Article

SM+S
social media + society

Social Media + Society
October-December 2023: 1–15

DOI: 10.1177/20563051231216922
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms
Sage

Mediatized Love: A Materialist Phenomenology of Tinder

Viktor Berger

Abstract

The article scrutinizes the mediatization of dating and love as part of a broader mediatization process of the life-world, with a focus on the experience of using the popular dating app Tinder. Central to the analysis is how interfacial features, algorithmic structuration, and user perceptions create the affordances of the application and, in the process, shape the experience of using it. The experience of using Tinder is characterized by a "swipe logic," marked by speediness, visuality, and (self-)objectification, but also by the prevalence of cynicism and boredom on the platform. Under these circumstances, users of Tinder are confronted with new challenges, and to tackle these, they make use of their life-world knowledge as well as creating novel forms of knowledge. While using Tinder, they apply and modify their life-world stock of knowledge. Tinder as a tool of online dating is marked by the duality of reflectivity versus impulsive affectivity, superficiality versus depth, and instrumentality versus striving for relations thought of as authentic. All in all, the mediatization of partner selection is interpreted as a special form of the colonization of the life-world.

Keywords

online dating, Tinder, phenomenology, life-world, visual regime, late modernity

Introduction

Love and intimate relationships have emerged as important ideals of (late) modern societies, despite the fact that the association of love with long-term relationships and sexuality is not universal but socially constructed (Giddens, 1992) and rooted in modern capitalism (Illouz, 2007). In late modernity, as argued by Bauman (2005), meaningful work-based identities are undermined by job insecurity and the uncertainties of the labor market. As a consequence, as noted by Bauman and also Schulze (1992), most people seek to accomplish their individual project of a meaningful life in the private sphere, more specifically, by building consumption-driven identities. Others, in turn, have emphasized the role of intimate relationships in the personal quest for happiness (Giddens, 1992) and personal well-being (Rövid et al., 2021). The third point of view combines the previous two by stating that the individual quest for happiness in intimate relations is intertwined with the logic of consumerism. According to Illouz (2007), in the era of "emotional capitalism," emotions and intimate relationships have been commodified and obey the logic of consumerism. With the rise of the romantic ethic (Campbell, 1987) and the modern concept of romantic love as a product of capitalism and consumerism (Illouz, 1997), love has increasingly come to be seen as a means to finding happiness in the modern age.

Late modernity has seen the emergence of novel forms of dating. Online dating platforms expose the new ambiguities and difficulties of intimate relationships. Illouz (2007, Chapter 3) interprets online dating as leading to a transformation of romantic encounters into economic transactions. According to this view, people have to promote themselves as products, by creating a personal brand to make themselves desirable to and "consumable" by others to be able to "consume" them in turn. These are signs of the instrumentalization of partner selection and of "cold intimacies." According to the theory of cold intimacies, users of online dating services, who are confronted with an almost unlimited pool of potential partners on the dating market, develop a preference for casual relationships at the expense of committed bonds, because they cannot free themselves from the belief that

University of Pécs, Hungary

Corresponding Author:
Viktor Berger, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Pécs, Ifjúság útja 6, 7624 Pécs, Hungary.
Email: berger.viktor@pte.hu

there is always someone better, a better "product" to be "consumed." They often aim for people "out of their league" without any inclination to make compromises, which makes it even harder for them to find a partner with whom they would be willing to settle down (Fáber, 2019; Illouz, 2007, p. 104; van Hooff, 2020, p. 123). This consumerist tendency in partner selection, a persistent feature since the onset of online dating websites, is even more heightened in dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, Happn, or Bumble, which reinforce the role of visuality in "scopic capitalism" (Illouz, 2019). As Illouz (2019, p. 23) puts it, services like these "turn the subject into a consumer of sex and emotions, entitled to the right to use or dispose of the commodity at will." Nevertheless, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990) have argued, the growing contingency of intimate relationships does not lead to the rejection of love but to its even heightened significance for individuals and a shift in how it is conceptualized and practiced. Similarly, Giddens (1992, Chapter 4) highlighted a transformation away from the traditional ideal of romantic love (supposed to last "until death do us part") to that of the "pure relationship," which ought to rely on mutual commitment and emotional engagement, lasting only as long as these emotions are maintained (whether in marriages, domestic partnerships, relations among people living apart together, or in any other form).

