..what should I say?

– A feminist analysis of the intricacies of online dating

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Summary

As new technology develops, society develops with it; we find new ways to interact with our business associates, our friends, and our family. This study looks specifically at the ways individuals in our contemporary community express sexuality and how dating and forming new relationships is being affected. We begin with a brief history on the study of sex and sexuality, and continue with a section exploring theories and more contemporary research on the subject. Focusing on current social phenomenon such as gender objectification and the anonymity pertaining to online interactions, we investigate social media and phone/computer applications focused on dating. We look for answers to questions regarding how the evolution of sexuality influences power structures within a community, through empirical interviews and hidden online observations, and from a feminist perspective. The intricacies of text communication and the interpretation of such interactions is a cornerstone of modern dating, which this thesis analyses closely by looking at how the participants initiate contact with potential partners.

Key words

Sexuality, dating, feminism, online, interaction
Preface and acknowledgements

With a life-long passion for social research and gender equality, I found myself privileged to be able to conduct a study on a phenomenon so, to me, fulfilling and contextually relevant as online dating. In addition to all the wonderful, open people who agreed to participate in this study, I have an amazing network of friends, uncensored and blatant, shared their thoughts and stories relevant to the subject. During the past year, I have been lucky to be on the receiving end of an endless stream of encouragement and positive commentary to help me make the most of my time spent collecting data and writing. There are many people who deserve to be mentioned in these acknowledgements and I will try my best not to forget anyone.

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Secondly, I would like to acknowledge another person who spurred me on with ample positive thinking, and provided me with a plethora of reading material. Kaitlyn, you have been a great motivator and inspired me to always read more, and to finish what I have started. I am forever grateful for having you as a friend and I only wish the very best for you wherever your life takes you.

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To Sofia,

Who introduced me to the wonderful world of social science.
Introduction

In a globalized society, people have grown accustomed to a variety of gadgets and electronic devices to get us through the day. With help from a rapid expansion of internet access and technological advances in the 21st century, it is virtually impossible to perform an average job without any computer-based knowledge or familiarity with digital tools. Secretaries and data entry clerks, as an example, are required to fill a certain WPM\(^1\) quota related to keyboard strokes rather than the traditional typewriter. Additionally, most monetary transactions are also being made electronically, directly through stations or even cell phones, connected to the bank.

An age of information has dawned: news, trivial articles, videos, and photos can be read, seen, and shared globally within seconds. Social media\(^2\) platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow us to connect with people from all around the world and can serve as useful tools in a wide assortment of activities ranging from the sharing of pictures of a meal, to spreading and organizing political opinion. As observed, the internet has brought us not only closer to one another on a global scale, but also offers unique employment opportunities. Companies employ marketing teams to spread messages and promotions via above-mentioned platforms that can reach consumers directly\(^3\). Cookies and complex algorithms help in optimizing the online experience for each and every individual user, making advertisements easily tailored to consumers’ specific interests.

In similar fashion, developers and entrepreneurs have figured out formulas for romantic matchmaking, e.g., new methods for people to meet others with intent of dating and potential relationships. On websites like OkCupid and MatchMaker, algorithms and similarity matrices help individuals find mates with similar interests and preferred measurements as a way for people to make love connections online.

As these sites grew larger and more popular in the 2010s, it was clear to the developers that more and more people were using them for casual sexual encounters rather than forming lasting relationships, which sparked a recent trend that inspired businessmen and women to create platforms built for that single purpose: downloadable applications such as Tinder in which the user is presented with a photo of a person in their geographical area, featured along with a short description of said person; they are then faced with the decision to either “swipe” the picture left or right on their smartphone. Swipe right and the app will send an alert to the person in the picture and tell them that they have an admirer.

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1 WPM, or Words per Minute, is a measurement used by employers to determine a worker’s efficiency when transcribing/entering data into a computer system. A commonly requested value would range between 40–65 WPM.

2 A concept developed to describe various means of communication over the Internet between two or more devices. Also known as CMC (Computer-mediated communication).

If there is a mutual attraction, the two can exchange information and meet up for a date.

The heteronormative nature of Tinder sparked a debate within the LGBT\textsuperscript{4} community to create similar applications for individuals with other sexual orientations. Thus, other apps such as Grindr (for men seeking men) and Dattch (for women seeking women), came as welcome additions to the online dating platform marketplace.

This proposed essay will investigate and study internet based dating platforms (Tinder, Bumble, HappyPancake, and Hinge) with a focus on user interactions and social control in terms of sexual and social constructs, in an effort to understand how users choose to express sexuality and sexual needs in a way that has differed from historical traditions. Furthermore, we will look at the evolution of sexuality itself and attempt to determine how these apps and sites affect gender roles and prejudice from a hetero- and homo-normative perspective.

With the utilization of feminist theory, the ultimate goal of his study to investigate one of the cornerstones of the socialization of women today – namely: sexuality. Feminist theory is most often implemented in studies that will further aid in the struggle towards gender equality and it is therefore the aim of this study to add to the body of research that has already been conducted on the subject. We will foremost look for answers to the following questions:

1. Why and how does an individual get involved in online dating?
2. What are some issues encountered during the dating process?
3. What are some macro level consequences of online dating and in what areas can we find a need for further research?

\textsuperscript{4} A generalized, loosely defined, term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people.
Theoretical perspectives and related research

The theoretical section of the study sets the framework for the research process. In short, the theory often determines the method as each theory helps in laying the ground rules of what data need to be collected, from where, and how. The choice of theory also influences the type of questions which will be asked during the data collection process, as it allows us to narrow the field of vision. The choice of grounded theory, for example, encourages the researcher to approach their subject completely blind, whereas feminist theory would encourage us to look at the subject from a standpoint in which positivism is discouraged, and advises the researcher to look at data collection from a gender-equal standpoint. Naturally, sociological theory is not absolute nor is it constant. Since the creation of grounded and feminist theories, new theories have evolved such as grounded feminist theory or constructivist grounded theory. However, since we are exploring the subject of dating from a gender-equal perspective, grounded theory would not be an appropriate (if at all possible) choice because the pre-existing perceptions of discrimination and objectification are too prominent in this society to be ignored. It would therefore be verging on ignorant to attempt to approach the subject of dating objectively, and rather see gender from an oppressed viewpoint, as the oppressed tell a much different story than the positivist.

Ethnographic positivism

In order to grasp the need for and development of feminist theory, it is pivotal that we understand what factors contributed to its initial creation. Positivism, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, is an epistemology that has traditionally been seen as ensuring the validity of research, especially gender research. This is despite the fact that the majority of studies have been carried out by ethnologists stemming from very similar backgrounds, namely well-educated, white men. As sexuality had been a relatively uninteresting subject in fields other than psychology, it had not been studied from many other viewpoints than within the confines of the relationship between men and women, more exactly: marriage. Due to women not being viewed as sexual beings outside of marriage, where their purpose was to merely engage in the act of reproduction, little was known regarding their sexuality. One of the more ground-breaking leaps into understanding the sexual intents of women came with the works of sexologist Alfred Kinsey in “Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female/Male,” where he performed vast quantitative and qualitative studies on the intimate relations of women in- and outside of committed relationships, based on age, race, socioeconomic status, and religion. The Kinsey Reports, perhaps wrongfully

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5 As explained by Judith Wuest in *An Exploration of the Congruency and Tensions between Two Traditions Knowledge Discovery* (1995)
interpreted from a feminist standpoint, caused an outrage in the general public and research society due to the break from conventional thoughts of sexuality and data collection methods. However controversial, the works of Kinsey questioned positivism regarding gender studies and sparked a discussion revolving around previously considered taboo subjects such as women’s sexuality, homo- and bisexuality, and sadomasochism, which had a significant impact in the fight for women’s suffrage in the 20th century. Questioned but not eradicated, ethnographic positivism still influences the way researchers and the general public interpret the world, thereby continuously enforcing the pre-existing concept of structural functionalism.

**Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory**

When we dig deeper into the importance of male dominance in the sciences for the sake of understanding the need for feminism, we must acknowledge one of the main forces behind supressing women’s involvement in social studies: functionalism or structural functionalism. Herbert Spencer, an anthropologist, popularized a theory which viewed society as a biological organism (drawing similes to the human body and its organs6). His contentious theory, as well as his continuous argument regarding the biological importance in social issues, drew wide criticism. On a macro level, Spencer argued, society is built on structures that work together to keep itself functioning. One such structure/organ was the lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. Within this “organ,” the woman needed to engage in household and child-related functions, or else the household structure would be disrupted and the body would begin to crumble. Although functionalists understood that such a change would rapidly spread and require more drastic changes in others parts of society – the economy, for example – the focus was always on the organic, and backed by a notion that all alteration to the body will always be the result of evolutionary progression. Once popularized, vastly in the United States, it started receiving a great amount of criticism sparking the creation of conflict theory as well as feminist theory.

A champion of structural functionalism in the United States, Talcott Parsons, used the concept when supporting his grand theory7: a sweeping theory in which he attempted to include many different sciences within the same framework that would, simply, explain

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7 Ibid. p 24
society as a whole. Seeing society through an “evolutionary”\textsuperscript{8} looking glass made it easier for Parsons to explain how relatively simple social constructs were and how they all perfectly fit together. A thought process based in positivism through three important factors as presented by Georg Henrik von Wright\textsuperscript{9}: 1) Monism methodology, or, the notion that the research method should be the same across all sciences. 2) The natural sciences are the methodologist ideal and should act as a template for how all other science should be conducted. 3) The scientific explanation is causal in which separate instances should be undermined by a broader general consensus. These factors laid the groundwork for not only positivism but also how Spencer, prior to the work of Parsons, interpreted society from a biological standpoint. Opposing theorists, however, argued that due to materialistic advantage and a skewed wealth distribution, it was easy for certain groups in society to manipulate, for the sake of this example, “organs” to gain further advantage in their community; a notion based on Marxist values which inspired conflict theory, and is credited to the development of theories such as feminist, which is the main theory used in this study.

**Sexuality on the rise**

As of the 1960’s, most of studies regarding female sexuality had, as mentioned before, been heavily influenced by strictly biological narrative and in terms of a male dominated relationship. But as the equal rights movement gained more ground, it came clear that there was a need for social scientists to take a closer look at the issues that were brought up around it. Early feminist anthropologists in the 1970’s and 60’s began looking at gender (Slocum, Leacock), specifically the woman, from the notion of *universal sexual asymmetry*\textsuperscript{10} – meaning that the majority of women in the world are subordinate to men. Sally Slocum, in her paper *Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology*, wrote that there was indeed a clear bias even in social science and not exclusively in other institutions of society. She argued that there were a number of factors that had not historically been accounted because of this bias, one of which was strictly linguistic in nature: the study of man\textsuperscript{11}. With the liberation of sexuality and the first wave of feminism, women social

\textsuperscript{8} Evolution is to be viewed here as rather relative as Herbert Spencer did not share opinions with Charles Darwin on the subject. Wrongfully attributed with the title of having created the notion of “survival of the fittest” (originally coined by Spencer), Darwin’s theory of natural selection varied greatly from that of Spencer, where the latter described evolution as the ability to adapt to your environment rather than a theory based on random mutations.


scientists became increasingly concerned with the previously established concepts and notions brought to light by previously-mentioned authors such as Spencer and Parsons, and called for changes in how women’s roles in various communities are studied and interpreted. The works of prior researchers which had focused mainly on the biological arguments in favour of the subordination of women came under scrutiny with the goal of rejecting the idea that gender hierarchy was in any way predetermined by biological factors and was, instead, a social construct. One of the most prominent scientists focusing on this was Eleanor Leacock, who argued that the origins of gender hierarchy were to be studied from an historical aspect, with a Marxist approach. As we will discuss in the future section regarding Sexology, we will find some evidence in her claimed related to the impact of capitalism and traditional living arrangements had on contemporary society. These writers had become part of a great breakthrough in sociology and anthropology, which would soon spark the development of modern feminist theory.

**Feminist theory**

As previously written, due to the historical and systematic subordination of women, the majority of sociological research had for long been dominated by male scientists studying male subjects. Sociologist George Ritzer argues in *Sociological Theory* that although there have been instances throughout history in which these questions have been prominent, pointing specifically to the late 1700’s with the American and French revolution, discussions of feminism and gender equality had never been properly organized until the mid 1800’s as part of the battle against slavery and for political rights. Ritzer continued by saying that despite those efforts, it would take another half century until women were able to truly establish a presence, as mentioned above, on the sociological map. Only to once again being shoved aside by sociology’s dominant, male power base.

It is in a way logical to look at male behaviour from an equal rights point of view because many modern sociological and anthropological theories are based around the notion that facts acquired in a male dominated world are to be considered true, despite that they as mentioned, have been carried out by men, on men. This is what in social research terms would be known as positivist epistemology. Positivism, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, stems from a notion that sociology as a science traditionally has a valid claim to

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15 Ibid., p. 7

suggest that any properly conducted research, whether conducted by men or women, is to be seen as a “truthful” representation of society. A claim that in more recent studies has been questioned, particularly by women sociologists and journalists, due to it being founded on a science grossly dominated by men. Cynthia Epstein writes in her book *Deceptive Distinctions* that even “analyses that today would be regarded as having a feminist perspective were published by male sociologists.”

Referring to the work of Evelyn Fox Keller, Epstein presents a theory which ties together with previously discussed male epistemology, namely, that all sciences are deeply gendered; “The values of domination and separation are built into Western sciences.”, arguing Fox Keller and uses Freudian theories regarding the psycho-sociological development of sexuality in boys and young men, a subject which will be further analysed in the Sexology section of this thesis. Although these types of analysis are highly prominent in feminist theory, it is a hypothesis criticized by other sociologists, such as Epstein herself, because it ultimately presents us with an interpretation of society in which boys and girls have “unvarying but differentiated impacts on adult life”, which also impacts how they later will conduct science. The very claim that social science is to be viewed as “value-free”, diminishes critical thinking, the basis of understanding how topics like oppression and domination can be properly studied and deconstructed.

What further makes feminist theory relevant to this study is the notion, as we must remember, the above mentioned *standpoint epistemology*, which in short, “*argues that all knowledge is constructed in a complex matrix of physical location, history, culture, and interests, and that these matrices change in configuration from one location to another.*” It rejects a notion of positivism (e.g. epistemology of facts) where its pretence creates a view from nowhere, in favour of the postulate that subjects are specific. Therefore, a feminist standpoint theory is to be considered optimal for the purpose of this type of study because it argues a position of the woman as diverse in race and class in relation to social domination. In order to understand the masculine standpoint, we need to look at the matter from a female perspective to get an idea of what the underlying cause for this sexual evolution is, in addition to observing the behaviour of men from a man's perspective on a sociological level. In what way does the fact that these “apps” and socially

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interactive platforms were created by men affect the overall experience of utilizing them, for both men and women?

