

# Ψηφιακή Λαογραφία και σύγχρονες μορφές του λαϊκού πολιτισμού.

Αφετηρία και προοπτικές ενός νέου πεδίου



Επιμέλεια:  
Γεώργιος Κατσαδώρας, Εμμανουήλ Φωκίδης

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Διδάσκοντας τοπική ιστορία, πολιτισμό, παραδόσεις και έθιμα με τη χρήση ψηφιακών παιχνιδιών. Προκαταρκτικά αποτελέσματα από μία μελέτη περίπτωσης στο νησί της Νισύρου, Άννα Χαρτοφύλη, Εμμανουήλ Φωκίδης.....	529
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## The tinderisation of romance

*Yvonne Kosma, Vasilis Gialatzis, Jojo Ekate Diakoumakou*

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### Περίληψη

Η επικράτηση των εφαρμογών γνωριμίας έχουν μεταμορφώσει το πώς τα υποκείμενα αλληλεπιδρούν, αντιλαμβάνονται την ταυτότητά τους και δημιουργούν διαπροσωπικές σχέσεις. Το βασικό ερώτημα που αποσκοπούμε να απαντήσουμε στο κείμενο αυτό, είναι κατά πόσο αυτές οι εφαρμογές έχουν μετασχηματίσει τους τρόπους που τα άτομα αντιλαμβάνονται το σεξ και τις ερωτικές σχέσεις. Αντλώντας δεδομένα από ερωτηματολόγια και συνεντεύξεις βάθους με προπτυχιακούς φοιτητές και φοιτήτριες στο Αμερικανικό Κολλέγιο Θεσσαλονίκης (ACT), διερευνούμε τις υποκειμενικές τους εμπειρίες από τις εφαρμογές γνωριμιών. Συγκεκριμένα, προσπαθούμε να αναδείξουμε τις σχέσεις εξουσίας, τις αντιφάσεις και ασυνέχειες που αναδύονται μέσα από το λόγο που εκφέρουν, και την απόσταση μεταξύ των στόχων που διακηρύσσουν και των εσωτερικευμένων τους αντιλήψεων, που συχνά αντανακλούν βαθιά ριζωμένες έμφυλες προκαταλήψεις και πεποιθήσεις για τη σεξουαλικότητα και τον έρωτα.

**Λέξεις-κλειδιά:** εφαρμογές γνωριμίας, φύλο, ταυτότητα, διαδικτυακό φλερτ, προφίλ, παρουσίαση του εαυτού, σεξουαλικότητα.

### Abstract

The prevalence of dating apps have transformed the ways in which people interact, perceive identity and form relationships. The main question we aim to address in this paper is whether such applications have changed how individuals perceive sex and romance. Drawing from questionnaires and in-depth interviews conducted with undergraduate college students at the American College of Thessaloniki, we explore respondents' experiences of online dating. In particular, we try to illustrate power relations, contradictions and inconsistencies that surface in their discourses, the distance between proclaimed goals, perceptions and ideas, and the more deeply sedimented views that often reflect deeply rooted gender norms and beliefs about sexuality and romance.

**Keywords:** dating apps, gender, identity, online dating, profile, self-presentation, sexuality.

### Introduction

#### *A new dating landscape*

Mobile dating applications have increased in popularity in recent years, and transformed the ways in which people interact, perceive identity and form relationships. Although various forms of matchmaking have always been around (Avdikos, 2010) -the first algorithm-based dating service was introduced as early as 1959- a gigantic shift in dating culture happened in 2013, "when Tinder expanded [from the iPhone] to Android phones, then to more than 70 percent of smartphones worldwide" (Fetters, 2019). Soon many more dating apps came online. At that time, technology had

already radically changed romance, with online dating growing massively in popularity ever since Match.com appeared in the mid-90s. But since, “apps, such as Tinder, with their speedy account set-ups and ‘swipe to like’ approach, have taken dating to another level” (Belton, 2018). Turning dating into something more like a game, it quickly became the most popular dating app on the market, recording over 1.6 billion swipes daily from its users (Tinder). When the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally in 2020, bringing about sanctions on in-person meet-ups, it has been a turning point for dating apps that could have been incremental. Instead, it was seen as maybe the only alternative to real life dating. Especially since “acceptance and normalisation of online dating was already underway before COVID-19”, says John Madigan, an analyst at business research firm IBISWorld, tailwinds from the pandemic have actually accelerated growth (Pardes, 2021).

As a consequence, our current era is defined by a serious shift in the perception and definition of intimate relationships. First of all, the mere existence of dating apps, even if one doesn’t actively use them, creates the sense that “there’s an ocean of easily-accessible singles that you can dip a ladle into whenever you want” (Beck, 2016). The most important thing dating apps deliver is not a relationship, but the promise of possibility. An implication of “the idea of being one swipe away from a potential mate” is likely to lower the meaning of prospective interaction, though (ibid). This, in turn, leads to what has come to be known as hook-up culture, the “permalancing” version of dating, in which sexuality is associated with ambivalence and, in line with today’s gig economy, “one’s relationship, like one’s employment status, is never clearly defined” (Weigel, 2016). Hence, it’s complicated...

### *Our questions*

The prevalence of dating apps in the ways people form intimate relationships today, makes them an extremely interesting and fertile ground to explore. Drawing from a research project that was conducted at the American College of Thessaloniki (an international academic institution in Northern Greece), we will examine how users conceptualise their online dating experiences in light of the factors described above. Our main question is whether dating apps have changed the way individuals perceive sex and romance. In this framework we will discuss:

- understandings of self-presentational practices,
- the shared expectations that are relied upon during mediated communication -that is how descriptive terms are typically interpreted by those in the dating community-,
- and how these reproduce or challenge gendered offline expectations.