This article focuses on Tinder, the most popular dating application worldwide.[1] Drawing on a critical and theoretical analysis of previous scholarship on the app, it examines how specific objective and material structures solicit certain experiences on the part of Tinder users. The main goal of the article is to interpret how online daters' processes of sense-making emerge in a dynamic relation between everyday actors, app features, algorithms, and affordances, as well as corporate strategies. Due to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's and Giddens's comments on the still-continuing importance of long-term relationships, the article gives special attention to the conditions and possibilities of finding a long-term love relationship under the circumstances of online dating (without denying the legitimacy of other motivations per se). The article claims that online daters' typical motivations, attitudes, and behavioral patterns—as well as their strategies of self-representation and attempts to interpret those of others—do not simply arise from their own reasoning, but are embedded in a broader sociotechnical context. This calls for a theoretical framework capable of interpreting actors' behavior, attitudes, and sense-making in light of their situatedness within broader material structures. The materialist phenomenological approach, proposed by Couldry and Hepp (2017), is suitable for this task. Materialist phenomenology, as understood here, draws on classical phenomenological theory, but, in contrast with these classical approaches, gives more prominence to social and material structures and the conditions in which actors are dynamically embedded. This is not to say that the role of objective circumstances is entirely missing from classical accounts. According to Alfred Schutz (1962), founder of phenomenological sociology, the social sciences ought to interpret social action by constructing abstract scientific models of actors embedded in a specific social world (see also Havrancsik, 2018). A phenomenological interpretation, therefore, includes the construction of models of actors driven by typical motives, carrying out typical actions in typical social settings. While this article's approach is loosely based on the Schutzian method—in that it aims to identify typical structural circumstances and users' typical attitudes, motivations, and actions—it also departs from Schutz in two ways. First, it gives greater prominence to material and social structures and to their influence on actors' experiences than Schutz's approach. Second, this article preserves these typical aspects in their multiplicity, rather than tying them together to construct a single ideal-typical figure of "the" Tinder user (as Schutz, 1964a, did for the stranger).

This article draws on previous scholarship on Tinder, but not on any genuine empirical study. While a (materialist) phenomenological inquiry certainly can involve empirical work, it does not necessarily have to, since its aim is to construct actors' typical motives and actions in typical configurations (Schutz, 1962). As far as previous studies provide clues (albeit decontextualized ones) for discerning Tinder users' typical external circumstances, motivations, and actions, they may inform a phenomenologically oriented interpretation, despite having different research questions, conceptualizations, and theoretical backgrounds.[2] On the upside, drawing on a wide selection of research means being able to cover a broader range of findings than any sole study could provide.

To offer a materialist phenomenological assessment of the Tinder experience, this article will thus first delineate the social context, including the relevant and typical aspects for Tinder users. The broader context affecting their experiences includes the mediatization of everyday life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), the transformation of online dating in the 2010s, the interfacial features of the Tinder app, and the growing power of algorithms working behind the visual interface. The next chapter will analyze how these objective and material structures feed into user experiences, and argues that this can be accomplished by unearthing the (imagined) affordances of the platform. This is due to the fact that structural mechanisms, interfacial features, and algorithms do not have a structuring power on their own, but rely on users' perceptions to unfold. The imagined affordances of the application, as user-generated responses to external circumstances, include the dominance of visuality (the "swipe logic;" David & Cambre, 2016), ghosting (Narr & Luong, 2023), perceiving the app's algorithm as manipulatory, and the fostering of addictive behavior (Narr, 2022b). The subsequent chapter will examine if, how, and to what extent users are able to reflect on or resist certain negative tendencies inherent on Tinder. By relying on Habermas's (1984, 1987) conception of the life-world, special attention will be given to the

specific life-world resources that are available to actors for these purposes. The subsequent section will argue that research findings point toward inherent and fundamental dualisms in the experience of users: superficiality and depth, reflectivity and visceral affectivity, as well as instrumental attitudes and striving for committed relations perceived as genuine. The final chapter draws a number of conclusions in the context of the mediatization and colonization of the life-world and interprets the mediatization of dating as a complex and ambivalence process.

Mediatization of the Life-World and the Power of Algorithms on Tinder

If online daters, and Tinder users specifically, are to be interpreted typically, the first necessary step is to outline the sociotechnical and material context of online dating. In this regard, the mediatization of everyday life is highly relevant. However, to include these novel processes into phenomenological investigation, a materialist phenomenological approach must be taken. The primary question from a phenomenological viewpoint is how actors construct knowledge that enables them to ascribe meaning and order to social actions and, more generally, to social reality. Classic phenomenological theories—even when they take some elements of the social environment into consideration—attribute the meaningful construction of reality essentially to the activities of pragmatic individuals and their face-to-face interactions (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). In light of media's growing importance in human actors' processes of sense-making, such a view is rather reductive. The significance of media highlights the need to move from conventional phenomenological theory to a materialist phenomenology that allows for a joint analysis of human sense-making, as well as media technologies and infrastructure (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 5–7; Hepp, 2019, p. 10). The concept of mediatization refers to the role of media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in processes of sociocultural change, and to their growing importance for various social spheres and everyday life structures and interactions (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). There are far-reaching implications of the mediatization of the life-world. Media are not neutral, and the growing reliance of communication on media, ICT, and various tools and apps has an effect on actors' knowledge, interactional styles, structures, and content.