**Sexology**

We are now familiar with the concept that the majority of sociological research has traditionally been carried out by predominately male scientists, so let us put ourselves in the minds of the early theorists, known as sexologists, to investigate how we have historically hypothesized sex and intimate relations.

Although widely considered a rather small component in the sociological tapestry, sexology still strongly influences the way modern researchers look at sexuality today. Ranging as far back as the Victorian era, and despite the heavy repression of sexual exploration, 18th and 19th century theorists such as Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, and John Stuart Mill began making distinctions between sex and gender by studying what back then was generally seen as obscene and taboo, namely: masturbation, homosexuality, and transgendered individuals. Towards the 19th and 20th century sexology was widely brought to the scientific eye from the works of psychologist and author Sigmund Freud. Freud argued that sex is to be seen as a driving force that motivates most individuals, and that it sets in at a very early age; commonly spoken of as the Oedipus and Electra complexes in which young boys and girls fall in love with their parents and, as part of a sense of ownership, wish the other parent be gone. In a later stage of the child’s sexual development, the Oedipus complex will pass due to what Freud describes as a “lack of success, an inherent impossibility.” This will ultimately lead to a repression of sexuality and a latency that will not pass until the child reaches the later stage of genital organization. In girls, however, he implied that this regression will lay latent for a longer period of time, and will not be let to mature until married life where a woman's struggles with her mother (as part of the Electra complex) transitions over to conflicts with the father object, in this case: the husband. Autoerotism and narcissism are concepts, Freud wrote, that further an individual’s sexual expression (in men much sooner than women). After the Oedipus complex has passed, he argued, many scientists agreed with Freud that

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24 Ibid., p. 166

25 Ibid., p. 167

26 Ibid., p. 190
for men “the only harm to come from masturbation was the guilt that traditionally attended it”\textsuperscript{27}, as worded by author Michael Kimmel. A notion that, as we discussed previously, has been carried forward ever since before the Victorian era. Michel Foucault writes in his work \textit{The History of Sexuality} that the moral issue tied to masturbation, or \textit{chresis aphrodision}\textsuperscript{28}, was theorized as early as 300-400 years BC. It is prudent to here tie in the importance of masturbation, because it is a form of managing the sexual urges that sexologists have traditionally argued drives society forward. This feeling of self-loathing is similar to an expressed contempt following a sexual act shared with someone, against one’s better judgement, which will be discussed further in the data analysis section.

Sexology as a scientific field of study did not by any means end with Freud, but it is crucial to understand that his theories on human sexual development played a significant role in how we continued to perceive sex and gender in the post war era. With authors such as John Money, and most famously, Alfred Kinsey, the scientific eyes turned their focus to the capitalization of sex, or more specifically: prostitution. A subject that in turn led to the exploration of sexually transmitted diseases, prompted by the sexual revolution of the 1960’s and -70’s, and reached a critical point with the discovery of HIV/AIDS in the 1980’s, and how it has come to influence the socioeconomic status of a society. Furthermore, the study of sexuality has also lead to peaking the interest by companies and marketing departments.

This poses us with an important question: how does sexology fit in contemporary society? Because the study of sexuality is affecting many areas of society, such as media, which plays a significant role in how we perceive sexuality, sexual models, and norms. In the introduction we touched lightly on the effect that the internet has had on the spread of information and social interactions. Platforms that fall under the category social media provide a large portion of the news we get in our everyday life from a globally interactional community. Along with the possibility of spreading advertisement instantaneously, marketers know that an easy way to sell product is to advertise it in places where potential consumers choose to visit. News sites, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, to name a few, contribute to the ability to link merchandise with a (to the consumer) credible source. By subjecting the consumer to imagery or verbiage that appeals to them, products make their way out of the store and into any household by the speed of a quick glance, whether \textit{high risk products} such as cars and housing or \textit{low risk products} as described below. As a common denominator, sex can be attributed to an increase in sales of a vast variety of \textit{low risk products}\textsuperscript{29}, such as health items, alcohol, and certain types of luxury goods i.e. watches or perfumes. A study by Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase at the University


\textsuperscript{29} Reese Sorrow, A., \textit{Magazinetrends study finds increase in advertisements using sex}, (2012), on July 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2016.
of Georgia suggests that implementing sex as a tool in marketing appeals to consumers because it sexualises merchandise\textsuperscript{30}.

As mentioned on numerous occasions, many of the early sexologists agreed that sex is a part of what drives society forward, and looking at the development of the United States during the last thirty years, we can see that sex works not only in a strictly biological sense, but also as an economic, technical, and medical booster. It aids in the accrual of monetary gains by working as a visual incentive that stimulates socially developed functions of the mind, convincing us that if one sports a sexy product, for instance, it must indeed make one sexually attractive. Mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century economists like Paul Baran and Paul Sweeney recognized that aggressively advertising a product in a way that appeals to a focused group, in this study adults susceptible to erotic messages, can allow sellers to greatly increase the price of their goods\textsuperscript{31}, which they, in turn, can spend on more elaborate advertising. They also saw that the use of media in advertising, television above all, was exponentially growing and argued that advertising in this was by any means a life saver for many businesses\textsuperscript{32}.

Apart from economic growth, sex can also be accredited to advancements in the medical field in that we as a whole strive towards means of enjoying sexual encounters without becoming victims of their immediate risks; sexually transmitted infections, and unplanned pregnancies for example. Furthermore, it has also presented us with most serious blood transmitted diseases such as HIV and certain types of hepatitis, as mentioned before. Social science scholars of the twenty-first century argue that women's suffrage and the sexual liberation that started mid twentieth century has led to, what media calls, a masculinility crisis. Author Karen Ross explains this further in her book \textit{Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics} by saying that if men have lost their place in the nuclear family – that they are no longer necessary for the purpose of procreation, breadwinners, and sole initiators of sexual contact – then they have essentially lost their function in a traditional relationship\textsuperscript{33}. As such, the objectification of women (and occasionally men)\textsuperscript{34} can be seen as a way of subtly strengthening a patriarchal stance by continuously referring to women and men in advertising as little more than a sexual objects. Putting a female model in a context that suggests that she is promiscuous and

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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 119


\textsuperscript{34} Reese Sorrow, A., \textit{Magazinetrends study finds increase in advertisements using sex}, (2012), on July 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2016.
submissive helps enforcing the notion of the male still being in control of any sexual or social encounter. A common online phenomenon of which is known as slut-shaming: a concept that we will investigate further in the analysis.

With all that in mind, as we look at the technical advances that has allowed us to engage in intimate relations with others without, as one of my informants put it, “having to revel outside of the comfort of our home”. The intersectionality of these factors are indeed complex and depend greatly on one another in order to properly function - on both a macro and micro scale. But why do we still rely on nudity and objectification of the human body as an instrument for marketing? Is there a deeper meaning behind the fact that it brings in profit? Recent social research would certainly suggest so and, of course, as we touched on previously, positivist epistemology shows that there is a factor of social power determining whom the researcher, as a man, would chose to interview in a qualitative study. It is therefore necessary to look at potential theoretical limitations before we can appropriately engage in data analysis.
Research methods

Sociological research is not only defined by what theory is used in conducting it, but also by the means it is carried out. The research method determines how information is gathered which affects the type of data is available for analysis, and further, how it can be analysed. Whether the data is qualitative or quantitative, collected from a set manuscript of questions (structured research interview) or an open discussion (unstructured research interview), or strictly from observation, the interpretation is partly based on the means of obtaining the data.