In order to understand the cultural impact of dating apps, one must consider the social function they serve. Generally, “the relationship economy has certainly changed in terms of how humans find and court their potential partners, but what people are looking for is largely the same as it ever was: companionship and/or sexual satisfaction” (Fetters, 2019). Yet, these needs are likely to differ depending on age and circumstances. The most obvious incentive for using dating apps is probably that for some people they are the easiest or even the only way to cover such needs. People who have left education, are in fixed employment and have more or less exhausted the possibilities provided by their circle of friends and acquaintances, seem to be the cohort that would need dating apps the most. Yet, more than 50 percent of Tinder’s users are ages 18 to 25 (Tinder), which is an age-group one would assume has ample possibilities to meet new people. This made us consider dating apps within the broader cultural context -is it possible that dating apps thrive in this particular moment in time because young adults have stopped looking for potential partners while they go about their school and community routines (that is in general, not due to COVID-19 restrictions)? Or that, even when they their love interest is indeed a member from their expanded social circle such as college, the expression of romantic interest is preferably attempted through the mediation of such apps, in order to minimise risk of being turned down? According to our data, users find it easier to hit on someone through an app rather than in real life (RL), and possible rejection feels much less personal. An



implication of this buffer-effect is that the use of dating apps may disincentivise “people from going for more high-stakes romantic opportunities” (Beck, 2016), which in turn may be linked to hook-up culture and a no-strings-attached approach. These hypotheses led us to focus on undergraduate students, an age-group that is also amongst the heaviest social media users (Smith and Anderson, 2018), and are attuned to a scroll and swipe approach to communication.

## **The research**

### *Data collection*

In our research we employed a mixed method approach that combines quantitative data with an in-depth qualitative analysis, so as to gain more nuanced answers about undergraduate students’ perceptions of sex and romance in the context of dating apps. For this purpose we developed a questionnaire to gather an insight on dating practices online, and then we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. Practically speaking, we needed to become familiar with prevalent tendencies so as to know into which direction we should steer our interviews in the first place. With this goal in mind, we collected initial data from the questionnaires, and then we used this information to frame the discussion in the interviews that followed. However, our aim was never to collect exhaustive quantitative data given that the platforms themselves provide detailed demographic information about their users.

The data from both the questionnaires and the interviews was collected before the pandemic, in particular in 2018 and 2019. Consequently, it does not account for any possible shifts that may have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically lockdowns and restrictions. This is important since social distancing has clearly marked a shift in the prospects of meeting one’s matches in RL. In this light, a follow up study would be fascinating at this point, but we feel that our findings are still valid in the post-pandemic era as social life gradually resumes.

### *Participants and research site*

For the purpose of collecting broader information about prevailing perceptions, we distributed the questionnaire to approximately 300 individuals, but we only processed the data of those who stated that they used dating apps, or had used them in the past. Our sample of eligible respondents was comprised of 101 individuals with relatively uniform demographic traits. All respondents were undergraduate students at the American College of Thessaloniki (regular and study abroad), so by definition they belonged to the same age-group and level of education. Given that they studied at a private institution, they came from a largely comparable socio-economic background, that is, most belonged to the middle and upper-middle class. The fact that provides an interesting variation in our sample is the diversity in nationalities of the students that participated in the study. Three quarters of the sample population are from Greece (36,2%) or the U.S. (36,8%) in approximately equal shares. Another significant percentage of participants are Balkan, but, there are also respondents from Russia, Brasil, China, Nigeria, Northern Europe, and India. Although these latter nationalities are statistically insignificant in themselves, they do provide a certain insight into a multicultural environment. In our overall sample of volunteering participants, 58,7% were female, and 39,4% were male. A very low percentage identified as non-binary (1,9%). However, the research participants in our sample that used or had used dating apps are 54,2% female, and 45,8% male.

### *Procedure and findings*

The questionnaire was comprised of two sections, a demographic section, and a section on the respondents' usage of dating apps. The demographic section was aimed at all respondents; the second part only addressed the respondents who currently used or had used dating apps in the past. The reason why we didn't simply give out the questionnaires to dating app users alone, is because we were also interested in the percentage of users in the overall student population in correlation with their age, gender, nationality, sexual orientation and relationship status. It turned out that in our total sample about 1 in 3 used or had used a dating app in the past. Given that "in its annual survey of 5,000 Americans, Match Group, the dating conglomerate that owns Tinder and OkCupid, found that (...) 62 percent of millennials surveyed had used a dating app" (Bromwich, 2018), we initially thought the percentage of users in our sample was low. It occurred to us, however, that there are several reasons that may account for this disparity. First of all, undergraduate students today are only borderline millennials. Millennials as a group are largely already in a very different walk of life, and have different needs and aspirations.