Mediatization in the present,[3] broadly speaking, refers to the growing significance of online dating sites and applications in partner selection, as highlighted by various studies (Newett et al., 2018, p. 353; Rosenfeld, 2018; Rosenfeld et al., 2019; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). The internet has gradually become the most important factor in establishing intimate relationships in the United States, displacing traditional matchmaking institutions and mediators such as friends, educational institutions, workplace, church, and family (Rosenfeld et al., 2019, pp. 13, 15; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012, p. 530). However, the recent mediatization of dating is more than that, since online dating today is embedded in what Zuboff (2019) has called surveillance capitalism. According to this view, corporate providers of online platforms and solutions aim to exploit users to maximize their profits by collecting and analyzing as much user data as possible (cf. Narr, 2022b, p. 5343). The rise of surveillance capitalism in the context of online dating signals a shift: While in the 2000s, the landscape of online dating was dominated by websites such as OkCupid or match.com accessible through PCs, the 2010s saw the rise of dating apps primarily used on touchscreen phones. This shift has had profound consequences. As they can be used in various locations, smartphones and their applications cultivate different data (passive, ubiquitous, and habitual) than websites (deliberate and circumscribed in terms of time and space), which leads to different data cultures (Albury et al., 2017, pp. 3–4). In this new environment, users are enticed to become habituated to their apps to generate an abundance of various types of data for companies to collect and analyze. With the advent of geolocated applications on touchscreen phones, the possibilities of gathering data have multiplied (Albury et al., 2017; Narr, 2022b).

By, first, creating pleasant, stimulating, exciting, immersive, or "fun" interfaces, and, second, employing specific algorithms, the profit-oriented providers of online platforms and services lure users into regular app use to extract data from them. As for Tinder, its usage and interfacial features are well known: After registering, signing in, creating their profile, and uploading their pictures, users can view each other's profile cards and swipe left or right. A left swipe implies dislike and a right swipe indicates interest. Having mutually liked each other's profiles, users get connected and can start to chat. Profile cards are dominated by pictures rather than textual information, and there is no possibility to apply fine-grained filters, only age, geographical distance, and preferred gender. The sequence of profile cards and simple yes or no questions is designed to make Tindering a seamless and gamified experience (Grigoriadis, 2014). However, there is secrecy regarding what actually happens beneath the user interface, since contemporary dating companies only give hints, but do not reveal how their algorithms actually work.

Algorithms—understood as formalized models of a series of computational operations—are an integral part of this process. They are at work wherever digital data generated by users need to be processed, sorted, and analyzed to make automated decisions, to aid human decision-making (Ságvári, 2017, p. 64), and, finally, to make a profit (Narr, 2022b). In fact, algorithms are everywhere: from medicine to crime prevention, risk assessment, traffic control, governance, the economy, and online search suggestions (Peeters & Schuilenburg, 2021), to generating playlists and recommendations on music streaming platforms (cf. Barna, 2017) or

curating social media feeds (Hogan, 2010). Algorithms structure what information is available (and in what order) for users to perceive and interpret. In this way, they structure social interactions, but without human actors being (fully) aware of this.

One of the most important questions regarding the principles of Tinder's algorithm is how and in what order the app displays profile propositions to its users. The algorithms of dating apps such as Tinder work in a different way than those of dating websites in the 2000s and early 2010s. As Narr (2022b, p. 5341) has highlighted, "Popular dating websites—such as OkCupid.com, Match.com, and eHarmony—recommend users according to algorithms ostensibly designed to make good matches from questions users deliberately answer for that purpose." In the case of OkCupid, it was a "match percentage algorithm" that helped users to select promising profiles and to overcome information overload. The working principles and intentions of Tinder's algorithm are, however, much more opaque. While users may specify their preferences regarding age, gender, and geographical distance, the free version of the application does not display the profiles of all potential partners corresponding to these criteria. David and Cambre (2016, p. 5) have demonstrated experimentally that the app proposes only a limited number of profiles to non-paying users, which are selected and ordered according to the platform's algorithm. It is fair to assume that the algorithm determines whose profiles users see, at what time, in what order and, consequently, who gets to match with whom (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018, p. 7), but how exactly is unclear. By way of the experience sampling method, Courtois and Timmermans (2018) have been able to infer some basic properties of Tinder's algorithm. While dating websites' algorithms were designed to provide good matches for online daters (Narr, 2022b, p. 5341), Courtois and Timmermans stress that, for Tinder, user matches and interesting profiles are valuable assets to be protected—and the algorithm does exactly that by regulating how many "interesting" profiles (non-paying) users see in specific intervals, and thus also the number of matches. All this to keep users satisfied but not too satisfied, as both offering these valuable assets too fast and being too parsimonious with them would lead to decreased user satisfaction[4] and, consequently, to declining revenues (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018, p. 13).[5] The algorithm of Tinder encourages a certain swiping behavior, both restricting and enticing users, while aiming to create a balanced use.

All these objective and material structures—being subjected to data collection in surveillance capitalism, shifts in data cultures, the features of Tinder's interface, and the workings of the app's algorithm—affect and shape the experience of using Tinder. However, these external circumstances do not govern actions directly and automatically. How Tinderers actually act is dependent on how they perceive and interpret the application's affordances. Having examined the typical situational aspects of Tindering, the next chapter will turn to the emergence of affordances, and how they typically influence users.