This section of the thesis will feature descriptions of each method chosen for the study, and will also feature detailed explanations of why said method was determined best suitable. Let us start off with a segment about participant and hidden observations, then move on to the research interview used to collect most of the qualitative data. Lastly, we will touch on the influence of media and advertising and how we can analyse them to give us a greater understanding of how sex is used on a global, macro level.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was sent out as a preface to every qualitative interview in order to put together a more individually-tailored experience for the informant. The questionnaire touched on what sort of platforms the person had used, whether or not they still use it/them, what inspired the individual to use online forums as a dating tool, and why they preferred one program over another. Modifying the already set schedule for each information became necessary to allow for obtaining information that most closely reflected an individual’s experiences. Although adapting the interview questions for each subject undoubtedly gives a nuanced version of the data collected, it presents us with a fairer and more accurate representation of the strengths and weaknesses of each particular medium. This became abundantly clear when comparing statements regarding the same software, especially Tinder, where the intent of each specific interaction varies greatly as certain groups, and informants, are looking for short-term hook-ups while others seek more commitment through dedicated relationships. Said interactions also appear to play a significant role in an individual’s decision to seek out other methods of finding companionship, or, to stick with what they have already immersed themselves in. Said questionnaire proved to successfully aid in the categorisation of the plethora of sites and apps as they, in some instances, are utilized in ways that they were not originally intended.
Mass media products

Media, in a variety of formats i.e. ads, newspapers, internet sites etc., impacts the way we perceive all matters of life. As discussed in the theory section, sex is certainly not excluded from this and its presence in media production cannot, and should not, be ignored when conducting detailed research on the theme of sexuality. The internet, relatively untouched by researchers, constitutes a massive part of what sociological theorist Alan Bryman describes as virtual products which can be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. I have through the course of this study closely monitored, with the help of my informants, how online interactions have increased during the past ten years, and what changes have been made technologically to more easily access such interactions. In addition, it has been found very useful to study virtual and other mass media products from a political stance perspective, e.g., how individuals from different media sources choose to portray the same issues. I found, for example, that the idea of online dating can be discussed on a good vs. bad basis depending on the socio-political opinions of the author, as some of my informants has described. Certain sources will welcome online dating as a result of globalization in contrast to those who shame people engaged in internet based-relationships as it promotes promiscuity.

Participant/Online observations

As the internet creates a relatively anonymous space for expression, opinions and stories posted, we are presented with questions and sources of information that one might not otherwise have considered. Even though internet posts can easily be altered, the internet should nevertheless be treated as an important field as it serves as the main mean of communication when immersed in online dating as well as other types of interaction. In doing field research, the most tedious yet useful means of collecting data is to observe the mundane in everyday situations. Location, choice of words, and tone are all important factors in analysing human behaviour because they rarely lack meaning in understanding a particular individual’s intent. Online interactions are especially interesting because they allow each person to disguise themselves behind a variety of masks, in order for them to maintain or establish dominance in any interaction. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erwin Goffman writes that creating a discrepant role, a personality that differs from how an individual normally behaves, it is common to see a certain amount of over-communication of some facts (and under-communication of others) in an attempt to

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36 Lawrence Neuman, W., Social Research Methods – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches; Third Edition, Allyn and Bacon, USA (1997) p. 361
pose a convincing enough act\textsuperscript{37}, the execution of which will greatly alter the interaction. This is proven to be particularly true on online forums or dating apps, where the intent lies heavily on marketing oneself in the pursuit of forming relations. He lists three types of people taking part of such an interaction: the performer, the ones performed to, and the outsiders whom do not participate in the performance, nor do they necessarily observe the act itself\textsuperscript{38}. The performer, in this case, know all the secrets of the game, the audience knows only what is presented to them, and the third part is excluded from the act; potentially capable of observing hints of destructive secrets in the performer’s act. As a complete observer\textsuperscript{39}, the researcher acts somewhere between the role of the outsider and that of the audience, but holds an advantage of not technically being the one the performer has adapted the play for. As such, the researcher is allowed to interpret the theatrical display in a different light than the audience which poses a potential advantage, or, a potential disadvantage if the act is too foreign for him. In this study, I have chosen to look at specifically Reddit forums and Craigslist because they allow a high level of anonymity that other sites, like Match.com, Tinder, Bumble, and PlentyofFish, do not promote. Above-mentioned sites are being looked at from a feminist perspective investigating the women users being seen as objects, and how the level of anonymity plays into the way they are communicated with.

\textbf{Semi-structured interviews}

One of the most useful tool in a researcher’s arsenal is the qualitative interview. This type of method allows the researcher to interact with the informant on a more personal level which provides a more emotional and, in some instances, intimate experience for both the interviewee and the interviewer.

A crucial point to take away from this method is that, depending on how close of a relationship gets established, the researcher now takes on the role of an audience member. Although perhaps looking for/at hidden meanings, body language, or tone of the informant – the researcher knows only that which is communicated to them in the interaction.

As is the focus of this study, gender plays a significant part in the data collection as well\textsuperscript{40}; something that becomes more evident as one interacts with an informant face-to-face, as it sets a certain limit and/or script for how the data is going to be presented.

\textsuperscript{37} Goffman, E., \textit{The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life}, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh (1956) p. 87
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 90
\textsuperscript{39} Lawrence Neuman, W., \textit{Social Research Methods – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches; Third Edition}, Allyn and Bacon, USA (1997) p. 357
\textsuperscript{40} Lawrence Neuman, W., \textit{Social Research Methods – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches; Third Edition}, Allyn and Bacon, USA (1997) p. 356
**Ethical reflections**

As with any type of scientific research, sociological studies have guidelines that should be followed when conducting a study. These guidelines focus mainly on the treatment of informants and can be described under the following categories: information about the study, consent, confidentiality, and the use of empirical data. Before conducting interviews or participant observations, for example, it is necessary to inform the participating individuals what the study is about and how their testimonies will be used, so that they can be given an honest chance to determine whether they would consent to participate or not. When consent is established, the informants must be briefed regarding how their testimonies will be kept confidential and how they will be used. As a researcher, it is critical to keep records of interviews and field notes in safe storage in order to protect the individual’s anonymity. Although complete anonymity can never be promised, it is pivotal to follow procedures to keep materials out of reach from unauthorized persons. Lastly, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the materials, once used, are disposed of in an appropriate manner. This may include destroying existing computer files, shredding or burning of field notes and transcripts, or in some instances locked in a safe place. In order to make sure that my informants were aware of these factors, each one of them were presented with a descriptive letter which they could base their initial decision off of. Secondly, I made sure to again read them their rights and my responsibilities prior to beginning each interview.

When conducting a study such as this, finding ethical guidelines for online research is a difficult process since there have been so few. Internet-based research faces ethical dilemmas that differ from those of a face-to-face or on-ground approach in that it is, as we have discussed earlier in this paper, more challenging to establish an understanding of individuality as well as maintaining the protection of data collected. A Stanford article, written in 2012, touches on these issues and points to the increasing questionable ethics by large corporations such as Facebook in their efforts to create large databases for users individual information. As such, sociologists are encouraged to not keep similar databases online seeing that they can easily be corrupted and contain too much private information.