Another insight that transpired from discussions with participants was that young adults, especially freshmen (sic), still rarely date outside the confines of their social circle of real life (RL) acquaintances, remaining under the influence of parental control, even though most have left home to study. The hypothesis is confirmed from our data as we found a statistically significant correlation between age and the use of dating apps ( $r=.393$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), meaning that age alone accounted for 15.4% of the variance in the use of such applications. This is also evident in the table below (Table 1), which characteristically shows that dating apps usage takes off after individuals turn 20:

**Table 1.** Age and dating apps usage

Age	Percentage of responders who use of have used dating apps
17-18	13.2%
19	16.2%
20	56.5%
21-22	53.7%
23+	74.8%
Total	30.2%

In the table we see that the percentage of dating app users aged 17-18 is merely 13.2%, compared to 20-year-olds where users are more than four times as many (56.5%). Looking into the percentage of users that are 20 or older, we see that findings are in line with the data indicated in the survey by MatchGroup mentioned above.

Having gained significant insight of the patterns in the use of dating apps in our cohort, we developed a comprehensive yet flexible interview schedule. The outline was built upon information we gathered through the quantitative data from the questionnaires, and our strategy was to employ a form of more free-flowing discussion. We guided each interview using a fixed set of topics, but questions were asked in a conversational style, and interviewees were encouraged to elaborate by bringing in their own narratives and thoughts. Although some questions were intimate and respondents had the option to skip them, they never did. Instead, they were eager to share their experiences, and they were very engaged in the conversation. In specific, we conducted thirteen extensive in-depth interviews that lasted between half an hour and 75 minutes each. In our sample 7 respondents were male and 6 female, aged 18-27; 9 identified as heterosexual, 2 as homosexual, and

2 as bisexual; 9 were Greek, although four of them were of mixed national or ethnic background and/or were raised abroad, 2 were American (U.S.), and 2 Albanian. Regarding their relationship status at the time of the interview, 8 were in a committed relationship and 5 were single. All participants registered their informed consent, and names have been changed so as to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

In our interviews we asked participants about their experiences from online dating, but we were particularly interested in the contradictions and inconsistencies that might surface in their discourses, which manifest in the distance between proclaimed goals, perceptions and ideas, and the more deeply sedimented views that reflect deeply rooted gender norms and beliefs about sexuality and romance. This assumption was indeed verified since, especially heterosexual males, tended to project traditional expectations about female users, confirming the prevalent heteronormative matrix. This means that although new media offer multiple options for young people to challenge the given gender order and to identify outside the dominant gender binary, interestingly they are also a place where patriarchal perceptions are being reproduced and perpetuated.

## Discussion

### *“Tindered” romance and the presentation of self*

In the age of social networking, individuals’ perception of self is largely mediated by their online self-presentation. Even in the physical presence of others, users socialise by interacting through the infinite flow of perfectly curated images that everybody knows are carefully manipulated, but are still accepted as a standard to live-up to. All forms of social interaction, including the pursuit of sex and romance, are inextricably linked to this aspect of contemporary communication.

In the process of pursuing a variety of relationship goals, users negotiate romantic connections through strategies that juggle selective self-presentation, and the assessment of potential dates. This is something that transpired in all the interviews, either as a given or as a challenge. Some embraced it as an opportunity to better their odds, others rejected any deliberate attempt to embellish in the name of staying true to themselves; but all seemed to be concerned with the fidelity of the profiles of their prospective dates. Although the need to present oneself more or less applies to any situation where individuals find themselves in the dating market, the relative anonymity of dating apps -“that is, the social disconnect between most people who match on them” (Fetters, 2018)- has had a major impact on the way users navigate the dating landscape. To achieve their romantic goals, online daters need to build an appealing profile that will draw plenty of matches. Simultaneously, users have to decipher their potential partners’ profiles, anticipating they will also try to embellish their own images respectively.

Homer<sup>1</sup>: “Since Tinder is something that’s virtual, you can present a fabricated version of yourself. For example, [you can] take a photo that is flattering and show what you want to show, thus improving your odds.”

“Dating has always been work”, Weigel attests in her book *The Labor of Love* (2017). “But what’s ironic”, she states, “is that more of the work now is not actually around the interaction that you have with a person, it’s around the selection process, and the process of self-presentation. That does feel different than before” (ibid.). Depending on the impact of the first impression, users try “to construct

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<sup>1</sup> Homer (aged 21) is Greek, and he identifies as heterosexual. At the time of the study he was in a relationship and didn’t currently use dating apps (Tinder). Previously, when he did, he used them to find more meaningful connections, and he was not interested in hook-ups.

versions of self that are attractive to potential romantic partners” (Ellison et al., 2012); this might motivate users to ‘tweak’ their profile in order to become more compelling.

Homer: “A lot of girls project a façade, which is not indicative [of their actual selves] or they list interests, just for the sake of writing something in their bio, while in reality they might not care about them at all. A lot of people try to show-off something they are not, and I don’t like that.”

This situation creates a certain tension between the profile and the actual person, but it also produces an internal conflict within users. Obviously everyone wants to come across as compelling as possible. Yet, they are also pressured to present themselves more or less accurately, given that they run the risk of alienating their date “if their online profiles are judged as too inaccurate upon meeting” (Ellison et al., 2012; also see Whitty, 2008). When asked about the possibility of users selecting deceptive pictures for their profile, Zach<sup>2</sup> commented:

Zach: “What’s the point? Even if you manage to hide everything [weight, height, body type etc], once you meet someone in person it’s over.”

This concern is not limited to looks. Dating app users are very much aware that to create a completely false impression is not an ideal strategy, not just because a real-life meeting would break the illusion and ruin everything, but because false claims in the profile will also attract the wrong people -at least if what users are after, are more lasting connections. When asked whether she would make any adjustments to her profile so as to increase the chances to match with someone particular she likes on the app, Anna<sup>3</sup> was adamant.