Imagined Affordances and Tinder's Logic

So far, this analysis has outlined, from an external perspective, the specific sociotechnical and material environment in which online dating apps such as Tinder are embedded, as well as the relevant properties of the app interface and its algorithm. The fact that Tinder's online daters are subjected to data gathering in surveillance capitalism, that the app's interface has specific features, and that interactions are to a great extent organized by algorithms, influences users' attitudes, behavior, and typical swiping strategies. The purpose of the present chapter is to interpret how the interfacial features and algorithms of the app (themselves mediators of the intentions of profit-oriented corporations) shape user experience, and what role actors play in this. After considering the theory of (imagined) affordances, the discussion turns to the imagined affordances of, first, Tinder's user interface, and, second, to those of the app's algorithm.

The theory of affordances, as put forward in recent social media scholarship, is a suitable theoretical tool for explaining how algorithms and interfacial features feed into actors' experience. However, the concept itself originated rather far away from technology and social media studies. It was developed by James J. Gibson to interpret how animals (and, among them, humans) relate to their surroundings. He argues that the "affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson, 2014, p. 119). For animals and humans, elements of the environment, by virtue of their properties, offer the possibility of certain actions relevant for them. And the same object may afford other actions to different species (Gibson, 2014). Affordances are not simply the objective possibilities and restrictions that material objects offer or impose, because they only emerge through a dynamic interaction between perceivers and the environment. They are, therefore, neither solely material qualities or objective properties, nor simply subjective imaginations or mental states: Affordances emerge somewhere between these poles (Gibson, 2014, p. 121). Although the theory of affordances is not an explicitly phenomenological approach, it aligns well with it, as there are obvious parallels. For example, for Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2005, pp. 53, 115, 222), perception is a "living communication with the world," where both poles are active, and the perception of objects is co-constructed by material qualities of things and bodily actors' "intentional arc."

Interestingly, in the context of communication theories, the concept of affordances has, for several years, been used in a rather reductive way. As Nagy and Neff (2015, pp. 2–3) have pointed out, in communication studies, the concept of affordances came to mean the possibilities a technology

offers to its users, with an emphasis on how conscious users utilize technologies, but ignore effects that they are unaware of. Instead, Nagy and Neff have proposed the alternative of "imagined affordances." This reconfiguration of affordance theory—more in line with Gibsonian (2014) thought—situates the emergence of affordances in the dynamic interplay between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations, the materiality and functionality of technologies, and designers' intentions and perceptions of users (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 5). It draws attention to what many previous approaches could not account for: that affordances are to a great deal shaped by perceiving actors, who are not only rational and conscious about the technologies they use, but also have attitudes, expectations, and affects that influence how they engage with media. Whether they are true or not, sentiments and perceptions play a key role in the construction of affordances: Misinterpretations and misperceptions also condition how a technology is seen and thus influence how people act upon it (Nagy & Neff, 2015, pp. 3, 5).

This article takes this concept of imagined affordances as a point of departure to interpret how Tinder influences the experience of its users. Mediatized interactions constitute their own forms of sociality, as previous research has shown (Ekdahl & Osler, 2023; Osler & Zahavi, 2023; Zhao, 2015). As a dating app, Tinder marks a clear shift when compared to classic dating websites in terms of how and for what ends it can be used, what mentality this engenders, and how users relate to the platform and its algorithms. As Narr and Luong (2023, p. 2) have remarked, dating websites promoted a more rational approach to dating because they allow for more fine-tuned and detailed partner search parameters, while dating apps, and especially Tinder, only offer limited possibilities for partner selection (preferred age, gender, distance), which restricts (but not eliminates) user rationality and puts greater emphasis on the affective aspect of the experience. Dating websites, in their heyday, were mediatized dating markets promoting a market mentality, a consumerist stance toward possible partners.

The imagined affordances of Tinder are perceived and shaped by users in relation to the app's interface features and algorithm. The simplicity of the interface (visuality and plain likes and dislikes, as described in the previous chapter) enables users to pursue various ends. Numerous studies have explored the motivations of Tinder users, and despite the different terms describing these, the results obtained for young people in the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands are remarkably similar: The main motivations of Tinder users are finding a romantic relationship, self-validation, hooking up, meeting new people, curiosity, ease of use, excitement, and fun (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016, pp. 6−7; LeFebvre, 2018; Newett et al., 2018, p. 352; Palmer, 2020; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017, pp. 71−73; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018; Tyson et al., 2016, pp. 6−7; van Hooff, 2020; Ward, 2017, pp. 1649−1650). There may be differences between genders (a relative preference of men for casual sexual encounters), countries, and age groups (younger users typically prefer hook-ups over finding a romantic relationship, while adults are more likely to look for committed relations; Christensen, 2021, p. 3). As Illouz (2019, p. 78) has noted, "Tinder can offer just quick, disposable sex or the possibility to meet a 'dream woman,' thus suggesting a multiform and undefined range of possibilities between these two extremes."