In order for me as a researcher to maintain safe records of my data, I have taken special precautions by eliminating all correspondence from its electronic format as soon as it has been transcribed onto physical paper. In addition, I have made sure that interviews have been stored on portable flash drives instead of a computer hard drive. As mentioned in the opening section of the ethical reflections, complete anonymity can never truly be

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established but in coordination with the Swedish Research Council, I have made sure to follow proper procedure for keeping safe records to protect the informants that have partaken in this study.

**Prior research**

Most likely due to it being a relatively new subject, there has been little prior research on the specific subject online dating. There has, however, been an evidently clear spike in the interest for self-presentation through web-based media in the past five years. A study published through the Society for Personality and Social Psychology suggests that as many as 86 percent of the individuals that participated in their study, believe that other people engaged in online dating “misrepresent their physical appearance”, and that it is the limitations to the media that allows for the opportunity to do so\(^4^3\). Granted, this study was conducted some eight years ago and technology has since then advanced greatly, but these statistics can explain much of what the informants of this study experience in terms of uncertainty regarding their peers’ intentions when engaging in online interactions. The authors also make reference to studies conducted by Goffman and argue that the editing of oneself is essential in any social interaction, which can be easily abused in text based correspondence as the one used in dating of mention sort. The most common attributes believed to be the desired in a potential match are also the most commonly altered. For instance: on the subject of weight, the results showed that over half of both men and women choose to alter the truth. Men, as it stands, also seem to be more likely to falsify information by about 12% more than women in the study, particularly regarding height and age\(^4^4\). Similarly, in a Pew Research Report that came out in 2013 suggests that 54% of all people in their study that engaged in online dating had experienced serious misrepresentation on another user’s profile\(^4^5\). What is also interesting with the latter study is that it showed that some 28% of users had been contacted in a manner that made them feel uncomfortable, a statistic that will surely prove useful when looking at potential issues that arise through online dating. Apart from the statistical data, there have been a few articles written regarding the importance of physical attractiveness and how it influences the sorting nature of the online dater, which we will look closer at in the analysis.


\(^4^4\) Ibid., p. 8

Analysis

Informants

For this analysis I gathered data from six individuals, one man and five women, all of whom had in some way engaged in online dating either through a website or a cellular app. Although the male participation in this study was significantly less than female participation, the sole male participant’s story was found to provide context and insight into several of the experiences that the female participants recounted in their interviews. Ultimately it was concluded that by retaining and using the data collected from him, this study would provide a more nuanced and altogether more holistic understanding of the online dating experience, with a first-person account service to illustrate many of the experiences and concerns of the female participants. All data was obtained through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and in two cases: written correspondence. I first came in contact with these individuals through acquaintances and responses to a general request sent out through social media. The informants were initially sent a questionnaire asking them to describe their usage of online dating platforms, after which an interview script was designed to better suit each specific informant’s experiences. Below is a short description of each informant to give the reader a better understanding of where the source material originates from. It should be noted that a majority of the interviews were conducted in Swedish rather than English, which has been translated as carefully as possible to maintain an accurate description of the informant’s testimony. This includes inflections, choices of words, and mid-sentence pauses. The language in which the interview was conducted is indicated.

Lucas: Mid-twenties, male, Swedish
Chloe: Mid-twenties, female, Swedish
Jennifer: Mid-twenties, female, English
Destiny: Late twenties, female, Swedish
Catherine: Middle aged, female, English
Amanda: Late twenties, female, Swedish

First steps: what drives a person to pursue dating online?

Now that we are familiar with our demographic selection, we can start digging into the reason why our informants turned to online dating. In each of their interviews, there was a brief discussion regarding their initial thought process, which weighs heavily in the analysis as it determines their intent and influences the way they perceive their experience. It is evident looking at the data that, initially, engaging in online dating stems from either a
long-lasting sense of loneliness, or, as a rather immediate result of a recent break-up. Both Jennifer and Lucas began their search only a short period after they had broken up with their significant other. Lucas explains it thusly:

It started with the break-up between me and my domestic partner during the fall. late summer of two.. uhm.. 2013. Missing a certain closeness to another person became very palpable after a short period. And uhm.. I felt that bars and drunk people is not a place.. an environment where I don’t feel comfortable in, so I thought that there must be a better way to interact with other people and figured that there are a bunch of dating sites and apps.. I thought I’d give it a try and see what happens ...

I: What was it that inspired you to start looking online?
L: It really started off because I wanted to initiate a sexual relationship because of a need uhm.. as part of being a human, not having that need satisfied..

Lucas mentioned later in the interview that he started signing up for pages after one month after his break-up. Jennifer, although having waited for closer to three months following her break, did not sign up for sites and apps until encouraged by a friend who had just ended her own relationship, which turns out to be a common theme amongst the other informants as well. As we will investigate further in this section, most of the people contributing to this study were encouraged to start dating through online services as a result of their social sphere. Jennifer was directly influenced by a friend through said friends’ own usage of such a service; Destiny was inspired by her co-workers frequent talk about finding people on Tinder; Amanda - similarly to Lucas’ situation – was subconsciously affected by the long-term effects of a lack of closeness and being the “third wheel” at parties as she is often the only one without a partner in her immediate circle of friends. She expresses this in an answer to a question regarding what has changed in how she has previously met new people:

A: Nowadays people are staying home with their families and rarely go out. Almost everyone has already found their +1 so when parties do occur, I’m usually the only single.

In addition to his answer regarding his initial intentions of dating, Lucas’ experience is almost identical to that of Amanda’s:
L: ..in my gang of friends, most people are married and have kids so I kind of turned into this “extra guy” when we [former girlfriend] broke up because I was then the only single in that group of friends.. so I became the only one who was dating, the only one looking, everyone else had theirs on dry land so to speak. Uhm.. so that caused a sort of mental pressure like “Shit, I’m so fucking miser.. such a failure to not have a family like my friends” sort of..

Other informants express relatively analogous answers but do not get into detail on directly or indirectly influenced them. Catherine, for example, was just like Amanda, Lucas, and Jennifer impacted by feeling lonely and left out. When asked what she is specifically looking for in her online searches, she responds thusly:

C: I don’t know what I’m looking for.. I’m looking to not be single anymore, But.. after so long of waiting for actually being in a meaningful relationship.. I’m pretty much done looking for a relationship too so.. I don’t know.. exactly.

It is worth noting that the elongated search for companionship takes its toll on the majority of the participants, but also that Catherine is the only person who specifies that she does not know what she is looking for. There is an underlying sense that men engaged in online dating are primarily the ones who would admit to looking for both a strictly sexual relationship as well as a deeper companionship. Although not specifically asked, the women participants do not disclose what their intentions of dating are/have been, which, could possibly serve as an indicator that there is a sense of underlying fear of being seen as a strictly sexual being, possibly leading us back to a lingering gender hierarchy that Slocum, Leacock, and other prominent researchers critiqued in the 1970’s. As discussed in the theoretical section, women had traditionally not been studied as sexual beings but rather as a secondary participant in a marriage, will surely serve as a reminder that there is still a clinging trace of the structural functionalism influencing these interactions. As we get further into the analysis, we look at the means of engagement to give us a clearer picture of what the informants are looking for specifically and how it is communicated.