Anna: “No way! This would be forcing things. If we had been compatible, it would have happened in the first place.”

The concept of curating one’s profile beyond recognition, however, always needs to be considered in light of the divergence between a user’s perceived self, and the way others perceive them in turn. In our interviews, respondents often claimed that the pictures in their profiles corresponded exactly to the way they looked in RL. The fact that a photograph is by definition a selective and partial representation, and as such it can never fully account for the person it depicts, did not occur to them as a possibility. Neither that our own views of ourselves are always already mediated by our self-image. Consequently, the distance between a deliberate misrepresentation of oneself, and the actual belief that a certain depiction is accurate is rather murky, and hardly objective. This subjective distance -that is further stretched by the way we relate to our mediated selves on social media- clearly accounts for the amount of ‘tweaking’ and ‘filtering’ that is considered fair play. Amongst the profiles on the various platforms there are certainly also some that are fake. But discrepancies between one’s online profile and offline presentation are rarely a deliberate attempt to catfish; mostly they are a result of the way these misrepresentations are assessed and justified by users themselves. This sometimes leads to a double standard; users feel that when it comes to their own profile they merely ‘embellish’, but when a date proves to be disappointing upon meeting them in RL is because the other person has ‘lied’.

This insight led us to the hypothesis that users anticipate a certain degree of ‘deceit’, but also that there might be a self-serving bias in the way profiles are appraised; users are more lax regarding

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<sup>2</sup> Zach (aged 23) is Greek, and he identifies as heterosexual. At the time of the study he was single and was actively using dating apps (Tinder, Badoo). He used them just for fun, and he had never met anyone in person, although he almost went on a date once.

<sup>3</sup> Anna (aged 23) is Greek, and she identifies as heterosexual. At the time of the study she was in a relationship, and so she wasn’t using dating apps anymore (Tinder). When she did, she used DA out of curiosity and to meet someone (for dating or finding a relationship). She has been on several dates but she did not meet her current partner through a dating app.

the accuracy of their own self-presentation, but more demanding when it comes to judging the profiles of prospective partners. Although in the questionnaires the majority of respondents claimed that they were truthful in their self presentation (only 24% admitted to have made some false claims in their profile), there are several reasons to be skeptical. First of all, it is quite likely that respondents make false claims more often than they are willing to admit, as some of them might insist that they are being honest in their profiles in order to construct a positive self-representation. In a way, there is a tension between the need to be truthful to oneself (and to appear truthful to others), and the urge to handle insecurities that stem from the perceived failure to conform to normative ideals. Such pressure is probably more prevalent in female users, as women are culturally expected to measure up to almost unattainable standards. This is something that Manos<sup>4</sup> clearly recognises in his interview. Not only does he acknowledge that users in general are inclined to enhance their profiles, but he also directly addresses the pressure women feel to meet societal expectations, which leads them to modify the way they present themselves.

Manos: “Some girls, who believe that they lack certain desirable assets, will deliberately tart up their profile. [They will claim to have] qualities they don’t possess.”

This tension also clearly transpired in the other interviews. Compared to the low percentage of questionnaire respondents that admitted to have ‘tweaked’ their image, the interviewees were more likely to state that modest embellishment is acceptable; this way, they could justify certain modifications in their own profiles. At the same time, 38.8% of all respondents admitted that on dating apps their criteria for choosing a potential partner are more strict than in real life.

### *The vocabulary of online dating*

We already discussed that the appraisal of certain features illustrated in users’ profiles is barely objective. Besides (i) the self-serving bias that justifies an enhanced representation of self, and (ii) the distance between self image and the ways other people see us, which often account for the discrepancy between a user’s profile and the way they are perceived in a RL meet-up, it is important to also consider (iii) the discursive aspects of “Tinderese”. Simply put, to make sense of dating apps, and hopefully to avoid unpleasant surprises, one needs to be well versed in the vocabulary of online dating.

We saw that, although in the questionnaire few admitted that they might shave-off a couple of pounds, add some inches to their height in their self-description, or use a heavily filtered profile picture, in the interviews this topic was more open to negotiation.

Manos: “Let’s not forget that on dating apps we are often insincere”.

Given the fluidity of mediated representation, where impressions matter the most, users acknowledge that they do weigh up how much they can get away with. In this context, Manos claims male users will make false claims so as to lure women that would normally be ‘out of their league’. He says that many users will adjust their proclaimed interests so as to appear more interesting, use very flattering pictures, and they might also change their age -mostly younger males will want to appear older. He is very much aware of the fact that people will embellish, and for that reason he states this is something he is willing to accept, and cannot condemn. However, he also feels it makes no sense to

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<sup>4</sup> Manos (aged 22) is Greek, and he identifies as heterosexual. At the time of the study he was single and actively used dating apps (Tinder). He used them for fun, and he was looking for sex, but had never met anyone from a dating app in RL.

blatantly lie in your own profile, since it will become immediately evident upon meeting in RL. Ian<sup>5</sup> adds a further insight to the conversation:

Ian: “People use filters even if they look great. It’s just a thing today. I’m not prejudiced towards that. It’s a trend now, I guess.”

This illustrates how dating apps are, amongst other things, like any other a social medium, and the presentation of self on these apps adheres to similar rules.

