space. I also arranged an emergency contact, who I informed prior to the interview, either via text/phone call, where and what time the interview

²⁸ I touch on how prevalent concerns around issues of authenticity were in chapter 6 and how this influenced many aspects of participants dating app use. It has been interesting to reflect on how these same concerns became central to the design of this research and the ways that I managed communication and interactions with potential participants in light of this.

²⁹ It did transpire that during the very brief window that I did attempt to recruit via dating apps themselves, I received a number of sexually explicit and harassing messages from male users. Nevertheless, as addressed earlier in the chapter, I was blocked from these sites before I even had time to process the impact this had on myself and the steps I needed to take to address this ethical dilemma.

³⁰ As will be discussed in chapter 6, these risk-management techniques are common when managing dating app meet-ups.

was taking place, as well as when to expect a post-interview text/call ensuring them of my safety and wellbeing. During this window, I asked them to keep their phones close by if a situation arose where I did contact them out of concern for my safety. Moreover, if I did not reply to my emergency contact within a reasonable window of time, we had arranged that they would contact the police and my supervisors. This eventuality never arose, however, such procedures helped me feel at ease and allowed me to focus my energy solely on the interview itself and less on my safety.

Concerns around my physical safety were somewhat reduced when interviews were conducted solely via Zoom. However, any abuse, whether it is received in person on the street or online has the ability to cause harm³¹ and so there was always an awareness that the screen may not protect me in every sense (Henry and Powell, 2018). I can confirm that none of the interactions I had whilst conducting interviews, both in person or face to face via Zoom, made me feel as though my safety or wellbeing was at risk.

3.8.1 *Managing consent*

Prior to beginning audio-recorded interviews, informed consent was sought and gained from participants in line with the British Sociological Association's (referred to henceforth as BSA) guidelines for ethical practice (BSA, 2017). I provided participants with an information sheet via email prior to the interview and again in person during the interview, and also asked participants to sign a consent form (see Appendix D). However, addressing and managing consent was something that proved to be problematic. Namely, asking participants to sign consent forms prior to the interview taking place elicited a lot of confusion from participants. I got the sense that it impeded my ability to build a conversational partnership with participants which could elicit open and in-depth discussions on sensitive matters such as intimacy. Indeed, despite its undoubted importance, it seemed antithetical to begin an interview with such a formal and bureaucratic process and then ask participants to delve into a semi-informal discussion on personal matters such as dating.

In light of the exploratory nature of this research, I considered whether it was possible for interviewees to give their fully informed consent at the outset of interviews when they could not anticipate the direction or nature of the discussions that were to be had (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). As such, whilst still adhering to the BSA ethical codes of practice, I altered the way in which I addressed consent during interviews. The information and consent forms were

³¹ As I will go on to discuss in chapter 6.

still sent to participants prior to the interview for them to read and sign if they wish, however, at the beginning of the interview I simply asked whether they understood everything in those documents, explained that the interview would be recorded, asked for their consent to begin recording the interview and asked for their verbal consent as to whether they were happy to continue with the interview. At the end of the interview, I then took time to go over essential matters relating to confidentiality and anonymity and, if they had not already, to sign the consent form having full knowledge of what they were consenting to. This ended up being a nice way of closing the interview in a way that reminded participants of what would happen next with their data. From my perspective, this change positively impacted the flow of interviews.

Nevertheless, ethical considerations were a dynamic and ongoing process and the COVID-19 pandemic was a key period where ethical considerations were once again reassessed and adjusted. Using video conferencing software to conduct interviews can be beneficial as participants can conduct the interview at a time that is convenient for them and in a 'safe space', such as the home, that will make them feel comfortable (Hanna, 2012). Nevertheless, the flexibility around location, also raised ethical issues pertaining to confidentiality as certain areas in the home can be considered 'disruptive environments' as they may be shared with other members of the family, who may be present or overhear our discussions (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). To achieve an optimal Zoom interview, it is recommended that it should take place in a quiet room with minimal distractions- i.e., no tv, family/housemate members, radio, etc. (Seitz, 2016). This simultaneously helped minimise any disruptions to the flow of the interview and reduce any breaches of confidentiality. I addressed this issue during email conversations with participants prior to the interviews, where I provided participants with some clear guidelines on where it might be most appropriate to conduct the interview (e.g., in a study/office, dining room rather than say at work or in a communal room). I also added this information to the new electronic participant information sheet that was created specifically for interviews conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. Equally, I also ensured that these same measures were applied to my own surroundings so that I could reassure participants that no breaches to confidentiality would occur on my end and with members of my household.

Ethical issues relating to consent and data protection are 'still valid, but less easy to define' when it comes to synchronous online interviews because researchers must negotiate how consent can be obtained without face-to-face contact (Lo Iacono et al., 2016:9). Using Zoom, rather than Skype, was an intentional research strategy because with Zoom participants did not need to create an account to be able to join our online meeting. Rather, I simply sent a link,

which participants then clicked on to join the Zoom meeting, and once the meeting ends no personal data was shared with Zoom, third parties, or the researcher which could breach data protection and confidentiality. Furthermore, whilst Zoom does have the option to record and transcribe meetings, this meant that a copy of our conversation would have been saved to a shared cloud storage place that could be accessed by authorised University staff. Therefore, to protect the anonymity of my participants I chose to disable this feature and simply record the interview using a Dictaphone. I also ensured that I informed participants when I had begun recording the interview via Dictaphone as the device may not have been visible.

As briefly touched upon, relevant alterations were also made to both the content and format of the participant information sheet and consent form (see Appendix E). Firstly, O'Connor et al. (2008) suggest that information regarding participant withdrawal is essential because a drop-out could be misinterpreted as a withdrawal and vice versa, the interviewer might assume a drop was a technical fault, rather than a participant choosing to withdraw from the interview. Therefore, some information about what not to do during an interview (i.e., move/ walk around with the technology/ talk away from the microphone), as well as clearly outlining how to withdraw from the interview was offered on the new participant information sheet and discussed prior to interview. I also ensured that I obtained verbal consent from participants, which was audio recorded, before beginning the interview.

3.8.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

In addition to matters of confidentiality and anonymity that have already been addressed above, I ensured that the data obtained through interviews was managed securely. Audio recordings were saved in a password-protected folder. I removed or replaced any identifiable data such as addresses and locations from transcripts, and each participant was allocated a pseudonym from the start. All transcripts were saved into a password-protected folder on my One Drive. Only myself and my supervisors were granted access to interview transcripts, and supervisors were only granted this when all identifiable data had been removed from the transcripts.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the steps taken throughout the data collection process and the methods by which data was collected. It has been suggested that a qualitative methodology, drawing on qualitative data collection techniques, was fitting for the aims and objectives of this research. I have reflected on the appropriateness of my methodology for the constructionist framework adopted in this research, as well as on various elements of the data

collection process. I have outlined the process of recruitment, which highlighted the benefit of using Twitter as a recruitment tool for future research wanting to recruit current and former users of dating apps. I have acknowledged the potential drawbacks encountered through the use of logbook diaries and Zoom interviews and how my positionality may have affected the research process. A step-by-step account of how the data collected has been analysed, which was shown to be an incredibly iterative and messy process. The matter of ethics was also an iterative process and the ways in which the ethical issues were addressed at various points throughout the data collection process have been provided. The following chapters explore the themes identified as a result of the analysis undertaken on the data collected.

4 Chapter 4. The Tinder Game

4.1 Introduction

There was a consensus across the dataset that dating apps could be employed ‘correctly’ or ‘incorrectly’ or, as one participant Amelia playfully framed it, there were agreed rules on how to play the Tinder game. Indeed, most participants shared the view that playing the Tinder game ‘correctly’ should involve taking a casual and low-stakes approach. Nevertheless, as Kusch (2005:186) asserts, ‘correctly’ and ‘incorrectly’ ‘are normative notions, and normativity is a social phenomenon. ‘Oughts’ [or in this case ‘shoulds’] exist only for members of groups’. Consequently, throughout this chapter I will demonstrate the high degree of normativity displayed in the meanings participants ascribed to dating apps and in their use of them. This will be the first step in illustrating the ways in which we can, and should, start thinking about dating app use as a social institution (Kusch, 2005). That is, ‘correct’ dating app use was shown to be ascribed by the user and generated by use, not from the design and functionality of dating app devices themselves (Schlyter, 2009).

‘Casual’ was the language participants themselves often used, not my own analytic insight, and was mobilised to convey several interrelated aspects of correct dating app use. Firstly, casual was the meaning that many participants ascribed to dating apps. The term casual was also used by several participants to describe the expected attitude that a dating app user should have towards dating apps, as well as how, what, when and where dating apps should be used. Participants predominantly constructed dating app meaning and correct use in this way through distinguishing between the meanings and stakes associated with dating apps to that of dating websites. ‘Stakes’, in this situation, refers to a measure of how much risk a situation poses. The kinds of risks identified in participants’ talk centred around issues of labour. This was done on several levels, the dynamics of which will be explored throughout this chapter.

I purposefully include the age of participants in this chapter, or the age cohort to which they claimed to belong, because age was identified by many participants to be significant. The casual and low-stakes nature of dating apps, alongside understandings of particular conceptions of generational sexualities (Plummer, 2010), seemed to shape certain participants’ understandings of who would and should play the Tinder game and how. Namely, participants who were ‘younger’ or were at an earlier stage in the life course constructed normative use as young use. Nevertheless, this was not determinative and did not rule out ‘older’ users, or users at different stages of the life course (Carpenter and DeLamater, 2012). In fact, many users who were ‘older’

conformed to the overarching meaning of dating apps as casual and low-stakes. However, the final section will explore how, when these different users did interact and misapplications of dating apps was witnessed, sanctioning discourse and behaviour was enacted, and the ways that this further reinforced the normative user as young and normative use as casual (Schlyfter, 2009).

4.2 Keep it Casual & Low-Stakes

When discussing dating apps, it was common for most participants to normatively evaluate them against the performances of other online dating platforms. For instance, dating apps were constructed as being distinct from, and better suited to participants' needs, than other online dating tools; specifically online dating websites. As will be illustrated throughout this chapter, the main factor that set these dating services apart, according to most participants, was that dating apps were known for being 'casual', whereas dating websites were thought of as 'serious'.

I mean I will say the only dating app I have ever used is Tinder and the reason for that is because urm... there really weren't any others aside from Tinder when I joined. I mean now there's Bumble and like... I mean there was always like OK Cupid and stuff but that always felt more like serious. Whereas Tinder felt a bit more like casual (Alan, aged 25).

I think there's some like Match.com and e-Harmony too, like serious like those proper ones. I don't even know why I call them proper ones to be honest but like they kind of get advertised and I feel like, on tv and stuff, and I feel like they just seem more serious...Whereas I think something like Tinder just seems a bit more casual (Sally, aged 26).

It was not simply that these devices had different meanings and expectations attached to them, but that the serious meaning and expectation associated with dating websites was frequently employed by participants to justify why they had opted to use dating apps instead. Drawing on the theoretical tools of the PTSI (see pp.20), this stemmed from the fact that dating websites 'failed to operate within particular formative intentional actions' (Schlyfter, 2009: 109). That is, dating websites failed to operate on a casual basis, the dynamics of which will be explored throughout this chapter.

A number of participants viewed dating apps as more casual than dating websites because of their different designs and accessibility. For instance, dating apps like Tinder and Bumble are a relatively new phenomenon and have only ever been accessible in app format via a portable device. By contrast, dating websites like Match.com and e-Harmony have existed for several years and are traditionally accessible via a web browser on a computer (see Appendix A).

I suppose that's it really because the only real difference I guess between a dating website and an app is that the apps on your phone and the websites on the thing, they're very similar. You know, you put the photos on and you write your bio and you like people who you like and if they like you back you talk. So, I would think they're very similar. So, I guess it's purely the type of device you are using it on (Harry, aged 21).

Harry's suggestion being, that the reason dating apps are associated with being casual and dating websites as being serious could stem from the materiality of the artefacts themselves. Nevertheless, whilst material factors are important and were sometimes used by participants to differentiate dating apps from dating websites on a more practical level, these material differences alone did not account for why participants viewed them in such distinctive ways. One way this was demonstrated was when I informed some participants that a few dating websites (Match.com, for example) have now implemented an app version of their services, the supposed material marker of casualness, and how some participants³² were still very quick to disregard them and any possibility of using them, regardless of whether they existed as an app or not, because of their association with being 'serious'.

IV: Match.com does come as an app as well now.

LR: Does it? Well, I wouldn't use that because to me that seems like you're looking for something serious. (Lynn, aged 28).

It transpires then, that there have to be other reasons as to why dating apps were constructed as casual and low-stakes and dating websites as 'serious'. Rather, a more comprehensive understanding, as alluded to above, stems from participants constructions of the attitudes and strategies of the users of these 'different' platforms, which, cannot as easily be accounted for by design and are instead rooted in social processes (Schlyfter, 2009).

³² I say some because it was predominantly users who were 'younger' or were at earlier stages in the life course who were less willing to even consider the possibility of using dating websites. Many 'older' participants had either used dating websites in the past, or were using them alongside dating apps.

4.2.1 *Certainly Uncertain*

The majority of participants compared the ‘casual’ dating strategy adopted by users of dating apps to the more ‘serious’ dating strategies associated with dating websites. This begs the question, what did participants mean when they described dating apps as ‘casual’ and dating websites as ‘serious’? Scholarly literature (see Choi et al., 2016; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016; Albury et al., 2020) and cultural discourse (see Amrani, 2013) readily labels dating apps, especially Tinder, as tools for casual sex or ‘hook-up apps’. A view that most participants in this study were very much aware of themselves. As such, it was important to understand whether ‘casual’ in this instance was being used by participants to mean hook-ups or casual sex and, by contrast, whether describing dating websites as ‘serious’ was referring to how participants imagined people were using these platforms to look for different, more ‘serious’, relational outcomes³³.

For a small distinct subgroup of participants, this serious vs casual dichotomy did seem to relate specifically to how dating apps and dating websites offered very different relational outcomes. Serious or casual, in this sense, related more to what kinds of relationships these differing services fostered and the expected intentions of the users. This was the case for Roxy (aged 23), Jennifer (aged 27), Lynn (Aged 28), and Amelia (aged 38) who were the only participants to explicitly state that ‘hook-ups’ were their main intention and for whom hook-ups were perhaps implied in their use of the term casual. It is interesting how it was only these women who were explicit about how they were using dating apps to facilitate hook-ups. Other studies have found that women are less likely to report engaging in hook-up culture than men (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016), perhaps because women receive more backlash for engaging in hook-up culture as it subverts certain traditional gender and sexual scripts (Wade, 2021). It is possible that my position as a female researcher influenced these female participants’ willingness to speak of their desire to engage in hook-ups. Equally, however, it may also be the case that me being a female researcher negatively influenced male participants’ desire to discuss such issues and why so few of male participants in this study reported seeing dating apps solely as a hook-up app³⁴. That, or perhaps male participants did not feel the need to be as explicit about using dating apps to hook-up’s because it was assumed that this is what they were using them for.

³³ Interestingly, evident in popular discourse on the subject of dating apps is this same impetus to not take it too seriously (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/business-40386116>). Future research could explore this link.

³⁴ See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion on positionality.

Analysis of the language used by several participants when making comparisons between dating apps and dating websites also suggested that terms ‘casual’ and ‘serious’ were being used to indicate relational outcomes. As demonstrated below, it was very common for participants to use terms like ‘settle down’, ‘long-term relationships’, ‘re-connect’, and ‘committed’ or to mention goals like marriage, looking for a wife/husband, partner and having children when prompted to describe their understanding of dating websites. The language used to describe dating apps, however, was very different and instead it was common for participants to use terms like ‘fun’, ‘short-term relationships’, ‘hook-ups’, and ‘spark’.

It's been around for longer than the others and I feel like I must have seen tv adverts about it and it's very much like people on the beach holding hands and talking about how they, you know, yeah I dunno... re-connect. It seems to be more geared towards people who are looking for long-term relationships, compared to the other apps (Jennifer, aged 27).

I guess even just the title right? Something like Guardian Soulmates or something like Match.com create this illusion that it is about looking for the one. It's about looking for a heterosexual wife/partner. Whereas something like Tinder obviously the imagery is around the spark, the connection, the fire whatever (Maisy, early 30's).

You know, if you want to do that [use a dating website], you're obviously looking for something really serious, because I think there is that idea that those are for serious, maybe you're going to find person you're going to marry, kind of dating. Whereas, Tinder and things like that, which have a much more relaxed kind of culture (Annabelle, aged 21).

At first glance, this seems to align with wider sociological debates that were outlined in Chapter 2 concerning the contemporary nature of intimacy and courtship (see Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2007). Indeed, the above discussion seems to indicate that there is an impetus for using dating apps to instigate casual, fun, short-term relationships where no commitment is implied, rather than serious relationships that are based on ideals of romantic commitment. Nevertheless, it was not always the case that ‘casual’ translated as ‘casual sex’ or hook-ups where people no longer ‘keep contracts’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) and simply ‘press delete’ (Bauman, 2003). The majority of participants themselves acknowledged that dating apps have a bit of a name for themselves for being ‘hook-up-y’ and in some cases this was an unintended occasional outcome of their use. For instance, Aidan (aged 28) explained that if he was given the opportunity to hook-up then ‘...yeah why

not? Kind of thing I guess. Urm but yeah I would say that isn't what I'm interested in, I wouldn't go searching for that shall we say'.

However, there were other participants who described dating apps as casual but whose motivations were not to hook-up. For most participants, casual was meant more as an attitude to dating or a dating strategy. This was constructed by most participants as not having a specific goal orientated approach or, as the title of this section implied, expecting uncertainty. Indeed, pinpointing motivations for using dating apps was difficult a lot of the time because most participants' answers did not fit neatly into one specific category such as 'searching for a relationship' or 'searching for casual sex'³⁵. This aligns with the findings of Timmermans and DeCaluwe (2017), who found there to be as many as 13 motivations along the Tinder Motivations Scale. It also builds on the work of Correiro and Tong (2016) who found that Grindr users interested in sexual encounters were far more tolerant of uncertainty. In this case, however, being uncertain or vague about one's motivations was favourable in general as most participants seemed to be up for everything, and nothing all at the same time. For instance, Annabelle's (aged 21) motivations seemed to have nothing to do with dating specifically as she was only '*on there to talk to people when I'm bored, if something comes along, something comes along*'. Whether '*something came along*' did not seem to matter to Annabelle and was very much framed by her as an afterthought or an unexpected, but welcomed, side effect of using dating apps. There were different extremes to this, and other participants did describe being on dating apps for the purpose of dating but were equally vague and nonchalant about the outcome.

For me, I suppose I like to go on dates and just kind of see whether it's someone that you're going to want to see again and get along with and maybe lead to a relationship (Betty, aged 24).

I feel like how I use my apps I'm very just like I'll meet someone and if we get on, we got on, if we don't, we don't. Like, I wouldn't say like I'm sitting here looking for the one, do you know what I mean? (Samantha, aged 25).

The use of '*maybe*' in Betty's case, reflects the widespread unwillingness amongst the majority of participants to express any strict expectations for their dating app use and to instead uphold a casual attitude. This was different to dating websites, for whom most participants imagined it was acceptable and common place for users of these sites to be very overt about what kinds of relationships they were hoping to develop and that they were using them to develop serious

³⁵ This raises some interesting concerns around the appropriateness of quantitative methods which solely provide fixed categories for exploring app users' motivations for using dating apps.

long-term committed relationships. For instance, Rebekka explained how she envisioned users of dating websites to be committed to the search:

I was just thinking like not committed to the search...I don't mean oh if I go on Match.com like it's like I'm not looking for a hook-up and I really want a relationship. It's more like oh you're pretty invested in this situation like whereas like it's not the main priority in my life. So, maybe it's more commitment in oh you really want to go on loads of dates, don't you? Not that I don't go on loads of dates, but it's maybe a bit more like less...it's a bit more ad hoc when you go on an app (Rebekka, aged 29).

As such, there was a normative component to how different online dating devices were seen to operate and of the attitude of their users. Dating websites were perceived to be appropriate for those who wanted to take dating seriously, who were far more committed to the search and whose relational intentions and outcomes were imagined to be far more *serious* and less diverse. Dating apps, by comparison, were seen to be more appropriate for participants to use because they aligned with participants' formative intentional outcomes of being casual, nonchalant, and unconcerned with specific goals and outcomes, indeed participants' intentions were not described as being intentional at all. These findings resemble that of Ward (2017), who found that such nonchalance around one's motivations stemmed from a prevailing stigma associated with online dating, making entertainment a more socially acceptable motivation for use³⁶.

Moreover, by constructing the normative attitude of app users in this way, participants also appear to be presenting dating apps as low-stakes. This was illustrated by Mary (aged 21), who explained that '*I went in with pretty low expectations so you know I wasn't disappointed in that sense haha. but I think it would have been daft to not to have ever tried it you know because it is easy and free*'. This implies that there is less risk of participants being disappointed or disheartened if they do not hook-up or meet someone because they had low expectations of their use in the first place. This is different to, say, dating websites where users' motivations were perceived to be very overt and defined, which, if not met, could lead to feelings of disappointment. Note, also, how ease of use and how dating apps are free were also identified by Mary as contributing to the casual and low-stakes nature of dating apps. This will be explored further in the following section.

³⁶ I go on to discuss the issue of stigma in more depth later in the chapter.

4.3 Labour: ‘it doesn’t do any harm, it’s no great investment of time’

It has been addressed above that dating apps were viewed as casual dating tools and that the attitude of the expected user of dating apps was also casual and nonchalant. Accordingly, participants also described how their use, and how they imagined others used dating apps, aligned with this conventional knowledge around the attitude of the normative user. That is, through their referential talk of their dating app practices, participants exemplified that there was a correct (and incorrect) way of using dating apps, which involved being casual and low-stakes.

Participants constructed correct dating apps use as casual and low-stakes by comparing the labour (or the lack thereof) expected of dating app users to the perceived labour involved in using dating websites. There were four key areas that participants tended to draw comparisons: profile set up, accessibility, the speed at which in person interaction was likely to occur and financial cost. I discuss each of these in turn.

4.3.1 Profile Set up

The minimal effort required to set up a dating app profile³⁷, compared to that required of setting up a profile on a dating website, was a very important part of participants motivations for using dating apps and contributed greatly to participants’ construction of correct dating app use being that which is casual and low-stakes³⁸. For instance, Roxy (aged 23) explained how *‘I imagine setting up a profile on the website takes a lot longer because it’s more like a profile. Whereas, Tinder is just a few photos, give a little description about yourself and get started. It seems a lot kind of a faster process to get set up’*.

Dating apps were framed as highly ‘convenient’ (participants’ own words) tools for dating. Other participants also emphasised the little time it took to download the app, set up a profile and then begin swiping, and how this whole process could take no more than 5 minutes. Tinder helps users speed this process along by automatically importing data from Facebook such as one’s name and most recent photos, meaning users can theoretically choose not to set up a profile at all (Duguay, 2017). This was different, according to participants, to dating websites which typically ask users to construct expansive profiles where you include information about your height, body shape, occupation, star sign (to name a few), as well as fill out an extensive compatibility questionnaire asking about your interest, hobbies, relationship goals and more. It

³⁷ A more detailed outline of the distinct nature of dating app profile construction can be found in Chapter 2.

³⁸ Whether this actually the case will be explored in the following chapters.

was not simply that dating apps were easier and quicker to use, this also meant that they did not cause ‘*any harm, it’s no great investment of time. Ultimately you can stick a profile together in like 5 minutes*’ (Georgia, 41). The use of the word ‘investment’ is key here as it helps contextualise why *convenience* was so important for participants. Again, the analysis suggests that it relates back to the stakes involved, or lack thereof. Having low expectations and no clear objective of their dating app use, lessens the possibility of disappointment, while the lack of effort required of participants made having no specific goal or objective justifiable as little investment has been made in the first place.

There was, however, also the expectation amongst participants that little effort *should* be placed into dating app use. Many participants spoke of the strategies they enacted, or felt others should enact, that made their use of dating apps convenient and thereby conform to the normative attitude and effort level expected of app users and ensure their use remained low-stakes. This was evident in how having a 500-character bio was not perceived by participants to be limiting. Rather, most participants opted for ‘*keeping it (profile) brief*’ (Jennifer, aged 27). This meant not including a lot of information or detail about themselves in the bio or in some cases any information at all: ‘*I don’t think there’s anything in my bio at the moment*’ (Sally, aged 28) because ‘*Why would I want to have more on my profile? I don’t think it’s really necessary*’ (Jennifer). As was addressed above, making an expansive profile was not necessary because the whole point was not to have any, or express having any, specific intentions or goals.

This was further illustrated by the way participants spoke of dating apps that do offer the opportunity to expand one’s profile in a similar way to dating websites. Participants mentioned how Bumble and Hinge have questions, prompts and conversation starters that users can answer such as [talking about Bumble] ‘*your height, your religion, your star sign...whether you’re active, whether you smoke, whether you drink, whether you do drugs...Whether you have children, whether you want children, what you’re looking for*’ (Anne, aged 25). Very few participants spoke of actively engaging with these features. There was also the very rare occurrence where participants had purposefully avoided apps like Bumble or Hinge altogether because ‘*you’re kind of having to put more effort in*’ and instead used Tinder because ‘*it’s the most accessible as a game. You know, it’s really simple*’ (Amelia, aged 38). Unlike participants’ evaluations of different online dating tools in general, this is an example of how some participants normatively evaluated the performance of different dating apps.

This highlights how the materiality and design of dating apps did not fully determine how dating apps would be appropriated by participants. Indeed, whilst user behaviour may be constrained by the affordances and architecture of dating apps (i.e., 500-character bio, imported Facebook data etc.), analysis suggests that having a casual and low-stakes approach to profile construction and dating app use was assigned by the user. It is true that dating app companies do not explicitly sanction users for not filling in fields in the profile, however, dating app companies do send push notifications prompting their users to complete or engage fully with their dating app profile, with the promise that it may lead to more matches (see Figure 9³⁹). Moreover, advice columns published on dating app blogs like The Buzz (2022b) encourage their users to fill out the bio completely⁴⁰. This is likely because it is in dating app companies' best interests for their users to engage fully with their profile because a significant amount of their revenue relies on the aggregation and monetisation of personal and sensitive data (Lutz and Ranzini, 2017; Wilken, Burgess and Albury, 2019). However, many participants did not fully complete the fields provided by dating app companies and this was because their understanding of correct use of dating apps did not frame this as mandatory, appropriate, or desirable. As such, we can start talking about dating app use as a social institution because correct profile set up was ascribed by users and the product of self-referential activity (Schlyter, 2009). Profile set up should be easy and casual in so far as participants treated and talked of profile construction in this way.

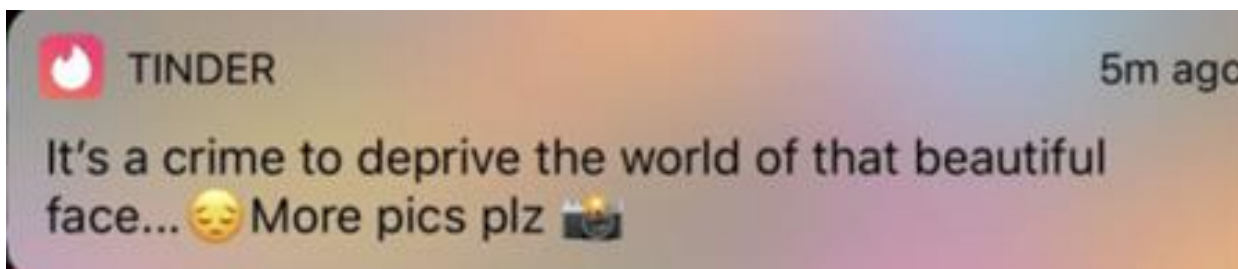


Figure 9: Tinder Notification

4.3.2 Portability and Accessibility

Another way in which participants felt dating apps, and their use of them, differed to that of dating websites, was the ease at which they could be incorporated⁴¹ into their everyday routines. Match.com and e-Harmony were, until very recently⁴², only accessible via web browser. Of

³⁹ This is a screenshot of a push notification that I received from Tinder during the time I was using Tinder to help recruit participants to take part in this study.

⁴⁰ See [Bumble - Get the Most Out of Bumble Prompts With These Tips | Bumble](#) as an example of this.

⁴¹ I refer specifically to the process of 'incorporation' referred to in literature exploring the domestication of artefacts (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013).

⁴² See glossary in appendices/ intro.

course, one can now access internet browser via one's mobile phone, but many participants were under the impression that users of these sites would be *'logging on to their computer at home and, you know, filling out a profile with a glass of red wine haha'* (Jennifer, aged 27). The fact that dating websites were accessible via browser, instead of via an app, was therefore seen to limit where and when these services could be used. Namely, that dedicated time had to be set aside to use them, and this was contingent on whether you were home or not. This was very different, according to participants, from how they used dating apps. Indeed, the fact that dating apps are available in app form on one's mobile phone, which is something that most people arguably have access to at points throughout their day, meant that participants could use them anytime and anywhere. As Jeff (aged 24) put it:

Now everybody's got a phone you can do it in your spare time and you carry around in your pocket, you don't have to set aside time to go home and log on and do what you used to have to do.

Indeed, their portability and accessibility meant that participants recruited dating apps in particular ways within particular social⁴³ and domestic environments (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). Despite the fact that dating apps could, theoretically, be used anytime and anywhere, participants tended to use them within particular spatial and temporal contexts. Dating apps were not seen by participants as something they would actively dedicate a time or place for, rather, participants typically described their dating app use as *'something that I can do if I've got five minutes while I'm waiting for a train or whatever, and it's easy to just open up swipe, swipe, swipe um job done'* (Harry, aged 21) *'when you've got a bit of a spare moment or you may be a little bit bored or something, that's when you're going on them'* (Samantha, aged 25) or as *'part of my bedtime routine'* (Annabelle, aged 21). The majority of participants use was incorporated into their spare time, at times where they wanted a distraction or as a means of passing time. It was not, for instance, something they felt drastically impeded on their everyday life and routines in the same way they imagined using dating websites would. This correlates with existing research which found that 'passing time' was part of users' motivations for using Tinder (Timmermans and DeCaluwe, 2017; Kallis, 2020).

This made it possible for participants to incorporate dating apps as a routine practice, or, as is described elsewhere, 'interfaceless interfaces' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999 in Farman, 2012: 7).

⁴³ The ways in which dating apps were recruited in social ways will be talked about in the next chapter which explores participants collective and social use of apps with friends.

[...] *almost like unconscious. Your finger and your thumb just moves to the dating app folder and goes on Bumble* (Aidan, aged 28).

I pick up my phone and you know like you scroll through Instagram you'd like literally...like I would scroll through like dating apps in a similar way (Betty, aged 24).

I use [them] to procrastinate. So, it is interesting where like I wouldn't even think about it and then I would just open it (Anne, aged 25).

Carter, Green and Thorogood (2013) argue that there is nothing inevitable about the appropriation of artefacts. Rather, the domestication of an artefact is largely dependent on four key processes (see pp. 22-3 in Chapter 2). Of relevance here is the process of 'incorporation', which is the extent to which the use of an artefact becomes part of a regular temporal routine (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). The way in which participants spoke of their dating app use as an unconscious and automatic practice suggests that dating apps have been incorporated into participants' everyday routines without much resistance or negotiation⁴⁴. Indeed, the portability and accessibility of dating apps has supported particular temporal and spatial patterns of use amongst participants. Nevertheless, this is not determinative, and it is equally possible that the portability and accessibility of dating apps could foster different spatial and temporal patterns of use. There are no sanctions enforced by dating app companies which limit the location, time or length of use. An exception to this is how some dating apps, like Tinder, restrict the number of right swipes a user can have in a day to 100⁴⁵. However, this does not limit users' ability to use other features of these devices such as the chat function. It is therefore important to consider why these spatial-temporal relations have been adopted by participants. Again, it seems to come down to an issue of labour and the amount of time and effort participants' thought was appropriate and would conform with their understanding of what the correct use of these apps was. The use of dating apps to pass time or procrastinate would seem to be the result of the social institution of casual and low-stakes use being successfully upheld by participants.

⁴⁴ This will be problematised in future chapters where the cyclical use of dating apps by most participants suggests that complete domestication or closure was not possible.

⁴⁵ Unless you pay for Tinder subscriptions like Tinder Gold, which, as I will address later in the chapter, was not something participants considered appropriate.

4.3.3 'Not looking for a Pen pal'

The profile was not the only 'speedy' part of the dating app process. Many participants identified the speed at which an in-person meeting could be facilitated was also another way dating apps were casual and low-stakes⁴⁶.

I do spend a long time talking to people anyway cause I'd much rather meet up with them or like exchange numbers urm just because I think it's a bit weird talking to people you don't know online for an extended period of time (Anne, aged 25).

Whereas like I feel like now people will just talk for like days on an app and then go do you want to meet up and decide afterwards (Lydia, aged 24).

These quotes highlight two separate, but highly linked, expectations held by the majority of participants in this study. Firstly, that participants were not looking to establish virtual relationships on dating apps. Rather, the expectation was that some sort of in-person interaction will occur. This impetus to 'to get them off the app as soon as possible' (Jeff, aged 24) cannot be traced back to the design of the apps themselves. Integrated GPS might make it so that in person interaction can occur, but it does not set any standards for whether it should occur or how quickly. For instance, Hinge advertises itself as 'The dating app designed to be deleted' (Hinge, 2020; 2021), but there is no part of the technologies' design, or the design of any of the other dating apps that participants used, that suggests that in-person interaction must occur. Instead, this advertising campaign by Hinge is perhaps a perfect demonstration of the iterative relationship between designers of technologies and users of technologies (Pinch and Bijker, 1994).

Secondly, not only did participants want to meet up in person, they felt as though meeting up in person should happen sooner rather than later. This was exemplified by Maisy (early 30's) who stated:

...years and years and years ago when online dating was first a thing I had a bit of a, not a situation, but I got chatting to someone for ages and ages and built it all up and then when we met up it was like I actually felt quite uncomfortable.

This points to how dating websites were not necessarily seen to foster quick, in person, interactions and were seen to be more likely to foster virtual relationships. What's more, Maisy's somewhat negative experience with this pre-longed interaction is reflective of other

⁴⁶ Whether this was the case or not will also be explored in the following chapter.

participants' reasons for keeping the time between matching and meeting as short as possible. To speak for such a prolonged period of time and then to meet up and realise within a very short period of time that you are not interested, is far more high-stakes than chatting for a short period of time, meeting, and then realising you do not wish to continue interaction further.

This may also explain why participants spoke of how they did not like the idea of matching with someone who was too '*far away*' because '*as awful as it sounds it's probably more effort than I was willing to put in*' (Megan, aged 27). Megan, lived in Newcastle and is speaking of a time where she stopped talking to a guy because he was from Durham, which complicated the logistics of arranging an in-person date. Durham, which is a 10-minute train journey or can take roughly 30 minutes in the car, was the bar at which Megan classed as too '*far away*'. Similarly, Lynn (aged 28), also living in Newcastle, spoke of how '*I ain't going to Durham for a shag so we reduced (the search radius) to 15 kilometres I think*'. When speaking to other participants about the possibility of matching with someone '*far away*' or in different cities to which they lived, they often responded with similar sentiments to '*what's the point, you know?*' (Harry, aged 21).

4.3.4 Disrupting Normativity

When the United Kingdom was placed in a strict lockdown in March 2020 this meant that legally⁴⁷ dating app users within the UK would not be able to meet up with their matches in person for, what turned out to be, a very long time. Instead, if users continued to use their dating apps, they would have to keep their interactions online and have the virtual relationships which, as described above, were seen as less desirable. Just over half of the participants in this study were recruited and interviewed during the first 5 months of lockdown (see Table 1 on pp.62 in Chapter 3) and so I was able to speak to participants about their experiences and perceptions of using dating apps during this time, which were very diverse. Participants' descriptions of their dating app use during this time, therefore, offered valuable insight into the socially constituted nature of dating app use. Specifically, the impetus to meet in person and as quickly as possible.

⁴⁷ I emphasise 'legally' here because it is possible that people did not follow the legal guidelines and arranged to meet during this time. Although, none of the participants in this study spoke of doing so during this first stage of lockdown where tighter restrictions were in place. A few participants, however, did explain that they did bend the rules somewhat when restrictions began to ease. For example, Roxy admitted (her words) that she hooked-up with a man she met on Tinder in June 2021 when lockdown restrictions were not in place but meeting up with '*random people*' was probably not advised.

For some participants, lockdown led to a period of non-use, or had extended their non-use (Wyatt, 2003)⁴⁸, where they had not officially deleted the app but did not express any interest in using dating apps during this period.

I suppose, recently, obviously the lockdown is something that has definitely effected that. Like, you know, it's just not been a priority. Yeah, it's just not been in your head as much. Also, you're like self-isolating, it's not like you're going to meet someone (Amelia, aged 38).

I think because of the pandemic, you know, I came off in February, the pandemic was March, probably would have been about the time that I would have gone back on. But then, actually, what is the point? You couldn't meet anybody. You'd end up just having a pen pal who was using you there as much as you were for a bit of a safety net, someone to chat to. I always think as well, once you've been chatting to someone for a few months, if you haven't met, it's not going to tend to go anywhere (Grace, aged 42).

Issues pertaining to health and risk were also part of participants' reasonings for not wanting to use dating apps, but the restrictions placed on participants during this time also served to further highlight how having a virtual 'pen pal' was not part of participants' normative use of dating apps (see figure 10). It was not until those participants who were interviewed during lockdown '*started to see hopefully a way out, you know, like it's started to become that it would be possible to meet people*' (Maisy, early 30's), even if this involved keeping a 2 metre distance, spoke of having, or being willing, to use dating apps again.

⁴⁸ Wyatt (2003) highlights that there is no clear binary distinction between use and non-use of artefacts. I expand on this in greater depth in the methodology chapter, however, I include this here as another illustration of how use and non-use can manifest in many different ways and how the ways in which they manifest can change across time and in different contexts, like a pandemic.