The means

How each person chooses to pursue online dating will greatly impact their experience when looking for matches. Whether they had tried various sites and applications or just stuck to one, the individuals that contributed to this study can generally be divided into two camps: Those who had just gone through a break-up, and those who were tired of being single. Whatever the reason they had for immersing themselves, the means that they used in doing so were all based around the same principles: user friendliness and word-of-mouth. Three out of six informants started using Tinder as their first resource, and two of the
remaining three had at some point switched to Tinder, having used other media previously. It should be noted that this study did not by any means set out to solely examine the use of Tinder, but it seems to be the most prominent platform in terms of marketing success, which we will look at below.

Jennifer, who had ended a long-term relationship some three months prior, was the first informant to mention Tinder as her, at the time, preferred dating tool. As with a majority of the people interviewed, she found it through a friend under some particularly interesting circumstances:

I: You said that your friend found your ex on Tinder?

J: Yeah, so I mean.. it made me angry ‘cause I was like “if he’s doing it, then I’m gonna do it too” (laughs) … I was actually with her, consoling her after her break-up and I spent the night with her and.. uhm.. she was really upset so she got on Tinder and I was looking at it and she started through and this was her first time doing it.. and my first time like actually seeing the app and.. my ex-boyfriend came up and I was like “well, fuck this.. if he’s on here, then I’m gonna be on Tinder too” so I downloaded it also and that’s how it started.

Just like the chapter before, it is important here that we stress the importance of the impact Jennifer’s friend had on her, in addition to the fact that she did not hesitate to start using Tinder even though she had just seen it for the first time. In fact, most of the informants in this study found and started using dating apps, Tinder in particular, because they – as mentioned earlier – had heard of it through a friend. Both Amanda and Destiny, who started dating through apps as a result of a long term sense of loneliness, confessed that they downloaded Tinder based solely on recommendations from friends. Here is Amanda and Destiny:

I: How did you hear about Tinder and Happy Pancake?

A: Both suggestions by friends when I complained about being single.

Destiny:

I: How did you initially hear about Tinder?

D: Uhm.. I’m not sure how I initially heard out it, but I knew that it existed and then.. I.. knew a bunch of people who use it. That’s probably the reason I got it because people around me have it and use it ...
It is evident from these interviews that these individuals had not seen or heard much in terms of official Tinder advertising, but rather from word of mouth. Catherine is no exception:

I: How come you decided to download Tinder?
C: Because I’ve never gone on a date through Plenty of Fish, so.. I figured why not?
I: What did you know about Tinder before you decided to get it?
C: I had just heard the name. I hadn't really heard anything about it other than.. you know, people bring it up a lot in conversation. Tinder’s like a.. you know, popular thing.

The most reliable source of information to our interviewees is undoubtedly people within their social circle, and what is also interesting is the magnitude of which Tinder is spoken of. Not only do the contributors use it privately but there is also evidence of it being solicited in a group setting. Three of out the four Tinder users attested to having used it, or at least heard of it being used, amongst a party of friends. Some of them describe it as a fun activity in which the company shares histories and swipes pictures together, and others speak of it more as a forum where they can give advice on how to respond to correspondence between them and a potential match. This activity seems to be consistent amongst both men and women. Although not having taken part of such a situation himself, Lucas answers:

L: ..I know that there groups of guys that like.. talk a lot about Tinder and hit on people and look for.. temporary girls for the moment uhm.. but in my gang most people are married and have kids..

Being the only male amongst his immediate friends who uses dating sites, Lucas still looks for aid when formatting the text on his profiles and on how to respond to or initiate contact with another person, relating back to the self-representative nature of the works of Goffman. How one chooses to present themselves textually on social media, seems to greatly impacts a person’s dating qualities. Continuing on, he points to the idea that there is sort of a taboo, or social stigma, regarding him being single amongst his guy friends, which in turn would affect the way that dating sites are spoken of. He does not interact with other men in the way that other groups would because of his “lone wolf status”, and as such, has no one to efficiently communicate his questions with because his friends have not shared similar experiences:
L: ...it ends up being me who ask some of these friends when I end up in situations where I’m not exactly how to act with girls. When I ask “hey, I’ve ended up in this situation. How would you act if you were me?”. And then I’ll tell them what the situation looks like, but other than that no one will ask questions or wonders or wants to help out.

In contrast, other informants, such as Jennifer, Destiny, and Amanda attest to there being a significant trade of advice when it comes to talking to guys. Some even go as far as making dating into a game. Destiny:

I: Do you have friends or family who also use Tinder?
D: Yes, there are a bunch of my colleagues who use Tinder and go on a bunch of dates as well. They had some sort of bet too, that some people should... something about them going on one Tinder date each and then just... it just escalated so now they’ve gone on a ton of them.

Destiny also mentions that the most common group setting she has seen it being used in is when some friends exchange phones and swipe for fun. This notion is shared with Jennifer and Amanda who explains that they both have at least a couple of friends who will get together with them and discuss the intricacies of text communication. Although text communication specifically is far from new, the development of this type of interaction has grown exponentially since online dating was introduced in the late 1960’s, and now requires a high degree of experience and guidance to execute so that it resembles a successful face-to-face conversation as much as possible. Not engaged in online dating anymore, Jennifer is still consulted by some of her friends on what to write sometimes when they get together:

J: ... I can think of two friends in particular but pretty much the two girlfriends that I have who are single and actively interested in being in a relationship, and both of them will sometimes come to me for advice ... just because I'm pretty... you know... like outgoing and like to talk to people and stuff so... they'll sometimes ask “oh, he said this, what should I say back”.

Aside from Jennifer being known to her friends as being outgoing and can easily make new acquaintances, the fact that she has previously gone on dates – and successful at that, Jennifer did find her new long-term boyfriend through Bumble – as a result of her experience and skill in multiple types of human interaction, surely makes her a highly
reliable resource when it comes to dating advice. Further into our conversation, she also shares that she, herself, would not hesitate to ask her friends for help if stumped by an answer:

J: I’m sure that if did when I did online dating, I would do that like “oh my god, he’s..” you know.. not always, but if something came up that I wasn’t sure how to respond to I would definitely take it to my friends and try to figure out the best way to respond.”

As of this moment, Tinder which was originally tempting because it was fun and simple to use, has become much like any other dating app or site in the way that swiping right and getting a match, and has now left the user to grapple with a complex argot made up of word choices and various emojis\(^\text{46}\). The concluded analysis of the intentions as well as the chosen tools to follow said intentions, leads us to investigate the experiences our informants have gained from doing so. How did they interact with others, how were they interacted with, and what were the end results of their communications?

**Experiences**

While immersing themselves in the online community, our contributors have faced a variety of dilemmas and other daters. As we have now analysed why they initiated their online dating career, and what means they chose to do so, it seems only logical to look at their experiences and whether or not these experiences deterred them from, or encouraged them to, further pursue their goals through multimedia platforms. We will begin by examining the results from our women informants as their perception differs somewhat from Lucas’.