The struggle to strike a balance between enhancing one’s own profile and getting away with it becomes particularly evident in another interview, where Lydia<sup>6</sup> admits that she always claims to weigh less. As long as the elaboration is moderate (that is, not immediately obvious to the eye), it doesn’t really matter, she attests. Specifically, when asked whether she would ‘tweak’ any information in her profile she states:

Lydia: Of course I would! (...) It feels awkward to tell someone my weight. I wouldn’t even tell my mom! There is no way I would disclose that I weigh “200 kilos” [exaggerating so as to make a point]. I’d say 70... 60... I’d embellish a bit. (...) And height... I am 1.58m...

This is not to say that users lied in the questionnaire (where the 3 out of 4 stated they would not make any false claims), but rather that the extent to which enhancement is considered acceptable, or at what point it is perceived to be misleading is quite relative. There are two factors that determine this; the first is that users expect that everybody will try to present themselves in a flattering light; the other, that everybody is aware of the fact that there are some shared expectations that are relied upon during mediated communication. Descriptive terms used in the presentation of self rely on a common vocabulary -which means there exists a certain consensus about the way they are interpreted by those in the dating community. The finding mentioned before -that 74.7% of our questionnaire respondents would not contact anyone who is overweight- is particularly telling. Although body shaming is indeed a sad reality, and heightened expectations online may amplify such bias, in hindsight we think that what accounts significantly for this high percentage is the descriptive term we used in our question; ‘overweight’ is simply not part of the common dating app or social media vocabulary. The descriptor is not included as an option in apps such as OkCupid (which requires a very detailed portrayal from its users), nor would users describe themselves as such, using a euphemism instead; one is expected to use terms such as ‘curvy’ or ‘plus size’. Given dominant gender norms, both the stigma, and the need for an alternative term mostly applies to women. On Instagram images of fuller bodies abide; but it is telling that at the time of writing the hashtag #plussize has 22M posts, #plussizefashion has 11.3M posts and #plussizemodel has 4.8M posts, whereas #overweight only has 476K posts, #overweightwomen and #overweightgirl have just 1000+ posts each, and #overweightmodel has fewer than 100 posts. Consequently, the defining factor is not so much the objective number on the scales, but the body as a discursive construction.

One more point to consider, is that people may also project their aspired self in their profile. Due to the asynchronous nature of the contact, they may allow themselves to project properties they possessed in the past, or properties they aspire to acquire in the future (Ellison et.al, 2012). For example users might post older profile pics where they look slimmer or more fit, which however are relatively recent and are thus seen as justified; or they hope that they will fit their idealised image by the time a RL meeting occurs. In their very interesting article Ellison et. al (2012) devise the concept of ‘profile as promise’, that quite accurately describes the way users rationalise their representational

<sup>5</sup> Ian (aged 21) is Albanian and is still questioning his sexual orientation (the interview was focused on gay dating apps and relationships). He was single at the time of the interview.

<sup>6</sup> Lydia (aged 18) is Albanian, but she was born and raised in Greece. She identifies as heterosexual. Despite being in a relationship at the time of the study, she continued using DA (Meddle, Kick, and others) to meet romantic/sex partners, but also for chatting. She has gone on several dates with people she met on DAs.

choices online. When asked what solution he seeks when he doesn't get enough matches, Manos said that he loses weight. This, however, refers to an aspired self that reflects a long term goal, and as such it can only be manifested instantly through an idealised representation in his profile. This is not to imply that the respondent might not indeed go on a diet or an exercising regime, but this is irrelevant when the point is to get more matches here and now. In this sense, the fluid perception of self described through this concept also functions in reverse; the 'profile as promise' does not only inform the way other users assess an individual asynchronously, but it also provides a lens for individuals to define themselves through a future projection.

This insight about the distance between presented and RL-self often creates a fundamental anxiety about the truthfulness and accuracy of other users' self-presentations.

Tania<sup>7</sup>: "There was this guy with whom we used to chat for months-all summer long. [...] He looked very dissimilar in his profile and the videos that he sent me. When I saw him in-person he was totally different. I was taller than him and he practically looked nothing like the person I had seen online. I was like 'Wow! What's happening here?'"

During our interviews, the most prominent reason mentioned for a date going awry, was when someone turned out to be significantly different than anticipated. The problem, interviewees explained, was not so much that the other person was not as good-looking as in their pictures -this is something daters anticipated to a certain degree. So, although they knew that it was very likely that they might not feel attracted to their date in person after all, this was a possibility they were willing to accept.

Manos: "It's a dating app. When I created my account, I knew that somebody could lie to me [in regards to who they claimed to be, in comparison to how they actually were in person] (...) When we partake in apps like Tinder, we must accept the risk."

Users were indeed very much aware of this probability, and so they had also considered in advance what to do, in case the date did not go as anticipated.

I/r: (...) "How would you react if you matched with someone you liked, who was very photogenic in their pictures, but you went out and they weren't the way you expected them to be? They were a bit different..."

Nicholas<sup>8</sup>: "I mean, it depends to what degree. If it's too much, ok... I still have the option to get out of the situation. (...) I would finish the date, and then..."

Even Ian, who previously stated that curating one's image does not necessarily mean the person has something to hide, still recognises that this is a possible risk. He describes an incident when a date was drastically different in-person than in their profile:

Ian: "I had a friend call me, to get me out of the situation."

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<sup>7</sup> Tania (aged 20) is Greek-Italian, but she grew up in Venezuela and the U.S. She identifies as heterosexual, and at the time of the study she was single. She had been using dating apps for three consecutive years while in Greece, but she wasn't looking for anything at the time, since she was about to leave the country. She believes that Tinder is more for sex, not relationships.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas (aged 27) is Greek, but he was born and raised in Germany; he has also lived in several Arabic Countries. He identifies as heterosexual, and was single at the time of the study. He didn't currently use DA (Tinder and BitFlirt), but when he did, it was just for fun.