~~Not~~ looking
for a penpal

Figure 10: Tinder Instagram Post

Some participants, however, continued to use dating apps but took advantage of videoconferencing software to date at a distance. Video conferencing software such as Skype has been shown to be important in fostering intimacy at a distance for those in long-distance relationships, both locally (Jamieson, 2013) and globally (Madianou and Miller, 2011). Nevertheless, during the pandemic, technology such as this, arguably, took on a whole new importance in everyday life. Zoom, in particular, saw a massive uptake in users in 2020 and became central to how many people attended work meetings, stayed in contact with friends and family and, of importance here, how people dated during lockdown (Sherman, 2020; Yuan, 2020). Dating app companies themselves began introducing new features to accommodate this. For example, Hinge launched a “Date From Home” feature which allowed users to tell their match that they are interested in going on a virtual date, which, at the time, they could do via the app through their new video chat feature (Hinge, 2021)⁴⁹. Some participants in this study also reported utilizing these kinds of technologies and going on video and socially distanced dates.

⁴⁹ Tinder also made their Tinder Passport feature free for users across the world throughout the month of April 2020 and framed it as a way for those in isolation to stay connected.

It wouldn't have even crossed my mind to be honest before COVID because I think in person will always be better in terms of sussing out a vibe like it's just not the same. But yeah, I've done 2 video chat dates with a guy since lockdown (Stephanie, aged 27).

He'd set his phone up, or his computer, and he'd made it, you know, sat opposite each other at tables. Which made it more nerve wracking, but it was quite nice. I had quite a good time doing it, we played some drinking games (Annabelle, aged 21).

In many ways, participants enjoyed video dating because it was their way of having that face-to-face engagement with matches that meeting in person would typically afford. Some participants also felt video chats offered a more convenient way to date as '*it saves me a bit of time and effort haha*' (Darcy, aged 36). Now participants could swipe and date whilst wearing their pyjamas. However, like Stephanie, nearly all of the participants who reported going on video dates spoke of how they had never considered going on a video date prior to the pandemic. For example, Maisy (early 30's) explained how:

I think generally the kind of consensus or the idea is to the online dating that it will be about building up to meet someone in person. So, it just feels like you would just get to that a bit sooner and like you know there would be quite a lot of focus on the meeting in person bit and the seeing if you have the spark and the connection bit and just kind of physically being around someone.

It is often said that you only notice something when it is gone. In this case, the restrictions placed on participants as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that there was a high degree of normativity involved in participants dating app use and that meeting up with a match in person within a small timeframe was conventional, normative, and user generated.

The pandemic, therefore, raises several important questions for social scientists from various disciplines around the impact it will have on our current way of life and what futures are being assembled? For this study, the restrictions placed on participants highlighted further how dating apps could be used differently and how the impetus to meet up with someone in person very quickly was one of many potential ways in which normative use of dating apps could have been imagined. Lockdown, then, offered many of the participants the chance to re-imagine, as well as reinforce, what the normative use of dating apps looked like. Spending more time talking on the apps themselves and video dating could have potentially become a new part of how participants used dating apps going forward. Hinge, for example, kept their video chat feature

available for several months after lockdown restrictions lifted⁵⁰. Nevertheless, it remains very unclear, at this stage, as to whether the changes discussed above will have any permanence and whether virtual dates become part of users' normative dating routine. During interviews I asked participants directly whether they thought they would make video dating part of their new dating routine and most spoke of video dating as a short-term solution. Most of the participants who spoke of having video dates during lockdown described their current dating situation as 'frustrating' because they did not like having to keep up the momentum online. For instance, Maisy continued to say that she '*would probably only do it (video date) for some exceptional reasons. I wouldn't be like oh this is a preferred method*'.

Indeed, although participants did appreciate some of the ways video dating was convenient, they felt they could not truly ascertain whether they had a 'spark' or fancied someone without in-person interaction. The fear amongst participants who were considering video dates during this time was that it was risky to invest a lot of time keeping up a conversation online for several months to meet and realise they did not like one another.

Because it feels such an effort to keep everything going until a potential face to face meet. I feel like two months would have been, under normal circumstances, enough time to determine you know is this going to be a thing or not? Because you would have met a couple of times in person. Whereas, at the minute, it's just like well, you know, it's a bit of a risk chatting for months and months and months, meeting them face to face, and going nah, not for me haha. So, it's...yeah I think it's completely changed it, for me anyway, and it's made me a bit more reluctant because it's ...yeah the fun of it is meeting and going for a face to face date and being able to suss them out and just going yay or nay are we moving forward or not? (Stephanie, aged 27).

This level of investment certainly did not fit with the expected casual attitude of the normative user because keeping up a conversation online made meeting up a high-stakes activity. It was high-stakes in that the level of effort and investment participants would be putting in meant more was riding on whether the meet up was a worthwhile additional investment of time. Therefore, participants' experiences of using dating apps during lockdown demonstrate that dating app use is conventional. That is, understandings of what constitutes correct dating app use exists within a specific spatial, temporal, and cultural context. In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected and unforeseeable moment in time which led to changes in participants routinised use of dating apps. Kusch (2005) asserts that an enormous effort goes

⁵⁰ For reference, this is being written in November 2022.

into maintaining a social institution, changes are often slow and small in magnitude. So, the fact that participants were unwilling or unconvinced that having a ‘pen pal’ would have any real permanence is evidence of how participants were, either consciously or unconsciously, making choices that served to maintain and reinforce the social institution of casual and low-stakes use.

4.3.5 *If you pay, you’re ‘committed’ and ‘desperate’*

As well as having to invest time and effort into them, dating websites were also identified as a financial investment, as most dating websites work on a subscription basis (see Appendix A). The idea of having to, or being willing, to pay to meet new people also seemed to contribute to participants’ perceptions of dating websites being a high-stakes activity. Using a dating service where you must pay was believed to be a marker of one’s level of commitment to achieving one’s dating goals. This, as has been highlighted, is not part of the Tinder Game because to invest money, as well as time, into dating websites and potentially not be successful raises the stakes tremendously. This was illustrated by Jeff’s (aged 24) understanding that paying might encourage dating website users to invest more time and effort into their use.

I think that’s a little bit different because Match.com is a bit more effort. People are actually paying for it more. It’s more expensive so you want to put a bit more effort in.

Indeed, paying was seen to place more emphasis on whether a dating website user was successful in achieving their dating goals or not. Whether one is successful or not on a dating app, however, is less of concern as little investment has been made, both physically and financially.

What’s more, whilst most dating apps offer their basic services for free, dating app companies do offer their users subscription services which, if chosen, offer their users exclusive access to additional features. For instance, the ‘Tinder Gold’ package offers its members access to features such as Tinder Passport, the ability to Rewind, have unlimited swipes (compared to the 100 a day allocation), have 5 super likes a day, 1 boost a month and the ability to see whether someone has liked you before you swipe (Tinder Pressroom, 2021) (see Figure 1 pp.7). Very few participants stated that they had, or would, pay for services like Tinder Gold. In fact, most participants made a point of saying that they did not or would not pay for these services. Take Samantha’s (aged 25) point below and the way she criticises her friend for considering joining and paying for Match.com’s services.

Maybe part of me still holds on to the like the stigma of them. I don't know, maybe. Because when my friend said that she wanted to join Match, I was like what? You're going to pay for a dating app? Like this is too much, you know? So yeah, maybe that has stuck with me a little bit, and also, I'm not that committed. Like I said, I'm using them when I've got a bit of spare time, like I'm not prepared to log in on my computer.

Here, in her communicative actions, Samantha has made a normative judgement on both her friend's choice of dating tool and on her friend's use of these tools (i.e., her willingness to pay for them). Indeed, the judgement evident in Samantha's reaction could be seen as a form of discursive sanctioning, which is a central component to how social institutions, in this case the social institution of casual and low-stakes use, are stabilised and reinforced (Kusch, 2005; Schyfter, 2009)⁵¹. If Samantha's friend did choose to disregard her advice and pay for subscription services instead, it is possible she would be subject to the 'stigma' Samantha felt was attached to this practice.

This seemed to be the case for the two interviewees who stated that they had at some point paid for premium subscriptions on dating apps. Both interviewees accompanied this declaration with comments such as '*I must be desperate*' (Stephanie, aged 27) and '*as daft as it was I actually paid for Tinder*' (Jeff, aged 24). Although these were short and flippant remarks, they communicate a powerful message about what paying to use dating apps communicates about the attitude of that person. For some participants, being '*desperate*' enough to pay for online dating suggested that someone is perhaps incompetent at dating because '*they are shy or are so gross they could never find someone face to face*' (Stephanie). It was also seen as a '*last resort*' and for people who are '*running out of options basically*' (Alesha, aged 18). As such, it is perhaps precisely because dating apps are free that has contributed greatly to their widespread popularity and as to why they appear to have overcome the stigma⁵² which was often associated with other forms of mediated dating that came before them (e.g., Lonely Hearts Columns, Matchmaking Services, Video Dating etc). The fact that you do not have to pay seems to alter the image of the user from being '*uh I can't find a partner so I'm turning to online dating, and more like everyone's on Tinder*' (Alan, aged 25). This again, reinforces the normative use of apps as involving low investment and the normative attitude of app users as nonchalant and unconcerned.

⁵¹ I will go on to discuss participants sanctioning practices in greater depth later in the chapter.

⁵² Albeit, as addressed earlier in the chapter, and which will be addressed further later in the chapter, there is some debate as to whether dating apps have overcome stigma completely. Rather, work goes into making dating apps, and one's use of them, free of stigma (Ward, 2017).

It is worth noting that neither Stephanie nor Jeff continued to pay for dating apps, which, considering the points raised above, is a decision that should not be treated as insignificant. Rather, this could be treated as a display of self-correction on Jeff and Stephanie's part. That, in response to using these apps, seeing how they are used by others, and being subject to sanctioning, they could have engaged in imitation and self-correction in an effort to avoid the negative labels associated with those who pay for dating app services. They have altered their use so that it aligns more appropriately with the collectives understanding of correct dating app use.

Furthermore, it is unconvincing that participants' evaluations that you should not pay for dating apps was deduced from the design or function of dating apps themselves. Tinder's premium subscriptions are responsible for a significant proportion of Tinder's revenue and financially benefit the company greatly (Match Group, 2022). In other words, it is not in dating app companies' interests for there to be a stigma associated with their subscription services. Once more, it translates that participants' understanding of correct dating app use, in this case not paying for the service, must stem from elsewhere. Analysis suggests that there is a normative component to dating app use which stems from the users themselves and the social mechanisms that define correct use (Schlyter, 2009).

The data presented thus far has shown that there was a high degree of normativity evident within participants' post-hoc articulations of their dating apps use. Nevertheless, it also transpired that it was not simply the case that correct use was casual and low-stakes, this also had implications for who the normative user of dating apps was seen to be. Namely, that normative use was young use. This is what the remainder of the chapter will address.

4.4 Who can play the Tinder Game?

4.4.1 A Younger Person's App

As exemplified by the quotes below, it was assumed by many participants of a younger cohort that dating apps were a '*younger person's app*' (Rebekka, aged 28) and dating websites were '*grown up one's*' (Betty, aged 24) and for '*an older audience*' (Alan, aged 25). Before addressing why this was the case, it is perhaps worth addressing what participants meant by 'older' as understandings of ageing and what is considered 'older' was variable. A lot of participants aged 18-24, readily labelled someone in their 30's as 'older'. The bar for what counted as 'older' tended to be a lot broader amongst participants who were between the ages of 25-34. The ages typically drawn on by these participants tended to be in the 40's to 50's

range but there was also a tendency for these participants to draw on stages in the life course and milestones associated with this (Carpenter and DeLamater, 2012) such as being divorced, widowed, a parent and middle-aged, instead of a specific age, to mean ‘older’.

I think Match.com and Plenty of Fish do target...they're advertising towards an older like target audience and naturally an older target audience might be looking for something more serious and I think Tinder did position themselves as a younger person's dating app (Roxy, aged 23).

I assume that ugh that apps are for younger people and websites are more for older people I guess. Like my uncle is using a dating website, that doesn't surprise me because I think he is 51. So, yeah that's kind of it really. I suppose you've got like a...there's like an age barrier. Like a Urm...it's a different demographic I guess. So, the websites seem to suit that demographic, for whatever reason in my mind, than it does a younger demographic I guess (Aidan, aged 27).

Although several participants, like Roxy, rather unproblematically saw this age stratification amongst users of dating websites vs dating apps as ‘*natural*’ and arising from the fact that ‘*naturally*’ older people desire different forms of intimacy than younger people, sociological, historical and anthropological work on sexuality tells us that there is nothing ‘*natural*’ about sexual conduct and the meanings and practices fostered within a specific culture, they are socially constituted (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Equally, Schyfter (2009: 108) proposes that it would be absurd to speak or think about the identity of an artefact without first considering the ‘myriad of practices and institutions associated with or dependent upon the existence of [a] particular technological artefact’. As I will show, participants’ understandings of the imagined users of dating apps and dating websites was dependent upon the existence of both the social institution of generational sexualities and casual and low-stakes use. Arguably, social understandings and expectations of what it means to age appropriately and what kinds of sexual practice are appropriate at different life stages (Plummer, 2010; Carpenter and DeLameter, 2012) (e.g., it is fine to hook-up when you are young, but you should settle down as you get older) were employed alongside participants’ constructions of casual and low-stakes use to shape what kinds of technologies they thought different groups would use and what they would use them for.

This was evident in the ways some younger participants tried to envision someone ‘older’ that they knew used dating apps. Responses to this question were varied but they did all share similar

sentiments- that this would be *rare* and *weird*. Aidan (aged 27) thought of his uncle who he knew used dating websites like e-Harmony and how he would react if his uncle started using Tinder instead:

I would assume that because he has reached a stage where he has been married and unfortunately got divorced, to go back to the hook-up thing would just... I would think I would see it as taking a step back I guess, I suppose. I think hooking-up and all that sort of thing is something that maybe you do when you're a bit younger and it's certainly not for everyone, which is fine, and then as you get older you know the kind of that traditional western way of seeing things, whereas you get a bit older you're expected to settle down a bit and get a house and two kids and a car and a mortgage and all that kind of thing.

Here, Aidan questions whether older people, like his divorced uncle, would see hook-ups as desirable to be engaging in at his stage of life. It might be that his uncle would desire hook-ups, but Aidan did not consider this a possibility. Aidan even went as far as suggesting that this would be a step back for his uncle. He, like many others, therefore subscribed to a linear or maturational understanding of sexuality whereby it is expected that as you get older you perhaps '*naturally*' abandon some sexual scripts and desires and take on ones which are viewed as more age appropriate (Plummer, 2010).

Aidan's understanding was reflective of many of the younger participants I spoke to. Lynn (aged 28) also considered how she would feel if her divorced auntie started using dating apps and concluded that because dating apps are ultimately '*shagging apps*' that '*It just makes me think that's what people are sort of using it for so my auntie shouldn't*'. Interestingly, the emphasis here shifts to *shouldn't*, and, as outlined earlier in the chapter, 'ought' and 'shouldn't' 'have their logical home in social institutions' (Kusch, 2005:10). Indeed, through her referential activity, Lynn, it could be argued, is producing and reinforcing who the correct and/or appropriate user of dating apps is, and who it is not (i.e., her auntie).

Nevertheless, I was able to recruit and speak to a number of participants who perhaps would be viewed by participants mentioned above to fit outside the age of the normative user of dating apps. These participants did not just use dating websites like Match.com, they used the very same dating apps - Tinder, Bumble and Hinge- that participants above claimed were primarily for younger users. What's more, they were even using them to find '*the one*' (amongst other things). Consequently, these differing generations did not cohabit this digital space

unproblematically. Rather, as I will continue to show, sexual stigma (Plummer, 2010) demonstrated through participants sanctioning (Kusch, 2005; Schyfter, 2009) of older users was prevalent across the data set. Indeed, younger participants expressed negative assumptions about older cohorts who used dating apps and participants from older cohorts spoke of engaging in practices which helped them negotiate using dating apps age appropriately. As highlighted earlier, sanctioning and self-correction are normative judgements and evidence that there is correct and incorrect usage that is produced and protected by competent members (Schyfter, 2009). This is something I explore throughout the remainder of the chapter.

There was a small number of younger participants who recognised that older people did use dating apps, albeit to a lesser extent. Indeed, some younger participants spoke of occasions where they had witnessed older people on the apps themselves when they had either purposefully⁵³ or accidentally changed their search filters to include 55+ in their search parameters. When speaking about this, there was a tendency for these participants to view older users somewhat negatively and to frame them as *'weird'*, *'lonely'* and *'desperate'*. For instance, Alan (aged, 25) specifically interpreted older men on the app as *'like maybe even kind of predatory actually'* and compared seeing older men on dating apps to seeing older men in the club *'tryna talk to an 18 year old or something'* and interprets both situations as equally *'sleazy'*. Furthermore, age and gender also seemed to intersect to shape Alan's interpretation as notably he did not view older women on the apps as *'sleazy'* or *'predatory'* because he did not interpret women to be a physical threat. Instead *'the word desperation comes to mind'* when Alan spoke about older women who use dating apps. The double standards of ageing and sexuality (Sontag, 1997) between men and women are likely to have shaped Alan's views of older dating app users. This also perhaps explains why it was so common for the small number of female participants who accidentally widened their search parameters, to make comments such as *'I was wondering why I was getting so many weird old people and like people really far away trying to match with me'* (Lynn, aged 28) or report feeling *scared* (Annabelle, aged 21) or *creeped out* (Lydia, aged 24), when older men were sending them messages or super liking them on dating apps⁵⁴.

Further issues emerged when younger participants witnessed older cohorts attempting to play the serious dating game on dating apps and not on their allocated serious website platform.

⁵³ There were a few participants who described having purposefully changed the age parameters on their search filters due to a sense of curiosity over what kind of profiles this would elicit. This practice speaks to how function does not necessarily determine use and the important role of user agency (Schyfter, 2009).

⁵⁴ These accounts might help explain why Emile Ratelband quite notably tried to legally change his legal age from 69 to 49 to boost his prospects on Tinder (Boffey, 2018).

...you can tell that the person's genuinely like quite lonely or like wants to meet somebody. However, they don't know how to play the Tinder game (Amelia, aged 38).

I mean I haven't come across much older people, but they do tend to sort of seem a bit like kind of a fish out of water and not quite sure what's going on, not quite sure like...Yeah, they sort of stand out (Mary, aged 21).

These older users stood out or seemed like a 'fish out of water' according to these participants because they were playing the Tinder Game differently by being explicit about their intentions. This speaks to how there perhaps exists flexibility and variation amongst different age groups as to how to play the Tinder Game. Nevertheless, the way younger participants responded with subtle forms of sanctioning in the form of mockery and judgement could be said to limit and constrain this flexibility. What's more, the ageism and stigma evident in the data presented above suggests that there exists social rules on who can and should play the Tinder Game based on understandings of appropriate performances of sexuality across the life course and correct tool use being casual and low-stakes. Who can legitimately use these devices, therefore, could itself be considered a social institution (Schlyter, 2009).

It is worth highlighting that not every participant expressed such negative comments at the thought of older people using dating apps. Rose (aged 27), for example, recognised that '*there's a lot of people who are in their 60's who are on it and can use it and I think if they feel comfortable doing it then you know go for it*'. Roxy (aged 23) also described how she, along with her brother encouraged her mother to use Tinder.

...made my mum her Tinder account against her will...She like drunkenly admitted that she wasn't really looking for anything serious she just maybe wants to meet a few guys and build her confidence backup and we were like get yourself on Tinder. Get some guys to throw some complements at you. You don't have to take it seriously and she didn't want to take it seriously. She literally was there just to get some confidence thrown at her and maybe go on a couple dates to try and build her confidence back up.

Roxy's approach was dissimilar to that of Aidan and Lynn's response to the idea of their uncle and auntie using dating apps and she instead seemed very comfortable with the thought of their mother using Tinder. She spoke of showing her mother some examples of Tinder profiles on her app and helping her mum set up her own profile. However, it is also worth contemplating whether Roxy's support of her mother downloading Tinder was dependent in some way on the fact that her mother '*didn't want to take it seriously*'. In other words, her mother was going to play the Tinder Game correctly. In fact, Roxy and her brother, as competent members of the

social institution, may have even had a role in ensuring this because they demonstrated to their mother how to create a profile, that Tinder was an appropriate tool to build confidence and forego having specific relationship goals. It is questionable as to whether they would have suggested Tinder if their mother had expressed having specific expectations of her use or if she intended to take dating apps ‘seriously’. Moreover, even though Roxy and her brother orchestrated her mother’s Tinder profile, her mother still felt hesitant, demonstrated by the fact that it was ‘*against her will*’ and ‘*She was like no you won't, like I won't meet anyone my own age, that's really creepy*’. This suggests that older cohorts themselves might, to some extent, be aware of how normative use is young use. Therefore, Roxy and her brother’s willingness to set up their mum’s Tinder profile seems to be the exception, as opposed to the rule.

The data presented here collectively communicates the stabilised meaning of dating apps as not only a casual tool but a younger person tool. So, when participants said that ‘*everyone uses them*’, what they typically meant was that everyone their own age uses them. As such, there seems to be some generational conflict (Plummer, 2010) evident between these different generational cohorts who seem to be sharing this same experience, but whom have different understandings of who this experience is appropriate for and what normative use of the tool looks like. Plummer (2010: 171) described life as ‘like an escalator, and as people move farther and farther along this escalator, they become more and more distant from those at the other end who are just boarding it. There are always major generational differences, generational understandings, built out of these different standpoints’. Similarly, there is the sense here that as one gets farther along the escalator certain sexual worlds start to close off, whilst others start to open. From the perspective of younger participants, dating apps seemed to be a world that those just boarding the escalator would want to enter, whereas those in the middle or nearing the end of the escalator should not, or indeed will ‘naturally’ not, want to enter this world, and will instead see other online dating worlds as more appropriate for their desires.

There is very little evidence to suggest that there is a material basis for this normativity. One exception is that Tinder has been accused of age discrimination as it charges people over the age of 28 years old nearly four times the price for their subscription features such as Tinder Gold, Plus or Platinum⁵⁵ (Kelion, 2015). Tinder has, however, denied claims around age discrimination and instead maintain that they premise these prices on the understanding that those under 28 will not be as likely to be in as great a financial position to pay higher prices

⁵⁵ It was speculated back in February 2022, albeit by rather unreliable sources, that Tinder intend to stop charging those over 28 more for subscription services (Adnan, 2022; Bell, 2022; Kariuki, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2022).

(Kelion, 2015; Welsh, 2020). Other than this, the designers of dating app devices do not place sanctions on use by age, which again means we must look elsewhere.

It is important to consider the role that marketing might play in shaping participants' expectations of the imagined dating app user and their sanctioning discourse and practices. As witnessed in the quotes that have been presented throughout the chapter thus far, many participants referenced television adverts when explaining why they envisioned dating website users to belong to an older demographic. Looking at both Tinder's and Bumble's websites (November 2022), there is a scarcity of age variety, with most images having, what I would see, as younger looking individuals, couples or friends. This is also true of their video adverts. For instance, Bumble (2020) recently published an advert starring the acclaimed actress Helena Bonham Carter, who according to IMDB (2022) is 55 years of age. One might assume that this choice of spokesperson potentially undermines the argument that dating apps are marketed as a younger person tool. Nonetheless, not at any point in the advert is Helena Bonham Carter seen using the apps herself. Instead, she narrates the experiences of young women using Bumble and dating during lockdown. Therefore, to the contrary, this somewhat reinforces the image of the normative Bumble user being a young user.

Further, there are also age specific dating apps that have been developed, such as Silver Singles and Lumen (see Appendix A), which are targeted specifically for over 50's dating. Conversely, I am yet to see a dating app that explicitly markets itself as a tool for dating under 50. Rather, there seems to be the assumption that dating apps like Tinder will be used by younger cohorts. The fact that specific apps are being developed specifically for dating over 50's implies that such a space does not exist elsewhere and that this cohort requires a separate space from other dating apps, which do not cater for them. Again, emphasising that the role of marketing cannot be ignored when considering the normativity seen in the ways younger users sanction older users.

Data gathered cannot speak to the impact these media images had on participants' dating app meanings and practices. Nevertheless, analysis of this data does demonstrate how participants are, in their everyday talk and daily routines, constituting and reinforcing what correct dating app use looks like (Schlyfter, 2009). What's more, existing research advises against treating individuals as 'cultural dopes' who have no agency or understanding about who they are or the decisions they make (Hall, 2020). Consequently, I posit that correct use is a social institution whereby dating app function 'is generated by rather than generative of usage' (Schlyfter, 2009: 103). The normativity seen in the ways younger users sanction older users, therefore, seems to

be the result of the social institution of casual, young use, alongside expectations of appropriate ageing sexualities, being broken.

4.4.2 Was this the case?

Thus far, discussion of participant data has largely been from the perspective of younger participants and their assumptions about older cohorts and how they navigate their intimate lives. I will now focus exclusively on the perspectives and experiences from participants of older cohorts. Namely, whether older adults used dating apps ‘seriously’, meaning that they would (not) desire the casual relationships which dating apps are predominantly seen to foster, but also that they would be ‘desperate’ or ‘committed’ to finding someone.

Overall, older participants use of dating apps was different, but they still conformed to the overarching meaning of dating apps as casual and low-stakes. For instance, older participants did seem to be taking dating apps ‘seriously’ in both these senses as they were very forthcoming about their intentions and their intentions were not hook-up but to find ‘*a genuine connection with somebody*’ (Eleanor, aged 42), find ‘*a partner*’ (Sean, aged 52), and ‘*to find real love and I don't want to compromise*’ (Ben, aged 44). The overt way in which participants communicated their intentions and how they were not willing to compromise was very different to the nonchalant attitude that younger participants usually upheld. However, whilst it was very rare for older participants in this study to express using dating apps explicitly for hook-ups, this was not determinative. Peter (aged 55) came out of a 20-year marriage and soon found himself on dating apps and whilst he gave the impression that he was looking for a relationship, ‘*there's certainly been a handful of Tinder dates that has, you know, they've turned into hook-ups. You know, they've turned into to sex, you know, same night, very quickly*’. Similarly, Eleanor (aged 42), began using dating apps 7 years ago after her and her husband divorced and spoke of how when she first started, she ‘*went on quite a few dates and have some random sex with some random people*’.

Nevertheless, throughout earlier sections in this chapter, perspectives from the likes of Georgia (aged 41) (see pp.95) are examples of how older participants also applied a casual meaning to dating apps. Indeed, other participants at similar stages in the life course also considered dating apps convenient. In fact, it was part of their motivations for using them in the first place. For example, Ben (aged 44) spoke of how he purposefully used dating apps because they were ‘*[...] something I can sit there, even if my kids are in bed or even if I'm on my own, day or night*’ and Grace (aged 42) liked how ‘*[...] you can swipe, you can message 24 hours a day, realistically. Doesn't have to be that one night a week that you might get out or, you know, that weekend that*

you've managed to get the kids babysat. It's accessible. It's easy'. This resonates with the spatial-temporal aspects of dating app use addressed earlier in this chapter. Similarly, Peter (aged 55) shared the preference that *'Typically, for me, it would be if you've got a conversation up and running, then I want to meet at the first opportunity. You know, within the first two or three weeks because what's the point?'*. As such, these examples collectively highlight how 'older' participants may have ideally been searching for different, more 'serious' relationship outcomes from their dating app use, (albeit this was not determinative) but casual use was still celebrated and employed by these participants.

'Older' participants experiences' of using dating websites also seemed to complicate the serious versus casual distinction constructed by younger participants. For instance, Grace (aged 42) spoke of how she specifically chose to use paid sites like Match.com because *'you presume you're joining up to somewhere like Match.com, that the people on Match.com, are serious about dating'*. However, in her experience, this was not necessarily the case and she found that:

I've had just as many dick pics on Match.com as I have on Plenty Of Fish and Tinder. So, it makes no odds at all. People, you know, you often get a message on Match.com off guys saying hi, what are you up to? You know, fancy coming round in a while? I can come round to you, we can watch a movie or, you know, stay over and I think listen mate! If you can't afford to shoe the horse, you're not riding it⁵⁶.

Just from the few accounts from 'older' participants that I was able to interview it is possible to complicate and challenge the seemingly black and white distinctions that younger participants made between younger and older dating apps use. Indeed, whilst there is evidence of flexibility and that expectations of normative use of dating apps for younger participants did seem to be different to older participants, it was still the case that this was not deterministic and older participants in this study seemed to both reinforce, as well as subvert these imagined age-appropriate desires.

It would be unrealistic to expect total conformity, it is common for conformity to co-exists with divergence (Kusch, 2005). The theoretical tools provided by PTSI may also help contextualise why such divergence exists between older and younger participants expectations of, and their use of, dating apps. Social institutions are conventional, and people's finite experiences of dating, being in relationships and using dating apps can ultimately change their interpretations (a good example further on in the chapter is Justin's case, pp.116). To this end, older participants might have substantially different experiences of being in relationships than

⁵⁶ The pervasiveness of image based sexual abuse will be explored in Chapter 6

younger people and/or of using dating apps and so their interpretations and practices might be different from younger people (Kusch, 2005; Schyfter, 2009).

This leads me on to the final question. Considering the stigma that younger participants aimed at older users of dating apps, if older people are navigating their intimate lives on dating apps, and in serious ways, whether, and in what ways, did such ageist views and sexual stigma influence, inform, and sanction older participants use and experience of dating apps? What I found was that it did, evidenced by the ways ‘older’ users spoke of negotiating ways of using dating apps age appropriately. The first way in which this was evident was how ‘older’ participants spoke of how their use of dating apps was different to younger users or had changed across time. For example, Justin, (aged 55+), was convinced by some younger work colleagues to download Tinder after he and his wife of 20 years divorced.

I signed up to Tinder and then they says c'mon we'll get you some photos. It was a bit of a fun and a laugh and a joke. Took some photos. We need to write you a bio and I thought nah, I'm not putting that up, I says because the stuff that they was putting on was like for their age range, like mid-20s to late 20s, like nah I can't put that up. No, no, no. So, I eventually stumbled on urm a bio popped up and then put it on there.

The way in which Justin speaks of how his work colleagues’ draft of his bio was ‘*for their age range*’ illuminates how social understandings of what it means to age appropriately shaped his understanding of what was appropriate for him to put in his profile. Justin went on to describe how his younger work colleagues put ‘*cheeky*’ or in-authentic things in their own profiles and tried doing the same with his but that he did not think that this was a good idea as his years of experience had told him that embellishing like this would never end well if it came to meeting the person. Again, signalling that the finite experiences Justin had experienced throughout the years are shaping his understanding of how best it is to date now (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Kusch, 2005; Carpenter, 2015). ‘Acting your age’ on dating apps was also shown to be something some participants considered when deciding on what kinds of interactions were appropriate over the apps. Eleanor (aged, 42), for example, expressed frustration at men who attempted to engage in sexting or sex chat on dating apps and how this was something she had grown out of:

Honestly Melissa, I'm quite stern about the whole thing. I'm like nah I don't play at that sex chat. I'm so over sexting haha. So, 2 years and 2 months ago haha. That's not flirting, that's you know you've gone into the full-on sex chat and no I'm not playing that game with you 'cause you know I'm 42 man I'm not 16. I'm like no, no.

Again, Eleanor's use of *'I'm 42 man I'm not 16'* is arguably illustrative of how she is aware that there are age-appropriate sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1984) and that her awareness of this has shaped what kind of interactions she feels are appropriate for her age and ultimately what kinds of interactions she desires on the apps. Something which perhaps further reinforces this proposition is how Eleanor also spoke of how her intentions on the apps had changed over time. As highlighted above, Eleanor spoke about how when she first downloaded dating apps she went *'through a phase of thinking some company would be quite nice once or twice and then cheerio ahaha'* but that in the last *'2 years and 2 months'* her intentions had switched to wanting to find someone to spend the rest of her life with. Getting older seems to be her impetus for this abandoning of some sexual scripts and the adoption of others, as she commonly made comments about how she was *'too old for that'* and how hook-ups were something *'somebody 20 years younger than me is probably looking for'*. The way Eleanor communicated the fact she had used dating apps to have hook-ups was also interesting because as she was describing her hook-up phase, she interrupted herself by saying *'I'm trying to be as polite as I can haha'*. This could have been said without any meaning behind it other than the fact she was taking part in a professional study and talking to a stranger about sex and she was not sure how polite she needed to be. Nevertheless, given the way Eleanor talks of growing out of her hook-up phase, it does not seem wholly inappropriate to interpret this as another indication of how there are certain sexual scripts that are regarded as more appropriate for some life stages than others, and that Eleanor's awareness of this helped her negotiate how to *'act her age'* (Fairhurst, 1998) on dating apps. This was not an isolated case; the majority of participants who were older either spoke of the ways in which they imagined their experiences and use of dating apps would be different to younger groups. Namely, that younger cohorts would be more likely to view and use dating apps for hook-ups, and how this is not *'as true up the age range'* (Peter, aged 55).

As such, the more convincing explanation for why the majority of dating app users are Millennials or belong to Generation Z⁵⁷ (Iqbal, 2022) then is not that this is 'natural' but that it is the product of complex and nuanced sexual scripts and social institutions around casual and low-stakes use at play which place dating apps as a younger person tool.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to examine the high degree of normativity evident in participants dating app use and how this demonstrated that dating app use is a social institution.

⁵⁷ The generational cut off points are not definitive, however, Millennials are usually considered those who were born between 1981-1996 (ages 23-38) and if you are born from 1997-2012 you are considered as belonging to Generation Z (ages 7-22) (Dimock, 2019).

Demonstrating that participants' dating app use displayed normativity requires three things: (1) that dating apps can be mobilised correctly and/or incorrectly, (2) that dating apps are subject to normative judgements of usage, and (3) that dating app services are normatively evaluated as either good or bad examples of dating apps (Schyfter, 2009). Firstly, participants normatively evaluated the performance of different online dating platforms. Dating apps were constructed as being the better choice of online dating tool because other platforms, like online dating websites, were seen as failing to operate within particular formative intentional actions. That is, dating websites failed to operate on a casual and low-stakes basis. Secondly, dating app usage was subject to normative examination. Indeed, there was a shared expectation across the majority of the dataset that dating apps *should* be employed in a casual and low-stakes manner and examples were provided of the various ways that participants' dating app practices aligned with these expectations (e.g., minimal profile, quick swiping, meeting as soon as possible etc.). These converged to illustrate that there was a correct and/or incorrect way of using dating apps.

Dating app use can, therefore, be argued to be a social institution. Participants demonstrated that they were competent members of the social institution of casual and low-stakes use through their referential talk of the meaning they ascribed to dating apps and their individual dating app practices. Competence, and incompetency, was also illustrated by how participants both engaged in, and were subject to, sanctioning practices, which have been argued as being crucial for upholding understandings of correct artefact use. In this case, the who, what, when, where, and how of dating app use. This ultimately leads me to conclude that, whilst materiality of artefacts is crucially important, analysis confirms Schyfter's (2009:108) assertion that 'design cannot account for our continued understanding and knowledge of artefacts. Only social practices can'.

Nevertheless, thus far I have only demonstrated that dating app use is normative, in that participants across the dataset held similar views around what correct dating app use looked like and showed how they individually succeeded at following and enforcing what they felt correct use of dating apps involved. However, a core tenet of PTSI is that social institutions are collectively constituted (Kusch, 2005; Schyfter, 2009). The following chapter will explore in more depth the ways that correct dating app use was shown to be a collective achievement. It will also begin to address the contradictions that were evident in participants' own claims that dating apps were casual, low-stakes and nonchalant.

5 Chapter 5. The Reality of Playing the Tinder Game

Thus far, normative use of dating apps involved being casual, nonchalant, and low-stakes. This Chapter moves away from discussing the rhetoric participants had about dating apps to analysing descriptions of their own actual dating app practices and experiences, which largely contradicted one another. Indeed, looking closely at participants own accounts of their dating app practice revealed that a lot of time and energy went into dating apps. This was evidenced in the ways participants spoke of the labour that went into constructing and managing a ‘good’ dating app profile, which is what the first half of this Chapter addresses. A ‘good’ dating app profile, according to participants, was one which encouraged other users to engage further with their profile, such as clicking through the rest of their profile and swiping right. Having a ‘good’ profile was, therefore, seen to be key in achieving initial measures of success on dating apps (i.e., getting someone to match with you).

The second half of this chapter deals with participants’ accounts of how much ‘success’ they felt they were getting on dating apps, which seems very important given the labour the first half of this chapter will show went into them. Participants’ accounts of the dating app process reveal that there were different layers of success. Nevertheless, participants did not describe having much success at any of these different stages of the dating app process, and instead encountering (sometimes unbeatable) hurdles which led them to feel as though dating apps were a waste of time and question whether they worked at all. I argue that this contradicts the nonchalant and unconcerned attitude participants stated they had when using dating apps.

5.1 Profiles: Shallow or important?

In the previous chapter it was briefly mentioned that one of the ways participants constructed dating apps as efficient and themselves as nonchalant was to do with how quickly a dating app profile could be set up, coupled with the expectation that profiles should be kept brief and that users did not have to take full advantage of the social cues (picture, bio) available for presenting oneself. However, when it came to speaking with participants about how they went about constructing their dating app profiles, it became very clear that setting up a profile took a lot more thought and work than ‘*just whack up a few profiles, say you are male or female, what age you are, you know, and off you go*’ (Grace)⁵⁸. Indeed, participants very much wanted to

⁵⁸ The age of participants will not be included throughout the rest of the data chapters, aside from a few instances where age is a relevant analytic category.

create a ‘good’ profile which encouraged others to engage further with their profile and put great thought, care, and work into achieving this.

As has been addressed in Chapter 2, one’s self-presentation and impression management has been shown to be incredibly important in online settings (see Hogan, 2010; Marwick and Boyd, 2011), including online dating sites (see Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011) and most recently dating apps (see Birnholtz et al., 2014; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Ward, 2017). The same seemed to be the case for the participants in this study, albeit in slightly different ways due to the distinctive nature of dating app design, which I have already shown to be far more restrictive, and which arguably poses new challenges for self-presentation (Ward, 2017). Instead, it seemed to be profile pictures, in particular, that became paramount and which participants took great care over in order to give off social cues on their own, as well as assess others, dating app profiles. Alan stated this very explicitly in the way he spoke of how *‘you really have to be selective with your picture’* because *‘it feels like it’s very limited in terms of how you are actually making an impression’*. Nonetheless, similar sentiments were more subtly communicated through the exhaustive detail participants gave of the very complex and purposeful rationales they had for uploading certain profile pictures.