A significant further affordance of Tinder's interface is that it visualizes the "pool" of potential partners. Whether it visualizes the whole pool is debatable (David & Cambre, 2016, p. 5), but it unquestionably displays a larger proportion of possible partners than everyday face-to-face interactions. This is not a completely novel feature, as it was also offered by dating websites. But while they visualized a relationship market for relatively conscious daters who set out to increase their romantic benefits (Illouz, 2007; Narr & Luong, 2023, p. 2), it is much less obvious what pool dating apps such as Tinder display. Precisely because of the multiplicity of user motives, Tinder's pool should not be considered purely as a dating market, but a mixture of persons looking to find a romantic relation, to date, to hook up, to get self-validation, and so on. As a result, users may not be sure what the pool represents. Illouz (2019, pp. 74–86) calls this phenomenon "frame confusion" or "frame uncertainty," where actors are uncertain which script they should follow. Because of this, Tinderers have to allocate additional cognitive resources to find out whether their own and their (possible) matches' intentions converge to a satisfactory degree—negotiating these may be imbued with a variety of affects, from cheerfulness and playfulness to cynicism, anxiety, insecurity, or hostility.

Above all, Tinder's interface is also closely intertwined with and affords a visual logic. The app—by displaying "swipeable" profile cards dominated by visual appearances—affords a strong visual logic. This has led David and Cambre (2016, pp. 5–9) to coin the term "swipe logic," which is characterized by the centrality of visuality (appearances matter) and by speediness (ability of users to rapidly swipe left or right, thereby immersing themselves in a virtually infinite stream of potential matches). Acceleration reduces the field of perception to easily decodable visual cues of attractiveness (David & Cambre, 2016, p. 5). However, the specific significance of the dominance of visuality is more complex than previous scholarship would suggest. A range of critical scholars have stressed, in relation to a multitude of topics, that the dominance of visuality in modernity is not socially neutral: An exposure to the surveilling gaze of others is said to imply subordination, while the dominant position supposedly belongs to the holder of the gaze (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1980; Jay, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991; Mulvey, 1975). With respect to Tinder, this would mean that acceleration and excessive visuality push users of Tinder to objectify others, where objectification refers to treating people as quasi-objects to be viewed and evaluated

based upon bodily appearances (Rollero & de Piccoli, 2017). However, this view proves to be problematic in two ways. First, on Tinder, there are certain groups (for example, minority racial groups or nonbinary people) who are largely avoided by mainstream Caucasians because of consciously or unconsciously held stereotypes, resulting in much fewer "likes" and, consequently, matches for members of these groups. People belonging to minority races or having nonmainstream sexual orientations are thus made virtually invisible on Tinder (Narr, 2022a). Therefore, it is not those who are subjected to the objectifying gaze of others, but those who are made invisible in this sense who occupy the most disadvantaged position on the platform—they are not even objectified, meaning they are effectively not "part of the game" (Narr, 2022a).

Second, and regarding those users who are "part of the game," who are gazed upon, the power relations are not as clear-cut as previous scholarship suggests. There are, of course, aspects that seem to confirm the equation of visuality and dominance. The objectification of others is perfectly in line with developers' intentions—former chief executive officer (CEO) Sean Rad compared using Tinder to a casting process where users are the directors saying "yes" or "no" to potential partners (Grigoriadis, 2014)—and many users are attracted by this possibility. As one of Illouz's (2019, p. 124) interviewees stated: "[T]here is something exhilarating about swiping right and left. It gives a feeling of power. I think the designers of Tinder work on this feeling. You have a feeling of omnipotence on your romantic destiny." However, the affordance of the swipe logic, as mediated by users' perceptions, also has a typical unintentional effect. Users who feel part of the game not only tend to objectify others but also themselves, meaning they judge themselves according to their physical appearance. The reason for this is that they are aware that others perceive them in this way. The objectifying gaze directed at others and self-objectification are mutually reinforcing. This is true for both men and women, because Tinder and other online dating apps expose men to the objectifying gaze of others. As a result, men also tend to objectify their bodies (Strubel & Petrie, 2017).

There are other features of the app interface with paradoxical consequences. Tinder makes "ghosting" relatively simple, meaning that users can easily end communication and contact with their matches, without any warning or justification. On one side, ghosting may be a convenient solution to certain problems: If users ghost others, they can avoid conflicts, which they would not be able to do if they had to explain why they do not want to continue interacting with or dating the other (Narr & Luong, 2023). However, ghosting others is a different case than the experience of being ghosted, and most users have such experiences. No matter how much energy or creativity users have put into their messages, there is a risk that seemingly promising interactions can end at any time (Narr & Luong, 2023, p. 10). Having experienced this multiple times, disheartened users will become disillusioned, contact each other out of boredom, and send each other generic messages, which leads to boring conversations and to more and more boredom and ghosting. Tinder, according to Narr and Luong (2023), is saturated with the affective mood of boredom and disillusion—especially on the part of people who are looking for a committed romantic relationship and have not succeeded for a while. The affordance of ghosting in its dynamic relation to actors leads to the prevailing atmosphere of boredom on Tinder.