In effect, although a certain deviation from the person advertised in their profile and the following disillusionment when meeting in RL were perceived as a calculated risk, ultimately the decisive factor was the degree of discrepancy. What users really found concerning, was when the disparity between the profile and the RL individual created a fundamental feeling of distrust: “Who is this person?”

Homer: “If their profile is not accurately representing them, it makes you think, ‘Who is this person, really? What are they hiding?’”

In line with this concern, Manos said he was particularly sceptical in the absence of a profile picture. Given that most dating apps are based on a ‘swipe to like’ logic -and as such they are primarily image based-, the reluctance to contact someone without a profile picture in which the user is clearly discernible makes sense; indeed, 86% of our questionnaire respondents also stated they wouldn’t respond to anyone without a picture. The reason behind this reluctance directly reflects this feeling of distrust. Knowing that it is easy to manipulate an image to appear more flattening (which means that anyone could add a decent picture to their profile), the complete absence of a head shot arises greater concerns than the possibility that a potential date is less than attractive. In the best case scenario it manifests a complete disregard of the vocabulary of online dating, which is perceived as indifferent, disrespectful even, towards other users; in the worst case, it feels fishy. In this context, Manos stated that he wasn’t worried about the other person not being attractive enough, but about them being a catfish.

Manos: “How do I know that the Maria in the profile is not in fact John...?”

Homer, on the other hand, who was more interested in the other users’ personality and less focused on pictures alone, did not completely exclude the possibility of engaging in a conversation or even matching with someone without a picture, but only if their profile was really engaging altogether. He did acknowledge, though, that the way a person looks (both on dating apps and in RL), is always the first thing we notice when meeting someone; consequently, looks are a crucial incentive to initiate contact in the first place. Drawing on the fixation with the image, he also considered another possibility; that sometimes a particularly appealing profile picture might be too good to be true. In this vein he described an incident when he went on a date with a woman who claimed to be 20 years younger.

Homer: “(...) And, indeed, something was wrong. In her profile she was 25. I matched with her. She had some pictures in which she looked really pretty. (...) The photos could have been her, but I don't know what magic she had used... She looked way, way younger.”

In the conversation he clarified that the problem was not her age in itself, but the deception; and the fact that the person he met did not seem to correspond to her profile at all. When he addressed the fact during their meeting, she dismissed the claim by merely saying the photos were “a little bit older”. He describes how she seemed crazy during their date, that they never talked again, and that finally he unmatched with her. Despite the fact that Homer’s experience is rather extreme, and also problematic on a different level, it is very likely that women on dating apps do feel the need to hide their age, or are even discouraged from using these apps altogether. Although someone may claim that age is an objective fact, it is still mediated by discourse. Whereas a man in his forties or older may still be considered an “eligible bachelor”, women of the same age are commonly classified as MILFS, cougars, or simply too old. In “Tinderese” there seems to be no neutral term to describe this cohort.



### *Relationship goals and hookup culture*

The vocabulary of dating apps both reflects and informs social expectations about sex, romance, and relationships. This means that although dating apps do allow for more freedom of expression and conduct, especially for non-heteronormative individuals, they also reflect dominant perceptions about sexuality and gender. This way they also clearly reproduce the double standard, which “implies that men always think about sex and women must be ‘gate-keepers’ of their own sexuality” (Seabrook et al., 2016, cited in Berrocal et al., 2019). Within this framework, heterosexual men often consider women on dating apps to be promiscuous or “damaged goods”. Although Homer doesn’t share this opinion, he discusses these views, and the double standard that is applied to male and female dating app users in particular:

Homer: “[Many people] would regard it negatively for a woman [to be using DAs]. Why should a woman use dating apps when in RL it’s so easy for her to find a partner? For a man... I don’t think they would view it negatively. [But] they would make assumptions [about female users] -like thinking she must be really ugly to be on a dating app.”

This attitude clearly reproduced a distinction between women who are ‘girlfriend material’ and those who are ‘just for sex’, which is clearly reflected in heterosexual male users’ dating goals. According to our findings, male users indeed claimed they were more likely to use dating apps for hook-ups ( $rs=.303$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and sex ( $rs=-.260$ ,  $p<0.01$ ); whereas females used them more for chatting ( $rs=-.281$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) or out of curiosity ( $rs=-.332$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Manos: “Obviously [I was looking solely for sex]. If you want a serious relationship, this won’t occur through a dating app. This happens through mutual acquaintances -through friends. (...) You must be desperate to be looking for something more serious on a dating app”.

This seems to be a prevalent opinion that reflects a very patriarchal attitude towards female sexuality. However, the prejudice against dating apps and finding romance online gradually fades, as they become more normalised as an option to find a partner for men and women alike. Homer believes it is indeed possible to find a long-term relationship on a dating app, as long as your profile accurately reflects who you are, so as to attract like-minded matches.

Another aspect that reflects dominant perceptions about gender is that it is more common for males to initiate contact ( $rs=.466$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and to have a more active flirting role ( $rs=.270$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Tania: “I expect them [men] to talk to me. I feel very weird as a woman talking to them (...) I feel they are going to think badly about me. (...) I feel that if a woman starts doing that [initiate flirtation], it’s very desperate. So, just let them message you first”.