...you need to have one with your friends in it so you look like you’ve got mates. 100% I say this to myself, I’ll say it to any person, that is my trick of the trade! Well, it’s not my trick of the trade, it’s a well-known fact because, if it’s just you, you look really like you’ve got no mates (Rebekka).

It was took in Norway actually that picture, so that shows I like to travel and kind of pictures and whatever, and then there’s one of me at my Masters graduation so I look quite smart (Aidan).

I will address what participants felt a profile picture *‘should’* have or what it should *‘show’* in more detail shortly, but for now, what I wish to illustrate is that it was profile pictures first and foremost that participants relied on to make a ‘good’ pre-match impression. Arguably, profile pictures were used by participants on their dating app profiles to give off cues which would typically be readily available on dating websites, such as interests, hobbies, skills, qualities, as most users are asked to fill out as part of the compatibility questionnaires and personality profiles. Indeed, profile pictures seem to do more than simply show other users what you look like and help them measure your physical attractiveness. Rather, in the absence of these richer social cues, they seemed to also take on the role of indicating (and measuring) some of the things that are important for (heterosexual) dating. As we can see above, some of the specific

qualities participants spoke of as important were how fun you look, whether you have friends, are active, or smart. However, it is important to recognise that these are markers of class⁵⁹ and adherence to (gender and sexual) norms.

This was further reinforced by the ways in which some participants would say they could ‘read’ or ‘tell a lot by a photo and things’ (Eleanor). In some cases, participants would read into other users’ profiles with such scrutiny that the smallest of details would ‘put me off’ (Megan), or ‘give me the ick⁶⁰’ (Alesha) and allow them to make a judgement. In fact, when I asked participants what they looked for in a dating app profile, a lot of them could not think of much. Nevertheless, when I asked them what put them off someone’s profile, they had lists. One participant, Megan, took it upon herself to open her Tinder app during our interview to swipe through some profiles and annotate her decision-making process.

Megan: *So, this one here [picture of 4 men in a club wearing very similar outfits – white top and black skinny jeans] look like players and also there’s two people in the first photo and look here, can you see [same profile, man posing topless] He’d go left [Swipes left].*

IV: *Can I just ask what is it about that glimpse that you’ve just got that has just made you go no?*

Megan: *I imagine guys who do that, and again very, very, stereotypical, but I imagine guys who do that are like a player.*

From just a quick glimpse of what the person was wearing (or not in this case) and what they were doing in their profile picture, Megan, was able to make the judgement that he would go left because he was a ‘player’. There were other very similar examples where participants would make a very quick judgement based off very small cues, such as Ben, who said he swiped left on profiles of women where they had ‘pictures of them horse riding and kind of making...stuff like that, because horses take a lot of time and a lot of energy and a lot of money and so that’s going to seriously limit every anything that we do’. Therefore, quite big or extensive assumptions seem to be being drawn from quite small snapshots, and quite hastily.

⁵⁹ An in-depth discussion of the ways in which issues pertaining to class were raised by participants is beyond the parameters of this chapter and this study more generally, but I mention it here to demonstrate that social issues beyond gender and sexuality may also be pertinent to explore in the context of dating apps and an area which could be worthy of future research.

⁶⁰ ‘The Ick’ is a dating term used to describe an instance where someone will be dating someone and they will do something that immediately puts you off them (Gulla,2020).

Indeed, dating apps being limited cue environments seemed to only partly account for why it was profile pictures in particular that were treated as important for crafting a ‘good’ dating app profile. For instance, this factor on its own does not fully account for why it was mainly pictures and not always the bio which participants focussed their energy on. For participants, another important factor was the widely shared expectation that other users of dating apps did not spend much time choosing whether to swipe left or right on their dating app profile. This aligns with the nonchalant attitude participants felt was expected of users but could also be shaped by participants awareness of how long they themselves spent deliberating on a profile. Notably, Megan spoke of how she could swipe through 100 profiles in a minute and usually ‘*just [swipes] like left, left, left, left*’. Many other participants made similar comments such as ‘*you’re lucky if I get past like the first photo*’ (Rebekka) because when they swipe through the stack of profiles on their dating app(s) of choice, that ‘*generally, it’s the first picture whether I’m like no. Then if I’m like yes, I’ll look through. So, by the first picture I’m either like yes, maybe so or no*’ (Lynn)⁶¹.

This suggests that it is not simply that all photos are generally important pre-match cues in this setting, it seems to be the main photo which is of greater significance as it determines whether someone will engage further with the rest of your profile and potentially match with you. As Amelia put it: ‘*that’s the game, isn’t it? You need to present yourself in a way that the person actually reads your profile or looks at your second photo*’. Going off how quickly Megan could make this decision, and what others also described, participants felt they had a very short window in which to entice other users to engage further with their profile. Most participants explained that if people did not put effort into their picture or if they miss-judged their choice of picture, it would lead to a left swipe. For instance, Sally explained ‘*I just kind of go left if... I’m just like no I’m not interested in this*’.

Dating apps are often accused of being shallow because they are all about looks (see McBride, 2018), something that participants in this study also recognised and accused dating apps of themselves.

I do think you can tell a lot from someone’s profile because I know critiques of dating apps are that they are really like shallow and that it’s just off the basis of someone’s photo, but I don’t think that’s true at all. I think there’s so much you can read from the type of pictures people use...(Jennifer).

⁶¹ Data that I discuss later in the chapter will challenge participants’ own seemingly straightforward construction that all imagined others are quick to judge a profile and will reveal that consumption of profiles is actually quite a complex affair.

Nevertheless, the data presented above suggest that this completely undermines the importance participants attributed pictures in this setting and, because of this, the thought and effort participants put into choosing pictures that would give off the right social cues (Goffman, 1978). It is not enough to simply label these apps as shallow and all about looks, this is potentially part of it, but we might also want to consider what additional work these pictures are doing. These findings also challenge the straightforward rhetoric that the way dating apps are designed, intertwined with the nonchalant attitude expected of most users, means that dating apps do not demand much effort or energy from participants. Rather, it seems as though it is precisely because the design of dating apps limit participants ability to give off rich social cues about themselves and because participants imagined other users would not be putting effort into selection, that participants ended up putting a lot of energy into constructing a profile which would ensure that they stood out enough to keep them in '*the game*'. Therefore, looks did seem to matter, but not in the straightforward way we might think.

Given participants felt constructing a 'good' profile seemed to be very important for their success on dating apps, it is also important to consider how participants went about learning what a 'good' profile involved.

5.2 Learning the Rules of the Game

Existing research tells us that knowing how to behave and present oneself on social media platforms is complicated due to the 'collapse of social context and social roles' (Marwick, 2012:378). On Facebook and Twitter, for example, many kinds of audiences are typically collapsed into one context, meaning what you create in these spaces could be consumed by your family, friends, as well as co-workers and many other different groups (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). This multiplicity has been argued to make it difficult for users to navigate the boundaries of how to act and what social roles are appropriate (See Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012; Litt and Hargittai, 2016). Users have been argued to rely on 'mental conceptualizations of the people with whom they are communicating' or their 'imagined audience' as a helpful guide for ascertaining how to act in these settings (Litt, 2012:331). Understanding the ways in which users conceptualise their imagined audiences and navigate the expectations of user etiquette on social media sites has, therefore, been highlighted to be an important focus for future research.

It was apparent when looking at the specific language used by participants that they had had an imagined audience in mind when deciding how best to present themselves on dating apps. For instance, participants were very preoccupied with how their picture and bio would be received by other users. So much so that their rationale for choosing a picture always seemed to involve

careful consideration of who would be viewing it, what ‘they’ would ‘know’ from it or what it would ‘look like’ or ‘show’ ‘them’.

You’ve got to come up with the witty one liner or like a funny joke. Something to make someone think ‘yes, this is an interesting or fun person (Alan).

Your first one should be pretty much a proper front on photo of you, make sure there's a body shot so they know what your size and how tall you are and stuff and your figure. Then you should have one with friends so it shows you're not complete loner, maybe one would like a hobby and then a holiday/festival snap that shows you're happy and outgoing and fun kind of thing (Darcy).

However, there are some significant structural differences between social networking sites (which most research on the imagined audience has been based on) and dating apps, which may impact users’ conceptualisations of their imagined audiences. Users of social networking sites, for example, have some control over their audience as they can control who they follow and who follows them, and use privacy settings to control who sees, likes and shares their posts. However, dating apps use geo-location software, alongside set age and gender filters, to determine which profiles are shown and shown to (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Byron and Albury, 2018). The imagined audience is, therefore, a lot harder to predict as any number of profiles (strangers and people known to you) who fit your search criteria could come up and this could change depending on your location. Moreover, in the case of this study, dating apps were used for heterosexual dating (in the broadest sense) and so the imagined user is likely to be defined by this boundary – it will either be a man or a woman. It is, therefore, important to consider what role gender and sexual norms play in influencing what participants believe is important to ‘show’ and what ‘they’ will want to see.

More recently, Byron and Albury (2018) also point to the fact that on social networking sites, like Facebook, users can publicly browse friends’ profiles and look on their homepage wall to witness others posts and interactions as a way of gauging the expectations for self-presentation and conduct more generally. However, on dating apps this is not the case, you can only see the profiles that come up on your deck and only interact with people with whom you have matched, which makes it far more difficult to grasp the agreed etiquette. This lead Byron and Albury (2018:216) to claim that dating apps users largely rely on ‘private’ interactions with others in order to craft their own behavioural norms for in-app communication’.

The points raised here collectively draw attention to, beyond that which has been addressed previously, how knowing how to make a ‘good’ profile on a dating app is different, and

potentially more complicated, than in other settings. The next section builds on the arguments of these previous studies, and raises new issues around understanding how participants learned the rules of the game, which will also go on to cement my argument that dating app use is a social institution. I first show the ways in which participants drew on their in-app interactions to determine the rules of the game in ways consistent with the more individual focus of Byron and Albury (2018).

5.2.1 (Individual) In-App Interactions

A few participants spoke of how their private in-app interactions with matches and past experiences on the apps helped teach them what would make a ‘good’ dating app profile. For example, it was through witnessing other’s profiles and through interactions with matches on dating apps that male participants described learning that height mattered and needed to be included in the profile as it would impact women’s swiping decision. Indeed, most male participants spoke of how women usually tried to establish their height early on in their interactions. Rose recalled that her current boyfriend told her that ‘*a lot of the girls I spoke to were like oh how tall are you?*’. Male participants consequently attempted to pre-empt this by putting their height on their bio: ‘*a fair few guys I’m sure put their height on and stuff like that*’ (Harry). Harry (6ft4), did not include his height in his bio because he did not want to be just ‘*a tall guy*’ and assumed his pictures would let women know he was tall, but he did question whether he would get more matches if he did and described how ‘*sometimes I match and I’m like I AM! (6ft4)*’. For other male participants, however, information about their height compromised the entirety of their bio.

Furthermore, realising that height matters, men in this study who did not consider themselves to be tall would purposefully avoid mentioning their height in their profile or spoke of strategies they had developed for masking their true height. Aidan, for instance, included a picture of him with his Nan as one of his profile pictures because ‘*my Nan is shorter than me so it makes me look a bit taller than I am haha*’. Aidan followed this with ‘*I think that height is something, it’s one of the few physical things that I think most women do pay attention to*’. This comment illustrates that, whilst knowing to include height in the bio was something men gathered from their interactions on the apps themselves, this is not separate to gender and sexual norms and expectations more broadly where it is desirable and perhaps socially acceptable for the man to be the taller one in the (heterosexual) relationship. As such, arguably, it was through their in-app interactions that participants better understood what gender and sexual norms were valued and worth displaying on dating apps.

Byron and Albury (2018) looked at dating app etiquette from the perspective of same-sex-attracted female users, nevertheless, participants in this study identified as heterosexual and would therefore largely only see and interact with profiles which belonged to members of the opposite sex. Dating etiquette or norms for heterosexual men and women is known to not always be the same (Eaton and Rose, 2011) and so it may not have always been appropriate for participants in this study to fully base their own behaviour and self-presentation on the profiles they see and the ‘private’ interactions they have with their matches. It is also questionable as to how helpful the profiles would necessarily be given that it was socially acceptable for profiles to be kept ‘brief’. This may explain why private in-app interactions were not enough to teach users how to act and how to construct a ‘good’ profile. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that it was participants’ lack of in-app interactions which indicated that their profiles were not ‘good’ and that they needed to seek further advice to make their profiles stand out enough to encourage people to engage further with their profile, which they did by consulting a variety of other sources.

These other sources included explicitly asking friends, consulting social networking sites and internet sites, as well as implicitly learning through engaging in collective use of the apps. In their discussion of these sources, respondents demonstrated learning what made a ‘good’ profile was, in some cases, a collective accomplishment as they trained themselves and each other in how to produce ‘good’ dating app profiles. What will follow is a discussion of these and the ways they challenge the individualistic assertions of Albury and Byron (2018:216) that ‘there is no opportunity for group discussion, limiting the ability to foster a sense of community or establish a sense of common goals’.

5.2.2 *Collective Accomplishment*

5.2.2.1 *Asking for help*

Many participants sought information and help on how to make a good profile through asking friends for help, advice, and feedback on their dating app profile. Interestingly, both male and female respondents thought that women, more so than men, were more likely to have a culture of setting up their profile with one, or a group, of their female friends and to ask their female friends for advice on their profile. For instance, Betty described how she only ended up downloading Tinder because her friend agreed to do it too and they ended up making their profiles together: *‘we helped each other pick the photos. I think she urm I’m sure she like recommended like a bio’*. Similarly, Amelia was already using Tinder when she persuaded *‘my mate who’s 50 who has been single for so long, and she was really like, I don’t know what to*

do this! So, it was nice to, like, you know, just like chat about what she wants and stuff'. Women were also more likely to describe times where they asked friends for help on their profile more generally, such as Mary who described that *'I normally ask my friends what they think and what pictures to use'*. Some female participants even spoke of sending pictures into group chats and asking which one's they should upload to Tinder.

Contrastingly, very few male participants, if any, spoke of sitting down with their male friends and helping each other with their profile or asking their other male friends to help them choose which pictures to upload. Indeed, male respondents spoke of wanting, but having no help at all when it came to setting up their profile. Instead, men were more likely to speak of relying on the *'trial and error'* method, taking advice from websites and a few instead asked their female friends to have a look at their profile. For instance, Alan and Harry both spoke of occasions where they ran their profile by a few of their female friends and asked *'what would you change?'* (Alan) or *'should I have said that? Or what do I say? Does this sound alright from your point of view and stuff?'* (Harry). Aidan went on to explain that he was more likely to turn to his female friends for this advice because *'I think it's easier to talk to girls and confide and things like that. Whereas I probably wouldn't go to my male friends and ask for help'* (Aidan).

This was also corroborated by female participants who described how they have been asked for their female opinion on their male friend's profiles: *'some of my friends I've looked and helped them make their profiles or like looked at their profiles to make sure it's not totally off putting to any women'* (Jennifer). This did not seem to work the other way around and female participants rarely spoke of specifically asking their male friends for advice or feedback on their profile, likely because they already had sufficient help from their female friends⁶².

This points to the collective nature of gender performances and how this may inform how men and women approach their self-presentation and use of dating apps. Whilst asking for help setting up one's dating app profile and choosing the right pictures and words to successfully present oneself on dating apps may be part of women's 'collective rituals' for enacting femininity, this seemed to be less the case for men (Grazian, 2007). Typically, collective rituals of homosociality enacted by men, when it comes to 'the girl hunt', have been found to involve displaying heterosexual competence and engaging in competitive up-man-ship of sexual prowess (Grazian, 2007). These prescribe to cultural beliefs that men should be self-confident and independent (amongst other things) when it comes to approaching and trying to attract a

⁶² Some female participants did use them with their male friends to scope out competition, which I talk about later in the chapter.

woman. This seemed to translate into men's dating app use in the way some male participants spoke of showing off to *'the lads who I've matched with and stuff like that'* (Jeff).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that there was an absence of collective rituals of homosociality which involved men collectively helping one another set up their profile as this, arguably, involves displaying ineptitude and a lack of heterosexual competency. It could absolutely be the case that men just did not happen to bring up times where they had asked friends for help because they did not feel it was important enough to bring up in the interview. However, from the interviews I did conduct with men, it seemed as though men did want help but that they did not feel they could ask for it from their male friends.

There's definitely a whole thesis about men being lone hunters and women being social pack animals urm and I think that goes towards people asking for advice too. Men tend to assume that they've got it right, women tend to assume they've got it wrong and want social feedback (Sean).

5.2.2.2 Social Swiping

Dating app practice was not always described as a solo activity. Many participants recognised the *'social element'* of dating apps and spoke of times where they engaged in what I refer to as *'social swiping'*. I use the term social swiping to refer to the different ways that participants used dating apps collectively with other people. Participants described two kinds of social swiping: swiping/messaging collectively as a peer group and looking at/using profiles of members of the opposite sex, both of which participants demonstrated helped train them, and others, in how to make a *'good'* dating app profile.

5.2.2.2.1 Collectively as a peer group

It was common for participants to speak of occasions where they had used dating apps collectively as a peer group. These occasions tended to come about when participants were bored with friends or drunk on nights out. Sometimes it would be a case where *'one of us will go on it and the other one will be like oh are you on Tinder? I'll go on it'* (Mary) and so they would be using their own apps individually but whilst sitting in a group. In these cases, participants spoke of sharing with each other *'I've just matched that person'* and/or comparing their matches *'to see if we see the same people. That's always quite funny'* (Alesha).

In other cases, participants spoke of times where they would use their app collectively with other people. For instance, Annabelle spoke of times where *'we'd sort of put it on the laptop,*

put an HDMI cable in and...and we'd like to have it up on the telly and we'd all do it together'. 'Do it together', Annabelle explained, involved both looking at profiles and choosing as a group whether they should swipe right or not, but also sending funny messages and having conversations with matches. This was not always necessarily done with friends of theirs that also used dating app. Friends, who did not use the apps, because they were either in relationships or did not want to, frequently wanted to 'play on that game'. This was the case for Ben, who said that it was a 'regular thing, whenever we'd go out drinking, they would always grab my phone at some point and start swiping for me and messaging and those sorts of things...Once I was out drinking with the leader of local council who I know and yeah the poetry he was sending to some random woman, I didn't know he had it in him'.

Collective use of dating apps was seen by participants to be quite a common practice, demonstrated by the fact that Alan '*mentioned to a friend today that I was doing this interview and he mentioned that he goes on all his friends' Tinder account to fuck with people too*'. Recent work has also identified that, for both straight and queer women in particular, '*there is an entire network of intimacy, sociality, and publicity that forms around hook-up apps*' (Petrychyn, Parry and Johnson, 2020:249). Group discussions and interactions are known to be essential for norm negotiation and seemed to be a common part of participants' dating app practice for, as we can see, both male and female participants. There were some nuanced gender differences relating back to the issues mentioned in the above section around collective rituals of masculinity and femininity. Namely, that collective use of dating apps typically seemed to function as part of women's collective rituals of '*sharing stories and what you want and what you like in people, what you find attractive*' (Amelia) and part of their '*girly chit chat*' (Rose) more broadly.

We [her and her female friend] were just talking and were like what's the hot goss? What's going on in your life? and that kind of stuff when you're talking with your friends, as you do when you're going out for drinks and stuff like that. I think it's just like you start talking about like dating or like urm what they're doing in their lives and it just kind of happens after that, I guess. Yeah, so it just kind of follows the normal conversation urm when you're talking with other people so yeah (Lydia).

These kinds of narratives were absent from male participants accounts of their collective use, which suggests that collective use was not necessarily accompanied with chats about their feelings and emotions and more of something they did to have a laugh with the 'lads'. Indeed, a number of female participants did not expect men to be doing collective use in the same way as them because '*I think guys are bit more embarrassed about it. I don't know why but I just can't imagine them all sitting around someone's phone and swiping like in the same way that*

we do' (Alesha). Therefore, whilst these collective acts may be similar, they may have had different functions for men and women.

Humour and mockery in different settings have been found to have regulatory effects on gender and sexual identities (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Data collected from participants also suggests that these acts of collectively viewing and using other's dating apps can be a very educational practice. Participants spoke of how there was a lot of fun to be had at the expense of others on these apps and how they would ridicule some of the profiles that came up and purposefully match with these people and speak to them as a way of mockery.

It's also a lot of entertainment. You know, there's just a lot of like terrible profiles, people saying terrible things, so it's also quite entertaining in that sense as well. Just like, you know, not wanting to say it but a bit like a mocking aspect to it, which is terrible and problematic I know, but you're just like... It's just entertaining (Amelia).

I mean it was great entertainment for my friends you know they were screaming with laughter at some of the stuff I was showing them...so, in a way you could argue that what I got out of using the apps was just more kind of comedy value than urm haha than anything else' (Georgia).

Humour and mockery could be seen act as of sanctioning here as what participant's friends mock in others' profiles during these social swiping sessions may influence people's own conceptions of what a 'good' profile looks like, what kinds of profiles they should be attracted to, as well as appropriate conduct more generally. These instances of collective use of the apps can, therefore, be seen as acts of socialisation which work as a marker to 'expose, police and create gender-sexual hierarchies' (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 70).

5.2.2.2.2 *Looking at profiles of the opposite sex*

Collectively using a friend's profile, however, did not help participants necessarily gauge how other men or other women were presenting themselves as in these instances they could only see profiles of members of the opposite sex. As such, in cases where participants had the opportunity to 'have a go' or 'play' on a friend of the opposite sex's app, they strategically took this time to '*check out the competition*' (Ben).

Often, when I've been on dates, that we know we're not going to go anywhere, somehow we we've ended up kind of swapping phones and swiping on each other. It was eye opening. I'm always one for optimizing and I call it the 1% improvement. So, always everything I'm doing I'm trying to find how can I make a way of just making it 1% better.

So, seeing guys profiles was hopefully a way for me to say, well, how can I take some of those lessons? What works well? What doesn't? But so many of them are just atrocious (Ben).

I was just intrigued to see what it was like to look at straight women's, and particularly... and this was with one of my mates and he's like in his early 20s so it was like, you know, it was like young girls and it was interested to see how different it was. It was so different. Like like everyone looked great haha. I was like you're very lucky. Look at all these beautiful women, they all look great. Like, you should see the guys on mine haha like by comparison (Amelia).

She was looking at men so I was just interested to see what men were putting on their profiles so I can kind of compare mine to theirs or maybe even see oh that's actually a good idea, I'll do that, or yeah just seeing what other guys are doing and if there's anything that they're obviously doing that I'm not doing and I could start to do (Aidan).

Again, these collective interactions seemed to be quite educational for participants as they were an opportunity for participants to gauge what other women and men felt the normative standard of a 'good' profile was and take what they have learned to help them compete in the Tinder Game.

5.2.2.3 Twitter

Another resource some participants drew on to help them craft what they saw to be a 'good' dating app profile was Twitter. Specifically, a community of dating app users who had (usually) anonymous Twitter accounts and associated blogs dedicated to documenting, sharing and comparing their experiences using dating apps. A number of participants, typically older, were recruited through Twitter (see pp.59 in Chapter 3) and it was these same participants who spoke of using the #datingappcommunity to ask for feedback and advice on their profile.

Occasionally, and again it'll happen on Twitter, people, will actually, I've done it too, put a profile up or send it privately and ask for comments or, you know, which of these photos? and what do you have to say about this? And it's normally actually done kind of quite generously and sort of kind-heartedly, which is, you know, which is hard because obviously with guys together in a group and it can just become a massive piss take, even for me, as a kind of non-alpha (Peter).

I kinda look at other profiles on there and some people talk a lot of sense and you can take a lot from it and then there are some where you just think, really? What are you doing? Haha (Justin).

Again, aside from the act of asking their Twitter friends for help and browsing the profiles and advice shared by others, what stands out here is Peter's comment about how he received far more generous and kind-hearted feedback from his Twitter friends than he does from his male friends, which he implied would be met with mockery. This again seems to speak to the fact that asking for help does not seem to be part of men's collective homosocial rituals, at least in a serious way anyhow. One of the men I spoke to, Ben, was actively attempting to challenge and transgress this norm around men having to be '*lone hunters*' through his blog and podcast, where he gave advice to men about online dating. He spoke of how '*I get questions and guidance, that's sort of thing, that I can give out to people and it's... it's just a voice that wasn't there and isn't there still too much anywhere, sadly*'. Furthermore, whilst Sean had not done so himself and instead chose to carry on as a '*lone hunter*' and stick to the '*trial and error*' method, he described how he had also '*seen people who post their profile and say "I'm not finding who I'm looking for can you give me feedback on my profile?" and people are always willing to give feedback haha*'.

Whilst male participants may have spoken of Twitter being a more welcoming space to ask for feedback and seek advice on how to craft a 'good' dating app profile, it was equally helpful for many older female participants. For instance, participants like Darcy spoke of how she had friends with whom she could ask for advice but that she often preferred to consult Twitter because there were '*a load of people who get it*'. Similarly, Grace felt reassured when she went on '*Twitter and you follow a few people and then you hear them having the same conversations as you have with yourself. You know, why has this guy not gotten in touch? Why has he ghosted⁶³ us?*'. Nevertheless, women, more so than men, spoke of also using Twitter as a place to vent and share the '*crazy*' profiles they came across to both mock and shame them. For instance, Eleanor described how she shares screenshots (with the names blanked out) of '*the weird and wonderful photos that people use at profile pictures, which is haha ... surprising. Urm and yeah and maybe if people say... I've tweeted a couple of times about people who have openly said in their profiles that they're married and stuff*'.

The practice of publicly shaming the nightmarish behaviour of men on dating apps has been well documented (see Shaw, 2016; Vitis and Gilmore, 2017; Gillett, 2018; Thompson, 2018)

⁶³ See Appendix F, which provides a glossary of 'ghosting' and other dating app terms.

with Instagram sites such as *Bye Felipe* and *Tinder Nightmares* being spotlighted as sites of discursive activism which draw attention to gendered harassment on dating apps. Only one or two participants directly mentioned knowing of, browsing or engaging with these kinds of sites⁶⁴. Rather, the kinds of public shaming participants spoke of engaging with were on a slightly smaller, everyday scale, through their own Twitter pages or sharing screenshots of bad or funny profiles with friends via WhatsApp. Like Byron and Albury (2018: 12-13), however, I suggest that these acts of public shaming work as a form of ‘social-surveillance’ which informs user practice. Again, humour, ridicule and mockery found on social media sites, in this case Twitter, seems to function as a sanctioning tool which informs users of correct and incorrect practice. This was the case for Sean, who spoke of how he witnessed that ‘*women do tend to complain a lot on Twitter about how rubbish men are on dating apps*’ and how it was from looking at these complaints that he informally learnt that having bad grammar, group photos or badly lit photos were things to avoid when constructing a dating app profile.

As such, there seems to be a space on Twitter for dating app users to seek help and receive advice and an audience who is seeking this kind of advice, which again points to dating app use as a social institution. It is worth mentioning that it is possible that this community was not solely occupied by older people and that it was simply just chance that more people who were older and who belonged to this Twitter community came forward to be interviewed. However, from the data I have collected, it did seem as though Twitter was a space where older people in particular could ask for help. What’s more, they could ask for this help anonymously. Every participant who I interviewed from Twitter had an alias that they used on Twitter and spoke of how they liked the anonymity this provided them. Considering older users were far more likely to be stigmatised by younger participants, as well as their married friends and those who were in long-term relationships, it is likely that Twitter was a space where they felt they could ask this advice and not be judged.

5.2.2.4 ‘Hey Alexa, how do I make a good dating app profile?’

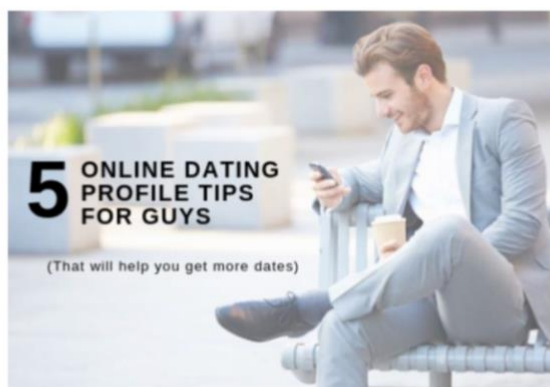
One final strategy mentioned by participants was to consult the internet and research how to create a ‘good’ dating app profile. It was more often male participants who spoke of consulting the internet to help them construct their dating app profile. The reasoning for this could stem from the fact that men were far less likely to have collective rituals where they could formally ask their friends for help and advice. Like most people with access to the internet, one of the most common ways was to ‘*just type into Google like dating app tips for men or something*’

⁶⁴ A more in-depth discussion of these kinds of sights can be found in the following chapter.

and look ‘on websites on how to make a good profile. You know, ‘cause there are where you can get advice for men, and women, on what to put on your profile, how to get more matches’ (Aidan). Some participants spoke of using these sites in order to get general ‘hints and tips on how to come across as presentable as possible’ (George).

Top 5 Online Dating Profile Tips For Guys [Updated 2021]

Does your online dating profile need a boost? This actionable expert advice gets results.



Whether you've had your online dating profile for years or you just started writing it, these top 5 dating profile tips will attract beautiful, smart women online – and entice them to actually respond to your messages.

Figure 11: Dating Profile Tips

Participants spoke of how some websites also offered gender specific advice for men and women. For instance, Aidan spoke of specifically searching how to make a good dating app profile ‘if you are a man’ and came across numerous pages dedicated to giving men advice. Existing research has pointed to how ‘narratives about sexual identities are produced as joint actions in which there is someone who tells the story- the storyteller- but also someone who asks for the story to be told’ (Budgeon, 2008:302). In this case, it appears that the internet sites that (mostly) male participants consulted communicated differences in sexual scripts for men and women in relation to how to construct a ‘good’ profile. Websites, then, potentially play an important role in (re)producing gender and sexual scripts. Some examples of the gender specific advice participants relayed included:

If all your photos are selfies, people are going to think you’ve got no friends. There’s all sorts of tiny micro-judgements people make (Aidan).

Apparently, women react less positively to men who smile on their photos on dating apps. Apparently, you should be neutral or frown (George).

The advice to avoid having just selfies and to show you have friends aligns with the complex rationales outlined earlier in this chapter and so it is possible to see how the advice on these websites is potentially informing participants' own dating app practice and plays a role in shaping collectively held normative standards of what makes a 'good' profile. Nevertheless, as I go on to discuss further shortly, the advice held on internet websites was not always relevant in practice.

These websites were not just dedicated to how to take a good photo, participants also spoke of drawing on them to help them come up with a '*witty one liner*', which was spoken of by participants as '*the done thing*' or what was normal to find in theirs, and others, dating app bio. Indeed, rather than, say, treating the bio as a space to provide long-winded information about relational goals, hobbies and interests, which participants typically associated with traditional online dating sites, participants explained that '*the whole point is to give just enough intrigue for them to message you*' (Mary). Witty one liners seemed to be participants main strategy for developing this intrigue, but the wit was not always be traced back to the participants themselves and they often spoke of borrowing ones they had found on dating app advice websites.

The witty one liners that participants picked from these websites commonly drew on popular cultural references to supply their audiences with a familiar set of symbolic resources with which to assess how fun they were. For instance, some participants spoke of purposefully picking lines from tv and films like '*I drink and I know things*' (Samantha), which is from Game of Thrones or music lyrics such as '*I don't want no scrub*' (Darcy). Therefore, not only were bio's purposefully brief, which seems to fit with the expectation of the normative user as casual, but the brief information they did provide was not meant to be factual, it was to show how fun you were, which also seems to uphold the image of a nonchalant and unconcerned user who is not taking themselves too seriously. Nevertheless, the fact that participants were taking time to research witty one liners that were funny enough or would make them stand out implies again that participants were not as nonchalant about their profile as they made out to be.

Seeking hints and tips on the internet might be individually sought, however the misalignment between what the websites say to do, and what actually works, raises some interesting questions around how useful these sites are on their own. Many participants commented on how they took the advice on websites with a '*pinch of salt*' as they knew not all of it was reliable. Therefore,

it is likely that it was through trying and testing how this advice holds up in interaction with others on the app and through considering it in relation to the hints and tips informally gathered from collective use with friends that they were able to understand, adjust and ‘appropriately’ apply the advice on websites.

Therefore, whilst the design of dating apps may spark the assumption that gauging correct dating app use is somewhat of an individualistic experience, where users develop their own self-made rules, the above discussion of participants’ informal and formal strategies for learning what constitutes a ‘good’ profile demonstrate that learning the rules of the game was a collective accomplishment⁶⁵. Indeed, it was mainly what others were doing, mocking or not doing, which informed participants own conceptualisation of a ‘good’ profile and correct use more generally. However, these processes also revealed that there were some significant gender differences in how men and women learned how to craft what they felt was a ‘good’ profile. Specifically, that men were less likely to have collective rituals with their friends where they can ask for help, advice, and training in how to construct a good profile and instead tended to rely on websites, discourse on social media and their own in app experiences to deduce what a ‘good’ profile looks like. This complicates the argument that the rules of correct profile construction are collectively produced as this would imply that both men and women would know how to play the game. Instead, the findings suggest that gender and sexual scripts pertaining to collective masculinities and femininities seem to inform in what ways, and how competently, men and women were able to train themselves and others in crafting a ‘good’ profile. Namely, that men were far less competent than women.

This is perhaps why it was so common for female participants to comment on how incompetent men were at presenting themselves in a way that they felt was appealing on dating apps. The toilet selfie was a classic example of this and so many women were absolutely baffled by how many men were making, what they felt, was the same mistake on their profiles.

...loads of men who’s profile photo is, they’re obviously in a public toilet, and they take it against the mirror in the public toilet so you can see a urinal in the background haha and it’s like have you ever met a woman? You know, women do not like haha the idea of uri... you know it’s repulsive (Georgia).

On the one hand, women expressed frustration at ‘*the sad state of affairs*’ of men’s profiles and how this was a ‘*callous reminder of the lack of romantic options available to you*’ (Jennifer).

⁶⁵ Dating apps do not operate in a vacuum. Whilst a case has been made for how dating app profile construction will be different that of social media, it is still the case that participants’ experience with using different social media platforms will have informed their self-presentation choices.

On the other hand, female participants found them to be of great entertainment. It has already been highlighted that women took great pleasure in mocking men's profiles either together as a group or in the form of public shaming on social media sites like Twitter. Georgia even suggested that this was the one good thing that did come out of using dating apps. In either case, female participants credited men's lack of competency in crafting profiles which they found appealing down to the fact that men did not have the same relationships with their friends as they did.

...but otherwise how do you work out what's normal? And how do you work what's... how to make certain decisions or whether somethings ok or not? Or just I think it's just important to get your feedback of your pals and how men, if men, don't do that then maybe that explains the terrible decisions they seem to make haha (Jennifer).

Therefore, because men seemed to lack collective rituals with their male friends which allowed them to collectively classify and/or infer what makes a good profile, it seemed as though they ended up collectively being bad at knowing how to construct a good profile. This may also speak to gender and sexual norms and whether it is more acceptable for men to not put in the same amount of effort as women, as it is typically the female body which is sexually objectified (see Mackinnon, 1994).

These strategies for researching and ascertaining the rules of the game when it came to correctly presenting oneself on dating apps also reinforce the point made in the previous section that participants did in fact care about constructing a 'good' profile that would help them get further engagement on the apps. Not only did their actions not conform to the normative standard of being casual and unconcerned, but they also seemed to put quite a lot of work and effort into constructing and managing their profile. Take what Ben says above and how everything he does is about '*that 1% improvement*'. Indeed, participants did not just do some research when they first downloaded these apps, make the suggested edits, and carry on with their profile as is throughout the remainder of their time on the apps. Rather participants spoke of how this research and managing their profile was an ongoing process.

5.3 Jumping Hurdles, putting in graft and wasting your time

It has already been established that participants did care about whether they were 'successful' or not on dating apps and that considerable work went into constructing and managing their profile to ensure this, but what happens after this? For the participants in this study, the next steps seemed to be even more difficult as participants spoke of having to jump '*hurdles*' at various stages of the dating app process. What follows is a detailed overview of each of these

stages, I identified 5 in total, and the hurdles and challenges participants described facing whilst trying to pass each stage. Notably, very few participants ever really managed to get to stage 5. Instead, participants seemed to fall at the last hurdle and be continuously stuck in a cycle between stages 1-4. It was outlined in the previous chapter that the rhetoric often upheld by participants was that dating apps were efficient because they were easy way to meet people compared to dating websites and dating in real life. Looking at participants actual practices and how many hurdles they encountered throughout their dating apps use raises very serious doubts as to the efficiency and low-stakes nature of these tools.

5.3.1 Falling at the first hurdle: 'getting matches'

The first hurdle is getting matches. When you think of dating apps, one's mind might immediately think of swiping through a stack of profiles and seeing the 'it's a match' icon popping up as you match with fellow users. In fact, a popular feature of dating apps is that they only show users when someone does match with you, rather than when someone does not. One, therefore, might assume that using dating apps is a really rewarding experience for users as they are never necessarily 'rejected' per se, and this 'ego boost' element was something a lot participants in this study recognised and took advantage of on the apps. Sally, for example, found out her ex-boyfriend had got into a new relationship and turned to Tinder to '*get some matches and make me feel better*'⁶⁶. Similarly, Justin spoke of how his work colleagues encouraged him to download a dating app in order to boost his confidence after his divorce. However, this 'ego boost' element becomes somewhat flawed if people are not getting that 'it's a match' notification in the first place, as was the case for a lot of participants in this study. Indeed, it was particularly surprising how many participants spoke of even struggling to get past this first hurdle and how '*entire weeks will go by, weeks and weeks, without me getting a match*' (Ben).

It did, however, become evident throughout the course of the interviews that it was mostly men who spoke of falling at this first hurdle and who seemed to struggle to get matches. Indeed, nearly every man who I interviewed said something to the effect of '*just generally I think the getting matches isn't, like, it's not that easy*' (Harry) and how this was having a negative effect on their self-esteem.

It is pretty grim to be honest, it's pretty crap, it's not rejection as such it's more like you just simply... you're just being ignored kind of things. Not even being ignored, it's like

⁶⁶ It is possible that this ego boost element was an important part of -participants understanding of success, which is something I will explore in Chapter 7.