The affordances of the interfacial features of Tinder are apparent to online daters, and so it is no surprise that they are relatively aware of them. In contrast, Tinder's algorithmic workings are much more opaque—most users are not even aware of them (Narr, 2022b, p. 5344), and it is much harder to reflect upon or influence them. Nevertheless, algorithms have a significant effect on Tinder's affordances. To assess how they feed into the app's imagined affordances, it is necessary, again, to differentiate between traditional websites and dating apps such as Tinder. As mentioned in the previous chapter, dating websites' algorithms were designed to provide valuable matches, and they were more transparent to users (by and large, users understood how, for example, OkCupid's matching score algorithm worked). Users valued this and were trusting of the algorithm (Narr, 2022b, pp. 5344–5345). Conversely, Tinder's (and other dating apps') algorithms are of a proprietary nature. As shown in the previous chapter, Tinder's proprietary algorithm is supposed to stimulate a certain degree of activity by luring users out of potential states of passivity and discouraging them to overuse the app, to keep them relatively but not wholly satisfied (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018). The aim is for users to generate data to be collected and analyzed, and to create incentives for buying a subscription. Consequently, the imagined affordances of Tinder's algorithm are markedly different from those of OkCupid in the 2000s, for instance. Tinder's algorithm is perceived mainly negatively. Based on interviews and a close analysis of Reddit forums, Narr (2022b) has concluded that Tinder's algorithm is imagined as being manipulative and fostering addictive swiping patterns. Users believe that the very purpose of the app's algorithm is to manipulate them into buying a subscription, and that it is designed to get people addicted (Narr, 2022b, pp. 5347–5348). While these perceptions are not completely unfounded—one purpose of the algorithm, as can be inferred indirectly, is to keep users active—such algorithmic imaginaries do not take into consideration that the Tinder algorithm not only entices activity, but also aims to prevent excessive swiping behavior (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018). Moreover, subscriptions are just one way the company monetizes on its users, the other being the gathering, analysis, and exploitation of user data. These blind spots in the imagined affordances of the Tinder algorithm are most likely due to the mistrust generated by the secrecy surrounding it. Nevertheless, the fact that this algorithm is imagined as addictive and

manipulatory shapes user attitudes, moods, and behavior, as evidenced in widespread cynicism, resignation, or irritation among users (Narr, 2022b). All in all, these algorithmic workings are much less apparent to online daters than the interfacial features. And it is even less clear to them how the imagined affordances of the Tinder algorithm (envisioned as being manipulatory and addictive) contribute to their own sentiments of cynicism, resignation, and irritation—and to enticing them to keep using the platform precisely through dissatisfaction (Narr, 2022b). The next chapter will turn to the question whether users are able to mitigate these negatively perceived tendencies.

Everyday Practices for Mitigating the Negative Effects of Using Tinder

The previous chapters have highlighted several negative tendencies on Tinder: rendering certain groups invisible, users objectifying others and themselves, the prevailing atmosphere of boredom and cynicism on the platform, the tendency of ghosting, and users' frustration-infused imaginations of the Tinder algorithm. Users are, at least partly, aware of these problems, and often try to mitigate their effects with the means in their possession. The following chapter aims to interpret these strategies.

In everyday life, actors rely on their sedimented knowledge, accumulated by participating in pragmatic situations of action and interaction with others over the years (Schutz, 1962). While Schutz certainly admits that interactions create intersubjective knowledge, he does not draw all the possible conclusions. Contrarily, Jürgen Habermas's (1987, pp. 140–144) concept of the life-world (itself influenced by Schutz) provides a suitable tool to understand how the life-world, as the intersubjective social world, can provide various kinds of resources for actors aiming to act in various situations. As Habermas stresses, the myriad life-world interactions[6] can be divided into three different types of reproduction processes. Cultural reproduction ensures the continuity of the knowledge needed for everyday actions; social reproduction ensures that the norms necessary for organizing social relations in a legitimate way are reproduced; and, finally, socialization ensures that the interactive capabilities necessary for a competent and responsible actor are passed on from one generation to the next (Habermas, 1987, pp. 140–141). Without stretching the Habermasian theory too far, the third dimension can be interpreted to include processes of self-socialization as well, namely self-reflection. This article argues that knowledge (typifications, categorizations, schemes for action, and so on), social norms, and the capacity for self-reflection are resources not only for the conduct of ordinary, routine-like actions, but also to interpret and, possibly, overcome problems in various contexts, including online dating.

Life-world knowledge, despite processes of mediatization, shows signs of continuity. This is evident in users applying life-world typification when using Tinder (Ward, 2017, pp. 1653−1654) as they are unconsciously seeking homophily.[7] Certain attributes such as age are self-evident, while typifications are used to discern traits such as personality type, education level, style, or socioeconomic status (Ward, 2017, pp. 1653−1654). Moreover, users of Tinder are presumed to have preliminary knowledge about different types of women/men and their typical attributes: what characterizes their actions, motivations, and to what extent they find a certain type attractive. Accordingly, van Hooff (2020, p. 117) notes that the men in her study were always looking for cues and signs to draw more holistic conclusions about women—more specifically, whether they were suitable for long-term committed relations or casual sex. All this points to the continuity of the life-world knowledge necessary for orientation in everyday life. However, online dating also necessitates the creation of new knowledge (based on existing knowledge) to interpret the self-representations of others, and, possibly, to identify personal types to which actors feel attracted to (or not). These latter typifications are certainly mobilized when users reflect upon others who violate everyday norms of decency.