Sally<sup>9</sup> too states, “They text you first. I never text first.” Even Iris, who consciously rejects the dominant gender order, still claims that she does not initiate contact with men.

Iris<sup>10</sup>: “Not because I was afraid, but I never bothered to initiate conversation with men; perhaps because I am really strict.”

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<sup>9</sup> Sally (aged 18) is Greek of Indian descent. She identifies as heterosexual, and at the time of the interview she was single and using Tinder. She never went on a date with anyone she met on a DA.

<sup>10</sup> Iris (aged 22) is Greek and identifies as bisexual. At the time of the interview she was in a relationship but she had experimented with various dating apps while she was single.

Further conforming to dominant gender expectations, we found that women tend to invest more time in chatting before meeting someone in person ( $r_s = -.478$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Sally: “Guys see it differently, while girls see it... You know... You meet a guy, and then talk and talk and somehow you start dating. You fall in love. Whatever. Something like that. You know... Girls can always dream”.

This is related to both their different dating-app goals, but also to the expressed fear of meeting in person with a stranger. In specific, our findings suggest that males generally feel safer than females to meet in RL ( $r_s = .321$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 10.3% of variance explained).

Toby<sup>11</sup>: “Generally, because I am a guy and usually it’s the guy who initiates, I’m probably on the safer end, so that [an incident that would put him at risk] wouldn’t happen to me as often. It is still entirely possible but I think, generally, I am not (...) too worried.”

Despite feeling safer overall, men also usually prefer meeting at a public place on their first date.

Homer: “(...) I wouldn’t choose a remote place. A first meeting should take place in public locations like a coffee shop. (...) There’s less of a safety risk”.

However, the chosen location is obviously also determined by the aim of the encounter. If the meet-up is strictly for sex, users may prefer the intimacy of a private space instead of meeting at a public space first.

Ian: “He asked me to come to his apartment. I’m a grown man and I can protect myself. His place was dark, with candles lit everywhere.”

Safety concerns aside, however, for many users meeting in RL does not even seem to be an end goal. In this context, we found that the vast majority of users (82.6%) agree that swiping feels more like a game; about a third (28.6%) find it unlikely to go on an actual date with someone they met on a dating app; and 28.3% have never met any of their matches in person. Furthermore, only about one fourth in our sample used dating apps in pursuit of a romantic (23,4%) and/or a sexual (25,5%) relationship. This could be interpreted in the light of common social media usage patterns, with matching being the equivalent of the self-validation users gain from ‘likes’ on other platforms.

The correlation of dating goals with sexual orientation is more peculiar. Firstly, non-heterosexuals tend to contact multiple individuals simultaneously more often than heterosexuals do ( $\chi^2 = 10.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ): 34.6% of them “strongly agree” that they contact multiple individuals and only 3.8% disagree, compared to 9.5% and 16.2% for heterosexuals, respectively. Secondly, non-heterosexuals feel it is easier to form romantic connections on dating apps. In specific, 19.2% of non-heterosexuals claim it is easier to find romance through dating apps than in RL, compared to only 5.6% of heterosexuals. This is probably related to the “closet” factor, since dating apps allow non-heterosexuals to find similarly minded individuals without risking exposure in their RL environment. In this context, Ian describes an experience of how he met a guy in an elevator, and assumed he was gay because he was listening to Nicki Minaj:

Ian: “I thought to myself. Why didn’t you ask him for his Instagram? What would have been the worst that could have happened? So I thought I would just log in on Grindr to find him. He might do the same.

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<sup>11</sup> Toby (aged 19) is from the U.S. and he identifies as heterosexual. He has been on two dates with people he met on DAs, and he has engaged in conversations multiple times but they just didn’t “jump anywhere”. However, he made lots of friends and strengthened relationships with pre-existing acquaintances. He was still using DAs at the time of the interview.

Because I have had similar experiences before, when people found me (...) through the application. Neither of us dared to say hi [in RL], so we chatted online”.

This is supported by certain differences in their stated dating app goals compared to heterosexual users. A telling example is that half of the non-heterosexual dating app users are interested in friendship, compared to a mere 16.2% of heterosexuals ( $\chi^2 = 11.71, p < .01$ ). Another related finding is that non-heterosexuals use dating apps significantly more. In specific, 58.6% of non-heterosexuals in our sample use or have used dating apps, compared to 25.6% of heterosexuals ( $\chi^2 = 12.97, p < .001$ ).

Ian: “I can just turn on the app, take a glimpse and go away. Just checking. It’s this fear of FOMO: Fear of missing out. People tell me ‘you are always on Grindr’. Because when you log in on Grindr you’ll appear online for the next 12 minutes (...). I’m not always chatting or messaging someone [when logged on], though”.

Although these findings are very interesting and do seem to indicate a strong correlation between sexual orientation and use of dating apps, the heavy prevalence of heterosexual participants in our sample suggests that they should be taken with a grain of salt. Yet, they are perfectly in line with a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, according to which “roughly half or more of 18-to 29-year-olds (48%) and LGB adults (55%)” state to “have used a dating site or app, while about 20% in each group say they have married or been in a committed relationship with someone they first met through these platforms” (Anderson et. al, 2020).

Ian: “Partners who used dating apps before getting together are commonplace in the gay community. Often this is how they met in the first place”.