I dunno... it's like it's like your presence on the app doesn't exist. To exist on the app means you have to get matched now...So yeah when you go without that for a while it is a bit like ooh yeah it's just a bit crap really cause that's the whole... the whole uh the first step to success I suppose on an app is to get matches (Aidan).

Comparatively, it was very rare for female participants to speak of struggling to get matches. In some cases, it was what was absent from their accounts that highlighted this, and in others it was illustrated by the ways in which female participants explicitly commented on managing how many matches they did have. As was the case for Lynn, who would *'get a lot of matches and then like I just sort of like basically the people that will then message me'*. As such, it seems as though the ego-boost element perhaps benefits women, more so than men, as men are having *'dry patches'* where *'they've been on Tinder for a month not and they haven't had a single match'* (Peter). Consequently, male participants frequently spoke of how they did not get an ego boost from it and instead felt *'rejected'*, *'crappy'*, *'kinda shit'* and like they did not *'exist'*.

Furthermore, both men and women in this study recognised that this was a gendered experience and drew on heteronormative assumptions as an explanation for why this was the case. For instance, men spoke of how they knew, or assumed women, were more likely to be *'picky'*, *'fussy'* or *'selective'* about who they chose to swipe right on, almost to the point that women were *'hesitant'* to swipe right. For example, Alan described how he would *'have a go'* on his female friends Tinder and observed how *'females are a bit more selective about who they're willing to swipe yes or no to than men'* because his female friend would constantly not let him swipe right on profiles where he thought the men were *'conventionally attractive'*. Alternatively, women assumed that men were *'less picky'* and would settle for *'whatever's on offer'*, which was informed by their awareness of a practice which I have called *'shotgun swiping'*. This is where *'they just swipe right incessantly and then whoever matches them, that's how they select who they're interested in. Which is obviously opposite of my like selection process'* (Jennifer).

There were of course exceptions to this such as Harry, who spoke of how he was *'quite picky about who I swipe right for'* and George, who spoke of how he has recently begun to take more care when swiping. Contrastingly, some of the same women who spoke of being *'picky'* also spoke of how there were times when they were either drunk (Rose), dealing with a break-up (Sally), let their friends use their app (Mary), or were generally feeling a little horny (Amelia) where they found themselves being far more liberal with a right swipe and then found themselves retrospectively unmatching with the misjudged matches they had made during these swiping sessions. In fact, Ben informed me that this was called *'pumpkin-ing'*, *'where*

basically, like Cinderella, you'll match at midnight and then wake up the morning and they've disappeared because you know they were drunk the night before and drinking a glass of wine and then woke up next morning and shit Why did I...why did I match with them?' As such, it was not simply the case that there were these rigid gendered ways of matching, but, for the most part, the selection and matching process seemed to reveal something about the ways gender and sexual scripts, which place women as being the sexual gatekeepers, are being (re)produced in this setting.

These assumptions were generally corroborated by both male and female participants. Female participants described themselves as *'quite picky, well, I'm very picky'* (Mary), and being more likely to *'just like [swipe] left, left, left, left, left'* (Megan), or *'probably only swipe 1 in a 100 profiles'* (Darcy). There is perhaps a stage that comes before 'getting matches', which is being able to find people you wish to match with in the first place, a stage women in this study often spoke of struggling to pass. One of the reasons⁶⁷ women were more likely to swipe left was down to the issue addressed earlier in the chapter whereby men were less able to construct profiles in a way woman liked. In this case, men's comparative lack of understanding of how to make a 'good' profile seemed to dampen women's experiences of using these apps. Whilst male participants' esteem was challenged by their lack of matches, female participants spoke of how not seeing any profiles that they found attractive or having to *'sit through a lot of undesirables to get to that point [of finding someone worth swiping on]'* (Jennifer) seemed like a *'vacuous use of time'* and *'soul destroying'*.

Therefore, both men and women seem to be facing challenges which undermines the assertion that these apps are easy and efficient dating tools. This challenges the straightforward construction that was set up in the first half of this chapter that profiles were something that was quickly consumed by others. Instead, consumption of profiles is a complex, and gendered, affair which is different to the assumed short-term interaction that participants had in mind when constructing profiles. Moreover, this also undermines the size and quality of the dating pool available on dating apps, which was identified in the previous chapter to be the key benefit of dating apps over more traditional dating contexts.

5.3.2 Making it to stage 2: Getting replies.

In cases where participants did get past the first hurdle of finding someone they wanted to match with and then getting a match, the next challenge participants seemed to face was receiving

⁶⁷ Being 'picky' was spoken about by women as something they felt they needed to be as a risk minimisation strategy. I address this in more detail in the following chapter.

messages and getting replies. Again, it was generally the case that men, more so than women, spoke of having issues receiving messages and getting replies. This largely stemmed from the fact that, in line with traditional heterosexual scripts, both men and women in this study generally agreed that it was men who were expected, and more likely, to be *'the driving force'* and send the first message on dating apps. Seemingly, whether a conversation happened, and continued, was perceived to be in the hands of women. Male participants very rarely got replies from women, whereas female participants, for the most part, had no trouble receiving *'cheesy chat up lines'* or a first message from men⁶⁸.

I've spoken to enough guys to know that if they get 1 or 2 messages a day that's great and I've spoken to enough women to know that they will get 10-20 messages a day (Peter).

I try and instigate from that [what's in their bio] and then, maybe it was just the way I worded things, they just thought I'm not gonna reply back. So, it kind of gave you the high of being liked, then you send it and then you've got the anxious wait to see if someone replies back to you. So, you go from that great big high to crash and low (Justin).

Again, these quotes seem to suggest that there are some discrepancies in how men and women experience using dating apps, with male participants very much associated being rejected, within this context, to be part of the male experience, rather than something women experience often. Indeed, Rose often swapped her dating app experiences with her boyfriend and during one of these conversations she learnt that *'for every maybe 10 girls he [her boyfriend] matched with, if he messaged 5 of them, he would get a response from 1'*. This was very different to what she remembered experiencing where *'you might match 10 guys, 8 of them message you'*. Correspondingly, and as is hinted by the above quote from Justin, many male participants spoke of how their lack of 'success' getting replies was a second hit to their self-esteem. Indeed, because the chances of getting a match in the first place were rather low, male participants spoke of how when they did get a match, it was a big deal to them and it gave them the *'dopamine hit'* they had typically been lacking. To then be 'rejected' for a second time was a further blow to their confidence and male participants spoke of how *'it's not nice, it's not comfortable'* and made them feel *'depleted'* (Ben). These experiences are far from the low-stakes, nonchalant, interactions that were described in the previous chapter.

⁶⁸ In some cases, this was problematic for women, as I address in the following chapter.

Interestingly, a small number of female participants used the dating app Bumble (see Appendix A), which is an app that markets itself as ‘shaking up outdated gender norms’ by making it so women must send the first message, which men then have 24 hours to reply to the message, or else the match disappears (Bumble, 2021a). In the situation where female participants did use Bumble and the roles were reversed, it was far more likely for them to mirror the same issues as set out by male participants above. For instance, Samantha spoke of how her ‘*success rate on Bumble is very low*’ and Grace, mentioned that ‘*even when you match with people on Bumble, there’s no guarantee they’re actually going to message you*’. Therefore, although Bumble may market itself as ‘empowering women’, a lot of the female participants who used Bumble spoke of how they ‘*absolutely do not feel empowered*’ (Samantha). On one hand, this seemed to be because ‘*this is different to what I’m used to*’, (Stephanie), and because of this she rarely ‘*plucks up the courage to message them*’ out of a ‘*fear of rejection I suppose*’. This suggests that it was because sending the first message was outside these participants’ normative sexual scripts. On the other hand, some women did not like it because ‘*it’s a lot of work*’ (Amelia), 38, because ‘*countless times you’re having to come up with something to bloody say to them, and then they might not reply*’ (Samantha). Samantha went as far as saying that felt as though Bumble ‘*was made by men to like embarrass women*’ because when men do not reply ‘*then you’re like, oh, that was embarrassing*’.

Male participants, however, spoke of really liking Bumble and purposefully downloading the app because ‘*Bumble takes that [rejection] away, from a male perspective, you just have to get the match and then the girl can send you the message...you think oh! this person must want to speak to me, so that’s quite nice*’ (Aidan). It was not just Aidan who had made, or would make this choice. Alan explained that if he was not currently in a relationship that he would decide to use Bumble for the same reasons expressed above. Similarly, Lydia explained that her male friends uses Bumble so that he does not have to message first. Therefore, it seems that Bumble is being used for reasons that may not have originally been imagined by its creators. Bumble (2020) is very much framed as a gender equality app where women are relieved of the frustrating behaviours of men, not the other way around.

In either case, it seems as though the first 2 stages of using dating apps can be a very humbling experiences for men in particular, and this seems to stem from the enactment of gender and sexual scripts which place men as the initiators and women as gatekeepers during relationship formation.

5.3.3 Stage 3: *Keeping the conversation going long enough to meet in person*

This leads on to stage 3, which is the difficult task both male and female participants had trying to keep a conversation going. Namely, how there seemed to be common issues with keeping conversations going on dating apps because of *'eventually fizzling out, notwithstanding their gender*. Indeed, Alesha spoke of how the conversations she had on Tinder typically had an expiration date *'Like, I've not maintained anything with anyone particularly. I'd say a week, two weeks, is the max that I speak to someone really'*. Similarly, Harry spoke of how *'there's been a couple of times where I've thought things were going really well and I'm like oh do you wanna meet up?...but then every time it's sort of been a bit like urm either no response from them or you know that sort of like oh I'm busy then and then gradually just fading out'*. A notable exception to this was during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic where participants reported spending more time talking to matches as they were bored or had more time to, which was addressed in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, in other cases participants did not expect conversations to fizzle out, and were surprised when their match suddenly ceased interaction. This is popularly known as *'ghosting'* and both male and female participants were more than familiar with this practice. Both male and female participants spoke of times where they had been ghosted, or they had ghosted other people, and how this was ubiquitous on dating apps because *'it's so easy to swipe and so easy to have those initial connections. It's also incredibly easy to ghost and to stop those discussions'* (Ben). Peter explained how dating apps offer its users a *'coward's way out, if you like'* because *'it's so easy to block and delete somebody and to, you know, expunge somebody from your digital life'*. This was different, he explained, to when he was dating in 2004 where *'you couldn't ghost somebody unless you moved house and didn't give them my new phone number'*.

The sheer ubiquity of *'ghosting'* was demonstrated by the ways in which participants used phrases like *'the first few times it happened...'* and spoke of how they had experienced it so many times that they had simply *'got used to it'* (Rose). As Samantha put it: *'I can't get people to reply to me, never mind get a date'*, which illustrates perfectly the surprising fact that holding a conversation long enough to arrange a date seemed to be very rare for the participants in this study. Annabelle, for example, had not met up with anyone off an app in *'about 10 months'*, even though she had been using them consistently. Another example which I feel exemplifies this very well is an experiment Ben told me he conducted where he sent every single one of the women he matched with a *'personalized message, because all the messages I send are based on their profile whether it's a picture or information given, I don't like a cut and paste job*.

That's rubbish'. He asked me, *'I messaged 157 women in that week. Of those, how many do you reckon actually ended up in a date?'*. Ben revealed that, of the 157 women he messaged, he only managed to arrange 4 dates, of which 2 of these were *'no shows'*.

These accounts also undermine the label of hook-up apps, often associated with dating apps, like Tinder. The fact remains that the 'success rate' of participants on dating apps does not seem high enough for such a stable and embedded stigma such as this. Moreover, despite it being an expected, yet unwelcomed, part of the dating app experience, conversations fizzling out or being ghosted was still something participants said *'never got easier'* (Grace) and spoke about as being *'demoralising and kind of soul crushing'* (Ben). Indeed, it was at this stage especially that participants spoke of really questioning *'what am I doing wrong?'* (Rose) and *'God is it me? Is it the way I'm putting myself across'* (Grace). Participants' soliloquies typically involved blaming themselves for their *'lack of success'* and often led to them inspecting how they were presenting themselves on the apps, both in terms of their profile but also in terms of how they were interacting with their matches and the kinds of conversations they were having. This again speaks to the ongoing effort involved in profile construction.

Equally, Grace was also 'accused' (her words) by her friends and co-workers of being *'hard to please'* or perhaps *'not putting herself across right'* because she had been using some form of online dating for 13 years without much success (with breaks, she hastily mentioned) and because of this she gave her friend control of her Match.com and Bumble account for 1 week and let her *'write a profile as me'* and *'send a few messages out'*. To no surprise to Grace, her friend immediately realised how much effort was involved in looking at people's profiles and thinking of different messages to send every time and how she sees *'what you mean now when you say it's like having a second-full time job'*. Her friend even commented on the fact that if she was single *'I couldn't go through that'*, and this was only after 1 week of using them. This, therefore, was where participants said the real 'graft' came in.

Indeed, many participants spoke of the *'labour of messaging'* (Maisy) and how, perhaps again because of how quickly people were ready to make a 5 second judgement on a profile, ghost people, or because they knew that there *'would always have more profiles, more choice'* (Grace), participants ended up putting in a lot of 'graft' to make sure they stood out and passed each of the hurdles mentioned thus far, but especially when it came to *'trying to be funny and interesting and remembering what you've said to each person and show interest in them, like it's exhausting'* (Maisy). Similarly, Sean spoke of how *'I think it's a myth that it's too easy because the hard work is getting to know somebody and then sending them and actually chatting to them'*. This, once again, paints a very different picture of dating apps and the casual, fun,

nonchalant and unconcerned users that participants framed themselves to be. Dating apps were certainly not something participants only did in their *'spare time'* because they were unconcerned about the outcome, rather they seemed to be a *'whole other part-time job on top of your full-time job'* (Darcy) and something participants put a lot of effort and care into if they were going to compete in the Tinder Game.

5.3.4 The final stage: Groundhogs Day

Now, you might expect, when participants did speak of jumping all these hurdles and actually ending up on a date with someone they had met on a dating app, that they would speak about it positively, they really had beaten the odds after all. However, the reality seemed to be that participants could put in all the *'graft'* of speaking to someone for weeks, thinking of things to say to keep the conversation going, to only meet and *'within 5 seconds you're like oh I don't fancy them. So, it's a lot of work for something that could actually, and usually does for me, amount to nothing'* (Maisy). Similarly, Darcy mentioned how *'I've had it where I've had like two dates a week, so that's two evenings taken up with the pre-chat to go with it, then you've got to send the text message afterwards⁶⁹, like, sorry really liked the night but I don't fancy you, best of luck. So, there is like a... and then you're back to swiping, again'*. As such, participants seemed to also be quite cynical as to whether the date would ever lead to anything and often found themselves back at square one over and over again.

5.4 Conclusion

Looking at the different hurdles participants described facing not only suggests that participants did care about success, but that there are actually multiple layers as to what could constitute success for participants on dating apps. Indeed, whilst the ultimate measure of success may be whether they meet someone (for whatever capacity i.e. relationship, hook-up), there also seems to be smaller measures of success along the way such as whether participants can get a match, whether they get a response once they've matched and whether they can then keep that conversation going long enough for it to transition into some form of in person interaction. Nevertheless, as we can see from the above discussion, at every stage of the dating app process participants are encountering obstacles, some of which were dependent on gender, and so even these lower measures of success were rarely achieved. This led many participants to comment on the fact that dating apps were a *'waste of time'* and they do not *'really seem to ever work'*.

⁶⁹ Carefully managing ceasing future interaction with men was something women identified doing to ensure their personal safety, I address this in the following chapter.

This very much contradicts what participants were saying about dating apps being efficient ways of meeting someone. Indeed, the odds seem just as bleak, 2 out of 157 in Ben's case.

The findings presented throughout this chapter, therefore, collectively challenged participants' assertions that dating apps, and their use of them, is efficient, low -takes and nonchalant. Firstly, it was demonstrated that participants put significant energy into constructing a 'good' profile, which involved laborious training in managing a profile, as having a 'good' profile was seen to be incredibly important for being able to stay '*in the game*' or '*stand out*' and encourage other users to take time and engage with your profile. What's more, even after all of the hard work participants put into constructing a 'good' profile, the odds of actually getting matches, having conversations with these matches and meeting up with these matches was incredibly low. The stakes, therefore, seem incredibly high as participants can put significant effort into dating apps, but only have very limited chances of receiving anything in return. This begs the question, what is the point? I will come back to this question at the end of the following Chapter, following discussion of issues of risk which exacerbate these issues/questions still further.

6 Chapter 6. Risks of Playing the Tinder Game

Risk is understood to be pervasive within modern cultures and something that can and must be managed by individuals (Lupton, 2013; Walklate, 2004). It has been argued that the increasing entanglement of technologies in everyday life could impact on how we experience and mediate risk, as well as altering the types of risks themselves (Lupton, 2014). Correspondingly, dating apps were perceived by participants as ‘inherently’ risky. While it is necessary to problematise the idea that any technology can be ‘inherently’ anything (Pinch and Bijker, 1994). The sentiments demonstrate that risk was central for participants when deciding whether and how to use dating apps, as well as how technologies may foster new forms of risk.

The risks discussed in this chapter differ somewhat to the ‘stakes’ mentioned in previous chapters. Rather, throughout this chapter I make a distinction between risk and risk of violence. Risk refers to what might be deemed more general risks associated with using dating apps such as risk of rejection, wasting one’s time or financial scams. Risk of violence, however, is used to refer to the ways dating apps posed a threat to one’s physical and sexual safety and can be physical, emotional, symbolic and structural (Kelly, 1987). I begin by examining the perceived and experienced risks and risks of violence associated with dating apps and the ways these were gendered, before outlining the safety strategies used (or not used) by participants to manage these risks. I frame these findings within the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987) and draw on feminist scholarship into violence against women (Stanko, 1990) and the concept of Domestication (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013) to help understand the ways these findings connect with understanding violence against women more generally.

I thereby demonstrate how women have been mitigating risk of violence long before dating apps, which opposes the view that risk is pervasive to modern cultures. The ‘safety work’ that women engaged in to feel safe whilst using dating apps is also argued to further undermine participants’ own claims surrounding how dating apps are efficient and low effort.

6.1 Lies, deceit and inauthenticity

Every single person I interviewed, both male and female, expressed concerns about whether the people they were matching with and speaking to on dating apps were lying, deceiving or misrepresenting themselves. It has been recognised that a significant ‘flip side of the freedom afforded by virtual space to experiment with identity and to play with subject positions is a growing savviness about the constructed character of online identity’ (Andrejevic, 2005: 488).

This has never been more apparent than in the online dating arena, where the fear of deception has been found to be one of the most prominent concerns people have when using online dating (Anderson, Vogels and Turner, 2020). Existing research has demonstrated online daters' growing awareness and 'savviness' around the ubiquity of deception, misrepresentation and inaccuracy in online dating profiles (see Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008; Hancock and Toma, 2009; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts, 2011; Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011). Similarly, when participants spoke of '*fearing the worst*' (Lynn) on dating apps, what they were mostly talking about was '*Catfishing*'.

The term catfishing was popularised by the film documentary *Catfish* (2010) and subsequent documentary style television series *Catfish* (2012) and is commonly defined as an individual who lies about their identity online for various reasons, including to form relationships, or cause financial or emotional harm (Lauckner et al., 2019). The show depicts 'catfish reveals' where people are found to have lied about their gender, age, occupation, physical appearance, sexual orientation and relationship status to coerce people into sending money and gifts and to enact emotional revenge or secure online relationships. Several participants referenced *Catfish* (2012) during our interviews and spoke of being concerned about '*Just turning up and meeting somebody and them being a different person to the picture*' (Betty).

It's like that show Catfish, you don't know if you're being like catfished or, you know, that sort of thing. I think there is just still that sort of cultural, you know, cultural sort of hesitance about meeting up with people that you've only known through an app or through the internet (Harry).

I think I was a little bit apprehensive because I was kind of like is he going to be who he says he is? Is he going to be the person that's in the photos and, again because I'd watched programmes like Catfish so much because watching terrible tv seems to be one of my pastimes, it was kind of like I was attuned to the fact that people may not be who they say they are (Rose).

The above concerns resonate closely with the common understanding of catfishing as outlined above. However, the participants in this study also used the term catfishing as an umbrella term to account for deception at multiple different levels. In most cases, this involved more subtle forms of deceit that did not necessarily involve creating a whole new identity. For instance, Lydia explained how she had '*never like been catfished to the point where it was like just somebody entirely different from like the person or profile they put up online, but I've definitely had it before where like people have definitely like used like really old photos or like just like*

said things on their profile that was just wasn't true'. Similarly, Peter found that *'there's misrepresentation across dating apps, but I think it's common to have pretty old photos and stuff like that'*. This aligns with existing research which has found deception in online dating profiles to be *'frequent yet small in magnitude'* and reinforces the argument that deception on dating profiles is strategic (Toma, Hancock and Ellison, 2008: 1033)⁷⁰.

In the context of dating apps, the tension between presenting an ideal, yet *'authentic'* self, seems to be ever more present with photos taking priority on profiles and GPS software making it easier to facilitate in person meetings (Ward, 2016). A frequent complaint from male participants was how women *'can make sure that your photos are absolutely 100% perfect'* (Aidan). For instance, male participants were aware that women made sure that *'the lightings perfect and, you know, the angles are right. You know, as shallow as it sounds, they might be a little bit more chunkier than they actually are because the lighting makes them look a lot skinnier'* (Jeff). Equally, many female respondents complained about the number of men who lie about their height⁷¹ and *'said they were 5"10, and they were shorter than me'* (Anne), or how men would be very strategic with their photos and *'wear a hat in all his photos to hide the fact that he's bald'* (Darcy). New literacies have now developed to account for these softer forms of deception, which is often referred to as the practice of *Kittenfishing* (Albury et al., 2019). Other variants that participants mentioned included *'hatfishing'*, which is a term to describe an individual hiding that they are bald by wearing a hat in all of their photos or *'dogfishing'* (see Appendix F), which, Ben explained, is when someone borrows a family or friend's dog in order to include them in a profile photo to secure more matches.

There were also indications that age influenced the ways deceit manifested on dating apps. Older male and female participants complained about people lying about their age (what we could call age-fishing) or about their relationship status.

I mean, I went on a date once with one guy and I met them in town and this guy was, I mean at that point I was 32, he was 36, never married, no kids, property developer. The guy who turned up was 46, had two ex- wives, four kids and I thought 'are you joking?' (Eleanor, aged 42).

Similarly, older women seemed to be targeted more by scammers looking to mislead them into sending money.

⁷⁰ An in-depth discussion of these studies and arguments can be found in the literature review chapter.

⁷¹ A man's height was shown to be something that could impact whether a woman would swipe right or left on a profile, see Chapter 5.

There's a lot of scammers on there. So, again, I always found that once I reach the grand age of 40 you seemed to be targeted more by, well, it was always an alleged American soldier, but it wasn't American soldiers at all (Grace, aged 42).

As such, age and gender seemed to intersect in interesting ways to shape the forms that deceit took on dating apps. The data on this issue was limited and further research is necessary in order to fully understand the nature of this intersection.

The forms of deceit on dating apps were not the only way in which risk seemed to be gendered⁷². Whilst every participant expressed concern about catfishing and its variants, the risks that deceit posed were experienced differently between male and female participants. Specifically, the risks that men mentioned tended to be financial or centre around frustration that they were wasting their time. A common example of this was the number of 'spam bots' or 'Russian bots' that men encountered and '*that are probably just out for your bank details or whatever*' (Harry). In some cases, risks posed by deceit were missing all together from male participants narratives. For example, when Sean explained that in situations where the person he met does not look like their photos '*the worst that will happen is that we don't have much in common or we're not going to be friends and that's one of the worst things that can happen*'.

Contrastingly, for many female participants, the '*worst case scenario*' was very different. Their worst-case scenario pertained to their personal safety. Personal safety, in this context, was used by female participants to refer to their sense of physical safety and wellbeing whilst meeting up with men they met through dating apps. Every woman I interviewed spoke of their concern around personal safety whilst using dating apps. It was by far the most consistent issue raised by women. Indeed, female participants were less frustrated about the fact that their dates had lied about what they looked like and more concerned with why they had lied and whether this was because they had dangerous intentions. In some cases, this was explicitly stated by female participants themselves such as Roxy, who explained '*I think it really is like a psycho killer thing that really scares me. If you look different to your profile, that doesn't really bother me*'. Therefore, whilst female participants may have been frustrated to arrive at dates and '*met guys who forget that they're 10 years older than they are*' (Grace), what was different was that this

⁷² It has been mentioned previously in Chapter 5 that another risk commonly expressed by male participants was the risk of being rejected, which is certainly also relevant to the current discussion. It demonstrates further how the kinds of risks associated with and encountered on the apps were gendered.

was accompanied by an undercurrent of fear that they could also be at risk of being ‘murdered’, ‘stalked’, ‘stabbed’, ‘raped’ and ‘kidnapped’⁷³.

The pervasiveness of catfishing was not the only way in which dating apps sparked concerns over personal safety. Megan was particularly conscious of the geo-location software built into dating apps and how it could be used by ‘creepy’ men to stalk her. The app Megan was discussing in particular was Happn (see Appendix A) which relies on geo-location software more so than other dating apps as it only shows profiles of people who you have crossed paths with. This worried Megan because, unlike other dating apps which show one’s distance in miles, Happn would disclose the specific places she visited as well as her home address, which made her feel incredibly vulnerable.

Stanko (1990:53) observed that perceptions of risk are shaped by cumulative experiences throughout our lifetime and ‘involves understanding that you are potentially susceptible to violence both as an individual and as a member of a particular group’. Existing research tells us that men and women negotiate different risks, with women negotiating both sexual and physical risks posed by men, and men largely considering physical risks to their safety, which they perceive as likely to come from other men, not women (Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray, 2018). In the context of dating apps, we can see how these understandings have influenced male and female participants’ risk assessments of how deceit and misrepresentation may impact their safety. Men, in this instance, are less likely to view women as a physical or sexual threat and so the risks they imagine centre around issues of finance, time, and rejection. Women, however, are continuously negotiating the sexual and physical risks posed by men, especially men they encounter on dating apps, thus the risks they associate with dating apps are more specific to risks of violence.

6.2 Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV)

Whilst the risks associated with the ubiquity of deceit on dating apps affected both men and women, albeit in different ways, another risk that was perceived to be pervasive on dating apps was sexual harassment and abuse. This was communicated as largely being a women’s issue. The majority of women in this study described online sexual harassment to be an ordinary part of their dating app experience. This is consistent with existing literature, which has identified

⁷³ Popular rape myths popularise the notion that sexual violence against women is more likely to occur at the hand of a male stranger in a public space, instead of men whom women have some form of relationship with (Harris and Grace, 1999). Albeit the men whom female participants met with might more appropriately be labelled acquaintances as some form of interaction has taken place before they have met, rather than strangers, the women in this study subscribed to narrative consistent with popular rape myths.

that dating apps, as well as online spaces more broadly, are ‘conductive spaces’ for old, as well as distinctive, forms of violence against women (see pp.44-7). It is worth noting that very few female respondents used specific language like sexual/gender violence or sexual harassment when describing their dating app experiences. Rather, words such as ‘*creepy*’, ‘*crude*’, or ‘*abusive*’ were commonly drawn on. The language and typologies of TFSV, therefore, allow me to frame participants’ experiences within a lens of online sexual harassment⁷⁴. I draw on these typologies below to aid in the categorisation and analysis of the forms of sexual harassment that women in this study experienced throughout their time on dating apps.

6.2.1 Sexual Solicitation: Cheesy chat up lines and unsolicited messages.

Powell and Henry (2017:160) define sexual solicitation as ‘receiving unwanted requests to talk about sex, do something sexual or engage in an intimate relationship’. A common complaint I heard from female participants was the amount of ‘*cheesy*’ or ‘*creepy*’ chat up lines or unsolicited messages they had received from men which included some form of sexual solicitation. For instance, Lydia explained how some of the chat up lines she received were ‘*just quite creepy I think*’ because ‘*there’s always like weird sexual undertones to the messages, do you know what I mean? That’s like wow I don’t know you, calm down haha*’. Similarly, several female participants spoke of times where men had initiated conversation by asking them to do something sexual such as ‘*...like oh can I pay for pictures of you?*’ (Stephanie), or ‘*...how good are your blow jobs?*’ (Grace).

These kinds of messages depict what Thompson (2018) refers to as a missing discourse of consent and conveys a sense of sexual entitlement. Little consideration seems to have been given to whether women would like to receive these kinds of messages or what their desires might be (Thompson, 2018). ‘Groan-inducing failed pick-up lines’ are a notorious part of dating app culture and practice (Hess and Flores, 2018). Whilst a cheesy chat up line can be a useful ice breaker, Eleanor explained how there was a difference between the innocent and humorous chat up lines like *will you be my Cinderella?* and the ones which ‘*you’re like no you’ve crossed the line now. That’s not flirting, that’s gone into the full-on sex chat*’. So much so that several ‘discursive activist’ (Shaw, 2016) or ‘feminist digilanty’ (Jane, 2016) sites like *Bye Felipe*, *Tinder Nightmares*, *Beam me up soft boy* and *Instagranniepants* have emerged which serve to publicly shame and problematise the chat up lines or unsolicited messages that go too far and which exhibit toxic masculine performances (Hess and Flores, 2018).

⁷⁴ A discussion of TFSV and the ways it conceptualises violence against women online can be found in Chapter 2.

As well as unwanted sexual requests, another recurring illustration of sexual solicitation described by several female respondents was receiving unsolicited messages containing ‘hypersexual declarations’. Hess and Flores (2018: 1092) refer to hypersexual declarations as the overt sexualisation of the female body, which they found to be a common element of many dating app pick up lines found on Tinder Nightmares. Similarly, some women I interviewed recounted numerous cases where men had sent them messages which sexualised their bodies.

I train Brazilian jujitsu and maybe on my profile it will say oh I train BJJ, or whatever, and like the response is either very sexualized or urm like something like...like kind of competitive (Amelia).

I do frequently get like fiery, spicy, lioness, Jessica Rabbit comments because of my red hair (Roxy).

Once a guy said, and it comes back again to that critique of women, we matched and then he said to me like oh you don't look like a typical Geordie like lass, face caked in make-up urgh! I was just like fuck off! I didn't tell him to fuck off, I just I think probably just said that it's women's choice how they dressed and then unmatched him haha (Jennifer).

Existing research has found striking overlaps between sexual and gender-based harassment in that the kind of harassment and abuse aimed at women online can often ‘only be used against the female sex in a patriarchal society’ (Mergarry, 2014: 50). This is because women are subjected to harassment that is largely reliant on the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour and comments are usually based on the female body and bodily appearance (Mergarry, 2014: 50). In Roxy and Amelia’s case, their physical abilities and attributes were fetishized and drawn on as a measure of their sexual appeal and value. Both participants described feeling uncomfortable with the fact that certain assumptions had been made about them purely on the basis of their physical qualities, such as being ‘fiery’ or ‘dominant’ in the bedroom, and how they were being treated like the object of men’s sexual fantasies. Jennifer was also celebrated for adhering to requirements of acceptable femininity by avoiding displays of excessive femininity and wearing, what her match believed, was too much make-up. Comments such as these, which either celebrate or degrade women (both explicitly and implicitly) serve to discipline, correct and subordinate female sexual subjectivities (Mackinnon, 1994).

6.2.2 Rejection Violence

The above examples of sexual harassment were prompted by nothing more than female participants' sheer involvement in, and existence, on dating apps. Often, sexually explicit messages were the first messages women would receive from their matches. Another notable pattern of sexual harassment reported by female participants was rejection violence. This is where men become hostile when women do not reply soon enough, ignore a message, or reply saying they are not interested (Shaw, 2016). This has led others to conclude that women are 'damned if you do reply, damned if you don't reply' on dating apps as both situations can, and overwhelmingly do, lead to abuse and hostility (Thompson, 2018: 76). Notably, Rose recalled an instance where a man repeatedly sent her 'vile' messages and when she ignored and later rejected his advances, she was met with vitriol.

I'm not even going to repeat what he said because it was...vile. I ignore it and in my head I was like I'm going to unmatch him later and I forgot to. A week goes by, obviously I've not responded to him and I'd forgotten to unmatched him, a week later he sends me a message in a very similar vein again asking and I was like right you didn't get a response the first time do you seriously think that reiterating it is going to get a response? I messaged him back and was like no I'm not interested and I got something back that was like urgh you're frigid and I was just like great, thanks.

The term 'frigid' holds connotations of being cold or stiff and whilst it has different meanings in disciplines like psychiatry and medicine (Margolin, 2017), in this context, it is being used to reprimand Rose for not reciprocating his sexual advances. Indeed, the use of this term conveys the problematic message that Rose is perhaps weird or wrong in some way for not wanting to engage in whatever 'vile' sexual request or act this man had sent her. This very much resembles the 'not hot enough' discourse identified by Thompson (2018) in men's responses to rejection on dating apps found in screenshots on sites like *Bye Felipe* and *Tinder Nightmares*. In Thompson's (2018: 79) analysis, men attacked women's physical appearance when they rejected men's advances on dating apps in an effort to '(re)position her as merely a visual object to be consumed by him and reassert his power as the one who gets to choose whether they meet, based on how attractive he finds her'. Here, we can see how the image-based focus of dating apps, as addressed in the previous chapter, reduces women to commodities to be consumed. Indeed, whilst the focus of the insult in this case is somewhat different, it can be said to descend from the same issue of sexual entitlement and serves to reinforce, control, and correct boundaries of acceptable femininity which expect women to be subservient to men (Shaw,

2016; Hess and Flores, 2018; Thompson, 2018). As Margolin (2017:591) states, 'Non-frigidity equals giving to men; frigidity equals withholding from them'.

Here, the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' reference is doubly relevant in the way it pertains to the ways women are often mandated to tread a fine line between being labelled a virgin or a whore (Greene and Faulkner, 2005). If Rose had been willing to engage in whatever 'vile' act the match requested, there is the potential that she would be labelled a 'slut'. As such, there does not seem to be many options available which benefit Rose, or female participants more generally, when it comes to rejecting sexual advances on dating apps. I discuss the impact of this in more depth later in the chapter.

6.2.3 Image-Based Sexual Harassment: Dick pics as a form of Cyber Flashing

One form of image-based sexual harassment that was evident in female participants' experiences of dating apps was 'the sending of unsolicited nude, sexually explicit or pornographic photos and videos' (Powell and Henry, 2017:164). Amongst my sample, however, this practice was often referred to as receiving a 'dick pic' without consent. Many female participants mentioned receiving an unsolicited dick pic from someone on a dating app or knowing other women who had.

Men are very happy to show you their wedding tackle. No problem at all. You'll often be chatting to someone, having a normal conversation with them, and then suddenly you get a picture and, as awful as it sounds, even now, if somebody sends me a picture on Twitter, my first thought is oh here, they've sent is a picture of the knob because that's what you start to expect (Grace).

It tends to be you know this thing you hear about unsolicited dick pics. I'm fairly certain that the... let me get this right...my best friend's sister-in-law, she received one of those once (Georgia).

As we can see, dick pics have become somewhat of an unwelcomed, yet expected, part of Grace's online use more generally, so much so that an element of dread accompanies her when opening messages from men which have images attached. Dick pics have been argued to 'move in and across different frames of interpretation shaped by the affective registers of, for instance, shame, desire, disgust, interest, amusement, and aggression' (Paasonen, Light and Jarrett:2019:2). Annabelle, for example, described a time where her and her friends competed to see 'who could be the first to get the guy to send like a nude?'. As a collective practice, asking for, and receiving a dick pic, was a form of amusement and entertainment. Equally, dick pics

have long been part of same sex attracted men's digital sexual culture, and when consented to, are seen as desirable (Paasonen, Light and Jarrett, 2019). Image-sharing has also been found to be a part of young adults' sexting practices (Albury and Crawford, 2012). However, the fact remains that, for the majority of women in this study, dick pics were often unwelcomed and met with surprise and shock as many female participants explained that *'they don't even have a conversation with you about it though'* (Lydia) and that they *'come out of nowhere'* (Sally).

It may be that sending an impromptu 'dick pic' and knowing it will shock and cause offence is what the men sending them gain satisfaction from (Thompson, 2018). Traditional forms of flashing, which are criminalised by the Sexual Offences Act (2003), are seen to be done to purposefully cause alarm or distress. Correspondingly, recent scholarship has begun treating the practice of sending and receiving sexual images as a form of cyber flashing as it is seen to mimic the longer running issue of street flashing (Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018)⁷⁵. Nevertheless, it is also important to consider how dick pics do more than simply shock the recipient. Rather, dick pics are 'part of the overall hostile environment that women experience, with adverse effects on their overall sense of safety and empowerment' (Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018: 119). Like other forms of sexual harassment along the continuum of violence, this practice reflects gender hierarchies of power and can be said to be men's way of reasserting masculine power and control (Thompson, 2018). A few participants in this study did associate dick pics within the framework of control and dominance.

Obviously, that's a way of like having a form of like power and control and a way of like disciplining women and showing dominance in a way that I don't think a woman would like take a topless selfie and like send it to a man. I don't think it would be like imbued with the same kind of meaning if that makes sense? (Maisy).

Use of the term '*obviously*' is very interesting here. Maisy was well-acquainted with feminist teachings and so it would perhaps seem obvious to her that dick pics are a display of masculine power and control. The lack of legislative protection and response to unsolicited 'dick pics', however, suggests that understanding this practice as a breach of women's right to equality is not yet a mainstream belief. The above quote from Maisy also raises another very crucial point. Boundaries of acceptable femininity and fears around sexual reputation and exploitation might make it so that women are less likely to send an unsolicited nude image of themselves, but if they did, it is questionable as to whether these images would be interpreted in the same way. Research has found that adolescent girls often receive requests to share sexual images of

⁷⁵ Whitney Wolfe Herd, the CEO of the dating app Bumble was even successful in passing a bill which criminalises cyber flashing as a class C misdemeanour in the state of Texas (The Buzz, 2022a).

themselves, sometimes in a coercive manner, and that this was seen by adolescent boys as desirable (Ringrose et al., 2013). This is in contrast to the experience of women who have said in my study they do not want dick pics.