There are many factors that play an important role in sparking a mutual interest between members of the online dating community, the first of which is strictly physical. Many dating services, such as Tinder and Bumble, rely heavily on a person’s physical appearance as they are based on visual stimuli, namely: photos. The relation these statements have to the systematic sexualisation process in media cannot be understated. The basis of sexology is as we know the notion that sex drives society forward, enhanced by the economic stimuli this provides in advertisement, gives us a clearer understanding to why pictures play such an important role in online dating. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the basic functions of these apps is to swipe either right or left on a random picture of a person in the general

\(^{46}\) A type of ideograms designed to express a thought or feeling that might be difficult to describe in words. The most common form of which are "Smileys": faces that depict the general perception of expressions related to a particular mood.
area of choice. One would swipe left if there is no interest and right if the person displayed is to the liking of the user. The swiping function is one of the key elements of what hooks an individual to keep using the application, as our informants would attest to. Here is Destiny:

D: Swiping is pretty fun. That’s actually what’s fun about the app anyway. I think at least.. the swiping itself (laughs).. No, but it’s fun to judge people, right? Oh no, that’s horrible. No, come to think of it, it’s not horrible because they’re doing the same thing.

Notice the self-realisation of taking pleasure in objectification, an example of what makes the swiping function so attractive in the eyes of the users. Catherine, Jennifer, and Amanda also attest to the addictiveness of browsing through the profiles, which would support the argument of Tinder’s casual nature. Jennifer and Destiny sees Tinder as a fun distraction, or an entertaining group activity, whilst Amanda explores the source of the attraction by saying that the majority of people that are on these sites are just there for casual encounters, and that it influences ones’ own experience:

A: The majority is there just to have fun and it’s also an enhancement of the shallow society, deep shit, right? (laughs) ..where you don’t give people chances for real since “there is probably someone better out there”.

Assuming somebody else’s intent is a key element to online dating. Loading up the app and beginning to browse with the presumptive idea that a majority of people one will interact with are merely on there for casual encounters, will undoubtedly determine how a conversation is, primarily: initiated, and second: responded to. As we dive into the interactive part of our informants’ experiences, we carry with us some key concepts from the testimonies: 1) dating online was the preferred method by our participants because there is a subdued interest in going out to initiate contact with new people. 2) four out of five went in blind, meaning, they did not have much information on the apps they started using other than the recommendation from friends. 3) the majority were not sure what they were looking for when they first began, and, still are not sure what they are using the apps for. 4) it is assumed that a large percentage of the registered users are only looking for casual encounters - hook-ups – which could take an edge off of the seriousness of the interaction.

There is an attested variation in what types of individuals one could meet on a meeting site ranging from serious relationships, flings, hook-ups, and friendship. That being said, the sites should still be seen as a platform for any sort of interaction. A person’s intent can change on even an hourly basis depending on mood. In Lucas’ case, we remember that
although he had previously stated to have only been looking for a sexual relationship based in what he describes as natural urges, he comes back to explain how he felt a great shame about his decision. Much like we discussed about the self-loathing that can follow masturbation, Lucas here exhibits traces of a similar state of mind. These “human instincts” has in his opinion clouded his judgement and, once satisfied, made him feel a great discomfort with himself as a person:

L: ..and in searching like this I though “Oh my God, I’m so pathetic just looking for some sexual connection, I can’t be doing this.”. I have to start changing my approach, so I started modifying my info there [motesplatsen.se] and edited my profile so that it looked a bit more serious uhm..

As Lucas began to change his profile to look more attractive to someone who was not merely looking for sex, he further explained that he still kept another account as it were so that he, in his own words: “Worked towards two different goals depending on what page I was on.”. A sense of duality not found, or at least not mentioned, in the testimonies of the female contributors, perhaps stunted by how they are contacted and what sort of messages they receive from their male counterparts. This, along with the occasionally rapid change of comfortability in the conversation, attributes to how the application itself is perceived. Some of the women contributors are perfectly content with just chatting with people, and others like going on dates just for the sake of human interaction without any intentions of turning the face-to-face into something more serious.

Destiny, in what is the perhaps bluntest description we will see, calls Tinder an “unmitigated fuck-app”, as most people that she has talked to about the app, would question a person’s expectations when said person expresses that they use sites with the hope of finding a meaningful relationship:

D: I think that there are many people who use it as a dating thing but I’ve also heard that.. like.. “but you can’t seriously expect to find a date.. or like a partner on Tinder” because people only use it to get laid.

As sentiment shared by Catherine as she answers a question regarding how it differs from her pre-existing perceptions:

C: I thought it was a dating site.. I mean a dating app, and it’s really not. A dating app.. I think it’s more people who have random encounters, With other people.. yeah.
Smooth talk?

According to the testimonies of all informants, the change in perception relies heavily on how other people have initiated contact with them, or as in Lucas’ case, have initiated contact with someone else. It is clear from the interview data that the men will initiate contact the majority of the time, which goes in line with our previously mentioned sentiment that there is a taboo regarding women initiating contact with sensual intent. We will in this segment look at, and analyse, some examples of first impressions via text communications.

Intent, as mentioned at length previously, can most commonly be established with the first couple of messages received. Although for the most part relatively clean and polite, some daters choose to express their intent in the most to-the-point manner possible, and it is usually the individuals looking for casual sex. Catherine, who describes herself as being “past her expiration date” was surprised by the sheer number of admirers she was matched with just within the first week of using Tinder, and also where their interest lie:

I: How does a conversation usually start?

C: Usually it’s “how are you today” uhm..”hey, what’s up”. Couple of ‘em have been a little bit vulgar after that.. uhm.. Couple have just been, right away, “here’s my phone number, give me a call” … I have an open invitation to just text a different guy if I.. just wanna get some [sex] so you know, I guess that’s available too.

Jennifer says that when she started using Tinder, it was still on the new side and had not yet become so, as she describes it, “hook-uppy”, and continues on by saying that the longer she was using it, the more people came on there and it started turning from being a relatively serious forum. Even though she has gone on dates and enjoyed messaging back and forth with people, there have been some instances similar to Catherine’s experiences:

J: ..I have gotten a handful like.. “heeey, I’m in town for one night” like “I wanna have sex” (laughs), you know, maybe not quite as sleezy as that but you get a few.. you definitely get a few people who are like literally could very clearly tell that all they want to do is hook up.

What’s interesting here is the way the individuals who are specifically looking for primarily sex choose to express their “want”, a tactic that seems less than successful in most cases. Lucas, who earlier in our interview had mentioned that he used different sites for different “goals”, says that bringing up sex and joking about sex rarely works out in one’s favour:
L: You’ll notice very quickly with girls if you write… kind of… sexist eh… comments about wanting to fuck or that you want to get together and get cozy or… you know, joke about sex, you’ll get an arrogant tone back where you really… you get to know like “who do you think you are?”, “who do you think I am?”, “How cheap do you think I am?”.

In the same paragraph, he mentions that girls probably get saddened by constantly being objectified, but that it didn’t necessarily deter him from trying the approach again. Jennifer remembers a situation in which she felt objectified in a similar situation:

J: I went on a date once with this guy who we… I felt like we really hit it off, we had a really fun date, at the end of the date we talked about making plans for… you know we made plans for a next date and I thought it went really well … and then he texted me after the date, after we had already made plans to do something else, and was like “basically, just so you know I’m not looking for anything serious, I want.. Essentially I wanna be fuck-buddies”..

I: What did you respond to the guy?

J: This was one example where I had my, my roommates help me with a response because I was like “Oh, my God.. what do I say back to this, this is so rude and insulting”. … I was like “the fact that you’re coming right out and saying that right away just completely turns me off to you”.