Despite enhanced opportunities to meet new people, and declarations that dating apps are an easy way to find sex, reality does not seem to verify users’ expectations or even intentions. According to a recent study from researchers at Rutgers University and the University at Albany, millennials and Gen Z, who are the cohort mostly using DA, are having less casual sex than previous generations (South and Lei, 2021). Despite confounding evidence, though, the prevalent opinion still is that dating apps have made hooking-up more common. Our data strongly supports this hypothesis, as 47.5% of dating apps users are interested in hook-ups, 79.6% agree that hook-ups are more common now that dating apps became more popular, 60.4% state that they contact multiple individuals within the app simultaneously, and 57% agree that dating apps allow for more options. Interestingly, the findings from our interviews were more nuanced. Manos, for example, doesn’t believe that DAs have led to an increase in hook-ups. He is certain that DAs facilitate infidelity, given that someone is inclined to do so, but they do not cause it. Similarly, Homer states that an unfaithful person will be an unfaithful person regardless of dating apps; but DAs do make it easier. Ian, on the other hand, does blame dating apps for problems in relationships:

Ian: “I think social media [he refers to SM in general, since he discusses how Facebook and Instagram are also being used as DAs] have ruined the whole concept of dating, and that’s the number one factor for relationship problems, divorces even. They have a huge influence on people (...)”

Moreover, only 9.1% of users believe it is easier to find romance on dating apps than in RL, further supporting the hypothesis that such applications primarily facilitate hooking-up.

Manos: “In the back of our minds we all know it [that we are on Tinder for just sex]. I can’t hide behind my finger.”

With its almost exclusive focus of appearances, evident by the 500-character limit for bios, Tinder clearly reinforces this trend, encouraging the shallowness in the profile. Although some other apps claim to mitigate this effect through extended bios and more in-depth information on their users that are meant to facilitate more profound connections, they still mostly adopt the “swipe to like” approach, which gamifies dating. Despite of this, the majority of dating apps users (59.5%) do not feel that their willingness to commit to a relationship is compromised by the use of dating apps.

Homer: “I know people who would use DAs to meet a girl just for that night and nothing else. Not me. Something more serious for me.”

These mixed feelings transpire a lot in the interviews. Respondents commonly claim that dating apps have killed romance, but they often still assert that they were using the apps looking for more meaningful connections.

Homer: “On the one hand it’s more liberating but on the other hand it’s a pity that something like romance has been lost (...).”

This point is very concretely voiced by Toby who states that people are becoming more sex positive, but on the downside he feels they are also being too sexual, too quickly. In this context he narrates the story of a friend who had just met her date, and was asked for sex approximately half an hour later. Within this framework respondents emphasised that the usage of dating apps was ultimately dependent on the motivations and intentions of individual users. Xavi<sup>12</sup> tellingly asserts that “everybody has their own interpretation of what you should be doing in a dating app”. People have their own agendas, but the outcome is also coincidental.

Manos: “I kept it [Tinder] just for fun and if something were to happen, then that would be cool. It’s an extra ‘source of income’ when it comes to sex”.

Ultimately, as Sally states:

Sally: “It really depends on the person. If someone wants to date someone, if they want to have a romantic relationship (...) I don’t think they would opt for Tinder. Tinder is mostly for sex. That’s what the majority thinks. That’s what my friends say: ‘I don’t want to use Tinder. That it’s clearly for sex’. It’s not always for sex. I know a couple who met through Tinder. They didn’t last long but they were dating for some (...) time. Four to six months. That’s quite a [long] period. It really depends on the person”.

Although respondents varied in their expectations and experiences with dating apps, they essentially agree that in the end they are just a tool.

Homer: “It’s a tool and it depends on you how you’ll use it. (...) The best thing is to meet someone in-person but when that’s not possible, for whatever reason, that [DAs] is a good solution”.

## Conclusion

In our research we tried to uncover users’ perceptions about sex and romance in the light of dating apps and online dating. Respondents acknowledged that these applications have made it easier to

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<sup>12</sup> Xavi (aged 21) is from the U.S. and identifies as gay. He has used dating apps ever since he turned 18 for hooking-up, and occasionally for dating “which has worked sporadically”.

meet new people with whom they might be compatible, while simultaneously expanding their radius and options. The ease of access, however, did also create some concerns about whether this leads to a future of relationship instability, the death of romance, hookup culture and infidelity. The ways in which users assessed both the advantages and disadvantages of dating apps reflected always already existing perceptions about gender and sexuality in RL, often reproducing dominant gender stereotypes, but also allowing some space for alternative gender embodiments.

The respondents' evaluation of online dating was related to their individual dating goals and expectations and, consequently, perceived satisfaction with these apps would vary significantly. Some found it exhilarating to connect with new people, and believed in the possibility of creating lasting relationships; others saw an inverse correlation between commitment and the gamification of dating. Most saw the apps as an easy way for finding casual sex and hooking up, although this aspiration did not necessarily materialise.

Finally, one of the most interesting findings was that -at least in this cohort- many users did not intend to meet anyone in RL after all. They still made an effort to create a profile that would attract as many matches as possible, but this did not translate into actual dates. In this case matches could be seen as the equivalent of 'likes' on other social media, and the validation they provided seemed to be an end in itself. Another explanation is that "as the range of options grows larger, mate-seekers are liable to become 'cognitively overwhelmed'". Simply put "having chosen someone from such a large set of options can lead to doubts about whether the choice was the 'right' one" (Slater, 2013). So instead of meeting their match in person, users keep "chasing the elusive rabbit around the dating track" (ibid.). Whether this is true, is a question that remains open for future research.

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