This belief was echoed by some male participants who commented on how *'there is no equivalent of a dick pic for men'* (Aidan), and that *'there's a reason that the dick pictures are a thing, but boob pics are not'* (Ben). Similarly, George also cited a social experiment where a woman sent unsolicited vagina pics anonymously to men. Far from having the desired outcome of highlighting how vulgar this practice was, the response from men was overwhelmingly positive *'because we [men] see it as an empowering positive thing'*. I am not suggesting that having this equivalent for women would be in anyway a useful response or solution to the issue of image-based sexual harassment. However, the fact that we do not have a term for an unsolicited nude image of a woman does point to very real issues around how the female body is sexualised as an object of value, desire and consumption (Ringrose et al., 2013). For this reason, a woman's body is not seen as threatening or intimidating in the same way that receiving a dick pic can be. The latter is a form of harassment and violence which disproportionately affects women and has the potential to remind women of their inferior value and status and, in Grace's case, encourage her to always be on guard and fearful of potentially receiving one.

6.2.4 The 'lucky' ones

Female participants encountered a wide range of technology facilitated sexual violence on dating apps. What's more, even when female participants stated that they had not personally experienced much sexual harassment and abuse on dating apps, they either knew of friends who had or knew that it was part of the female experience more generally. This was the case with Jennifer who stated that she was *'lucky to not have encountered many, or really any, bad conversations on dating apps'* but knew a lot of female friends who *'hate Tinder because they get sent lots of unsolicited dick pics and, you know, Bye Felipe exists for a reason'*. Therefore, through interactions with her female peers and the cultural resources she had access to, Jennifer understood sexual harassment to be common among women. This was further supported by the ways in which the women I interviewed spoke of and framed their relative lack of encounters with sexual harassment on dating apps. Similarly, Anne explained how she was *'fortunate that of late I've not actually received much [harassment]'* and Georgia explained that she's *'been very lucky in that I haven't had any terrible experiences urm either in the dates that I've been on or on the apps'*. The use of language such as *'fortunate'* and *'lucky'* here is telling of how

expected or normative sexual harassment within the dating app arena is. It suggests that to not have experienced it is deviant or unusual in some way.

It is worth noting that none of the men that I spoke to expressed feeling lucky that they had not experienced this type of behaviour. Therefore, far from undermining the nature and extent of TFSV on dating apps, these minor cases serve to further reinforce how ubiquitous the problem of TFSV is seen to be. This awareness of how ‘lucky’ they are still contributes to the legacy of fear most women in this study described having and the fear of potentially encountering TFSV can and did still affect women’s experiences and use of technology.

6.2.5 So, why do men do it?

Most of the men and women in this study agreed that these ‘creepy’ pickup lines and unsolicited dick pics were not genuine attempts at seducing someone. At the very least, everyone that I interviewed was certainly of the view that *‘It (one liners/dick pics) doesn’t really seem to ever work’* (Alan). If this is the case, however, it is important to consider what their function is and why men do it? According to some male and female participants, power and resentment were likely culprits.

...it's just like ridiculous stuff like that, where it's like real resentment and bitterness towards women that really comes out. And bitterness towards the app as well, the process of the app. Like, they're frustrated that women aren't replying. So, they're getting angry with any woman that they match with haha (Amelia).

Research has been done on it, and apparently is purely about power. It is...It's not done with the expectation that they will either reciprocate or...or um is going to bear fruit... about having that ability to force yourself onto a woman. It's kind of like flashing, I guess. It doesn't matter about their consent. I'm in charge, I've got the power, I can do that to you, whether you want it or not and you haven't got the power to stop me (Ben).

Participants’ views, therefore, generally adhered to the arguments presented within existing scholarship into online harassment, which sees this behaviour as performative and stemming from a combination of sexual entitlement and resentment⁷⁶ (see Shaw, 2016; Powell and Henry, 2017; Hayes and Dragewicz, 2018; Thompson, 2018). The choice and control that dating apps offer women over whether and who they interact with has been argued to threaten

⁷⁶ Nussbaum (2010:79) theorises that online abuse and misogyny is a manifestation of ‘ressentiment’, which is the ‘reactive emotion inspired by the feeling of weakness’ that is typically directed at women who embrace and express shifts towards gender equality. Specifically, shifts which impact men’s dating and sexual privileges.

patriarchal privileges of sexual entitlement (Thompson, 2018). Men feel aggrieved by this and resort to TFSV in order to restore their sense of power and superiority. Dating apps are one example of what is seen to be a wider cultural shift to more reflexive and choice-centred heterosexual dating practices (Thompson, 2018). The existence of Incel identity⁷⁷ and Incel groups online illustrate a wider tension between the heightened choice and control offered to women and misogynist ideology which sees this as a threat to patriarchal power and privilege (Sugira, 2021). What's more, this resentment has led to real world incidents of violence against women, as was demonstrated by the attack in California in 2014 by Elliot Rodger who killed 6 people and supported this act of violence by stating 'who's the alpha male now, bitches?' (Sugira, 2021:1).

6.3 Women's Learnt Safety Work Practices

It has been demonstrated that participants associated various kinds of risks with dating apps but that it was predominantly female participants who expressed concerns about harassment and abuse from men and fears for their personal safety. However, it was not just that the perceived and experienced risks were different for men and women, the nature of these differences meant that female participants were also far more likely than their male counterparts to undertake 'Safety Work' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). In fact, in several cases, female participants did not explicitly state they were worried about their personal safety, but similar sentiments were communicated in the myriad of ways female participants spoke of the strategies they felt they had to take in order to manage and minimize risk.

Safety work accounts for how women '*factor their personal safety into decisions about whether, where, when and how they do certain things*', especially when it comes to occupying spaces that are thought of as conducive contexts for violence against women such as public, and now, online spaces (Kelly, 2015: 123). Female participants engaged in extensive safety work at multiple stages of the dating app process, from how they constructed their dating app profile, all the way through to after the date had ended, in order to prevent and manage the risk of potential violence they felt dating apps posed, both in person and online. I will discuss these strategies in order as to paint a thorough picture of the extent to which safety work factored into women's use of dating apps.

Participants engaged in safety work both on dating apps themselves, as well as part of their wider date management practices more broadly. I, therefore, begin by demonstrating that safety

⁷⁷ 'Incel' refers to individuals who are involuntarily celibate and who see this social injustice as being caused by women who have set hierarchies based on physical characteristics (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020).

work is so ubiquitous for women when navigating the dating arena more broadly⁷⁸, that it has also shaped female participants' domestication (see Chapter 2 pp. 22-3) of dating apps. The various safety work enacted by women on dating apps are, in many ways, consistent with the different phases of domestication, especially appropriation and objectification⁷⁹ (Berker et al., 2006; Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). I, therefore, situate safety work as an essential element of domestication work, whereby women domesticate dating apps differently to men based on gendered constructions of risk and risk of violence. I then go on to address the safety work women engaged in, that took place off the apps, in preparation for meeting their match in person.

6.3.1 Choice of App(s)

For a few female participants, safety work began before they had downloaded a dating app. Indeed, it was something that they factored into their appropriation⁸⁰ of dating app(s). The process of appropriation refers to the negotiations and considerations, both physically and symbolically, that have led to a device being adopted, or in this case downloaded, by an individual (Berker et al., 2006). There are hundreds of dating apps available to download. Undoubtedly, the popularity of particular apps factored into participants' negotiations of which apps to download and create an account with. Nevertheless, the perceived safety of certain dating apps also featured heavily in female respondents' evaluation and justification processes of why they had chosen to adopt certain dating apps and to reject others.

It has been shown that female participants perceived, and had experienced first-hand, that receiving sexual harassment and unsolicited messages was a startlingly common occurrence on dating apps. However, some female participants perceived some dating apps to be more conducive of this kind of behaviour than others. A defining feature of most dating apps is the swipe feature where one can only message someone if both parties have swiped right and matched with one another. This is premised on ensuring mutual consent before interaction can occur. At first glance, this feature might simply be overlooked as an effort to gamify dating, but *'for straight women it is quite a nice thing because you already have a filtering process'* (Maisy). By filtering process, Maisy is referring to the fact that she can initially control who is able to contact her through the app and because she, and many other women I interviewed, had

⁷⁸ As well as other social interactions more broadly.

⁷⁹ I have addressed the ways other elements of the domestication process in relation to dating apps, such as incorporation in Chapter 4. However, it was processes of appropriation and objectification that were relevant when thinking about safety and safety work,

⁸⁰ Here, I am referring to the concept of appropriation as utilised in domestication literature (see Berker et al., 2006; Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013).

such strict ‘*screening processes*’ to determine who they match with, it was felt that they could identify, filter out and avoid those who would send abusive messages and ensure that ‘*we’ve got some mutual ground and you’re probably not going to call me a bitch*’ (Maisy). I will later address what these screening processes were and explore these interactions further.

Contrastingly, at this moment in time, dating apps like Plenty of Fish or Badoo do not make it a requirement for users to mutually consent to interaction. Rather, the only pre-requisite for sending/receiving a message is that you have a profile. Therefore, female participants feared and experienced that without that filtering process ‘*you got like just an influx of just like really like strange messages and like people just like being like hi and saying weird things and it’s just all a bit too much to be honest*’ (Lydia). As such, whilst ‘*you do still get people messaging creepy things on Tinder*’ (Stephanie), a number of female participants’ felt that the apps’ structure was fundamental in helping them minimise the possibility of unsolicited messages and chose specific apps with this in mind.

Some female participants also singled out Bumble as offering an extra layer of filtering. Bumble markets itself as a female empowerment app which encourages ‘*integrity, kindness, equality, confidence, and respect during all stages of any relationship*’ (Bumble, 2021a). This goal has heavily influenced the structure of the app itself as not only do both parties have to match in order to be able to communicate, women are also mandated to make the first move and send the first message in, what Bumble claims, is as an effort to challenge gender norms. Men cannot make contact without the woman messaging first. As noted in Chapter 5, there were complex responses to this, with men, not necessarily women, celebrating Bumble’s features. However, a small number of female participants drew on these safety discourses circulating around Bumble when explaining their initial reasons for choosing Bumble. They assumed that this unique selling point (USP) of the app would deter ‘*dodgy*’, ‘*crude*’ or ‘*sexual*’ unsolicited messages from men.

In my head that [women messaging first] should kind of filter out some of the really kind of arrogant guys maybe because the men have just got to sit and wait for the woman to contact them, you would think perhaps that that wouldn’t appeal to some of the really unpleasant pushy men (Georgia).

As such, a distinction was sometimes made between Tinder and Bumble whereby Tinder, because of its generic design, was assumed to attract the kinds of men who would engage in harassing or abusive behaviour, but thanks to the swiping feature, women had found ways of filtering out these men. Contrastingly, Bumble was thought to be self-selecting from the offset

and had a *'reputation as having a higher calibre of people on it'* (Jennifer), as the apps mission would deter the kinds of men who would engage in this kind of behaviour. This assumption aligns with the proposition that toxic masculinity and resentment accounts for why men direct harassment and abuse at women online, as was outlined previously in this chapter (Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018). The kinds of men who would typically engage in, or value, misogynist behaviour were seen to be less likely to use Bumble in the first place as it is designed to empower women. When asked whether this was the case, however, responses were inconsistent with some female participants like Stephanie saying that she found the men to be *'a bit nicer'* on Bumble and others such as Jennifer observing that *'I personally found that it's just the same, the exactly the same people, everybody just has multiple apps in their phone haha'*.

As well as potentially attracting *'higher calibre'* men, Bumble was said to inhibit some forms of sexual harassment and abuse. As stated previously, it was typically the case that female participants feared, or spoke of experiencing, abusive or unsolicited messages either within the initial chat up line or as a result of not replying to chat up lines in, what the men felt was, a timely manner. This has been argued to come down to an issue of sexual entitlement (Shaw, 2016). Nevertheless, a few female participants' commented on the fact that Bumble takes away men's ability to send these kinds of unsolicited messages simply because they are not, and cannot, send the first message. Quite simply, Bumble *'doesn't give them a chance to get back into those generic or crude or dodgy vibes'* (Stephanie). This is perhaps why several participants, both male and female, referred to Bumble as *'the safety app'*.

It is also worth considering how women messaging first gave male participants in this study a boost to their self-esteem. If this the case for other men, this may lessen the likelihood of resentment towards women and affect the probability of harassment and abuse. Although, the nature of the data does not allow for any conclusive inferences to be made on this claim.

As such, the desirability of dating apps, and their appropriation amongst female respondents', was largely dependent and legitimised based on the extent to which the apps were perceived to contribute to their sense of safety. In this way, for women, the appropriation of dating apps was not simply a matter of which app has the best design, or had the most users, but also which app will do the best job at keeping me safe.

6.3.2 *Screening and Swiping*

It was briefly mentioned above that most female participants had developed ‘*quite a good screening process*’ (Anne) that they used to help determine who to swipe right for on dating apps. Dating apps like Tinder and Bumble might make it so that women have the opportunity to screen and filter who they match with and subsequently who can communicate with them, however, they do not determine what this screening process involves. Many female respondents described how they had developed their screening process as a result of the myriad of bad experiences they had encountered throughout their time using dating apps. This screening process was not only about having a type or partner preference, this was surely part of it, but female respondents also said it was also their way of acting in the interest of their personal safety.

That’s why when I’m scrolling if I have such a urm what’s the word? Urm strict set of limits about have you got this, have you got this or if you haven’t got this, this and this you go left and that for me is because... I’m trying to like almost protect myself and make sure the people I match with are safe because I know from fact that no matter how good looking I found somebody if they only had one picture on their profile I’d never go on a date with them because I’d think why has he only got one? (Megan).

The screening process typically involved looking out for ‘*red flags*’ or warning signs in the dating app profile that would help them determine whether they should or should not swipe right. Some examples of the ‘*instant vetos*’ that some female participants mentioned during our interviews included ‘*men critiquing other women on their profiles*’ (Jennifer), ‘*anything that’s kind of like a bit aggressive*’ (Maisy), or ‘*offensive in general*’ (Lydia) in their bio. These were taken as signs that these were the kinds of ‘*dodgy*’ or ‘*creepy*’ men who would engage in abusive or unsolicited behaviour. Amelia shared an example of such a profile during our interview, which she had screenshotted on her phone because of ‘*how bad it was*’.

This app fuels the female egotistical and narcissistic nature by giving them the selfie culture they crave, and a buffet of cock to choose from. This, in turn, transforms most of these girls into picky bitches with shitty attitudes, who believe they are "special snowflakes". Most of you females on here have nothing to offer but your depreciating looks and your worn out disease-ridden vaginas.

Amelia later found out from a friend, who she also ended up showing the picture to, that this was taken from a Men's Rights website and was subsequently relieved that she had '*dodged that bullet*'.

As well as the bio, a number of female participants felt '*there's so much you can read from the type of pictures people use*' (Jennifer). As addressed earlier in the chapter, catfishing, kittenfishing and all the other forms of '*fishing*' was something both male and female participants were concerned for on dating apps, albeit for different reasons. Seemingly, some female participants felt they could tell if someone had a fake profile or was lying about aspects of their profile. One '*giveaway*' included profiles that were '*too symmetrical and too attractive and they look like stock photos off Google*' (Betty). More broadly, any pictures that looked '*creepy*', such as someone '*holding an axe*' (Lydia), were taken as warnings that they should swipe left and avoid the profile. Indeed, with only a bio and picture to go off, it seemed as though even the most minor of detail could hold special significance for women.

This somewhat complicates the straightforward assertions that were presented in the previous chapter whereby women were framed as being '*selective*' and '*picky*' when it came to using dating apps. Rather, the data presented here suggests that being '*picky*' and '*selective*' was also part of the many strategies female participants had for managing their personal safety.

6.3.3 Self-disclosure and Uncertainty Reduction

Once female participants had decided on a choice of dating app, a very common next step in female participants' safety work was factoring their personal safety into the nature and extent of their self-disclosure on dating apps. Self-disclosure is understood as '*any message about the self that a person communicates to another*' (Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011:79). In this context, it was specifically identifiable personal information about oneself such as last names, home addresses, and even places of occupation that female participants spoke of being initially hesitant to disclose on both their dating app profile and during conversations with matches. For instance, Georgia spoke of how '*I've tried not to reveal a huge amount about myself on the profile so I've not included, you know, where I work, obviously I only put my first name*'. Similarly, Megan explained how '*occasionally when I've been chatting to people if they've asked me where I live or where I work I'm really reluctant to tell them and I feel really vulnerable being asked that*'. This vulnerability stemmed from female participants' concerns that '*you don't know who they [men on dating apps] are and they might end up being really creepy*' (Lydia) or have '*dodgy intentions*' such as stalking, sexual assault, and physical harm more broadly. Therefore, whilst it has been highlighted previously that participants felt the

norms and expectations governing dating apps, such as being nonchalant and low effort, meant not having a bio was socially acceptable, this also seemed to work in female participants' favour when it came to their personal safety.

I say initial hesitance because there were factors that influenced how and when female participants disclosed identifiable and personal information to those they met on dating apps. In line with existing scholarship looking at online self-disclosure (see McKenna, 2008; Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011; Ward, 2016)⁸¹, the majority of female participants in this study described only feeling comfortable disclosing personal information about themselves to dates once they had been able to reduce any and all uncertainties that the person they were speaking to was not creepy or had any dodgy intentions.

In Megan's case, her uncertainties were not fully assured until she had met with someone in person and could validate their intentions. However, other female participants described engaging in a plethora of information seeking strategies prior to the date in order to guide their strategic self-disclosure. Some direct information seeking strategies identified in existing literature include taking advantage of technology to reduce uncertainty such as Googling someone, checking public records (McKenna, 2008, Gibbs, Ellison and Lai, 2011), and looking at social media profiles (Ward, 2016). The latter was mainly applicable in this case, with every single female participant mentioning how 'Facebook stalking' or having a 'stalk' of matches' (and potential date's) social media profiles was something they did before meeting them in person.

Like, we can't just accept at face value that the person we are talking to is the person we're talking to so that's also why I'm like only confident, or comfortable even, to say accept someone on Facebook after a while of chatting to them because then I feel like I've managed to get to know a little bit more about them so that when I do add them on Facebook, I can do that Facebook stalk, and make sure some of the things they've been saying are the right kind of things (Sally).

Like, there's not much information and i'm like I'm not sure if I like this person, I might do a little bit of social media research (Darcy).

It is now possible for users to link their other social media profiles like Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook with their dating app profile, making it easier for users to access and look at their matches' broader online presence. In some cases, it is a requirement that you have some form

⁸¹ See Chapter 2, which covers these studies in more detail.

of social media account as to be able to create an account on a dating app. For example, Tinder notoriously used to require its users integrate their Facebook profile with their Tinder profile, which was the company's way of safeguarding against, and reducing public concerns, around the uncertainty typically associated with online dating (Duguay, 2017). It has not been confirmed whether the choice to allow users to link multiple social media profiles (Instagram, Spotify, Snapchat etc) was done with this same intension. Nevertheless, for the female participants in this study it offered them some sense of reassurance that they could verify the intensions of their matches, check the information they had provided during their conversations was accurate, as well confirm that their pictures were accurate. Moreover, having a Facebook or Instagram account is so ubiquitous nowadays for most social groups that female participants felt someone who could simply demonstrate that they had an active social media account was more trustworthy. I say 'active' account because having a social media account with no photos, posts or friends was deemed to be a '*red flag*'.

Another strategy most female participants used to reduce any uncertainties they had about the person they were speaking to was to move conversations off dating apps and chat to their matches on some form of secondary platform. WhatsApp was mentioned by many female participants and was spoken about as a sort of a safe steppingstone that was taken before arranging to meet up and part of the typical dating script.

He asked can we Whatsapp? I was like yeah no problem, cause there's a block function on that as well so I have no issue giving people my number, you know I'm not telling my date of birth, I'm not giving them my address, do you know what I mean? Giving them my phone numbers, I'm okay with that' (Eleanor).

I like it because it might be another picture from what's on their profile so you can double check that they're not a catfish or see a different picture to make sure you still fancy them' (Lynn).

These quotes illustrate how even the choice of which secondary platform to move to was something female participants selected in the interest of their personal safety. As Eleanor stated, you do not need to disclose a lot of information in order to chat to someone on WhatsApp (last names can be kept anonymous for example) and users can easily restrict who can contact them. Another benefit, Lynn explained, is that it adds another layer of safety as you can see pictures and information that are not necessarily on their dating app profile. This is different to, say, Snapchat, which a number of female participants purposefully avoided using because, despite the fact the main form of communication is photo-based on Snapchat, which might eliminate

any concerns around catfishing or attractiveness, ‘you’d get unsolicited urm... can I say dick pics? Haha’ (Lydia). Therefore, some platforms were far safer than others.

It has been mentioned previously (see Chapter 4) that Zoom or video dates became a popular substitute for in person dating for many, including participants in this study, during the early stages of the pandemic. Whilst participants felt that it was unlikely that they would integrate video dates into their typical dating routine ‘post lockdown’, a few female participants appreciated the safety element a zoom date before a face-to-face meeting could offer them.

Weirdly with COVID as well it will change it because I think, for a while anyway, I’d be inclined to actually do a video chat date before actually meeting them in person. So, it would kind of take away if any of those concerns did occur. So, you kind of suss them out, without actually being in person, before you take that step to actually be in the same room as them. So, it’s adding that extra layer (Stephanie).

Asking for a Facetime call or video date of some sort prior to meeting did not seem to be commonplace for the participants in this study prior to the pandemic. As Chapter 4 highlights, this is not part of the Tinder Game, with participants not wanting a virtual pen pal. Most popular dating apps introduced video calling as an option as a result of COVID-19 restriction. It would be interesting for future research to see whether video dating has continued now lockdown restrictions have ceased for what looks like forever, since it potentially offers women more security (Lovine, 2020).

Therefore, self-disclosure and levels of uncertainty were inextricably linked. Most female participants adopted a blanket suspicion of all male users and relied heavily on information-seeking strategies like those mentioned above to measure how much and when to reveal more identifying information about themselves. These were precautions they felt they must take to ensure their personal safety. The above findings also suggest that female respondents situated dating apps in the context of other apps in order to generate information about the men they were potentially meeting. In doing so, a negotiation could be said to take place to how as sites like Facebook are used, as they are utilised not only as social networking sites but as investigative tools. Indeed, dating apps did not provide enough certainty around authenticity for female participants and had to be domesticated in a way that they were used in conjunction with other platforms and technologies that could offer some further information. Objectification refers to the place and role a technology is given within the users’ environment (Carter, Green and Thorogood, 2013). In this case, personal safety played a key role in how female respondents situated dating apps into their social, symbolic and technological environments.

The safety work practices discussed from this point onward do not speak to processes of domestication as they did not take place on dating apps but as part of women's wider safety work activities in preparing for their date with the people they met off dating apps.

6.3.4 Public, Sober and Heavy Surveillance

Despite women's rigorous uncertainty reduction strategies, every single female participant explained that there were only certain circumstances in which they would agree to go on a date with someone off a dating app. Easily the most important of these, and which was non-negotiable for nearly every single female participant, was meeting for the first time in a public place *'no matter what'* (Amelia).

so I guess like I just like obviously like when you meet people through a dating app like you don't know who they are so you're going to meet them, hopefully, in a public place in any case and like urm somewhere that feels like you'll be like safe and you'll be able to not be murdered I guess haha (Lydia).

At the end of the day if I go out with someone I'm not going to meet them in a small space that's dark and secluded. Like I'm going to meet them in a bar or I'm going to meet them in a restaurant where there's going to be other people around me so it's kind of putting yourself in a safe situation (Rose).

As such, meeting in a public place was so important for female participants for several reasons. As highlighted above, it was assumed that their date would not attempt to do them physical harm in a public space and with plenty of people around to see. Female participants also liked the idea of being in public for their first date because if they were concerned for their personal safety, they could ask someone for help. What's more, if something bad was to happen female participants felt reassured that if they met in a public place that either someone would see and be able to report it or that some trace of them would be found on CCTV. Some first date scenarios that female participants specifically spoke of avoiding were going to an area they did not know well, in isolated areas, or going to their date's home. The data suggested that female participants found arranging to meet in a public place was very easy as most first date locations met this criterion such as coffee shops, restaurant or bars. However, it was also not difficult for female participants to recall a time where they had to turn down men's invitations to go round theirs and suggest a more public location for a date. This was the case for Rose, who planned to go to Durham for a second date and when her date suggested she stay at his that night she

'was just up front and said I don't really feel comfortable doing that just yet like we barely know each other'.

For some female respondents the timing of the date was also an important consideration. Namely, that meeting in a public place during the day, or at least when it is light, was preferable. In some cases, meeting up in a public place during the daytime was sometimes not enough and a few female participants stated how they would *'feel safer if I'm obviously not going to be intoxicated and it's in the light of day'* as doing so would *'compromise your safety a little bit'* (Annabelle). This is not surprising given the persistent messages women receive about the risks of being in public places in the dark (Stanko, 1997) and the *'never-stated assumption that men cannot be trusted to not take advantage of a woman who is drunk'* (Kelly, 2015: 123). Indeed, Annabelle explained how the first and only time she felt comfortable enough to consume alcohol on a first date was during a Zoom date she had during the first lockdown because *'over the phone, those risks and non-existent so I guess it's okay'*. Again, illustrating the *'extra layer of safety'* technologies afforded female participants.

Getting to and from the date was also something the majority of female participants considered as part of their safekeeping strategies. Indeed, most female participants were very adamant that they would never accept an offer to be picked up and driven by their date or give their date any control over their transportation. For instance, Amelia described a time where her date offered to pick her up and she responded with: *'no I don't want you to pick me up from anywhere to start our date. No, like I'll meet you in this place like you don't need to offer me a lift'*. Amelia went on to state that this was specifically for safety reasons *'because they can then just drive off'*. Similarly, other female participants explained that it was important that they had an easy way of getting to and from a date.

6.3.5 Collective Safety Work

These details of who, what, when and where were not only for participants themselves, they were also something female participants passed on to family and friends. Chapter 5 addressed how participants engaged in social swiping and collective use of dating apps. For female participants, these collective rituals extended beyond simply using the apps together for fun. Nearly all female participants said that if they went on a date with someone they had met on a dating app they employed friends and family to engage in collective safety work and *'wanted someone to know where I was'* (Grace). Of course, there were different extremes to this and some female participants took more precautions than others but, for most female participants, this involved checking in before, during and after the date.

Checking in before the date involved telling a friend or family member that they were *'going on a date, who it is with, what we're doing and where'* (Megan). In some cases, female participants made sure that *'they've seen the picture of the person I'm supposed to be meeting. Sometimes I will screenshot a profile and I'll be like I'm meeting this person'* (Sally). Collectively looking at a future date's profile with friends and family so that they know what the person looks like and about them, is an example of the way female respondents incorporated dating apps into their routines and relationships with others. Again, the ways dating apps were incorporated was inextricably linked with safety work and gendered constructions of risk.

Female participants also made sure to check in with friends and/or family during the date itself and *'just make sure I drop someone a text saying oh, like it's going well, something like that'* (Mary). Indeed, female participants would tell their friends and/or family when to expect them to get in touch and were told to be on stand-by so that *'if I don't reply then try and get in touch with me or something'* (Alesha). Alternatively, female participants also liked knowing that if they felt uncomfortable or if something troubling did happen then *'I had someone I could ring'* (Grace) or text and they would know enough information to be able to inform the relevant authorities. I was very pleased to hear that none of the women I interviewed found themselves in a position where authorities had been contacted. However, there were cases where friends had been contacted so that they could safely remove themselves from the date. Lydia, for example, turned up to a date to find that the person did not look anything like he did in his profile. She did not feel in immediate danger and went for food with them as planned but his deception made her feel uneasy about continuing the date and so when he suggested that they go for drinks after *'I messaged them [friends] while I was on the date to be like this person isn't the same person urm so could I come meet you afterwards'* (Lydia).

A small number of female respondents went beyond the text or call method and employed safety technologies to help them, and their friends/family, ensure their safety. Notably, Megan, explained how she downloaded an app called Life360⁸² which allowed her mother to track her whereabouts when she was on dates. Similarly, Roxy activated her 'find my friends' feature on her iPhone so that she could share her location with friends when she was on dates. Technologies such as this were said to relieve a lot of concerns that families in particular had

⁸² Life360 is a leading family safety service which allows users to share their location with friends and family, as well as obtain support from live agents and certified specialists who can arrange for emergency services to be dispatched. This is but one example of the numerous anti-rape technologies that have been developed by well-intentioned individuals, groups and organisations hoping to tackle the ever-growing issue of sexual violence (see White and Rees, 2014; White and McMillan, 2020). In the app store there have been found to be over 200 apps solely dedicated to prevent sexual violence (Bivens and Hasinoff, 2018). I go on to discuss the implications of such anti-rape technologies later in the chapter.

around their daughters, nieces, cousins and sisters using dating apps. This once again speaks to the ways female respondents situated dating apps in relation to other technologies. In this instance, and unlike social networking sites, these technologies were designed with personal safety in mind.

Female respondents also reported letting someone know when to expect them home. For example, as Grace commented ‘...*the first thing I do [when I leave a date] is I ring her [friend] just so that she knows I’m in the car and I’m safe and I’m on the way home*’ (Grace). Indeed, it was not until they confirmed their safety that their friends and family could go ‘off duty’ and a few participants recalled times where they had forgotten this step and found a number of missed calls and messages from concerned friends.

It was not just the first meeting or date where this happened, most female participants ensured that they told their friends and/or family these varying pieces of information until they were sure they felt safe enough not to do so. For instance, Georgia was ‘seeing’ a guy for a while but she still ‘*texted his name and his address to a couple of friends*’ the first time she went round his house. As such, friends and family typically played a significant role in most female participants’ safety work. Indeed, alongside dating being an entertaining topic that female respondents wanted to talk about with their friends, there was also this undercurrent of fear and concern that they should all look out for one another while doing so. This was reinforced when female participants described instances where they had not instigated the typical check in formalities. For example, Stephanie did not consider her personal safety when she first used dating apps and told her friends about her date a few hours before due to excitement and was surprised at how ‘*all my friends were like omg texts us when you get there, text us when...you know where is the date going to be? Like they were proper surveilling the date*’. These findings closely align with, and reinforce, recent research from Pym, Byron and Albury (2021:510), which found that ‘young people’s friendships are evidently an important aspect of safer [dating] app use, and friendships are repeatedly drawn into spaces that we might assume to be private sexual communications’.

6.3.6 Refusals and protecting the male ego

Ending the date was another situation that a few female participants expressed feeling at risk. For female participants, the end of the date came with many questions such as ‘*do I want to see him again?*’ (Georgia) and ‘*well do you kiss them?*’ (Rebekka). Some female participants were very adamant that they would never ‘*kiss on the first date because I think I don't know you that well*’ (Grace), but that they would always hug someone goodbye. Others were using dating apps

for the sole purpose of hooking up and so questions around ‘will this end in sex?’ were relevant. With the sheer diversity of preferences on how to end a date assessing what level of intimacy is appropriate at this stage is difficult and worrisome for most users. However, for women, there seemed to be this added concern that you have *‘to be very careful when you reject someone’s advances’* because of *‘like a fear of potential violence or repercussions’* (Maisy).

Fear of repercussions from refusals is not unique to dating apps, it is not even unique to dating contexts alone, research demonstrates that refusals in general are much harder to communicate than saying yes (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). However, in dating and relationship contexts in particular, women’s refusals are more tenuous because there is the fear that they will be ignored and overruled. An extreme, but unfortunately common, outcome of this is rape (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). None of the women in this study reported anything such as this happening to them, but some certainly expressed fears that it could and communicated times where their refusals had not been wholly recognised and instead interpreted as ‘token resistance’ (saying ‘no’ but meaning ‘yes’) (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999:306). Jennifer, for example, expressed how she sometimes thought about *‘What would happen if I said no? What would happen if I asked them to stop?’*. Similarly, Maisy explained how *‘there’s that slight horrible feeling of I have to somehow let this guy down without upsetting him or making him angry or offending him’*. Moreover, Amelia was asked at the end of a pretty horrendous date (her words) whether she would like to go back to his, to which she politely said no. However, rather than accepting this no as meaning no, her date proceeded to:

Go on this wave of like complimenting me and sort of saying, you know, oh yeah you're very beautiful and blah blah blah and like going back to this kind of way of like, Oh, you're kind of subtly trying to proposition me again. Like deflecting from the fact that I've said no and now you're trying to charm me.

What’s more, it took Amelia explicitly detailing that it was because of his horrendous behaviour on the date that she did not want to go back to his or see him again for her date to accept her no seriously. This is why, Amelia explained, she has since changed her approach to refusals. Instead of being ‘awkward’ about it, she is *‘really explicit and clear because...I think if you give a wobbly response to guys, or people, you're showing them a give in your answer’* which they feel they can challenge.

Scholarship has long challenged the view that improving women’s refusal skills will reduce sexual miscommunication and the devastating outcomes this can have (see Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012). Not only should women’s refusals be recognised in their

own right, but verbal communication is not the only way in which women signal a lack of interest, women's body language can reveal this also and more effort should be placed on ensuring men are more attuned to this (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012). This being said, Amelia's, example demonstrates that for many women negotiating consent in everyday life is still very tricky and can be associated with risk, which explains why several women instead chose to enact their right to refuse in strategic ways.

One strategy was to manage that male ego. This was the case for Maisy, who described how '*letting someone down gently*' is very important because she felt that simply telling someone to '*get away from me or like fuck off!*' when they come on to you might result in potential violence. I'd like to also remind the reader of Lydia's uncomfortable date situation and how she chose to carry on with the date and comply, rather than leave as soon as she realised her date had lied about aspects of his identity. Instead, Lydia waited until she had an unquestionable excuse (meeting her friends) which meant she could not, rather than did not want to, continue the date. Coming up with hard excuses such as this, or letting someone down gently, seemed far more appealing to these female participants than Amelia's direct and explicit approach. Indeed, even Amelia's direct approach seemed as though it was only feasible in certain circumstances. When asked if she felt comfortable doing this, Amelia, commented on how '*we were still like in a public space by this point, so it wasn't like I felt like I was at a physical risk*'. Again, being in public was deemed as a safe place in which to confront men on issues such as this, rather than private or isolated areas where a physical threat was more viable.

Several of the women I interviewed also spoke of how the introduction of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions eased their fears around refusing sexual advances and further interaction with men they met off dating apps. During the summer/autumn period in 2019, lockdown restrictions had eased somewhat so that people could meet up as long as social distancing measures were in place. For a lot of the participants I interviewed, this meant they could go on in person social distanced dates. One might expect that with the added concern for their physical health, this might make negotiating sexual consent more difficult and in many ways it did. However, for several of the women I interviewed during this time, lockdown restrictions which prohibited direct contact with someone outside your household, was another unchallengeable excuse women could rightly utilise as an excuse for why they could not, rather than did not want to, initiate intimate or sexual contact during or at the end of the date.

I didn't want to kiss him so it was sort of like alright. Which is good because sometimes I'd feel obliged to just get pissed and sleep with them just something I would maybe do. So, that was the difference haha (Rebekka)⁸³.

On the flip side, I was really happy that I didn't have to worry about that stuff with these guys because I didn't have to worry about if we were gonna have an awkward hug or anything. So, I was like, well, we can't touch so okay then, bye haha (Darcy).

It would probably be ideal because then I wouldn't... you wouldn't have to touch them or get anywhere near them (Grace).

As such, lockdown restrictions offered women a momentary, no-questions asked, ability to deny sexual advances. In many cases, it was automatically assumed that this was off the table and so many female participants felt they could leave the date without having to explain why. On the other hand, they also reinforce how these women did typically worry about negotiating sexual consent during and after a date. Lockdown restrictions might have offered these women the 'ideal' situation, but these comments also provoke questions such as what would you usually do if you did not want to hug, kiss, or engage in sexual contact with your date and restrictions were not in place?

Another, and probably the most popular, way in which female participants communicated refusals whilst also avoiding physical threats, violence or repercussions was to, once again, take advantage of technology and the distance it afforded them. For instance, Georgia explained how she always chose to wait until she got home before sending a text with 'words to the effect of *nothing's going to happen here*'. Likewise, Samantha never directly communicated to a date's face that she did not want to continue dating them: '*it's always been like a text*'. Of course, this could simply be because face to face refusals are uncomfortable and hard, however, this does not take away from the vulnerability women often said they felt in these situations and the strategies women had for dealing with this.

This demonstrates how there are multiple layers to the personal safety that women are considering. Whilst thinking about the threats to one's personal safety one might jump straight to more extreme cases of physical or sexual assault, which up until this point, were the kinds of risk of violence that women described mitigating. Fearing the repercussions that may stem from saying no or refusing a man's advances during or at the end of the date, however, reflect the

⁸³ I did follow up with Rebekka about this rather worrying comment and she reassured me that she had not been coerced into having sex. She explained that she meant it as a light-hearted joke and that she had slept with some people she probably did not want to but that they had her consent.

more subtle threats to one's personal safety that many women are mitigating in their everyday life, and have shaped the ways dating apps are domesticated as part of safety work. Negotiating sexual consent has been found to be risky for women in dating and relationship contexts in general (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). However, it is interesting to consider whether the expectation to get off the apps as soon as possible and the broader hook-up stigma often associated with dating apps (as outlined in data Chapter 1) adds further layers of complexity to women's comfortability with saying no and men's willingness to accept women's right to say no. This raises the question, do men perform safety work in similar ways?

6.4 Men's (largely non-existent) safety work practices

On the whole, it was agreed across the entirety of the data set that women were far more likely to engage in safety work than men and to domesticate dating apps as part of safety work. This was never more evident than when female participants compared their actions to that of men and vice versa. Indeed, many female respondents recalled conversations with their male counterparts where they had described either doing something that women themselves would consider too risky for their personal safety or not doing something which women felt was essential on dating apps, or other technologies situated alongside them, for ensuring their personal safety. For example, Jennifer explained how, unlike with her female friends, *'there would never be a beforehand conversation about it [meeting up with someone]'* among her male friends

It was not just conversations with male friends which has led women to come to the conclusion that *'men don't take any precautions'* (Megan). First-hand experiences they had with men on dating apps had also contributed to this view. For instance, female participants were very aware that they were *'always the one that brings it [safety] up'* (Roxy) and when female participants did bring up issues of safety such as *'have you told anyone that you're on a date? They'll say no'* (Grace). Equally, women brought up times where men had suggested going round to one another's flats for the first meeting, offering to pick them up in their car, and meeting up very quickly after matching. All of which insinuated to female participants that all of the steps which they understood to be *'common sense'* and taken for granted were not as much of a part of men's routine dating rituals.