Note again the use of peers to aid in communicating her exact feelings towards this person, without going in too strong. Jennifer says that if he had not come flat out and expressed clearly what he was looking for, there was a possibility that their relationship could naturally evolve into what he was looking for. As we saw in the conversation with Lucas, to clearly state your intentions will in many situations ruin the laid out rules of engagement, and thereby scare, or rather confuse, the receiving party of the message which in turn puts up a wall. Much like the experiences of Catherine, Jennifer argues that it is usually clear from the way someone contacts her in what their intentions are without them having to flat out mention sex. Destiny expresses similar feelings towards this type of over-open conversation and ties it together with an inherent concern of what type of person one is dealing with, which has gone as far as to deter her from using apps as much. Although not a first-hand victim of this sort of message, she says that there is a certain level of caution amongst her friends regarding meeting with strangers, and points to that the comfort level of meeting someone at, for instance, a friend’s party is now rare. This sentiment is shared by Amanda and Lucas, who mention that the likelihood of meeting someone at a party is becoming increasingly more difficult because of their friends already having partners and therefore do not socialise with single people as much, which is one of the reasons they
turned to online dating in the first place. This can also be found in the testimony of Chloe who was engaged in online dating much earlier than the others. Not only did she find it easier to find someone at parties of common friends, but she also says that getting to know people online was easier because the platform was initially more used to make friendships than, as Jennifer describes them, “fuck-buddies”.

The uncertainty that comes with relatively emotionless text conversation, as mentioned above, has in our informants’ stories given sites like Tinder a sort of “creepy” status. Some, like Catherine, Jennifer, and Destiny have all expressed feelings of either being let down, or even intimidated by the prospect of going out with someone they never met before. Looking at prior research found, this should come as no surprise as numbers as high as 28% of participants in other studies have shown discomfort in the way that they were communicated with by other person (Duggan; Smith, 2003). Destiny specifically mentions the potential risk of becoming physically impaired in a meeting with a stranger:

I: You mentioned a fear of getting drugged?

D: Yeah, I’d say that that’s the biggest reason that I don’t use it [Tinder] as much anymore because I feel that way ... just making contact with someone that way [online] you won’t know.. yeah, you won’t know what you’re getting into. It could be some sort of crazy person who’ll like.. stalk you and stuff.

On the subject of the fear of being objectified to the extent that someone might stalk you, hurt you, or be generally creepy, Catherine expresses something important that goes along with what Destiny mentioned previously:

C: ..my yoga instructor is on there. So that’s creepy. So I don’t want to be doing, you know, some weird yoga stuff knowing that he’s on a hook-up site.. and that’s just creepy, I don’t know.

Not only does she testify to the “creepy status” but there is also an underlying tone of a stigma that we have seen traces of previously in the analysis, namely: the shame of engaging in online dating in the first place. She concludes the conversation by stating that one loses faith in men, quickly, pointing to the amount of *dick-pics*[^47], and odd messages she has received after only a short time of being online.

[^47]: Quite self-explanatory, a *dick-pic* is a picture of a man’s genitals – most often taken by the owner of said genitals and sent to a person in hopes that it will attract the recipient to them.
Conclusion

The world of online/cellular interactions is evidently a complex one. The lack of face-to-face communication has led to the development of new ways to construct power hierarchies that are sometimes so complicated that they need to be decrypted in a team-setting. We have heard from our informants that there is, in fact, an umbrella that covers all of the coded messages involved in said interactions: textual analysis. Largely used in sociological and anthropological research, analysing text is, as we can read in the Methods section of this study, a great source of empirical data. However, the material obtained from text is a difficult body to investigate as it lacks a certain amount of human emotional expression, and does therefore require a particularly thorough method to understand. The empirical data collected in this study, through voice conversation, suggests that the chance of meeting a person in an open world setting is getting increasingly more difficult, which has led us as a society to find and invent new ways to meet and get to know other human beings. Whether their intentions have been to find a meaningful relationship or just hooking up with someone, the means of getting to their goal is in most cases very similar, and it revolves around how well they can interpret text and communicate efficiently in order to maintain the upper hand of a conversation, a notion that could easily be tied to certain aspects of chaos theory, as we have discussed previously. People are conscious about the existence of unpredictability in social interactions and must therefore focus efforts to maintain order. Chaos theory is based mainly on this unpredictability but also dictates that chaos is not without structure that individuals use to determine the behaviour of their peers. As other research has shown, over 50% of all individuals that have participated in online dating has felt lied to regarding someone else’s characteristic, which in turn creates another difficult obstacle in the interpretation (Toma; Hancock; Ellison, 2008). Even though amused by dating others through online applications, our informants describe the process as a whole as time consuming and at times uncomfortable because of this complexity. In fact, most of the participants have since submitting their testimony to this study have quit dating online to pursue other means of interaction. What led them to using internet platforms previously, have now become too taxing on their spare time and are only using apps like Tinder as a mildly entertaining distraction, specifically the swiping. Two of the informants stopped using apps because they were able to connect with another person with whom they could build a long-lasting relationship, and the remaining four moved on to other means due to the admitted hopelessness or depression that came with their chosen media.

Apart from the massive time consumption and boredom that eventually ensued, there are clear traces of discomfort from our women participants regarding the sexualised nature of their interactions. We concluded the analysis by looking at the ways they all had been, in lack of a better word, agitated by their counterparts in their attempts to boast their
attraction. This behaviour is in no way excluded to men as the women also admit to reciprocating the objectification by swiping through the pictures, but the means of expressing themselves. Amongst the vast variety of interactions ranging from dick-pics, vulgar approaches, and for the most part pleasant conversation, hides a larger and more influential factor, namely: the fear of not maintaining control of a situation and to be seen as something less than what one considers themselves to be. This is most evident in the informants seek guidance from their immediate social sphere in their text interactions, spurred by an underlying fear of losing control and thusly exposing oneself to not be “good enough”.

It can be concluded from these conversations on online dating that it may not be accelerating an increasing sense of structuralism, but still works as a forum in which it is expressed. As we set out to look at men’s behaviour from an equal rights perspective, we can see from the latter testimonies that women’s sexuality is very much a taboo subject which shows itself not just in the way they are being approached, but also by the way women view their own sexuality as something that is to be protected lest they lose their femininity. Destiny, for one, rounds up our talk by saying that most of the people her friends have been in contact with have initiated contact only to shortly thereafter stopped writing completely. Jennifer’s encounter with the individual who, in a manner of speaking, laid all his cards on the table by confessing that he was only interested in hooking up, admitted to her that he did so because he did not want to waste anyone’s time. As attested to by all informants, the attention span of most people on Tinder for example, seems to be cut short by the constant chase of something better, or rather someone better. Catherine said during our talk that you quite honestly, as a woman, do not really need to have that much going for yourself. As long as you have two breasts and a vagina, you are bound to get some attention. It is in statements like this one, in addition to the other stories of objectification by our informants that we find the most hard-hitting evidence of the revitalisation of functionalism in our society. If one as an individual is being fed an agenda based on a generalised sexual attractiveness and is continuously reminded that what it all boils down to, dick-pics and cleavage included, is the fact that you have genitals and a pretty face, then the larger part of what an adult individual has left to build their identity on is their own sexual self-consciousness. The people that have to make the smallest effort to see themselves as physically attractive, is the people who have the least difficulties in asserting authority over others, and that is how our contemporary sexual hierarchy is determined and maintained. This is where future research is needed because the evolution of dating does indeed create new and seemingly re-vitalize social issues that have been the subject of the gender equality movement for decades. In order to find solutions to these problems, it is pivotal that gender research not only continue looking at sexuality as a suppressing tool, but also look at areas such as dating to obtain a better understanding for the way that it manifests itself.
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