Let us now turn to the question of whether and how users can mitigate—by applying their life-world resources—certain negative aspects of Tinder's affordances. A key affordance of Tinder is the swipe logic. As noted by David and Cambre (2016), the swipe logic promotes the instrumentalization and commodification of potential partners on the part of self-objectifying users. However, a large proportion of users and non-users are (at least to some extent) aware of the workings of the swipe logic and are critical of it. For example, Narr (2022a) has observed that many Redditors discussing the algorithms of various apps were frustrated because they had a desire to be seen on dating applications, but were, according to their interpretation, rendered invisible by the algorithms. Consequently, they were trying hard to "discern what algorithms want in order to become more visible" (Narr, 2022a, p. 78). Furthermore, many non-users or former users reject the visual regime of Tinder, that is, the primacy of superfluous traits, while active users often criticize the app's one-dimensionality. Even those who felt themselves visible on the platform were critical of it. For example, according to an interviewee (female) of Newett et al. (2018, p. 357), the visual logic of Tinder prioritizes an instrumental orientation above emotions. Another interviewee (male) noted that he looks for the same physical traits both online and in "real" life, but nonetheless bemoaned the absence of a certain "vibe" created by physical copresence that can alter judgments of individuals deemed unattractive when compared to one's explicit preferences (Newett et al., 2018, p. 356). Some of Palmer's (2020, p. 135) interviewees lamented Tinder's provision of too large a pool of potential partners and too many choices. There are also users who perceive Tinder as something of a "meat market" with a dominant hook-up culture in which they participate, while secretly

hoping to find a romantic partner (Christensen, 2021, p. 11). A female interviewee of Palmer (2020, pp. 136–137, 140) complained that using Tinder led her to be disillusioned with love, and two male subjects stated that while they use Tinder to initiate casual sexual encounters, they do not like that this makes sex more and more meaningless for them. Moreover, Olivera-La Rosa et al. (2019) note that swiping decisions are not only based on perceptions of physical attractiveness, since users looking at photos with discernible faces also make judgments based on perceptions of moral character. As such, first impressions extracted from faces are linked to judgments about physical attractivity and, beyond that, judgments on moral character. All this suggests that while invisibility, (self-)objectification and superficiality are real and immanent problems of Tinder, many users are reflexively aware of the visual regime and the swipe logic and how it negatively affects them.

These criticisms reveal that Tinderers reflecting on the app draw on their knowledge about themselves and the life-world norms of reciprocity, which prescribes treating people as individuals, rather than as objects, and, on a more fundamental level, to acknowledge their existence. This is a sign of the continuity and legitimacy of these life-world norms. But it could be argued that the scope of these critical reflections is limited, since they may just be kept to oneself, or discussed among friends, acquaintances, family, and perhaps on online forums. While being aware of the swipe logic (and discussing it with others) may or may not mitigate its negative effects on the individual, these criticisms almost never translate to changes in the app.[8]

The affordance of ghosting is a double-edged sword, as it can conveniently serve one's own needs, while also causing much harm if one is ghosted. The norms of common courtesy and mutual respect are important for the stability of everyday life (Giddens, 1984, p. 64; Goffman, 1956; Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014), and ghosting is a breach of them. Paradoxically, most users have experienced the negative consequences of ghosting, but nevertheless report having ghosted others before. Reasons for doing so include boredom, cynicism, or experiences of negative reactions (mostly by men) to honest explanations of why they did not wish to move forward (Narr & Luong, 2023). It is clear that users' (self-)reflectivity is limited here. On one hand, many of them bemoan instances where they were ghosted by others—this itself is a sign that they consider reciprocal life-world norms to be legitimate. On the other hand, since the app makes it compellingly easy to ghost others, this reflectivity most likely will not lead to changes in users' behavior, and therefore the norms of decency are, effectively, not generalized.

As a further negative tendency, Tinder as a platform is infamous for unwanted sexual solicitations, as well as sexist and hostile messages (Narr & Luong, 2023, p. 2; Thompson, 2018). While such breaches of civility are also present in "offline" encounters, they are easier to carry out through the app due to its affordances. Countermeasures on the part of affected individuals include blocking the other or ridiculing them on other platforms (Brightwell, 2019; Hess & Flores, 2018). Regarding the latter, the alarming frequency of toxic masculine performances on Tinder (Thompson, 2018) has led to the creation of Instagram pages dedicated to the subversion of the power relations between the genders (such as "Tinder Nightmares" or "Feminist Tinder") by ridiculing such practices (Brightwell, 2019; Hess & Flores, 2018). Inherent in these posts are, again, norms of reciprocity and typification knowledge of how to identify misogynistic males. One declared purpose of these pages is "education," since they aim to show, by the power of ridicule, how not to behave. Certainly, the scope of these pages is larger than in the case of reflection in private circles, but whether they can attain their educational goal of changing the behavior of males who are showing signs of toxic masculinity is debatable.