This was largely corroborated by male participants. Some men spoke of how they also performed acts of safety work by adding their matches on social media so that they could prevent against Catfishing. However, as explained earlier in the chapter, at the moment of the date they had different concerns about risk of harm or violence. Around half of the men I

interviewed only mentioned safety work for preventing risk of violence as something they knew women undertook and to clarify that it was not something they themselves felt was necessary. Sean, for example, knew that *'women usually tell their friends where they're going urm some women have a code that they need to receive or send a message within the first half an hour or send out a search party'*. However, when asked whether he had a similar arrangement with his friends, Sean explained that *'I appreciate it will be different for men and women but I don't do that'*. Similar sentiments were echoed by Peter, who also appreciated that women are *'likely to tell your best friend where you are going, maybe check in with you after half an hour or, you know, worst case scenario, have somebody's sitting across the street, you know, in a wig'* but that he also did not do *'all of that stuff because I'm the guy so it would appear to be more risk free'*.

George was the only exception to this. However, as we can see from the quote below, his use of the phrase *'I'm not sure how serious I am'* is indicative of how safety work is perhaps not as non-negotiable to the same extent as it was for women.

I don't tell people when I'm going and where I'm going. I guess, I'm not sure how serious I am, like people have threatened to turn up and ruin dates before haha and things like that, but I guess it's just common sense.

Additionally, George followed this by saying how *'it makes me feel better knowing that the other person probably feels better and is safer. So, I've always sort of been safety conscious on Tinder dates and Bumble dates. Certainly, if not for me, then for the other person'*. A known exception to the general assumption that safe keeping does not impede men's daily lives in the same way as women, is circumstances in which they worry about the safety of the women in their lives: mothers, sisters, wives and daughters (Stanko, 1990). Or, as it seems to be in this case, when they take consideration for ensuring that the women they are meeting with feel as safe as possible.

As for the rest of the male participants, it was the fact that safety work was absent from their narratives which revealed that men do not perform safety work on dating apps in the same ways as women. Indeed, the ways male respondents took into consideration their own safety in relation to dating and dating apps centred less on their physical safety or potential harm.

I made a point of also asking male participants questions around any concerns they had with meeting up with people from dating apps. Unlike female participants who would effortlessly go into rigorous detail about the risks they felt they faced and the steps they took to minimise them, this was typically a question that yielded pretty short responses from men. Nevertheless,

Stanko (1990:11) found that ‘having men abandon the illusion of vulnerability, one mask of masculinity, was a tall order indeed’. This could help explain why male participants were less willing and less literate at articulating their fear of crime and victimisation. To do so, it has been argued, is not culturally expected of a man or within the remit of masculinity (Stanko, 1990; Walklate, 2004). Nevertheless, it is also the case that feminist research has continuously demonstrated that women disproportionately undertake safety work and so these findings largely reflect existing patterns (Stanko, 1990;1997). It is these patterns, I argue, which have shaped the ways men and women have domesticated dating apps differently.

6.5 Safety Work & Discourse of Responsibility

Examining the different safety work that female respondents undertook illustrates just how pervasive the perceived threat of potential violence was for women on dating apps and subsequently how extensive women’s safety work was throughout the different stages of their dating app use. This further complicates the idea presented in Chapter 4, that dating apps are fun, low effort and nonchalant. On the contrary, I subscribe to the view of feminist scholars who attempt to de-normalise the idea of safety work as common sense thinking and instead treat it as a form of invisible labour, or domestication work, which is often mandated of women (Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Nevertheless, women in this study did not perceive or conceptualise the safety work they undertook as work/labour. Instead, it was incredibly common for female respondents to characterise their safety work as ‘*common sense precautions*’ (Georgia), or as them simply ‘*trusting your own instincts*’ (Sally). This was never more evident when looking at the language women used when discussing their safety work. Specifically, the recurring use of the word ‘*obviously*’, which suggested that safety work was not necessarily hard, effortful or out of the ordinary for them. Stanko (1990) revealed just how ordinary and mundane safe keeping is and the myriad of ways it has become embedded into people’s everyday routines and rituals when occupying different public and private spaces, especially for women. These findings are also transferrable to online contexts such as dating apps and help understand why female participants tended to frame their safety work as ‘just good common sense’ (Stanko, 1990: 13).

The majority of female respondent subscribed to a discourse of responsabilization whereby the ritualised and common-sense nature of safety work has led it to be reconceptualised into work women see as something they are responsible for doing, rather than a social problem (Vera-Grey and Kelly, 2020; Stanko, 1990). Women have traditionally been held individually

responsible for their personal safety (Stanko, 1990; Walklate, 2004; Kelly, 2015; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). This discourse was evident within female participants' narratives.

So, perhaps there are things that I would consider the basic common-sense things to take into account because I've been brought up and socialised as a woman and I know you have to do those things, whereas men potentially don't go through life looking over their shoulders, women do (Darcy).

These messages of responsabilisation are evident in most safety advice, which positions women as at risk from men's uncontrollable urges (Brooks, 2011). These messages are also usually reinforced from a young age via various social institutions such as family, friends, media and public discourse, where the discourse usually frames women as vulnerable and promotes a set of gendered expectations inhibiting women's actions and behaviour (Stanko, 1997; Brooks, 2011). Darcy's reference to being 'socialised' is therefore reminiscent of how women are taught to be 'good women' who are 'law-abiding, middle-class, sensible, modest, risk-adverse' citizens who are deserving of state protection (Stanko, 1997: 486).

Several female participants referenced the media, schooling and their families as key actors in their learning of the role they must take in ensuring their safety whilst using dating apps. For instance, a number of female participants mentioned the numerous '*horror stories*' they had seen in the media where women had been sexually assaulted or murdered at the hands of men they had met online and how this had taught them to be fearful for their safety. A common example brought up by women was the case of Grace Millane, a 22-year-old British Backpacker who was '*murdered, like genuinely murdered*' (Lydia) whilst visiting Australia by a man she had met on Tinder. Similarly, Annabelle remembered attending internet safety assemblies in school where they would teach her about the dangers of young girls speaking to '*strange men*' online and receiving safety advice in which they could utilise in order to protect themselves whilst on sites like MSN⁸⁴. Roxy had a particularly interesting experience at the age of 12 where she met up with a boy she had met online from Hot or Not⁸⁵ without telling anyone. When her mother found out '*she flipped*' and '*was just shouting all of the things that could have gone wrong*'. This incident, Roxy, recalled, '*really hammered in*' how risky the internet was for young women and how she must take responsibility for her safety from there on.

⁸⁴ MSN, also known as Windows Live Messenger, was an early instant messenger service that was released in 1999 and slowly became one of the most widely used instant-messaging platform until it was supplanted by new software such as Skype and Facebook which led to it being shut down in 2014 (BBC News, 2014).

⁸⁵ Hot or Not was created in 2002 by two students attending Berkley University and, not so dissimilar to Tinder, it asked its users to swipe right or left to indicate whether a person was hot or not. If both users rate one another as being 'hot' then they could begin to chat (Bercovici, 2014).

Women's use of dating apps prompts a renewed interest into online safety advice and the implications it can have. Dating apps offer their own safety advice for using their services, which largely centres on what individuals can do to protect themselves. For example, the Tinder safety tips page suggests reporting all suspicious or offensive behaviour and to 'stay on the platform' as exchanges on Tinder are subjects to safe message filters (Tinder, no date). Firstly, it is very questionable as to how many people read the terms or conditions or actively seek safety advice on the company websites. What's more, this advice seems contradictory to what the women in this study felt was appropriate to keep them safe. Women often complained that the reporting feature did not work as they saw men they had reported on the app using them just weeks later and many women felt it was necessary to move off the apps. Therefore, whilst dating app companies are setting out parameters of correct, safe, use, this did not conform to what women in this study were actually doing. Rather, they based their safety work on the common-sense routines they had learned from years of female socialisation as safety workers.

Note, also, how, like has been found elsewhere, online safety advice more broadly typically adheres to a set of gendered stereotypes and common rape myths where male strangers are seen to be risky and dangerous and women as vulnerable and responsible (White and Rees, 2014). The implications can be seen in how female participants treated all the men they interacted with on dating apps with blanket suspicion and subsequently engage in the appropriate safety work just in case this something was to happen. This is problematic, especially since women are often blamed and seen as undeserving of state intervention and social justice if they are victimised and cannot show they have taken suitable safety precautions (Stanko, 1990; White and Rees, 2014; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Victim blaming discourse was present within female participants' narratives. This was evident in the few instances that female participants described times where friends or acquaintances of theirs had transgressed or poorly performed safety work. Grace, for example, was very unhappy with her friend's use of dating apps:

She would have a different random bloke round and I would say to her what happens if he murders you? You know, you've got people coming around your house at half past 2 in the morning. Realistically, nobody would know if you're alive until the next day. You could be well dead by then.

Note how the focus is not on the perpetrator, but on how her friend's actions had led to a situation where she could be murdered. What's more, this case demonstrates the potential role

friends and family have in disciplining and correcting behaviour which does not align with the risk averse behaviour mandated of women.

There was one outlier, who felt she had partly transgressed learnt safety advice which she typically adhered to in order to fulfil a sexual fantasy she had of sleeping with a guy in a car. In this particular instance, Roxy arranged with a Tinder match to be picked up, driven to a car park where they would have sex and be driven back after. Prior to telling me this story Roxy asked me not to judge her or *'think that I do this all the time'*, which immediately signalled her belief that what she had done had transgressed some of the taken for granted or common-sense precautions that women are usually taught, as well as scripts of femininity. Roxy also made sure to list all of the safety precautions that she did do to *'try and be as safe as possible'* in this situation, such as having the match FaceTime her so that her friends had seen his face, noting his car registration details to pass on to friends and asking to follow a certain route and go to a certain car park so her friends would know where she was. It felt as though she was proving that she could not be blamed if something had gone wrong. Despite this, Roxy expressed how *'that night I was terrified that some man was gonna like stab me because he was kind of in control. Like, because it was his car and he was the one driving us, therefore, like I was kind of putting my trust in him. I didn't have a huge amount of control'*. Therefore, Roxy's, classed her own actions as risk taking behaviour something which is usually seen to be the privilege of men (Olstead, 2011).

This instance described by Roxy also prompted questions around what it means to transgress safety rules and under what circumstances are women willing to subvert and ignore safety advice. It has been argued that *'risk taking activities are themselves, part of the way in which individuals produce gender and identity'* (Olstead, 2011:87). Specifically, women are far more likely to self-regulate their risk-taking behaviour in order to conform to standards of appropriate femininity (Olstead, 2011). Feminist research ALSO highlights how discourses of gender and risk make it so that taking responsibility for one's individual safety is *'related to the very core of what being a woman is not seen as something women do but as something that they are'* (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020:269). By this logic, to subvert, ignore, or fail in one's safe keeping on dating apps is to risk being seen as subverting feminine scripts (Stanko, 1990; Brooks, 2011).

In this sense, the domestication of dating apps for female participants was also tied up with the construction of feminine, and masculine, identities. As safety work is so boundly tied up with what it means to be a woman and acceptable feminine identities, the ways dating apps are domesticated by women invited moral exchanges of their worth. These findings, therefore,

speak to the ways that gender scripts are being enacted and reproduced through the use of dating apps.

6.6 Tools of Prevention or Tools of Responsibilisation?

At this point I would like to remind the reader of the technologies that some female participants employed as part of their safe keeping strategies. Anti-rape technologies have caused some controversy, with some scholars (White and Rees, 2014; Shelby, 2020; White and McMillan, 2020) exemplifying how, far from solving the issue of sexual violence, these technological solutions rely on a discourse of responsabilisation which unintentionally burdens women with the task of individually ensuring their own safety. Whilst some of the technologies female participants employed were not necessarily designed to be anti-rape technologies, they still represent a shift to utilising technology within everyday self-defence strategies. Moreover, the ways they were used by respondents mimicked a lot of the key features found in anti-rape technologies such as live tracking, checking in, and bystander intervention (White and McMillan, 2020). As such, this raises several valid concerns, especially surrounding the ways the adoption and domestication of these technologies may further responsabilise women and undermine any work done to shift the locus from individualising women and to treating sexual violence as a social problem. Arguably, this places even more of a burden on women and in the process further limiting their freedoms in how they can domesticate dating apps.

It is also important to consider the implications this might have on victim blaming discourse, which we can see from the above discussion was pertinent to female participants' narratives. White and Rees (2014:364) point to how the integration of anti-rape technologies into women's self-defence arsenal might make it so 'that its absence implies a woman was a willing participant'. Similarly, it is easy to envision a situation where a woman not using a tracking app or employing bystander intervention techniques when meeting with a man she met off a dating app might frame her as an underserving, rather than an ideal, victim and therefore impact the criminal justice system's response and handling of her case if she was assaulted by them. Technology is, therefore, being framed simultaneously as the cause and solution to sexual violence and so it is necessary to think about the role technologies play in changing the ways safety work is enacted. Technological solutions potentially mark a new phase in responsabilisation that could likely contribute in new and distinct ways to forms of violence against women (Stanko, 1990: 11).

6.7 Continuum

Once it became clear that the fear and threat of violence on dating apps was a persistent theme, I began asking female participants how this made them feel. It was common for female respondents to relate their experience of sexual harassment and sexual violence on dating apps to their wider experiences of violence in general.

Obviously there's lots of micro aggressions generally throughout women's days, and so for me it's just like another thing isn't it? (Rebekka).

I'm not sure whether online dating is offering... is creating anymore risks than day to day life does because you know women can end up with a stalker who's somebody who works in the office down the corridor or something like that. These risks are kind of an inherent part of being a woman so I'm not sure the apps make it, I don't know, on quick reflection I'm not sure the apps make it much different (Georgia).

These examples illustrate that the threat of violence and abuse that most of the women encountered on dating apps is not new, unique or surprising, but can be contextualised as part of the wider continuum of normalised violence that women encounter and manage throughout their lifetime (Kelly, 2015). This being said, as has been addressed earlier in the chapter, online environments present new threats to violence against women (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Therefore, the findings presented in this chapter provide some insight into ways that gendered forms of violence are reproduced and facilitated via dating apps and work alongside other forms of normalised abuse in women's everyday lives⁸⁶.

These findings also offer an insight into the implications normalised online violence and abuse has on women and their experiences of dating and relationships. Safety campaigns and advice usually paint public spaces and the opportunistic male stranger as the main site where women must undertake safety work to avoid violence (Brooks, 2011). Although, feminist researchers have highlighted how women are also mitigating threats of potential violence in private spaces (Kelly, 2015). However, dating apps complicate this public/private divide because 'the ability to stay connected via digital media regardless of distance means that physical boundaries are not barriers to abusive behaviour' (Gillett, 2011: 212). Indeed, women can privately experience TFSV in their home whilst watching tv or on their commute to work. Again, the notion of

⁸⁶ This sample was not racially diverse and so the data I have gathered largely articulates the ways risk and risk of violence was experienced by white, cis gender, men and women. It is important to recognise that racialised sexual violence brings about different issues for men and women in the dating arena. It is recommended that this be a focus of future research. Without it, we risk missing the voices of other marginalised groups and failing to understand the true extent of violence against ALL men and women.

domestication is salient to this discussion, as the ways dating apps are being incorporated into women's regular temporal and spatial routines, is impacting the ways they experience violence.

For the women in this study, the normalised nature of abuse and harassment on dating apps had an impact on the way women domesticated dating apps (as has been addressed above), women's self-esteem and led to regular disengagement from the apps. A significant proportion of female participants spoke of how the repeated instances of harassment and abuse '*can be really difficult mentally cause it knocks your confidence and it can be really demoralising because somebody's gone out of their way to say quite a lot of nasty things like one after the other for no reason*' (Eleanor). Although street harassment is not always taken seriously as having any harm because it does not have any physical repercussions for women (Fileborn, 2013), feminist scholars have found it to have severe implications on women's mental health and on how women go about their daily lives and their freedom of movement in public spaces (see Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Similarly, the impact online abuse had on female participants self-esteem also impeded their freedom to participate in dating apps. Nearly every woman I spoke to described going '*through phases of just not liking it because you get like lots of strange messages*' and how this had resulted in them adopting a cyclical use of the apps or having '*Tinder Detoxes*' (Jennifer), where they took time off dating apps to recoup until they are mentally strong enough to return and '*go through it all again*' (Mary). The appropriation of dating apps was, therefore, cyclical and iterative in that women had to either undergo a significant amount of work in order to justify their continued adoption or, as was the case for many women, abandon and re-domesticate the apps on a regular basis. Like Gillett (2021: 12), I argue that this relates to broader political issues surrounding women's equal access to online spaces.

6.8 Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the theme of risk was incredibly prevalent across the dataset. The way in which risk was conceptualised, and acted on, was shown to be highly gendered, with male and female respondents having different understandings of the risks they faced and the ways in which this subsequently impacted the use of their dating devices. A range of themes and concepts have been utilised to situate and explore these findings, including violence against women, safety work, responsabilisation and the continuum of violence. The ways women managed the risks to their personal safety when going on dates is not necessarily new information. Existing research has demonstrated the wide array of safety work that is enacted by women to manage risks in public spaces (Vera-Gray, 2018). Nevertheless, less

research has documented women's online safety work practices on dating apps. I have attempted to demonstrate that the safety work enacted by women on dating apps themselves, such as the choice of app and Facebook stalking, could also be considered acts of domestication.

To clarify, I am suggesting that there is nothing inevitable about the ways in which the men and women in this study have domesticated dating apps in different ways. Rather, men and women have domesticated dating apps against a backdrop of gender and sexual discourses and wider social structures that have served to shape men and women's constructions of risk which have, in turn, shaped the ways dating app can, and should, be domesticated. Namely, gender-based violence is so endemic in women's lives, that it has even factored into something as simple as women's choice of dating app.

Moreover, the legitimation of women's choice to use dating apps, and how they use them, cannot be traced to the superior design of dating apps, it was contingent on women's perception of their safety. I suggest that these findings, therefore, speak to broader issues that this thesis attempts to tackle regarding the relationship between technology and social life. Namely, the way these findings largely suggest that the domestication of a technology cannot be done in isolation, based on the technological design and prescribed functionality of dating apps alone. A better understanding of the domestication of dating apps would take a gendered approach.

This, again, compels me to revisit the claims made by participants that dating apps are convenient and low effort. Safety work, is just that, work. It steals energy and complicates the lives of women (Stanko, 1990; Ver-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Therefore, the question that arises is convenient for who and, alongside this, how does this nonchalant narrative around dating apps impact women's perceptions of their safety work? Does it make it even more hidden and invisible as it does not conform with normative understandings of appropriate dating app use? What's more, the level of fear and work which goes into making women feel safe when meeting with men on dating apps begs the question: was the fact that dates were rare (a finding which was revealed in the previous chapter) a feature of women's risk reduction processing?

7 Chapter 7. The Compelling Tinder Game?

7.1 Introduction

The last three chapters have shown there to be a contradiction evident within most participants' accounts of their dating app use. Namely, the difference between participants' conventional talk about app use, which confirmed with a social institution of dating apps use as low effort, low-stakes, and fun dating tools, compared to participants' everyday dating app practice, which presented a less positive picture of dating apps. These contradictions raise some interesting questions. One of which is, if participants express negativity and dislike towards dating apps and dating apps do prove, in participants' own practice, as failing to operate within the particular formative intentions (Schlyfter, 2009), why is it that they continue to use them? Why, despite all of these factors, are dating apps still worth using? This is precisely what this chapter aims to consider.

Throughout the last three chapters, I have argued that dating app use is a social institution. In this chapter, however, I argue that participants felt compelled to use dating apps because using dating apps for dating has itself become a social institution. In other words, dating apps have become the normative way to date. I will relate these explanations to broader theories of gender, sexuality, and intimacy to suggest that participants' use of dating apps occurs within the dominant framework of couple normativity and compulsory coupledness (Robinson, 1997; Budgeon, 2008; Wilkinson, 2012;2013; Roseneil et al., 2020). That is, the ideological force of coupledness is an important reason as to why participants continue to engage in an activity which they rarely enjoy, and how this in turn may serve to further reinforce and normalise the institution of compulsory coupledness and heterosexuality as a whole (Budgeon, 2008).

Richardson (2010) used the concept of 'compelling', rather than 'compulsory' heterosexuality, as it simultaneously accounted for the ways that heterosexuality is constraining and acknowledged that men play an active role in the construction, negotiation of heterosexual masculine identities. Doing this also acknowledges that constructions of heterosexuality and masculinities were not fixed, but changeable. Likewise, I draw on the notion of compelling, rather than compulsory coupledness in an effort to avoid a monolithic and deterministic treatment of heterosexual coupledness and acknowledge that social actors can reflexively construct, negotiate, and subvert expectations of coupledness.

7.2 Problematising individualism

I have criticised the socio-psychological focus found in existing scholarship into online dating (see Chapter 2). Specifically, explanatory accounts which rely on psychological concepts such as ego boost, self-validation, and entertainment to explain users' motivations, and use of, dating apps (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016; Timmermans and De Caluwe, 2017). The last three chapters have demonstrated that very often dating app use was a collective activity. They have also largely undermined the idea that participants in this study experienced the above benefits from dating apps. Rather, if anything, dating apps have been shown to have a negative influence on users' self-esteem.

For male respondents, this was because they found it difficult and rare to get women to engage with them on the apps. Moreover, female respondents' self-esteem was affected by the overwhelming amount of harassment and abuse they encountered on dating. In both cases, the large amount of emotional and practical labour required to use dating apps, led participants to (dis)engage with dating apps in a cyclical fashion. That is, participants would get so frustrated and disheartened with dating apps that they needed to take 'Tinder Detoxes'. Nevertheless, despite having to take breaks, participants described feeling compelled to go back and continue using dating apps. As I have argued, individualistic accounts cannot fully account for this compulsion. Instead, analysis suggests that this too is rooted in collective social processes.

7.3 Borderline Essential?

7.3.1 *'Everyone Uses Dating Apps'*

Across the data set, almost every participant remarked on how *'literally everyone you know has or has had those [dating] apps basically'* (Sally). Given the findings presented previously (see Chapter 4), it is questionable as to whether 'everyone' necessarily means 'everyone' or whether Sally is more accurately saying that everyone her own age is using dating apps. Nevertheless, it was certainly the case that most participants, regardless of their stage in the life course, expressed how *'it's so normalised meeting people through dating apps now'* (Peter, aged 55) and that dating apps have become a normalised *'part of society now'* (Anne, aged 25). Knowing that dating apps were thought of as normalised in most participants' social circles, could help understand why it is that participants continued to use dating apps, despite how little they enjoyed using them at times.

Research has shown that to reject or resist engaging with popular fads⁸⁷ or trends can lead to social exclusion or disapproval from peer groups. Research exploring the use and non-use of popular social media sites like Facebook, for instance, has found that the popularity of the platform amongst one's peer groups helped explain individual adoption or diffusion of Facebook (Baumer et al., 2013). Indeed, it was because it seemed like everyone used Facebook, that individuals adopted, and continued to adopt, Facebook as it allowed them to achieve and maintain social approval from friends and avoid FOMO⁸⁸. Likewise, users were far more likely to limit or stop using Facebook if they knew of others that had done the same (Baumer et al., 2013). Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to consider whether some participants adopted and continued to use dating apps simply because 'everyone' else around them seemed to be doing the same. One participant even made this explicit comparison.

I think it would be a similar reaction to you know when you get the odd person who's young and doesn't have Facebook? It is a bit odd isn't it (Aidan).

Peer pressure and the need to belong have also been identified as key motives for using dating apps, with existing studies finding that users downloaded dating apps because their friends had told/persuaded them to and/or because they were 'trendy' (see Timmermans and De Caluwe, 2017; LeFebvre, 2018; Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016; Tanner and Huggins, 2018). Although, it is worth highlighting that peer pressure and social approval have been found to be more influential during adolescence and so this might be less applicable for participants in older cohorts.

It is also worth clarifying that no participant expressed explicit fears that they would be shunned by their peer groups if they told them they were not going to use dating apps. Simply, others would be confused, surprised, find it odd, or expect this to change. However, given how many collective rituals, storytelling, and peer group activities centred around participant's dating app use, this would suggest, as Le Fabvre (2018:1214) argues, that this is because they 'did not want to be left out of contemporary conversations, friend circles, and popular dating culture'. As Brubaker, Ananny and Crawford (2016:385) found in their study, 'even when participants claimed that their use of Grindr was uneventful and their departure insignificant, leaving required participants to position themselves relative to the system's technology, people, interactions and cultural implications'.

⁸⁷ A slang term to refer to something that gains widespread popularity, but where this popularity might be short-lived. Some examples include Pokemon GO, Fidget Spinners or the cinnamon challenge.

⁸⁸ FOMO is a popular acronym standing for the fear of missing out.

7.3.2 *What's the alternative?*

Another reason that participants expected their friends would find it odd if they did not use dating apps was the perceived lack of alternatives for meeting people. Indeed, participants expected that their friends would also be curious as to ‘...how does she even date or get laid?’ (Lynn) if they did not use dating apps. This was because of the transformations that participants felt had occurred, or were underway, to the ways people meet and form relationships. Namely, that sites such as bars, clubs, and workplaces, which have traditionally been sites where people meet to date and hook up, are no longer viable spaces in which to conduct these activities.

I feel like the traditional methods of meeting people, like in a bar or a club or something like that, right now especially, is just is less and less common. So, I think that this is like the new way of meeting someone, I suppose (Mary, 21).

Like, how else am I going to meet someone? Like, I work in the charity sector, which is mainly women. I work for a social investment company, which is mainly men in the charity sector, and they are all old. What am I going to do? (Rebekka, 30).

I'm in that kind of awkward middle ground of where, you know, typically most people have been through a minimum of one divorce or relationship breakup and most women are currently perimenopausal. Believe me it's a fucking minefield but even, actually, you know, if I hit just about there in the real world, that's a pretty small pool of people in terms of hoping to meet somebody who's, you know, in that space, age-range, and mindset. So, thank God for dating apps eh? Haha (Peter, 55).

As evidenced above, there was an element of how using dating apps themselves had become a social institution and that participants felt compelled to use dating apps because of this. This opinion was not reserved for older groups, there was an understanding that a shift had/was taking place which was resulting in dating apps being the most likely place to, or perhaps even essential, to meeting someone. This lends some irony to the claims made by participants belonging to the 18-35 cohort, as discussed in earlier chapters, that dating apps were for convenience and fun whereas dating websites were a ‘last resort’.

There were, however, nuanced differences between younger and older participants’ narratives around the circumstances of their use. Indeed, the main difference between the young users and the older users relates to the pool of available persons in their ‘real lives’. Older users were more likely than their younger counterparts to comment on how there were significantly fewer people in their dating pool because people their age were typically married or in a long-term

relationship. Whereas younger participants had larger pools, but they were seen as no longer being accessible via traditional dating settings. In either case, however, both cohorts spoke of dating apps as borderline essential, rather than a matter of choice or convenience.

One participant even went as far as to suggest it was no longer socially acceptable to approach people in places such as bars anymore as it was deemed ‘*creepy*’.

A lot of the time now, if you do go over to someone, because of all this social media stuff it is deemed creepy to go over to a girl that, you know, you find attractive. It's like 'aw can I get your number' and they're like 'wait' because I think it's not normal, it's not normal anymore. A girl will be like 'hang on, why is a guy actually asking this?' (Jeff).

Jeff⁸⁹ went on to say that he and his friends would not approach a person they found attractive in a social setting and would instead ‘...try and find them on Tinder first and be like if I get a match perfect, that's my way in’. This is reminiscent of the work of Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (2015) and Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016), who found that location-aware real-time dating apps like Grindr resulted in the layering of virtual and physical spaces where users would check if the person they found to be present in the physical space was also actually present on Grindr (and vice versa)⁸⁹. Whilst beyond the reach of this study, it would be interesting to understand whether and what ways individuals seeking mixed-sex interactions use dating apps to augment physical social spaces.

Several participants stated that it would now be considered more abnormal amongst their friends for them to not use dating apps, than to use them, because of the reasons that have been highlighted above. For example, Samantha stated ‘*I was more strange for not having them last year, then having them*’. Several other participants expected that their friends would be ‘surprised’, ‘shocked’, and/or would question this decision if they were single and did not use apps. The only situation or circumstance where participants expected someone would not, or had not, used dating apps was if they were in a relationship.

⁸⁹ These findings were based on the experiences of men seeking sex with men (MSM) on gay dating apps like Grindr. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that their motivations for using Grindr to augment physical spaces will stem from several factors that do not necessarily apply to the realities of the participants in this study, such as the invisibility and marginalisation of LGBTQ populations, the scarcity of LGBTQ safe spaces and the prominence of heterosexual spaces, to name a few. This study did not have enough breadth or depth on the practice to explore it with any confidence, but the topic warrants further research.

For most of my friends that are like my age, the only reason they wouldn't have used apps is because they've just been in relationships since before they [dating app] came out (Anne).

This might, at first glance, seem like a very straightforward assumption. It is not difficult to understand why participants would assume that those in relationships would not be on dating apps. However, what this also suggests is that being in a relationship was perhaps the only legitimate reason (excuse) to be a non-user of dating apps. If so, this could have consequences for those who are single and who do not use dating apps. Consequently, it is necessary to consider once again the question of what it would mean to not use dating apps? The remainder of this chapter will consider how this might relate to broader processes relating to 'compelling coupledness'.

7.4 Compelling Coupledness: what it means to be normatively single

Existing research has highlighted that there is diversity in how people can and do live and structure their intimate lives. For instance, people are choosing to marry later, or not marry at all, and the same pattern can be seen for having children (Jamieson, 2020; Roseneil et al., 2020). Divorce rates have increased, and people are choosing to live together in relationships, as well as live apart together. Moreover, being single has been found to have been reinvented as a positive choice and lifestyle (Gray, 2018). All of which suggests that people have the choice, and are choosing, to live outside the couple norm (Roseneil et al., 2020). As such, I am using the term coupledness to refer to marriage, civil partnerships/unions, as well as other intimate arrangements such as being in a monogamous or committed relationship, whether that involves cohabiting or living at a distance.

Nevertheless, despite how these trends demonstrate that we have more choice about who and how we love (or not love)⁹⁰, the tenacity of the couple norm has been found to prevail and being coupled has been found to offer institutional, cultural, and symbolic rewards (Budgeon, 2008; Wilkinson, 2012; Roseneil et al., 2020). For instance, being coupled has been found to be ideological, make people happier, more fulfilled, more important/valuable, and more mature

⁹⁰ Theorists such as Giddens (2013) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2005) speak of the diversification and de-traditionalization around who and how we love. Nevertheless, they have received criticism from the likes of Jamieson (1999) for overestimating these changes and instead illustrate how traditional ideals around romantic coupledness are being rearticulated and reproduced. Therefore, whilst Budgeon (2008) found that some female participants constructed singleness positively through the lens of 'femme fatale', there was still a strong re-articulation around traditional femininity and coupledness.

compared to those who are single (Roseneil et al., 2020). Being single might have been reinvented for some, but those who are single beyond a certain stage in their life continue to be positioned as being a deviant and/or deficit identity and being single past a certain age is commonly presented as not being a choice or decision of the individual but an unfortunate circumstance they have found themselves in (Byrne and Carr, 2005; Budgeon, 2008; Sharp and Ganong, 2011; Wilkinson, 2013; Budgeon, 2016). De Paulo and Morris (2005) refer to this set of beliefs as ‘singlism’, which has been found to affect women disproportionately (Roseneil, 2020).

Indeed, Roseneil et al. (2020) emphasise how the couple norm is entangled with other norms, including age-norms, gender norms and hetero norms. For example, singleness can be seen as acceptable and positive for women who are at the stage in their life course where they are pursuing education and career advancement (typically between the ages of 18-25) (Sharp and Ganong, 2007; 2011; Budgeon, 2016). Nevertheless, women who have passed the stage in their life course where being single is socially acceptable have been found to face stigmatisation and criticism (Sharp and Ganong, 2007; 2011; Wilkinson, 2012;2013; Budgeon, 2016). One reason for this is that ‘is because marriage is closely tied to women’s identities and ideals around successful femininity’ (Sharp and Ganon, 2007: 832).

Moreover, Budgeon (2016) speaks of the strategies women have for explaining and justifying their single status and constructing themselves as ‘normatively single’ and avoiding the label of ‘spinster’. One such strategy is to show or appear to be actively aspiring, investing, or being ‘on the quest to be un-single’ (Taylor, 2012). Consequently, it is interesting to think about whether being a dating app user is allowing participants to avoid the stigma associated with being single. That is, being a Tinder user might satisfy the requirement of demonstrating you want to be, and are invested in being, un-single. Certainly, across the data set, there was the expectation that successful adulthood involves marriage or at least a stable, long-term couple relationship.

There was evidence of these gendered and aged disparities as many female participants tended to construct their single status as a temporary stage rather than a permanent choice. As shown below, those female participants who fell within the permissible single window, such as students and those in their early career phase, tended to speak of their ability to use Tinder with no set goals or expectations in mind as something that would change as they got older.

It changes probably the more mature you get. It probably switches from a bit of like people being a bit unsure of what they want, which is what I feel like I am. And then you

probably get people who are a bit older who are more looking to settle down or settle down again and stuff like that (Anne, aged 25)

...hopefully I won't be single when I'm like 30, but if I am, then I may consider it [dating websites] haha but right now I'm okay with just as it is and being single kind of thing (Mary, aged 21).

Equally, female participants who were single and at a later stage in their life course often spoke of how their single status was problematic for both their 'self-identity' and 'social identity' (Budgeon, 2016). For example, Darcy explained how '*...being single, for me, feels like this thing that is a really big thing in my life. It feels like it's become part of my identity and it's a problem that can't be solved*'. Her reference to 'solved' arguably demonstrates how being single was seen as problematic and something she felt needed to be rectified. Darcy also went on to say that her friends look at her '*with worry because you're not actively getting out there looking for someone, and then there's something wrong with that. I generally just feel like you can't win being single sometimes. Like, if you're not looking, they worry about you, and if you are looking, they worry about you*'. This is reminiscent of what was mentioned above about the strategies which make singledom acceptable. As such, Darcy seems to be negotiating what Budgeon (2016) refers to as 'gendered accountability', whereby women often must account for their single status, as it is often viewed as problematic for women both on a moral and institutional level (Wilkinson, 2013).

Popular representations of masculinity and how this relates to singleness are also worthy of interrogation (Richardson, 2010; Eck, 2014). Alongside positive images of the 'bachelor' or 'stud' who take advantage of their 'freedom' of being single, there are also potentially harmful stereotypes associated with men who never marry or who are single past a certain age such as being 'commitment phobes' or 'immature losers' (Eck, 2014: 150). For instance, Georgia explained how '*We [female friends] all joke about, you know, that single men are single because you know they're scared of women or they're in love with their mother*'. Indeed, it was highlighted earlier in the chapter that romantic or sexual interactions/relationships with women are a resource that heterosexual men may utilise to demonstrate and assert adult heterosexual masculine competence (Redman, 2001; Richardson, 2010). However, Eck (2014) found that girl hunt activities or 'promiscuous' pursuits were seen as less age appropriate as the men in their study progressed through different stages of the life course. Rather, men in Eck's (2014) study felt pressure to prove themselves as committed, settled, and mature by settling down. Factors such as class and race (as well as many other intersecting factors) also impact signifiers of competent heterosexual masculinities (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell, 2004).

There was evidence of this kind of pressure amongst some male participants in this study. For instance, Aidan (aged 28) spoke of how he has reached a time in his life where *'I'm definitely on the other side where I'm like no I've had enough of that [hook-ups]'* and that he was entering a stage in his life where he is *'expected to settle down a bit and get a house and 2 kids and a car and a mortgage and all that kind of thing'*. As such, it is important to consider what being a dating app user is doing for heterosexual men in this study. On one hand, could being a dating app user be seen as evidence of their lack of competence in being able to 'score' a woman. Equally, could dating apps also be compelling for men as there are also pressures and expectations that men will want to and should seek sex/relationships with women, and to not do so could fall outside the remits of heteronormative masculinity.

In this case, the compulsion to use dating apps could not be traced to individualistic and/or deterministic accounts around their design being convenient or fun. The data presented above illustrates how we must consider that the collective sources as to why participants feel compelled to use dating apps such as broader forces relating to compelling coupledness, and the ways this intersects with other gender and sexual norms. Subsequently, this also highlights the role dating app use has in rearticulating heteronormative ideals and practices around compulsory coupledness (Wilkinson, 2013) and gender and sexual scripts more broadly (Gagnon and Simon, 1973).

7.5 The Transformation of Intimacy?

These findings also speak to broader debates within the study of intimacies. As addressed in Chapter 2, there are debates concerning the impact of social change and new technologies on the ways we experience and structure our intimate relations. In particular, the findings above somewhat challenge the overly optimistic claims made by Giddens (1992) concerning the ways that relationships are now incredibly fragile because men and women are free to construct and participate in relationships which are centred around gender equality, sexual autonomy, and mutual satisfaction (Jamieson, 1990). Moreover, they also challenge the more pessimistic approaches, which put forward the argument that notions of commitment are waning, which online dating has been said to contribute to (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2007;2012).

On the contrary, processes of power and inequality relating to gender and sexuality were central to why and how respondents in this study used dating apps. Indeed, the fact that participants felt compelled to use dating apps because of the 'the potency of the couple-norm as a regulatory, disciplining and channelling force' (Roseneil et al., 2020: 232), a process they refer to as

‘couple normativity’ (despite not always enjoying using dating apps), and the ways this is bound up with constructions of heterosexuality, challenges both the notion that men and women have been freed from the constraining force of heterosexual coupledness and that notions of commitment are weakening. Technology might be reconfiguring how we do heterosexual intimacy, but heterosexual dating and relationship scripts are also being reinforced in new ways.

These findings, therefore, support those of Jamieson (1988; 1999; 2002; 2013), as well as more relational approaches to the study of intimacy and personal life (see Smart, 2007; May and Nordqvist, 2019), which have shown the various ways that intimacy cannot be understood without also considering processes of inequality, power and social change.

