

Doctoral Thesis

Agency and Structure in Digitally-Mediated Dating. A Sociological Case Study of Tinder

Summary

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Going on weekly dates with different people is something that a Tinder user I interviewed had never done before installing the app. In recent years, more and more people have started to use online dating platforms and apps to overcome issues like shyness, limited access to social venues, and daily responsibilities. The culture around dating apps has also become more relaxed as the use of smartphones and mobile apps has increased. However, the 2012 launch of the mobile dating app Tinder is what took the consumption of dating apps to another level in many parts of the world.

Tinder broke new ground by technologically modeling dating like a game. The proposed app design is based on gamification elements (Garda and Karhulahti, 2019). To maintain a relaxed atmosphere, users could build a profile by only uploading a maximum of nine photos and provide basic information such as their age, gender, and location, contrasting previous forms of digital dating. Therefore, anyone, no matter how busy, could quickly set up an account and start swiping. Tinder was first launched in college campuses in United States and targeted young users, given that they are more prone to experimenting with different relationship forms (Lundquist and Curington, 2019). Since then, Tinder has swiftly gained a wide variety of users from all social and age categories, and it is now among the most popular dating apps in the world.

Drawing on Giddens's (1984) interplay of *agency and structure*, I have assessed the experiences of users by acknowledging the environment in which their experiences take place. To reach a more complete perspective, I have also applied the concept of *technological affordances* (Hutchby, 2001), which brings the contexts in which technologies are used and the actual utilities awarded by users, not designers, into discussion with one another. To analyze the data, I have relied on several sociological lenses. Namely, I have used *time work* as advanced by Flaherty (2003, 2011) to analyze the temporal level, *emotion work* and *feeling rules* as discussed by Hochschild (1979) to address the emotional level, *vocabularies of motive* as proposed by Mills (1940) to examine the justification level, and the *moral career* concept coined by Goffman (1963) to analyze the learning and the social trajectories of users.

The data included in the analysis were obtained by employing the sociological survey, document analysis, observation, and content analysis methods. For the analysis of the data collected, I have used the discursive thematic analysis, combining the guidelines set by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gill (2000), as well as the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018), the complete observer technique (Baker, 2006), and the qualitative content

analysis approach (Prasad, 2008). As a result, my doctoral study is comprised of seven studies investigating both the sociotechnical organization of the app and the user experiences resulted from an interplay of agency and structure.

The first chapter, “Agency and Structure in Digitally-Mediated Dating. A Sociological Case Study of Tinder,” offers a detailed analysis of the elements of the sociotechnical structure that construe it as a product (i.e., business vision, identity, and slogan, business model, app features, design elements, the machine learning algorithm, and app pattern) and of the agents interacting and co-creating the digital dating environment (i.e., business founders, owners, and users). The data for this chapter includes announcements made by the Tinder company over time, reports delivered by independent organizations, statistics provided by research institutes, and observations captured by installing and browsing the app. One of the main findings is that the experience of dating on Tinder is significantly shaped by the company’s aim for profit. Tinder’s technological design and its business strategies become new rules of the dating game, leading to its increasing rationalization through quantification and a focus on scale and speed.

Tinder is a product that stimulated significant social changes in how people meet and relate to relationships. It has also created new opportunities and risks. For this reason, through the second chapter, “Perils of Digital Intimacy. A Literature Review,” I look closely at the scientific literature that recorded the changes, favorable circumstances, and perils introduced or amplified by the app. The chapter offers a narrative systematic review in which I show the main findings on a series of topics related to online dating: the transformation of intimacy (i.e., hook-up culture, ghosting, choice overload, etc.), discrimination, privacy risks, digital threats, and safety risks. Essentially, the investigation has shown that the normalization of online dating through Tinder has led to more abounding dating opportunities, but also to social changes and risks that affect the users. Users are influenced by the erotic theme surrounding the use of the dating app and its reputation, which can tip the scales in the favor of casual and short-term interactions. The priority of digital privacy conflicts with the safety needs of users. Anonymity has benefits, but it also poses significant challenges in building safe dating platforms. Moreover, users are more predisposed to social engineering attacks, which have flourished on dating apps in the last years.

Digital apps such as Tinder enable self-analyses beyond close social circles, providing means of instant feedback from numerous persons, and the possibility to intervene, modify, and test variations until a satisfactory result is achieved. In the chapter “Learning About Self and

Society through Online Dating Platforms. A Case Study of Tinder” I have analyzed the strategies of learning about self and society through participation in dating through Tinder, and in digital communities dedicated to collective reflection on this experience. The chapter is based on a content analysis of Tinder-related user posts on community platforms. In line with the neoliberal and techno-solutionist ideology of people as individual buyers of technologies to solve their problems on their own, the findings show that Tinder’s users are put in the situation to grasp and address on their own the confusing and frustrating situations they experience. Thus, engaging with external community platforms on Tinder-related issues has become a habit for many.

On Tinder, the gender distribution of users is significantly unbalanced. Men use dating apps in higher numbers than women. In the chapter “The Moral Careers of Male Tinder Users: An Exploratory Sociological Analysis” I have analyzed what incentivizes or inhibits the use of Tinder among men, whether the main goal is achieved or if it has changed over time, or what various new uses arise in the way. The study employs the moral career concept (Goffman, 1963), that envisions the trajectory of an individual who learns (in early childhood or late in life) that they carry a certain attribute that can discredit them socially and attract stigma from others (Goffman, 1963). Thus, this exploratory study presents the diverse moral careers routes taken by male Tinder users. The analysis is thematically organized to discuss the various situations experienced by those categorized as serial, relationship-oriented, passive, episodic, and discredited daters. Findings show that the sociotechnical dynamic contained in the app appears to promote unequal dating opportunities in the case of male users, encouraging the perception of self-value and worthiness by accounting for Tinder-specific “successful” presentations of self.

Motherhood is often studied through the lens of child rearing as a dominant activity, at the expense of other interests. With the advent of dating apps and consequently the opportunity to easily plan and schedule dates, more information on how single mothers manage and put into reality their intimacy desires have surfaced. In the chapter “Swiping as a Single Mom: A First Look at the Experiences of Single Mothers who Use Tinder,” I have looked at how single mothers use the dating app Tinder. The study is based on seven interviews with single mothers and seven media articles published online (i.e., in newspapers, news platforms and blogs). According to the results, single mothers extract benefits from Tinder with variable success by avoiding certain in-person limitations and exploring the extended possibilities provided by the digital space.

Seeking intimacy online is encouraged by their advantages in the speed and directness of interaction: participants reveal their availability faster and cross the barriers of space and traditional social circles and daily interactional routines. As agential tools for romantic pursuits, dating apps open an opportunity for the research of technologically mediated romance, with its evolving temporal scenarios and changes in forms of commitment. The chapter “Users’ Temporal Agency on Tinder” offers an analysis of users’ temporal agency on Tinder. The study employs the *time work* concept (Flaherty, 2003) as a theoretical framework. Findings show that the diversity of users’ dating experiences and strategies attest to the power of time work to reshape temporal structures created by technological designs. Tinder users adapt to Tinder-specific temporal configurations, looking for those most suitable for them. They take advantage of technological affordances and decide when is better to send a message, how fast to meet, or how soon to become intimate, which are still practices shaped by prevailing social norms (Yeo and Fung, 2018). However, the interactions are often interrupted by moments of waiting, which may turn into ghosting. The swiping gesture that stands at the basis of the Tinder use was described as addictive by most users. The temporal structure of the platform is secured around characteristics such as fast, easy, and fun. Some relationships, however, require consistency, complexity, and building up trust. While casual interactions thrive on speed, others require time and patience as essential ingredients. Thus, Tinder’s design brings a significant social change in the temporal structure of intimacy, and users raise to the challenge with adaptive time work tactics.

By participating in digital dating, individuals use previous notions of dating to navigate the dating processes set by-design and to make sense of the rules of the “game.” Along the way, users begin to associate emotions with digital functions (i.e., validated when receiving a like, rejected when the like is one-sided or send unanswered messages) and to modify their emotional reactions according to the ones considered more suitable for the digital dating situation. The chapter “Tinder and the Emotional Structure of Intimacy” presents how intimacy is organized on Tinder and the emotional management effort made by users in attaining intimacy goals. The analysis showed that dating on Tinder requires significant emotion work: users are encouraged to present themselves in a favorable light while having low expectations, and they work to be liked, which is reduced to being attractive, playful, and having writing social skills. On Tinder, individuals learn to quickly dismiss the users who perform poorly—by sanctioning indecency, rudeness, but, as a downside, they also discredit raw honesty, vulnerability, and non-conforming social and physical traits.

The development of this doctoral thesis comes with a set of limitations. More specifically, the study focused on users who have used Tinder systematically, thus exploring the impressions, justifications, perceptions, experiences that construe it as a valuable tool. A different portrayal of dating experiences might emerge from people who use other dating apps, do not find Tinder useful, or refuse to use dating apps for various reasons.

Through this doctoral study, I contribute to the scientific literature with an integrated sociological investigation of the benefits and disadvantages of a technology used by millions of people. Perhaps the one of most significant contributions of this thesis is the analysis of the single mothers' justifications for the use of Tinder in relation to their mother status-role and changing social context. The analysis of the moral careers of male Tinder users use fills a gap in the literature: what makes them use the app in the first place, how their engagement changes, why Tinder is attractive for them, and how the app pattern influences further use. Another contribution is represented by the analysis of the temporal and emotional agency of Tinder users, previously unaddressed in the literature, that clarifies the specific dynamic of the digitally mediated dating interaction. The thesis ends with recommendations for designing better dating technologies and predictions for the future of dating.

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