7.6 Conclusion

It was Simon (2003: iiv) who stated that it ‘is a supreme irony that most writing about sexuality is not about sexuality at all but about many other things -gender, power, discourse, identity’. This proves to be the case here also, with most participants’ narratives highlighting that their use of dating apps was not always necessarily about dating, sex, and hook-ups, but about a great many other things. I have argued that participants’ continued use of dating apps is reflective of how heterosexual coupledness is still compelling and to be able to play the game of compulsory coupledness, participants felt they had to turn to dating apps, as there are believed to be no other ways of securing dates. Hence, using dating apps to date has become a social institution for dating and for enabling coupledness. The use, and continued use, of dating apps was not inevitable because the apps were convenient and fun, but primarily because of the constraining forces of heterosexual coupledness.

Consequently, I have proposed that individualistic theorizations of dating apps are ill fitted to the perspectives and experiences told by participants in this study. Rather, the why and how around dating app use was shown to be rooted in collective social processes relating to processes of gender, heterosexuality and intimacy. Indeed, the data presented in this chapter highlights how we must consider the role dating apps have in rearticulating heteronormative ideals and practices around compulsory coupledness (Wilkinson, 2013) and gender and sexual scripts more broadly (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). This once again reinforces the theoretical applicability of PTSI, which argues that the function and normative use of a technological artefact is determined through collective consensus and achievement, rather than primarily set out by the design of the devices themselves (Schlyter, 2009).

8 Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored the ways heterosexual men and women go about negotiating and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice. This has been explored by collecting narrative accounts of users' constructions of dating apps and their everyday dating app practice. This thesis has shown that there existed a contradiction between participants' own constructions of dating apps and how they believed technology *should* be used, which involved a casual and low-stakes approach, and descriptions of their everyday dating app practice, which demonstrated that dating apps required a significant amount of additional labour from participants. This chapter will briefly rearticulate the links between the three data chapters and the discussion chapter to highlight how these findings address the aims and objectives of this thesis (see pg. 12-13), link to existing literature, and outline the contributions this thesis makes to theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality, the relationship between technology and social life and intimacy.

8.2 Contributions

8.2.1 *Themes addressed in individual chapters: Labour, Risk & Collectivity*

A key theme that ran across and linked the three data chapters was labour. Chapter 4 began by outlining the ways participants constructed dating apps as casual and low-stakes. These findings largely supported existing understandings of dating apps as fun, easy and efficient (David and Cambre, 2016; Timmermans and DeCaluwe, 2017; Ward, 2017). The findings of this thesis did differ somewhat from previous studies in that participants' constructions of dating apps as casual were not solely linked to their association as hook-up apps, they related more to the labour, or lack thereof, involved in their use.

Chapter 5 addressed the ways participants' own talk of their dating app practice and experiences contradicted the ways they had framed the normative use of dating apps as casual and low-stakes. It was demonstrated that being successful at different stages of the dating app process relied on a lot of effort and labour from participants. However, this effort did not always pay off given that male and female participants faced hurdles at different stages of the dating app process. In contradiction to the findings presented in Chapter 4, the stakes were shown to be quite high for participants.

Themes of labour continued to run into Chapter 6, where the issue of labour intersected with risk. A great deal of labour went into managing fears and expectations of risk on dating apps. This labour, however, was largely mandated of female participants' who engaged in numerous safety work practices to manage both the risks they feared and encountered on dating apps such as online sexual harassment, and risks relating to their personal safety whilst on a date with someone they met off a dating app. As such, whilst male participants did speak of managing risks such as rejection, catfishing, and financial scams, the risks they feared and the ways in which they managed them were very different to the women in this study. The ways in which this contributes to existing theoretical and empirical scholarship will be addressed later in the chapter.

Across this thesis, it has also been shown that collective interactions and practices were central to the ways participants ascribed and negotiated the meaning of dating apps and their dating app practice. It was shown in Chapter 4 that there was a high degree of normativity in participants' dating app use and that this normativity was generated through social practice. For instance, participants spoke of occasions where they had either engaged in, or were subject to, sanctioning practices such as judgment and mockery. These sanctioning practices played a crucial role in upholding understandings of correct dating app use or how these apps should be spoken of and used. This was addressed more explicitly in Chapter 5, where a number of examples were given of the ways dating app practice was a collective achievement. A key finding was the social use of dating apps. I referred to this as 'social swiping', whereby participants swiped and/or messaged on the app with friends or looked at/set up a profile with friends. These collective interactions were argued to be educational as they offered participants the opportunity to be socialised into the rules of the game such as what the normative standard of a good profile or a good message looked like and appropriate conduct more broadly. Interestingly, these practices were also found to occur in online spaces such as Twitter whereby respondents would talk of either asking for, or witnessing others asking for, advice on the standard of their profile and if they should change it.

The theme of collectivism continued into Chapter 6 in the ways that female respondents were shown to recruit their friends and family into their safety work practices. Not only would female respondents send pictures of their matches to friends and family, they also spoke of how their friends and family would expect them to engage in these kinds of practices and occasions where they had been sanctioned for not engaging in them. Here we can see how the thoughts and expectations of others were central to how participants negotiated their conduct on and around dating apps.

8.2.2 *Contributions to existing literature*

Each of the data chapters, therefore, make their own contributions to existing literature. Although themes of motivations, risk and self-presentation have been central to existing scholarship into online dating and dating apps, the findings of this study shed a different light on these themes. This research largely contradicts research which has painted dating apps as convenient or entertaining (Timmermans and DeCaluwe, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016; Kallis, 2020). Not only did respondents put a lot of labour into dating apps, but the risks of violence and rejection also meant that these were not always sites where an ego-boost, self-validation, and entertainment were experienced.

The findings of this thesis are consistent with the findings of newer research which has also undermined the efficiency of dating apps. Bandinelli and Gandini (2022), for example, found that a lot of interpretive labour was required from dating app users in order to navigate the structural uncertainty they experienced on these sites as a result of the lack of shared codes and norms available to guide their successful use. The findings of this thesis did not wholly match that of Bandinelli and Gandini (2022:432), who made a more individualistic link between dating apps and labour by equating dating app users to ‘entrepreneurs of the self who seek to capitalise on their ‘assets’ to attract the right opportunities in an uncertain environment’. Participants did speak of facing similar struggles to navigate their presentation of self on dating apps, but learning the rules of the game was largely found to be a collective achievement and located in social practice.

There is limited understanding of how now norms are established on dating apps and so one of the aims of this study was to explore the ways users go about negotiating and ascribing meaning to dating apps and dating app practice. Existing research has addressed how the context collapse (see pp. 123-5), accompanied by their expected dyadic use, makes establishing norms and codes difficult to decipher in these spaces. This has led some to argue that in-app norms are developed via individualistic means through trial and error (Bandinelli and Gandelini, 2020), or by individually acquiring personal strategies and rules (Byron and Albury, 2018). This study, therefore, contributes to current understandings of how the rules of the game are decided and learnt on dating apps. The findings of this study largely undermine the assumption that dating apps are solely used in a dyadic fashion, as well as the assumptions that stem from this around the personal or individual nature of norm negotiation. Rather, dating app use was argued to be a social institution whereby correct and incorrect use was generated, learnt, and enforced through social interaction and practice.

These findings both reinforce and extend existing scholarship into violence against women, TFSV and safety work, which addresses another research question of this study. The kinds of violence discussed demonstrated that old and new harms were being reproduced, reinvented, and produced in these online dating settings. Existing research has predominantly explored gendered and sexual harassment on dating apps by analysing public shaming sites such as Bye Felipe and Tinder Nightmares (see Shaw, 2016; Byron and Albury, 2018; Gillett, 2018; Hess and Flores, 2018). The types of gendered and sexual violence identified through analysing public shaming sites were also relevant to, and reflected in, respondents' experiences of violence on dating apps. Only a small number of participants, however, spoke of visiting these sites and none expressed that they had sent screenshots of their experiences to these sites. Female respondents were more likely to discuss, compare, share and complain about their experiences in their everyday interactions with friends and family, both in person and online.

The findings of this study have also contributed in novel ways to current conceptualisations of violence against women on dating apps. This study has been able to go beyond simply identifying the kinds of risks women face on dating apps and assuming the impacts these experiences had on women, to understand women's everyday experiences of harassment and abuse and the effects this abuse had on women. Like Gillett (2021), it was observed that women's wellbeing was affected by the abuse they faced on dating apps, but that the risks they faced were part of a wider continuum of violence that they experience across their lifetime.

What's more, the fact that dating apps are mobile tools means that women can receive and experience risks across both public and private spaces (Gillett, 2011). There is often a distinction made between street and online harassment, with the physical proximity of street harassment leading to claims that it causes more harm than online harassment (Henry and Powell, 2015). The mobility of dating apps raises new questions around the ways technology-facilitated violence against women might impact the ways women might fear and experience violence in public and private spaces.

The perspectives and experiences of heterosexual men are also largely missing in existing research looking at gendered and sexual online harassment on dating apps. All male participants distanced themselves from the kinds of men that would engage in harassing or abusive behaviour. It is very unlikely that, if they had, they would openly discuss this with a female researcher. Nonetheless, it is still important to make a point of including men in the conversation around gender and sexual harassment and abuse as to not include them poses the risk of painting a monolithic approach to masculinity (Beasley, 2015; Haywood, 2018). Most male participants were aware of the ways their experiences of risk on dating apps were different

to women. Men were also less likely to engage in safety work in this context, which is consistent with existing scholarship (Newburn and Stanko, 2002). During these discussions, male participants were very sympathetic and, in some cases, dissatisfied with the amount of harassment women experienced online. In response to this, several male participants spoke of how they made an effort to be amenable to the safety needs of women so that women would be willing to date them. Including heterosexual men in these conversations around gender and sexual harassment is important as it can be a reflective process which can encourage men to consider the ways their behaviour may be interpreted and effect the women they are interacting with.

The ways women respond to, and manage, the risks they face on dating apps in their everyday lives is another area that has not been widely explored in existing scholarship. Exceptions include Pruchniewska (2020) and Gillett (2021), who found that labour and risk were linked as women utilised many strategies on dating apps in order to manage online sexual harassment. These studies also observed that this was a gendered form of labour that disproportionately affected women and was reflective of a neo-liberal system that responsabilised women for their own safety, rather than one which treated this as systemic social issue in need of confronting.

Similarly, this thesis has demonstrated that several traditional, as well as new technologically facilitated, safety practices were employed by female respondents to manage risks, both on the apps and on dates with matches. A thorough analysis of the safety practices that women engaged with throughout the dating app and date planning process was provided. A key finding was the identification of technologically-facilitated tools of prevention employed by women in this study. This is a particularly salient issue given that the social concern with the level and nature of sexual violence facilitated by dating apps has led Match Group (2022) to invest over £100 million pounds into making dating apps a safer place.

We are beginning to see the outcome of this, with features such as Photo verification, Noonlight, Private detector and Does this bother you? features rolling out in some parts of the world (see Appendix A). To my knowledge, little research has identified or addressed the incorporation of tools of prevention in the context of dating app use. This is therefore one of the first studies to identify and problematise the development of these technologies, which have the potential to contribute in new and distinct ways to violence against women. Their development is a reflection of how it is seen as far easier for dating apps to equip women with the knowledge and tools to protect themselves on a tinder date than it is to police sexual violence from their male subscribers.

A number of these dating app-specific tools of prevention have not been made available for public use in the UK. As a result of this, only a limited amount of data was collected on them and their impact. As these technologies become more readily available, further research should explore whether, and in what ways, these technologies are incorporated into dating app users' safety management practices. Albeit, as Rees and White (2014), White and McMillan (2020) and my own research has shown, such tools are more likely to reproduce victim-blaming and responsabilisation rather than any real sense of security.

8.2.3 *Theoretical Contributions*

8.2.3.1 *Gender & Sexuality*

The themes explored across this thesis also speak to broader debates in which this thesis orientated itself to engage with. Most research into dating apps has been from the perspective of men who seek sex with men. Therefore, this study contributes to understandings of heterosexual adults experiences and perspectives of dating apps. Gender and sexual scripts were shown to inform who used dating apps, how they used dating apps, as well as their experiences of using dating apps. In Chapter 4, age intersected with sexuality to shape who can play the Tinder Game. Social understandings and expectations of what it means to age appropriately and what kinds of sexual practice are considered to be appropriate at different life stages were employed alongside participants' constructions of casual and low-stakes use to shape what kinds of technologies they thought different age groups would use and what they would use them for.

Existing research has tended to find that gender shaped motivations on dating apps, with men more likely to express a motivation for casual sex than women (Carpenter and McEwan, 2016; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2016). In this study, age was by far a more significant factor raised by participants in shaping who and what motivations users would have for using dating apps. It must be acknowledged that this may have stemmed from the fact that discussions of hook-ups did not feature heavily in interviews anyhow, aside from acknowledging the hook-up stigma associated with dating apps, and the role my positionality as a female researcher may have had in shaping this.

Little research has focussed on how older adults experience dating apps. Most research has largely explored dating apps from the perspective of younger users. These findings, therefore, offer some insight into the ways age shaped users' experiences and use of dating apps.

However, further research should continue to explore the ways age may shape other aspects of users dating app experiences and use.

In the following chapter, gender and sexual scripts pertaining to collective masculinities and femininities were shown to inform the ways men and women were able to train themselves, and others, in crafting a ‘good’ dating app profile. Most participants were found to engage in collective rituals and practices around dating apps, but collective use manifested in different ways for men and women. Women were far more likely to seek and obtain help and advice from their friends and their collective rituals were centred on support, advice and entertainment around issues such as profile construction, dating app conduct, navigating harassment and abuse. Alternatively, men’s collective rituals tended to centre around competition and competency. These findings correspond directly with that of Sobieraj and Humphreys (2022) who also found these same patterns of gendered social use. This thesis, therefore, offers further support to their claims that:

The shared experience, which on the surface serves entertainment, is intertwined or even powered by other motivations and normative expectations (e.g., to determine masculinity, to demonstrate desirability, to mitigate social risks, etc.). Sharing messages, posts, and responses helps users to interpret often coded language from potential mates, while also diffusing potentially taboo social and sexual practices (Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2022: 70).

Collective dating app practice can, therefore, be said to simultaneously reveal, as well as play a role in constructing, collective masculine and feminine identities. Existing research into the negotiation of feminine identities within the night-time economy has illustrated how collective feminine practice and rituals, such as simply spending time together, play a central role in how women negotiate and perform female friendships and identities (Nicholls, 2019). Likewise, collective practices where women share time together to share stories, show each other how to construct a dating app profile, and engage in ‘emotional talk’ to mitigate online risks, could be regarded as a new site in which women cement friendships, negotiate, produce and perform heterosexual feminine identities.

Similarly, dating for heterosexual men prior to dating apps has involved collective processes. (Grazian, 2007; Richardson, 2010; Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2022). Collective rituals involving heterosexual men, especially when it comes to ‘the girl hunt’, have typically been shown to centre around displaying heterosexual competence and engaging in competitive upmanship of

sexual prowess (Grazian, 2007). Collective masculine dating app rituals also served to enable male participants to determine and perform their masculinity among other men.

Dating app practice, therefore, reveals a huge amount about how the production and negotiation of femininities and masculinities are connected with friendship and continue to be a collective endeavour, despite the fact that dating app designs mostly cater to dyadic use (Nicholls, 2019). This suggested that dating apps are a site where heteronormative gender and sexual scripts at the interpersonal level are enacted and drawn on to inform how the rules of the game are learnt and performed correctly (Gagnon and Simon, 1973).

Gender was also found to shape the kinds of experiences men and women encountered on dating apps. As addressed earlier in the chapter, women were far more likely to fear or experience risk of violence on dating apps. Once again, examination of these gendered risks offers insight into the ways risk and safety is conceptualised on dating apps, and the ways this speaks to gender and sexual scripts. On one hand, the normalisation of these gendered risks of violence, as well as the expectation to engage in risk management strategies to mitigate against these risks, is reflective of heteronormative ideals which position men as pursuers and women as gatekeepers (Nicholls, 2019). Equally, enacting strategies for managing risk has been shown to be a way of producing gender and performing respectable femininities (Stanko, 1990; Olstead, 2011; Nicholls, 2019; Vera-Grey and Kelly, 2020), more especially a neo-liberal feminine self who ‘can act simultaneously as a way to take control and a tool to attribute blame to those perceived to act irresponsibly’ (Nicholls, 2019: 245). As such, it is possible to see how the cultural knowledge about how to use dating apps safely is interwoven with constructions of femininity and vice versa.

8.2.3.2 Science and Technology studies

The issues of collective and social dating app practice, as well as the ways the wider social context such as gender and sexual norms, informed participants’ constructions and negotiations of dating app meaning and use, also speak to theoretical debates concerning the relationship between technology and social life. This thesis engaged at the micro level with STS by addressing the ways technologies are domesticated in everyday lives, but also at the macro level, by considering how these everyday practices speak to broader theoretical considerations around the ways the meaning and use of a technology is socially constructed. As already addressed earlier in the chapter, dating apps are designed to facilitate dyadic interaction, which causes context collapse and questions around how users ascribe meaning to dating apps and

negotiate dating app practice. This makes dating apps an interesting context in which to explore the construction of technology and social life.

Existing research had demonstrated that the design of dating apps, such as Bumble's safety design, did not necessarily determine the expected use and norms of these devices (Bivens and Hoque, 2018; Young and Roberts, 2021). Irrespective of the intentions of the design of dating apps, users have been found to adopt and negotiate the meaning and use of dating app devices. Thereby demonstrating the need to explore social processes surrounding the construction of dating apps and to not focus on design of dating apps beyond that of which users speak and make sense of, which was an objective of this study. Part of the value of this thesis stems from the insights it offers on this matter.

The social and collective practice that has been shown to be central to users' constructions of correct use across the three data chapters support the theoretical contributions of PTSI, as laid out by Kusch (2005), and suggest that the meaning ascribed to dating apps and dating apps use is a social institution. That is, it is conventional, normative and collectively constituted (Kusch, 2005). Examples of this have been discussed earlier in the chapter. Here, all that needs to be added is that amongst the ways dating app meaning and use was shown to be a normative and a collective achievement, were examples of how the design of dating apps alone did not determine the meaning participants ascribed to dating apps or their understandings of how they should be used (Schlyfter, 2009).

For example, not wanting, or being willing, to pay for dating apps cannot stem from dating apps themselves, whose subscription features make up a significant percentage of their revenue. Rather this was shown to be constructed through referential talk and reinforced through sanctioning. Similarly, there was nothing inherent to the design of dating apps that constructed them as younger persons tools. This was shown to stem from the ways understandings and expectations of ageing sexual scripts were employed alongside participants' constructions of casual and low-stakes use to shape what kinds of technologies they thought different age groups would use and what they would use them for.

The findings addressed above, therefore, address another aim of this study, which was to explore whether and in what ways heterosexual users' articulations of their everyday experiences of using dating apps speaks to wider understandings of gender and sexuality and the relationship between technology and social life. Not only was normative dating app practice shown to be generated out of collective social practice, this social practice intersected with, and was informed by, social processes such as heteronormative gender and sexual scripts.

8.2.3.3 *Intimacy*

This leads me on to contributions this thesis makes to understanding constructions of intimacy. It was argued in Chapter 7 that the reason respondents continued to use dating apps, despite not necessarily always enjoying using them, was because dating apps themselves have become the social institution for dating. Here, I move away from talking about the social institution of dating app use at the micro level to talk at the macro level about how dating apps themselves have become a social institution in the dating arena. This led to a discussion chapter that relied on a collective and relational approach to the study of intimacy and personal life.

These findings were not consistent with some of the optimistic or pessimistic arguments that have been made in relation to the impact technologies and social change are having on intimacy and personal life. As addressed above, dating apps were not found to make dating anymore efficient or effortless, which challenges the claims made by Bauman (2003) that new technologies are liquifying ideals of love and commitment. The resonance of ‘couple normativity’, which compelled respondents to continue using dating apps despite not enjoying them, also undermines claims made by Giddens (1992) that modern relationships are fragile and only entered into for as long as they benefit the individuals involved.

The amount and kind of labour that was required of users was shown to be gendered, with women having to engage in safety work in order to mitigate risks of violence on the apps and when meeting people they met on dating apps. These findings also undermine the claims made by Giddens (1992) concerning the proliferation of the ‘Pure Relationship’ and that heterosexual men and women are free to construct and participate in relationships that are centred around gender equality. Whilst these findings cannot speak to relationships themselves, women’s fear of the risks of violence at the searching and dating stage, and all of the labour that went into mitigating this, is suggestive of how men and women do not enter into relationships on an equal footing and that heteronormative constructions of risks are still pertinent to men and women’s experiences of dating and relationships.

The compulsion to use dating apps could not be traced to individualistic and/or deterministic accounts around their design being convenient or fun. This compulsion was shown to stem from collective and relational social forces relating to compelling coupledness. This does not sit in conjunction with other individualistic approaches to the theorisation of intimacy such as that of Illouz (2007;2012) who’s concept of ‘cold intimacy’ suggests that rationality and consumer logic replace passion. The use of dating apps, at least from the findings in this study, can neither be said to be rational or passionate. Rather, the findings of this thesis reinforce the relevance of

relational understandings of intimacy and personal life as laid out by Jamieson (1988; 1999; 2013). Jamieson's research, which is located in everyday, microlevel, negotiations of intimacy and personal life, has illustrated that 'Besides creating new possibilities for safe spaces, levelling power, gender bending and queering, the Internet also affords an exponential expansion in the means of recreating conventional hierarchies of gender and sexualities' (Jamieson, 2013:22). This thesis has also demonstrated that dating apps have created new and innovative ways of reinforcing traditional heteronormative gender and sexual scripts. The ways risk is perceived and experienced is a perfect example of this. As such, this thesis contributes to current debates concerning the state of intimacy in the era of dating technologies. It reinforces the value of constructionist and relational approaches to the study of intimacy, which focus on mundane everyday meaning making and social practice, and arguably reveals more about the state of intimacy than theories which focus on macro levels of abstraction.

8.2.4 *Methodological Contributions*

This leads me on to how the nuance of these findings have methodological implications. This study, as well as the studies addressed above, which have made similar observations to this one, have employed qualitative methods and taken an exploratory approach. An exploratory approach brought into view a range of issues that have not been widely identified or explored by existing studies into heterosexual dating app use. The contradiction identified between participants' own self-understandings of their dating app use compared with descriptions of their own dating app practice is a good illustration of this. The findings presented in Chapter 4 are reminiscent of the narratives that have been presented in studies which have observed dating apps as being casual low-stakes, fun, entertaining for users (see David and Cambre, 2016; Timmermans and DeCaluwe, 2017). These narratives, however, were largely undermined in Chapters 5 and 6 and were not found to be the case in practice. This raises some interesting concerns around the appropriateness of socio-psychological quantitative methods which solely provide fixed categories for exploring app users' motivations for using dating apps.

This can also be traced to the fact that this thesis focussed its attention on the everyday. This study encouraged participants to go beyond speaking in general terms about dating apps and their dating app use. It asked them to situate and contextualise these findings within their everyday practices and routines, which has allowed this thesis to capture the level of complexity that has been able to further current understandings of dating apps. It is questionable as to whether the contradiction evident in participants' narratives would have been identified if a

focus on their everyday meaning making and dating app practices had not been explored. This illustrates the value of focussing on the everyday qualitative experience.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

8.3.1 Dating apps and Covid

The majority of the data collected in this study was collected during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have addressed in Chapter 3 the ways in which this thesis responded methodologically to conducting research with lockdown restrictions limiting the original methodological strategy. More could have been done, however, to incorporate the impact of COVID-19 into the analysis sections of this thesis. On the whole, it was the case for this study that COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions served to emphasise and exacerbate themes that had already been identified in the data. For instance, Chapter 4 illustrated how COVID restrictions had disrupted participants' ability to meet up in person and as soon as possible, which served to reinforce how this was a normative expectation of app use (see page 100-105). Nevertheless, this research project was constantly adapting to frequent changes to restrictions and Covid narratives and as such the data collected cannot offer more insights into the meanings heterosexual dating app users applies to dating apps and changes to their features during this period.

There is a stream of literature emerging which has explored these issues further, but it is still an area which is generally lacking in research. For instance, Duguay, Dietzel and Myles (2022) have explored the ways in which dating app companies re imagined dating app affordances during the pandemic in order to promote virtual dating. Whilst Duguay, Dietzel and Myles (2022) focussed on the response of dating app companies, Portolan and McAlister (2021) focussed on the experiences of users and found that cyclical use of dating apps, what they characterised as 'jagged love', was heightened during the pandemic. The UK, it seems, is permanently out of lockdown restrictions and so this is a good time for researchers to explore whether the technological changes will have any permanence and whether virtual dates will become part of users' normative dating routine.

8.3.2 Non- use & non-users

The fact that dating apps were found to be the social institution for dating necessitates further research that explores non-users of dating apps. If, as I have argued, dating apps are the normative way to date, how do non-users of dating apps date? This was a question that participants themselves raised during interviews. The perspective of non-users, then, can extend

the insights of this thesis by exploring the ways non-users negotiate dating and whether, and in what ways, they construct themselves as non-users of dating apps. As Wyatt (2003) highlights, current users are not the only group that can ascribe and shape the meaning and use of a technology (Wyatt, 2003). She explains that just because she does not drive a car does not necessarily mean that her life is not affected by cars, that she does not have any awareness of them, and that precisely her choice not to drive is not based on some personal thoughts towards driving. These issues could also be explored in the context of dating apps.

Existing research has illustrated that the binary of user and non-user is not as simple as those who use technology and those who do not, there are varying levels of adoption and use of a technology (Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford, 2016). This study focussed on current and former users of dating apps, but there are other categories of users and non-users to consider such as those who have never used a dating apps, those who have been expelled from dating apps, and those who have left the apps permanently. Dating apps have made the process of defining a user or non-user of dating apps rather complicated as the category of user or non-user is not fixed but is often cyclical in nature (Brubaker, Ananny and Crawford, 2016; Portolan and McAlister, 2021). Many of the participants in this study took ‘Tinder Detoxes’ where they temporarily took breaks from dating apps in order to recharge their dating app battery. Future research should, therefore, be considerate of this when exploring the subject of dating apps and clearly set out how they are setting the boundaries of user and non-user.

8.3.3 *Social categories beyond gender*

8.3.3.1 *Class*

A limitation that can be levelled at the body of literature that currently exists on dating app is the general lack of focus on the ways other social categories are salient lenses through which to explore the experiences and practices of dating app users. The findings of this thesis highlighted how class and race are areas where future research should focus their attention. A number of participants in this study spoke of how aspects such as grammar, what people are wearing and what lifestyle they present on their dating app profile would influence their swiping choices. Equally, existing research into online dating has found that bad grammar was interpreted by users as being indicative of the level of effort people are putting into their profile and the strength of their intentions more broadly (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Spelling and lifestyle choices can also be reflective of class expression (Bourdieu, 2006). There was not enough data or focus in this study to explore issues of class. However, the findings of this study,

as well as existing studies, suggest that class may be a relevant lens in which to explore dating apps.

8.3.3.2 Race

The majority of participants in this study were white. Only one participant, Samantha, identified as mixed-race. This may mean that the stories, perspectives, and themes raised are predominantly gathered are largely missing racialised, other than white, perspectives and an understanding of how gender intersects with and through other social categories such as race (Richardson, 2015). A few participants, however, did raise how experiences on dating apps could be racialised. For instance, Rebekka explained that friends of hers who are mixed race:

...always get matched by the same people and literally they spoke about it recently and they were saying that they need to put each other in the profile in like one of the pics so it shows that their friends to like limit the amount of that happening and like from my perspective that would never happen to me' and how they 'have quite racist vibes towards them. Like my friend [name] she literally all the time would have like people be like oh I've never fucked a black girl before sort of thing

Correspondingly, Samantha described how *'me and my friend would ,again, we always match with the same people so sometimes it's actually important for us to send them to each other to double check haha'*. These experiences could, in part, be a consequence of living in a geographical area such as Newcastle, which is very 'white'. Recent research has also begun to identify the ways those belonging to ethnic minority groups navigated racism, racial exclusion and racial prejudice on dating apps (Carlson, 2020; Li and Chen, 2021).

Gagnon and Simon (1973) have argued that even desire is socially constructed. In this sense, who we desire to date and love can also be seen as political and racialised, as well as shaped by class, ethnicity and age group, as it is still very common for people to date within their race. Existing research has pointed to how online dating has the potential to democratise courtship as it can increase cross-racial contact and interracial relationships as geographical boundaries which have historically limited cross-racial interactions are no longer as much of a barrier (Carlson, 2020; Li and Chen, 2021; Zhou, 2022). Recently, a number of dating apps have removed their race filters as they have been highlighted as problematic (Zhou, 2022), as they arguably justify and reinforce existing patterns of racialised love and inequalities. Collectively, these factors illustrate the need for more research to explore the ways dating app use is a

racialised experience, especially since the events of COVID-19, which were found to exacerbate racialised abuse towards Asians particular (Li and Chen, 2021).

8.4 Concluding Remarks

The overarching aims of this study were to explore the ways heterosexual men and women negotiate and ascribe meaning to dating apps and dating app practice and whether these everyday meanings and practices could inform understandings gender and sexuality, the relationship between technology and social life, and intimacy more broadly. I will briefly rearticulate the key contributions this thesis has made to the above aims.

Learning the rules of the game was found to be a collective achievement, despite the fact that dating app design is said to be premised on dyadic use. Evidence of sanctioning practices and social use of dating apps demonstrated that social interactions that surrounded these apps are equally as important to consider alongside participants in app use when thinking about how heterosexual users ascribe meaning to dating apps and dating app practice. This emphasises the relevance of user focussed and constructionist approaches to the study of technology and social life.

Dating app practice was also found to be informed by, as well revealing much, about constructions of gender and sexual scripts. Notably, risk continues to be a key issue associated with dating apps. Indeed, the prevailing fear of gender-based violence was shown to impact something as distanced as what choice of dating app a woman might choose to download. This research, therefore, demonstrate that risk should be looked at through a gendered lens.

The risks that participants associated with dating apps and the ways participants demonstrated dating apps were not always efficient or entertaining, ultimately raised questions around why participants would continue to play the tinder game? This thesis has contributed to understandings of heterosexual users' views of relationships, dating and intimacy by proposing that heterosexual coupledness is still compelling. Indeed, it was argued that to be able to play the game of compulsory coupledness, participants felt they had to turn to dating apps, as there are believed to be no other ways of securing dates.

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10 Appendix A: Dating App Glossary

(see next page)

Company	Current status	User base	Accessible via	Subscription	USP	How it works	Features
Kiss.com (1994)	Absorbed by Match.com	N/A	Website	1 month: \$24.95 3 months: \$16.65 12 months for \$7.49 Per month	N/A	Fill in the blanks style questionnaire. Select a choice of hobbies and interests that most represent you from a selection of cartoon drawings. Picture style survey to select religious and political beliefs. Two free response questions.	Chat room called 'whispers'.
Match.com (1995)	Redesigned in 2006 and became Match.	2004: Had over 42 million users. 2022: 360,000 conversations start every month on Match.	1995-2006: website launched. 2006: app version launched	Free membership: You can search, browse, send winks and send selected people messages. Paid Subscription: 6 months: £6.99 3 months: 13.99 1 month: £20.99 unlimited communication browse free of advertisements.	Match is often called one of the leading companies in the online dating industry. It sells itself on helping its users find the perfect match. Another unique feature of Match is that it organises single nights in local areas within the UK that users can book tickets to attend.	To set up your profile your 'help Match' coach asks you a series of questions, the information from which they use to set up your Match profile. The first series of questions relate to yourself and what you are looking for. It asks questions about your age, gender, sexual preferences, what you look like, location, relationship goals, whether you have children, smoke etc.	Incognito Mode Lets you view other users profiles discreetly. Zen Mode Only people who match your criteria are able to contact you. Boost Boosts your visibility. Love Note

				<p>find out who likes you.</p> <p>discounted price on events.</p> <p>You can also pay for specific features on the app such as Love Notes and Boost (see features section).</p>		<p>The second set of questions are about what you are looking for in others.</p> <p>You are then asked to upload a photo.</p> <p>Match will then provide you with a daily ‘our recommendations list’ of profiles that they recommended based on your criteria. You can, however, also use the search feature where you set filters and search for profiles.</p> <p>Depending on your membership level, you can then communicate with matches and use various features to aid your search.</p>	<p>Let’s you chat without a pass.</p> <p>Video and voice calls</p> <p>Go Live Join live dating events online.</p>
Guardian Soulmates (2004)	Closed down May 2020.	2020: 35,000 free members and paid subscribers.	2004-2009: Website 2009: Soulmates mobile launched.	<p>Free membership</p> <p>Complete your profile.</p> <p>Get top matches based on your profile view potential match’s profile.</p>	Its focus was on authenticity and helping its users find their soulmate.	<p>Users set up a free profile saying a little about themselves and what they’re looking for.</p> <p>Users can upload photos.</p> <p>Users can then browse other profiles or use the matching tool and receive messages via email.</p>	<p>My matches</p> <p>Soulmates takes into account what you’ve said you’re looking for and what others have said about themselves and uses this information to deliver up to 1,000 matches ranked in order.</p>

				<p>Ideal matches based on your home location.</p> <p>search for soulmates by location, age and gender.</p> <p>Paid membership</p> <p>1 month: £32 3 months: £21.33 6 months: £16.00 Per month</p> <p>You receive: Advance search including lifestyle beliefs etc.</p> <p>Send/reply to unlimited messages.</p> <p>Ideal matches based on ideal location.</p>			<p>My Fans Users can see who has made them a 'favourite'</p> <p>Gallery See recently uploaded pictures from soulmate members.</p>
eHarmony (2000)	Still available	eHarmony claim to have helped	2000- 2010: Website	eHarmony Basic:	It was one of the first algorithm based online	Complete a compatibility quiz and personality profile.	Secure call

		over 2 million find love.	2010: launched app version	<p>Access to millions of relationship-minded singles.</p> <p>Unlimited matched use of all communication tools.</p> <p>Limited messaging</p> <p>eHarmony Premium:</p> <p>One month = \$59.95USD</p> <p>Three months = \$119.85USD</p> <p>Six months = \$179.705USD</p> <p>One year = \$239.40USD</p> <p>Access to millions of relationship-minded singles.</p> <p>Unlimited matches</p> <p>Use of all communication tools: Smiles, Icebreakers & Greetings.</p> <p>Unlimited messaging</p>	<p>dating websites, that used compatibility matchmaking algorithms to help people find their 'real love'.</p>	<p>Upon completion of the questionnaire, you are given a compatibility score that breaks down what you're looking for in a partner. This questionnaire initially had over 300 questions to fill in. On the app, this has now been reduced to 100 questions.</p> <p>The personality profile is said to help users understand how users and their matches connect.</p> <p>This compatibility matching system is then used to present members with profiles of other members who match their criteria.</p> <p>You are then able to message the profiles you are presented with.</p>	<p>A way to privately talk to matches without providing your phone number.</p> <p>RelyID ID verification service for verified members only</p> <p>Premium Personality Profile An extended version of the normal personality profile.</p> <p>Whatif A matching feature that suggests matches outside preferences list.</p>
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				<p>View unlimited photos.</p> <p>Video Date feature.</p> <p>See who's viewed you.</p> <p>Distance search.</p> <p>Detailed Personality Profile.</p> <p>Dedicated customer service.</p>			
Ok Cupid (2004)	Still available	Over 91 million connections made every year.	<p>2004-2012: website</p> <p>2012: launched dating app version.</p>	<p>Free membership:</p> <p>Engage with other daters by sending and receiving Likes and Intros.</p> <p>View matches</p> <p>Have conversations with matches.</p> <p>Ok Cupid Basic You can send unlimited Likes.</p> <p>You can set Dealbreakers for the Preferences you</p>	<p>An algorithm based online dating website that sells itself on matching users with people based on what 'really matters'.</p>	<p>Sign up using email address and provide phone number to verify identity.</p> <p>It will ask for your name, gender, birthday, where you live, preferences and who you are looking to meet.</p> <p>You can upload profile pictures and write about yourself in the 'my self-summary' section.</p> <p>You are then asked to answer 15 questions, which is fed into an algorithm that finds you compatible matches.</p>	<p>Cupid's Picks Finds you people you're both more compatible with an more likely to match with.</p> <p>Conversation starters Icebreaker conversation starters are provided to help get the conversation started.</p> <p>Selfie Verification Allow OK Cupid to verify your photo and show others that</p>

				<p>don't have any wiggle room on You won't see any outside advertisements.</p> <p>You can see all your Intros at once.</p> <p>OkCupid Premium (24.90 a month) All of the above.</p> <p>Seeing everyone who likes you before you like them.</p> <p>Seeing everyone's public answers to questions, even the questions you haven't answered.</p> <p>Getting 3 free SuperLikes to use each week.</p> <p>Ok Cupid Incognito Mode:</p> <p>Allows you to keep an active profile on OkCupid while being 100% hidden to anyone you do not</p>		<p>You can connect your dating profile to other social media accounts like Instagram.</p> <p>Over a thousand questions It uses an algorithm to Match users with people they are compatible with based on your preferences and questions you've answered in common.</p> <p>On the app, you then go through the suggested profiles and swipe left or right.</p> <p>Once you've liked someone, you can then send them a message on the in-app messenger feature.</p>	<p>you are a verified user.</p> <p>Boost: Shows your profile to more people for 30 minutes.</p> <p>Super Boost: Same as boost, but you can choose when and how long your profile is boosted for.</p> <p>Read Receipts See if your match has read your message.</p> <p>Superlikes Notify someone you really like them.</p> <p>Ok Cupid stacks allows you to view matches that fit what you're looking for based on specific categories. Each Stack allows you to filter for people you may like based on various categories.</p>
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				message or like. Instead, you are only seen by the people you like or message.			
Plenty of Fish (2003)	Still available	Over 4 million active users.	2003- 2010: Website. 2010: released app version.	POF is free to use most of its features. However, you can pay to access premium features. POF Premium: 12 months: £10.00 6 months: £15.00 3 months: £20.00 Per month. Find out who likes you. See more details with access to extended profiles. Know if you've messaged someone before. Know if they've read your message. Check out who viewed you.	Plenty of Fish sell themselves as offering a catered experience that recognises that not one way works for everyone.	You first set up your profile by answering an extensive amount of questions about various aspects of yourself. This ranges from personal characteristics such as age and location, to your relationship status and preferences, as well as your income and education and whether you smoke or want to have children. You are then asked to choose a headline, which sells you in a few words. You are then prompted to provide one or two things people what to know about you? And provide what are one or two things you cant stop talking about? You can then add hobbies and interests to your profile. You can upload up to 5 profile pictures.	Cu'ed up Fill in the blanks game that you can play with other users to get to know them better. Choose those who stood out and swipe right on them to start a conversation. Meet Me Swipe through profiles. Like+ Use this feature on profiles that you like more than others. My Tokens Boost your profile to nearby matches (paid).

				<p>See when someone was online.</p> <p>Unlock first contacts.</p>		<p>There are multiple methods by which users can search, match and chat to people. You can swipe on profiles or search for profiles.</p> <p>From here you can like and message other users.</p>	
Uniform Dating (2004)	Acquired by Cupid plc in 2012.	Has an estimated 2 million users world wide	Available via website and app.	<p>Free members</p> <p>Limited chat options.</p> <p>Can only see small photos.</p> <p>Paying member:</p> <p>3-day trial: £2.79 per day</p> <p>1 month: 0.75p per day</p> <p>3 months: 0.50p per day</p> <p>6 months: 0.40p per day</p> <p>Unlimited chats.</p> <p>Large photos.</p> <p>'Looking for' info.</p> <p>Extended search options.</p>	A dating site for people looking to date people in uniform such as the military, nurses etc.	<p>The profile asks you to upload a photo and give some information about yourself such as your appearance, income and education.</p> <p>You look through profiles on the homepage, where you can select yes, no and maybe.</p> <p>You can send winks and flirt casts to people and chat using the chat feature.</p>	<p>Flirt Casts</p> <p>Choose from a selection of flirty messages that you can send to people.</p> <p>Like Gallery</p> <p>See who has liked you.</p> <p>Favourites</p> <p>You can add people to your favourites list so they are easier to find.</p>

				<p>Access to premium support.</p> <p>Share photos and videos in chat.</p>			
JDate (1997)	Still available	In 2010 Jdate reported having 750,000 users.	Website and available via app	<p>Free Membership</p> <p>Post your own profile with up to 6 photos</p> <p>Search our vast database of Jewish singles</p> <p>Receive "Your Matches" emails</p> <p>Purchase the Spotlight feature.</p> <p>It's not necessary to have a subscription to purchase this a-la-carte feature.</p> <p>Make your Jdate profile stand out at the top of the page!</p> <p>Premium Starts at \$29.99 a month</p>	A dating site to connect Jewish singles.	<p>Can sign up via Facebook or email address.</p> <p>During the sign up process, it will ask for information such as name, gender. Age and location.</p> <p>Users can remain anonymous by choosing a display name.</p> <p>Users can fill in the 'tell us about you' section, which asks questions about height, religion, occupation etc. It will ask what you are looking for.</p> <p>There is a free write section where you can write about yourself.</p> <p>You can upload photos of yourself, On the app it is as many as 9.</p>	<p>Look Book Browse profiles one at a time</p> <p>Messaging+ Allows you to communicate directly with anyone in the JDate community.</p> <p>Spotlight Make your profile stand out.</p>

				<p>Messaging+ feature</p> <p>Read and reply to all messages</p> <p>Read Receipts that tell you when your messages are read</p> <p>Enhanced Privacy Control — Browse anonymously, hide your status, and remove your profile from appearing in searches</p>		<p>Users can set discovery preferences based on age, religion etc.</p> <p>Profiles are presented to users like polaroid's with basic information on. You can click to see the full profile.</p> <p>You click on the heart to indicate you like someone or the x to pass.</p> <p>Users are notified if it is a mutual like.</p> <p>Users can chat to people they like via the messaging feature.</p>	
Skout (2007)	Still available	Has an estimated user base of around 10 million users across 180 countries. It is available in 14 languages.	Only available via App.	<p>Free Membership</p> <p>Register an account and set up a profile.</p> <p>Liking and commenting on other members' profiles.</p> <p>Adding favourites.</p> <p>See who has viewed your profile.</p> <p>Chat to other users.</p>	A social networking site that claims to facilitate a broad range of connections around the world, including friendship, relationships and networking.	<p>The profile asks you to upload photos of yourself.</p> <p>You can also set up a Skout ID, which acts like a handle that your friends can use to find you on Skout.</p> <p>You can edit your name.</p> <p>There is an 'about me' section which users can free write information about themselves.</p>	<p>Virtual dates and video chat</p> <p>Live</p> <p>Join live sessions. You can join different live sessions based on different categories of people like nearby, city etc.</p> <p>See people who have checked you out.</p>

				<p>Go premium</p> <p>1 month: £7.99 3 months: £18.99 12 months: 52.99</p> <p>No adverts.</p> <p>See who has listed you as a favourite.</p> <p>Help to boost your profile.</p> <p>Send and receive messages directly to inbox.</p>		<p>There are also a series of questions you can answer using the pre-populated fields such as your gender, location, interested in, looking for, ethnicity, body type, height, religion etc.</p> <p>You will be shown profiles based on your preferences and proximity.</p> <p>You can filter your search based on whether you would like your search to include those nearby, in the closest city, or even worldwide.</p> <p>You can see results in grid view or list view.</p> <p>There is also the match section, which gives you the option to swipe on profiles.</p> <p>Can click on photos and send a chat request. If the person accepts, you can then begin chatting.</p>	<p>Diamonds</p> <p>Users can receive gifts from other users during broadcasts, which Skout provides to users in diamonds. You can redeem diamonds for cash.</p>
Grindr (2009)	Still available	Around 11 million people are reported to use Grindr globally.	Available via app.	<p>Free membership:</p> <p>Can only access a limited number of profiles unless you</p>	The worlds largest geo-social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people.	<p>When you set up an account you will be asked to set up a profile.</p> <p>You will first be prompted to create a display name,</p>	<p>Boost</p> <p>Make your profile visible to more people.</p> <p>Albums</p>

				<p>pay a subscription fee.</p> <p>Grindr Xtra: Monthly: \$19.99 3 months: \$39.99 6 months: \$66.99 Yearly: \$99.99</p> <p>ZERO third-party advertisements.</p> <p>View up to 600 profiles in the cascade.</p> <p>Chat with users globally with Explore.</p> <p>Saved phrases to use in chat.</p> <p>Read receipts See who has chatted with you.</p> <p>5 expiring photos per day.</p> <p>View Full Album history.</p> <p>Unlock premium filters such as who is</p>	<p>which has be to between 0-15 characters.</p> <p>You also have room to write a brief description of who you are in the ‘about me’ section. There is a 225 character limit on this.</p> <p>The ‘stats’ section allows you to include information about yourself such as your age, height and weight. These are optional.</p> <p>The next section of the profile is the ‘expectations’ section, which asks you to pick from pre-populated options what you are looking for, where you would like to meet others, and what messages you are open to receiving.</p> <p>There are other sections that you can fill in such as what you identify as, your sexual health information, your vaccination status and your other social networking profiles.</p> <p>When users have set up their profile, they are presented</p>	<p>A private collection of photo and video content on your profile that you can share with selected people on Grindr.</p> <p>Viewed Me Shows who has been looking at your profile.</p> <p>Explore View profiles in other parts of the world.</p> <p>Taps Ice breakers you can send to anyone you are interested in.</p>
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				<p>online now, face photo's only and physical appearance.</p> <p>Grindr Unlimited: Monthly: \$50 Yearly: \$300</p> <p>See who's viewed your profile.</p> <p>Undo sent messages and photos.</p> <p>Browse profiles without being seen.</p> <p>Know when someone's messaging you.</p> <p>Unlimited profiles</p> <p>Send pictures that disappear from others' phones after one 10s view.</p> <p>Detects other users' language and translates for you.</p> <p>Plus all features that come with GrindrXTRA.</p>		<p>with the Grindr 'grid'. This grid is made up of a series of dating app profiles, which is ordered based on their proximity to you.</p> <p>You can click on profiles and send messages via the chat feature.</p>	
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<p>Scruff (2010)</p>	<p>Still available</p>	<p>Has an estimated community of 20 million users across the world.</p>	<p>available via app.</p>	<p>Free members can only view up to 100 profiles or 150 profiles if they have completed their full profile.</p> <p>Scruff Pro: Per month: \$14.99 Per year: \$119.99</p> <p>Unlimited chat history</p> <p>Unlimited private album sharing</p> <p>10x more profiles in your grid</p> <p>Ad-free</p> <p>Advanced search and filters</p> <p>Advances grid sorting</p> <p>Browse anonymously</p> <p>Send and receive videos</p>	<p>The top-rated, safest and most reliable geo-location social networking app for the gay, bi, trans and queer community to connect.</p>	<p>Can add hashtags to your profile to show off your interest and what you're looking for.</p> <p>Shows you a stack of potential matches every day for you to swipe on. Match is powered by the relationship status and open to sections of your profile. As such, it will only show you profiles of members that you have said you'd be into.</p> <p>You can also search for profiles using the nearby grid and search filters. The nearby grid shows you other profiles of people nearby to your current location. The profiles are ordered by distance.</p> <p>You can click on a profile to see their full profile which will include information on their basic stats, free text-biographical information and social media links.</p> <p>From there, you can choose whether to chat with the person via the chat feature.</p>	<p>Venture The global gay travel companion that lets you chat with travelers and locals at your travel destinations.</p> <p>Events Organises LGBTQ events such as parties, prides and festivals that users can attend.</p> <p>Bear Mode Auto-applies community interest filters to show you only bears or those who are into bears in the discover and nearby grids (A bear is a larger and often hairier man who projects an image of rugged masculinity).</p>
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Tinder (2012)	Still available	Over 300 million users. It is available in 190 countries and in 40+ languages.	Available via app	<p>Tinder- free Meet, chat and date. Limited to 100 likes a day.</p> <p>Tinder+ 1 month: £4.99 3 months: £15.00 12 months: £23.00</p> <p>Unlimited likes</p> <p>Unlimited rewinds</p> <p>Passport to any location.</p> <p>Hide advertisements.</p> <p>Tinder Gold 1 month: £7.49 3 months £27.96 12 months: £42</p> <p>(all of the above +) See who likes you</p> <p>New top picks everyday</p> <p>5 superlikes per week</p>	Biggest geo-location dating app in the world. Initially targeted to heterosexual dating but is now available to LGBTQ+ community.	<p>You can sign up using your Facebook ID or phone number.</p> <p>Tinder will ask you to provide your age, gender, sexual orientation and enable your location.</p> <p>You can then edit your profile. You are required to upload a profile picture. These can be imported from Facebook or uploaded from your phone. You can upload 5 in total.</p> <p>You can write a brief bio in the 'about me' section. You can write 500 characters in total.</p> <p>You can also provide information on your employment, education and link other social media accounts.</p> <p>You can edit your search parameters by age, gender and distance.</p>	<p>Rewind Allows users to go back if they have accidentally swiped left when they wanted to swipe right.</p> <p>Superlike You can swipe up (instead of left or right) on someone's profile to show someone that you super interested in them.</p> <p>Passport Allows you to look at profiles in other destinations around the world.</p> <p>Boost Allows you to skip the line and appear at the top of the stack of profiles.</p> <p>Photo verification Users can verify their photos or check whether another</p>
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				<p>1 free boost a month</p> <p>Tinder Platinum 1 month: £14.32 6 months: £50.10 12 months: £71.64</p> <p>(all of the above +)</p> <p>Message before matching.</p> <p>Prioritised likes</p> <p>See the likes you've sent over the last 7 days.</p> <p>You can also pay for individual features like boost.</p>		<p>Users are then presented with a stack of profiles, which users can swipe left to ignore and right to match. If both users swipe right on each other, it is a match. Otherwise, neither party is notified if one says no.</p> <p>Once 2 people have matched, they will appear in the chat section and users are able to chat to one another.</p>	<p>users' profile has been verified. Tinder ask you to take a picture making a certain pose and a member of the Tinder team will verify it.</p> <p>Top Picks Tinder displays a daily selection of profiles to show you based on the algorithm. These disappear after 24 hours.</p> <p>Personal Security A feature that has been released to protect LGBTQ users when visiting different nations. Tinder will not show their profile in countries which restrict criminalise gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual or queer relationships.</p> <p>Noonlight</p>
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							<p>This is an app that is working in collaboration with Tinder. It acts as a panic button for users who go on dates and feel unsafe. It will alert emergency services. (only available in U.S.)</p> <p>Does this bother you? Is a form of machine learning that detects whether an offensive message has been sent to a user. If it identifies that it has, it will ask you does this bother you? If you say yes, users are prompted to report the person. (available in the UK).</p> <p>Swipe night This is Tinder meets cluedo. Members are given a story and at key points in the story they use the swipe feature to</p>
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							decide what happens next. Every choice impacts who you will match with. (only available in the U.S.)
Bumble (2014)	Still available	Has an estimated 45 million active users across the world.	Available via app Also has Bumble Web	Bumble allows users to use its basic features for free, although it limits the number of swipes each day. Bumble Boost One week: £7.99 One month: £20.99 Three months: £14 per month Six months: £11.99 per month Backtrack Ability to extend time on your current matches Unlimited swipes One Spotlight per week Five SuperSwipes per week Bumble Premium	Bumble was created with intentions of challenging outdated heterosexual norms. It does this by making women make the first move. Bumble also has Bumble 'BFF' and 'Bizz', which are separate from Bumble 'date'. These other features allow friends and professionals to expand their social circle.	You can register an account by signing up with Facebook or phone number. If you sign up with Facebook, it will automatically pull certain information from their and include it in your profile such as your occupation. Users can upload a maximum of 6 photos. You will also need to provide information on your date of birth, what gender you identify as and who you are interested in seeing. There is also the option to answer questions on your zodiac sign, height, pets etc. You must provide access to your location.	Spotlight Puts your profile at the top of the stack to give it more visibility. Superswipe lets you tell a potential match you're confidently interested in them. Beeline lets you see and match with profiles who already liked you but you have not swiped left or right yet. Move Maker choose 3 prompts from a selection of 30+, and your answers are displayed in between your photos.

				<p>Upgrade from £12.99</p> <p>Access to unlimited</p> <p>Advanced filters</p> <p>Access to your Beeline so you can see your admirers</p> <p>Travel mode which allows you to change your location to another city (not available on Bumble Web).</p> <p>Backtrack so you can undo left swipes.</p> <p>Ability to extend time on your current matches.</p> <p>Rematch with users who have expired. (Please note that in opposite-sex matches, men cannot rematch with a woman who hasn't sent the first message).</p> <p>Unlimited swipes</p>	<p>You can also write a short bio , which can only be 300 characters.</p> <p>You also have the choice to answer move makers (prompts), which are short phrases that you can complete.</p> <p>Users can set filters by age, gender and distance, but if you pay for Bumble premium you can also set advanced filters such as whether people smoke etc.</p> <p>You can connect other social media accounts like Spotify and Instagram to your dating profile.</p> <p>Bumble is swipe based.</p> <p>In heterosexual matches on Bumble, women are required to make the first move. Once a match is established, the woman will have 24 hours to make the first move, or the connection expires.</p>	
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				<p>One Spotlight per week. This feature advances your profile to the top of the stack to be viewable by more people instantly for 30 minutes.</p> <p>Five SuperSwipes per week. You can SuperSwipe a user's profile to show that you are really interested in them.</p> <p>Incognito Mode</p> <p>You can also pay for individual features such as spotlight or boosts.</p>		<p>In same-gender matches, either person has the power to make the first move. Then, the other person has 24 hours to respond, or the connection expires.</p>	
Hinge (2012)	Still available	An estimated 20 million active users.	Available via app	<p>Free membership You can register, match and chat to other users for free but you are limited to 10 likes per day.</p> <p>Hinge Premium 1 month: \$29.99 3 months: \$59.99 6 months: \$89.99</p> <p>Advanced filters</p>	Hinge markets itself as the dating app designed to be deleted. They call themselves the 'love scientists' as their Hinge Labs researchers, behavioural analysts, and matchmakers study daters and compatibility. It is a modern version of a matchmaking service.	<p>You can set up an account by signing up with Facebook, which allows you to import data automatically, or by phone number.</p> <p>You will first fill in questions about your age, gender, preferences.</p> <p>Hinge will also ask you to answer a series of questions such as your ethnicity, do</p>	<p>Voice prompts allows users to answer a Prompt through a 30-second voice recording.</p> <p>Rose Sending someone a Rose bumps you to the top of their feed and shows that you're really interested. You get</p>

				<p>Unlimited likes</p> <p>See who likes you first.</p> <p>Get access to Hinge experts.</p> <p>See more "Standout" profiles.</p>	<p>Their 'mission' is to encourage authenticity, courage and empathy.</p>	<p>you drink, your religion etc. You can choose whether these are made visible on your profile.</p> <p>You can upload up to 6 photos. You can also pair your photos with video prompts.</p> <p>Hinge also lets you include profile prompts, which is where you choose 3 prompts from a selection of 30+, and your answers are displayed in between your photos.</p> <p>Users can also write a bio of up to 150 characters.</p> <p>Match uses the information you provide about yourself to select profile to present to you.</p> <p>Hinge uses a tap system, instead of swiping, where users tap the heart or X icon on profiles. This will notify the user that you have liked them. At this point a dialogue box will appear where you can begin a conversation.</p>	<p>one free Rose every Sunday.</p> <p>Standouts</p> <p>Every day, Hinge generates a list of users "most your type," based on how they answered their Prompts. Tapping on any of these Prompts will bring you straight to that user's full profile.</p>
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Silver Singles (2002)	Still available	Has an estimated 800,000 users.	2002-Website App version now available.	The basic membership is free but you can upgrade to access premium features. Premium Pass 3 months: £103.99 1 month: £65.99 See your matches' photos. Send and receive unlimited messages. The Like List: See who you liked – and who liked you!. Who's interested? See who's visited your profile.	dating app exclusively for singles over 50.	You can sign up using a valid email address. Next, you take the personality test which asks you questions about yourself and your preferences. You can rank how important certain preferences are for you. You can upload a photo of yourself. Get 3-7 highly compatible matches daily. Get access to your matches' complete profile. Send smiles and likes to indicate you are interested. Send icebreakers and read the ones you receive. Look through more profiles using our Open Search function.	N/A
Lumen (2018)	Now become part of Bumble	Had an estimated 1.3 million users.	Available via app	Lumens basic features are free, but users are limited to	A dating app that caters exclusively to people over the age of 50.	You can sign up using Facebook or phone number.	Lumen Social Users can join a selection of groups based on different

				<p>starting 6 conversation a day.</p> <p>Lumen Premium 1 week: \$11.99 1 month: \$35.99 3 months: \$71.99 6 months: \$99.99</p> <p>See which users have made you a “favorite”.</p> <p>Extend the 3-day deadline on any conversation by an additional 24 hours.</p> <p>Initiate 12 conversations per day instead of 6.</p> <p>See all the profiles you’ve skipped, instead of just the last 10.</p> <p>Choose two additional filters from the Advanced Filter menu.</p>		<p>Users are prompted to provide basic information, such as their name, gender, age and occupation.</p> <p>There is a free text space where users can say a little bit about what they are looking for.</p> <p>There is also an ‘about me’ section that can be filled in. To be able to set up a profile, users are required to have their profile picture verified. You must upload 3 profile pictures. You can upload 6 in total.</p> <p>You can set search criteria based on age, gender and distance.</p> <p>Users will be shown one profile at a time. You have the option to tap the green star icon to save them as a favourite, tap the yellow button to start chatting or skip the profile.</p> <p>Users have 3 days to respond to messages.</p>	<p>topics to meet like minded people.</p> <p>Rewind Can look at the last 10 profiles you’ve skipped.</p>
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<p>Happn (2014)</p>	<p>Still available</p>	<p>Reports an estimated 100 million users.</p>	<p>Available via app</p>	<p>Free Membership Basic Happn features are free but certain features are limited to weekly or daily allowances, such as likes.</p> <p>Happn Premium 1 month: \$24 6 months: \$89.99 12 months: \$119.99</p> <p>See who's interested Up to 10 hellos per day.</p> <p>Play twice as many crush games.</p> <p>Ad free experience</p> <p>Send up to 10 flashnotes.</p> <p>Unlimited likes</p>	<p>It is premised on the idea of 'fate' and shows you profiles of people you have crossed paths with in your everyday life but missed out on making a connection with.</p> <p>Users of Happn are called Happners.</p>	<p>Users can sign up using Facebook or phone number.</p> <p>It will ask you to enter basic information about yourself such as age, gender and location.</p> <p>Allows you to upload 9 profile photos.</p> <p>The about me section allows you to write up to 500 characters.</p> <p>There is a 'my audio' section that allows you to record answers to prompts.</p> <p>Every time you cross paths with someone on Happn in real life, their profile shows up on your Timeline. This can be within a few kilometres radius.</p> <p>People you have crossed paths with will appear on the home page in chronological order. You can filter locations you have visited to see who you have crossed paths with in certain locations.</p>	<p>Flashnote Can send a flashnote to other users, which shows you are interested in them.</p> <p>Crush Time A game where 4-profile grid will display and you will have to guess who has Liked you.</p> <p>My favourites Profiles that you have sent a flashnote to will appear in your 'my favourites' section.</p> <p>Map you can find all the main locations where you have crossed paths with users during the 14 previous days.</p> <p>Audio/video calls</p> <p>Blue badge A blue badge on someone's profile means they have</p>
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						You can like them secretly, so you will never know unless they like you back. If it is a mutual match or 'crush' you can begin chatting to each other.	been verified and certified.
Muddy Matches (2007)	Still available	Has an estimated 200 thousand members.	Website	<p>It is free to sign up and create and browse others' profiles, but users must be a paying subscriber to read and respond to messages.</p> <p>1 month: £26.00 (works out at £0.87 per day)</p> <p>3 months: £48.00 (works out at £0.53 per day)</p> <p>6 months: £72.00 (works out at £0.40 per day)</p> <p>12 months: £94.00 (works out at £0.26 per day)</p>	A dating site aimed at people who live in the countryside who want to find likeminded country people.	<p>Can sign up via email.</p> <p>Users are then asked a few basic questions about themselves such as age, gender and location.</p> <p>Users can personalise their profile by adding photos and information about themselves and their interests.</p> <p>The site automatically runs a search for users based on the criteria they have set based on age, gender, preferences and location.</p> <p>Users can then look at profiles and send winks to let the user know you are interested.</p> <p>If you pay for subscription, users can read and respond to messages.</p>	N/A

Veggly (2021)	Still available	Has an estimated 45,000 users in the UK.	Available via app and website.	<p>You can search, match and chat unlimitedly</p> <p>Veggly Premium</p> <p>Can see who Liked you before the Veg-Match.</p> <p>Use Veggly without advertisements.</p> <p>Can use Veggly Teleportation.</p> <p>Get 3 coins per month to send Super Likes.</p> <p>Get read confirmation in the chat.</p>	A dating app designed for vegans and vegetarians.	<p>You can sign up using an apple account or email.</p> <p>There is an about me section, where users can write about themselves and their interests.</p> <p>You can upload 9 profile pictures in total.</p> <p>You can filter profiles by age, distance, and diet/lifestyle.</p> <p>You are then presented with profiles on the home page, of which you can like or not like. Profiles are presented by distance or how new they are to the site.</p> <p>If someone likes you back, it is called a 'veg match' and the two can start chatting.</p>	<p>Superlike If you superlike someone it will send them an email or notification letting them know you have superliked them.</p> <p>Teleportation Look at profiles of people at different parts of the world.</p>
Grazer (2018)	Still available	Has an estimated 2,000 users in the UK.	Available via app.	The features of the app are free but you can buy 2 nd chance feature for \$0.99.	Calls itself the 'meatless matchmaker' and is a dating app for people who don't eat meat.	<p>You can sign up using Facebook or phone number.</p> <p>You can set up a profile by answering basic questions about yourself such as your age, gender, location, what you are looking for and dietary preferences.</p>	<p>Second chance Rewind all your previous left swipes to give them a second chance.</p>

						<p>You are required to upload 4 profile photos.</p>	
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Profiles will be shown to you based on these filters.

When a profile is presented to you, you can choose to keep grazing or chat now.

11 Appendix B: Electronic Logbook

Participant Diary – Instruction Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. Below you will find a few short questions asking you about your dating app use. I am asking these questions so I can get an idea of how dating apps are used in your everyday life. I would like you to answer these questions every day for one week in as much detail as possible, **within the boundaries of what you are comfortable disclosing.**

- There are some questions that you might find easier answering throughout the day and some which you might be best of leaving until the end of the day.
- Please take note of every time you use your dating app(s), **no matter how insignificant you think your use of it was.** Whether you use your dating app(s) for 1 second or a couple of hours, once a day or a couple of times a day, I would like you to log it in your diary.
- Do not worry if you don't end up using your dating app(s) each day, or at all this week, and cannot complete all the questions. Just answer 'no' to question 1 and leave the rest of the questions blank.
- If you forget or do not have time to fill in your diary one day, don't worry, please just fill it in as soon as you can.

There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions, I am only interested in your experiences and opinions. **All of your answers will be kept strictly confidential** and if you have any questions or concerns about any of these questions, please do not hesitate to email me at *loveapptually@newcastle.ac.uk*.

Love Apptually Diary Day 1

Response ID	Start date	Completion date
542567-542558-52864135	7 Dec 2019, 15:24 (GMT)	7 Dec 2019, 15:27 (GMT)

1 What is your name?

2 How old are you?

3 Do you identify as...

4 Employment Status: Are you currently in...

5 Have you used your dating app(s) today?

6 Which dating app(s) did you use [Tick all that apply]

6.a If you selected Other, please specify:

7 How did you access your dating app(s)? [Tick all that apply]

7.a If you selected Other, please specify:

8 In the Space provided below please list all the places that you used your dating app(s) today (i.e. at work, at home, on the metro)

9 When and for how long did you use your dating app(s) today?

9.1 06:00

9.1.a Tinder

9.1.b Bumble

9.1.c	Match.com
9.1.d	Badoo
9.1.e	Other
9.2	07:00
9.2.a	Tinder
9.2.b	Bumble
9.2.c	Match.com
9.2.d	Badoo
9.2.e	Other
9.3	08:00
9.3.a	Tinder
9.3.b	Bumble
9.3.c	Match.com
9.3.d	Badoo
9.3.e	Other
9.4	09:00
9.4.a	Tinder
9.4.b	Bumble
9.4.c	Match.com
9.4.d	Badoo
9.4.e	Other
9.5	10:00
9.5.a	Tinder
9.5.b	Bumble
9.5.c	Match.com
9.5.d	Badoo
9.5.e	Other
9.6	11:00
9.6.a	Tinder
9.6.b	Bumble
9.6.c	Match.com
9.6.d	Badoo

12 Appendix C: Interview Guide

Theme	Topics	Themes/Topics raised
Motivation: becoming a dating app user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How they first heard about dating apps • Perceptions of dating apps before using them, included, who, what, where, and how. Has this changed since using them? • What led them to start using dating apps? • Dating app choice? Why? • Current engagement with apps? • What does <u>being</u> a dating app user mean to participants? • Are there any concerns around dating app use? And are these gendered? 	
Everyday in-app dating app practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of dating app profile and is this consistent across all dating apps? • Is there anything they would not put on their profile, why? • Swiping logic: their process of assessing others' profiles. • How dating apps are integrated into their everyday lives/routines i.e., time spent, time of day, etc. • What happens after a match occurs? • Experiences of messaging via the apps. • Have they met with anyone off a dating app. If so, how is this arranged? • The ways everyday practice might be gendered? 	
Their perceived impact (individually & <u>Societally</u>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What effect do you think dating apps have had on dating and relationships, if any? • What would be their preferred way of forming a relationship? • What is their understanding of broader perspectives on dating apps? • Do you think relationships that began on dating apps are any different to those which begin via other means? • What do you think your life would be like if dating apps did not exist? • Do you think most people would agree with your opinions? 	
Meaning of Non-use: Becoming a Non-User	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know many people who have never used a dating app? • Why/ who do you think people decide to never use dating apps? • What kind of reaction do you think you'd get if you told your friends/family that you had never used dating apps? • Do you know many people who have stopped dating apps? Context? • Have you undergone period of non-use? Context? 	
Closing Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything you think I should know that we haven't talked about? • Is there anything you expected me to ask that I didn't? • Do you want to be updated about this research? • Explain and complete Information Sheet & consent form. 	

13 Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



From 'Love Actually' to 'Love Apptually'

If you have received this information sheet it is because you have shown interest in taking part in this research project. This information sheet tells you about the project and gives an idea of what will be involved if you do decide to take part. **If there is anything you do not understand or if you have any further questions please do not hesitate to ask.**

What's this project about?

I am Melissa, a postgraduate student from Newcastle University, and this project is being conducted as part of my PhD. The aim is to get a better understanding of people's experiences of using dating apps to explore how this technology influences views of relationships, dating and intimacy. I wish to speak to men and women, above the age of 18, who identify as heterosexual. You are being invited to take part in this project because you have either used dating apps, or the web version of these apps, in the past or are a current dating app user.

What is involved in participating?

You will first of all be asked to keep a diary for 1 week. This diary will be sent to participants via email and can be filled out electronically. These diaries will be different to the kind you may have encountered before, they will be more like log books of when, where and how often you use your dating app within that week. This is to get an idea of how dating apps are used in people's everyday lives. If you do not end up using your dating app that week, do not worry, simply say that in the diary.

After completing the diaries, participants will then take part in a semi-structured interview that should last about an hour. During the interview I will be asking questions about your reasons for using, or not using dating apps, how you use(d) your app and your thoughts and experiences of using dating apps more generally. It must be emphasised that although I wish to discuss your thoughts and experiences of using dating apps, **I am NOT concerned with any details about your personal dating or sexual experiences.** The interviews will be conducted in a quiet public space (i.e. Public library, university library, university rooms or local bookable meeting/conference rooms etc.) which is most convenient to yourself, or can also be done via zoom, which is software similar to Skype, if that suits your needs better. With your consent, the interview will be recorded (sound only) and then typed up by myself.

You do not have answer any questions you do not want to (just say "I want to give this one a miss") or you can stop the interview altogether. You can withdraw from the interview at any point. In both cases, you do not have to give me a reason for your decision.

How will the information you provide be used and kept securely?

I might take quotes from your interview that I think are useful and use them in my final write up, but I will ensure that I keep you anonymous in the research. This means that while I may repeat what you say in the interview, I won't tell people it was you who said it. **Your real name will NEVER be used in this project.** You will be given a pseudonym (a fake name), and any other personal information or identifiable characteristics, such as names of friends, locations, or work place, will be also be replaced with a pseudonym or deleted.

I will keep information on your age and gender to see if these factors affect your experience of dating apps. If I think this information makes it too obvious who you are I will change this to protect your anonymity.

My thesis might be published: this means that some of what I write could be made public in a book or journal article.

The security of your data is of the utmost concern in this project **and all of your information will be managed according to Data Protection Law.** Your interview data and transcripts will be stored in a password protected file on Newcastle University's secure database or on an encrypted USB stick. I won't keep your name or any contact details within the research project, but I will store some contact details on a separate document if you ask to receive updates on the research. All of this data will be destroyed one year after I have been awarded my PhD.

Disclosure Declaration

Hopefully it won't come to this, but I have to tell you that if I think that you or I are in immediate danger, I have to inform the relevant authorities. If this happens I cannot guarantee that I will be able to keep what you have said a secret. I will also have to end the interview at any point if I think it is unsafe for us to continue. It is important, therefore, that **you should not disclose confidential information in the interview OR say anything which you would not be comfortable being made public.**

Lastly, if you have any concerns about something, let me know! My email address is: **nloveapp@newcastle.ac.uk**. In the case that you think something is wrong and want to report it, you can contact either of my supervisors using the contact information below:

Professor Diane Richardson
diane.richardson@newcastle.ac.uk

Email

Address:

Dr Gethin Rees
gethin.rees@newcastle.ac.uk

Email

Address:



Informed Consent Form

Project Title: From ‘Love Actually’ to ‘Love Aptually’

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and had the research study explained to you.

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project provided in the Participant Information Sheet. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and had any questions answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I know I can refuse to answer questions and stop the interview at any time.	
3.	I consent to having the interview audio recorded and transcribed.	
4.	I understand how the content of my diaries and interviews will be used and stored.	
5.	I understand the researcher’s responsibility to maintain my anonymity and confidentiality.	
6.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me	
7.	I have read the disclosure agreement and understand that if someone is in danger, the researcher may have to pass on information to relevant authorities or end the interview.	

I agree to take part in this study. I understand and accept the checked statements above.

Participant Signature:

Date:

Researchers Signature:

Date:

14 Appendix E: Revised Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



From 'Love Actually' to 'Love Aactually'

If you have received this information sheet it is because you have shown interest in taking part in this research project. This information sheet tells you about the project and gives an idea of what will be involved if you do decide to take part. **If there is anything you do not understand or if you have any further questions please do not hesitate to ask.**

What's this project about?

I am Melissa, a postgraduate student from Newcastle University, and this project is being conducted as part of my PhD. The aim is to get a better understanding of people's experiences of using dating apps to explore how this technology influences views of relationships, dating and intimacy. I wish to speak to men and women, above the age of 18, who identify as heterosexual. You are being invited to take part in this project because you have either used dating apps, or the web version of these apps, in the past or are a current dating app user.

What is involved in participating?

You will first of all be asked to keep a diary for 1 week. The diary will be different to the kind you may have encountered before, it will be more like a logbook of when, where and how often you use your dating app within that week. This is to get an idea of how dating apps are used in people's everyday lives. This daily logbook will be sent to you via email every day for 7 days and can be filled out electronically. If you do not end up using your dating app that week, do not worry, simply say that in the logbook.

After completing the diaries, you will then take part in an interview that should last about an hour. During the interview I will be asking questions about your reasons for using, or not using dating apps, how you use(d) your app and your thoughts and experiences of using dating apps more generally. It must be emphasised that although I wish to discuss your thoughts and experiences of using dating apps, **I am NOT concerned with any details about your personal dating or sexual experiences.** Following current guidelines regarding COVID-19 the interviews will be conducted online using Zoom, which is software similar to Skype except it does not require you to create an account to be able to use it. This will also mean that consent will also need to be given verbally. About a day or two before the interview is due to take place, I will send you an invitation via email which will contain a link that you can click on and which will take you to the Zoom Interview.

You do not have answer any questions you do not want to (just say "I want to give this one a miss") or you can stop the interview altogether. You can withdraw from the interview at any point. In both cases, you do not have to give me a reason for your decision. Sometimes with Zoom interviews there can be glitches, cut offs or lags which could be misinterpreted as

someone withdrawing. If this happens, I encourage you to use the chat function or email me just to let me know that we can continue the interview.

Zoom Interviews

Taking part in a Zoom interview is as easy as clicking a button, but there are some things that can make it go a bit easier. For example, interviews generally go a bit better when they take place in quiet spaces with little distractions. So, if possible, it would be best if you could arrange to have the interview in a study or quiet room, rather than in a communal space like the living room where family members or housemates might be popping in and out. Zoom interviews can take place on a laptop, tablet and mobile phones but in the past they have been best on laptops. I appreciate that everyone's circumstances are different so if this is not possible, do not worry.

How will the information you provide be used and kept securely?

I might take quotes from your interview that I think are useful and use them in my final write up, but I will ensure that I keep you anonymous in the research. This means that while I may repeat what you say in the interview, I won't tell people it was you who said it. **Your real name will NEVER be used in this project.** You will be given a pseudonym (a fake name), and any other personal information or identifiable characteristics, such as names of friends, locations, or work place, will be also be replaced with a pseudonym or deleted.

I will keep information on your age and gender to see if these factors affect your experience of dating apps

My thesis might be published: this means that some of what I write could be made public in a book or journal article.

The security of your data is of the utmost concern in this project **and all of your information will be managed according to Data Protection Law**. With your consent, the interview will be recorded using a Dictaphone or using the Zoom record function (sound only) and then typed up by myself. If the Zoom record function is used, the sound recording will be saved to my computer and not shared with any third parties. Your interview data and transcripts will be stored in a password protected file on Newcastle University's secure database or on an encrypted USB stick. I won't keep your name or any contact details within the research project, but I will store some contact details on a separate document if you ask to receive updates on the research. All of this data will be destroyed one year after I have been awarded my PhD.

Disclosure Declaration

Hopefully it won't come to this, but I have to tell you that if I think that you or I are in immediate danger, I have to inform the relevant authorities. If this happens I cannot guarantee that I will be able to keep what you have said a secret. I will also have to end the interview at any point if I think it is unsafe for us to continue. It is important, therefore, that **you should not disclose confidential information in the interview OR say anything which you would not be comfortable being made public.**

Lastly, if you have any concerns about something, let me know! My email address is: **loveapptuallystudy1@newcastle.ac.uk**. In the case that you think something is wrong and want to report it, you can contact either of my supervisors using the contact information below:

Professor Diane Richardson
diane.richardson@newcastle.ac.uk

Email

Address:

Dr Gethin Rees
gethin.rees@newcastle.ac.uk

Email

Address:



Informed Consent Form

Project Title: From ‘Love Actually’ to ‘Love Aptually’

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and had the research study explained to you.

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project provided in the Participant Information Sheet. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and had any questions answered satisfactorily.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I know I can refuse to answer questions and stop the interview at any time.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I consent to having the interview audio recorded and transcribed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand how the content of my diaries and interviews will be used and stored.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	I understand the researcher’s responsibility to maintain my anonymity and confidentiality.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	I have read the disclosure agreement and understand that if someone is in danger, the researcher may have to pass on information to relevant authorities or end the interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>

I agree to take part in this study. I understand and accept the checked statements above Choose an option

15 Appendix F: Dating App Terms Glossary

Ghosting	When someone abruptly stops replying or ends communication with you without any explanation as to why.
Zombie-ing	This refers to someone who has ghosted you but reinitiates contact with you.
Catfishing	When someone lies about their identity online such as their gender, appearance or relationship status.
Kitenfishing	Softer forms of deceit online such as editing photos slightly
Dogfishing	When someone has a picture with a dog in the profile picture, but the dog does not belong to them.
Hatfishing	When someone wears a hat in all of their photos online to hide the fact they are bald.
Roaching	When someone you are talking to/dating on a dating site hide the fact they are speaking to multiple people.
Breadcrumbing	When someone talks to you online but does not attempt to pursue anything beyond that.
Pumpkining	When someone matches with you late in the evening but you find they have unmatched you in the morning.
Netflix & Chill	When someone invites you to come over and 'Netflix and chill', the implication is that they are asking whether you want to come over and engage in sexual activity.