The interfacial features of Tinder, such as the swipe logic or the ease of ghosting, are relatively apparent to users, and it is no wonder that many have vocal opinions on them, or try to resist them with the means at their disposal. The algorithmic workings of the app are, however, much harder to comprehend. If users intend to reflect on Tinder's algorithm, they need to create new knowledge—however, the strategies of resistance generated by this novel knowledge may often be problematic. This is exemplified in the case of certain tech-savvy users of Tinder, who try to interpret and counter its algorithm. Because the Tinder algorithm is proprietary, Redditors have to imagine how it works and what its effects on user behavior are. A central element of their interpretation is that the algorithm is exploitative, manipulatory, and addictive, and because of that they try to outsmart it. How to "game" the algorithm is, as Narr (2022b) explains, one of the most important questions of subreddits dedicated to Tinder. One strategy often mentioned by Redditors is to swipe left excessively (also on people users find attractive to increase their purported attractivity score), because they believe that they will see more attractive profiles this way (Narr, 2022b, p. 5350). This strategy is somewhat counterproductive, as it shows signs of an instrumental attitude toward others and to oneself: Swiping left on others just to increase the attractivity score of oneself is to treat others simply as means to an end (whether this strategy is successful or not) and to suppress one's own inclinations. The instrumental tendencies inherent in strategies of outsmarting the app do not contribute to changes in its logic; they only reinforce the culture of instrumental mentality also present in pick-up lines, generic messages, and misogynist tendencies.

Paradoxically, research has shown that distrust in online dating algorithms (displayed, for example, by Redditors striving to outsmart the Tinder algorithm) may be associated with a lower probability of success on the app. Based on a quantitative study, Sharabi has pointed out that online daters who were more trusting of the respective app's algorithm were more likely to find a partner (Sharabi, 2021, p. 942).

The reason for this was that "believing in algorithms was associated with communication behaviors and perceptions that are known to function as catalysts for successful relationship development in person" (Sharabi, 2021, p. 942). Research participants inclined to self-disclosure trusted the algorithm more and had a larger chance to find a partner on the app they used. This signals the power of trust, (self-perceived) honest interactions, and communicative action (Habermas, 1984), rather than the instrumental attitudes put forward in strategies of gaming Tinder. However, the wide spread of instrumental attitudes and strategies signals disturbances in the reproduction of interactive skills.

To sum up, users of Tinder are often aware of its rather gloomy tendencies, and try to reflect upon and resist them. However, their criticisms and strategies to counter Tinder are limited in terms of their resources, scope, and effect. Other strategies may, by their very nature, be misguided, as they display instrumental attitudes. The present and previous chapters have highlighted several paradoxes and types of ambivalence in the Tinder experience. The next chapter turns to the question of how to interpret these.

Dualisms in the Tinder Experience

So far, this examination has uncovered the typical external circumstances of using Tinder (mediatization and the algorithmic governance of dating), the typical imagined affordances of the app, users' typical attitudes and moods, as well as the possibilities and limitations of reflection and criticism. These findings also highlight the ambivalence of the Tinder experience, as expressed in a number of dualisms. The dualisms include the opposition between the algorithm's aim to restrict users and keep them active and their own needs, the dualism between trust and distrust, the desire for quality matches and counterproductive instrumental strategies, alongside the need for courtesy and the frequent lack thereof. This chapter will thus seek to explore the inherent ambivalence of the Tinder experience by unearthing not the thematic oppositions mentioned above but the more fundamental contradictions.

All the affordances of the application—whether restrictions or possibilities, interfacial features or algorithms, or the way they are perceived, interpreted, conceived, and felt by users—point toward three fundamental dualisms in user experience. Users oscillate between the opposing extreme poles of three dichotomous pairs: superficiality versus depth, reflectivity and rationality versus emotions and affectivity, and instrumental mentality versus striving for long-term relations felt as genuine. Swiping is characterized by the duality of superficiality and depth. Superficiality stems from the visual logic of Tinder's interface, which prompts users to swipe left or right, mostly on the basis of profile photos (David & Cambre, 2016). People's worth on the app is, to a large extent, simply a matter of looks. However, the ability of users to infer a number of other attributes from profile images makes the process less superficial, since it both supposes and mobilizes complex, albeit often tacit and unreflected lifeworld knowledge (Ward, 2017). Users not only look for physical attractiveness, but also make judgments based on perceptions of moral character (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2019). Moreover, users of Tinder are presumed to have preliminary ideas about different types of women/men and their typical attributes: what characterizes their actions, motivations, and to what extent they find a certain type attractive. Accordingly, van Hooff (2020, p. 117) notes that the men in her study were always looking for cues and signs to draw more holistic conclusions about women—more specifically, whether they were suitable for long-term committed relations or casual sex. Because they make holistic assessments of other people possible (Krüger & Spilde, 2020, p. 1407), dating apps reinvigorate the "gut feeling." In other words, Tinder is a curious amalgam of superficiality and (latent) depth.

A second fundamental dualism in the experience of Tinder is that users constantly oscillate between states of reflectivity and rationality on one hand, and their visceral emotions on the other. Rationality here is understood merely as a reflective assessment or setting of criteria, while emotions refer to unreflected affects and impulses. On one hand, Tinder users are expected to be reflexive, aware of their own preferences, and capable of responding to questions such as "What gender am I interested in?," "What is the maximum geographical distance that I find acceptable?," "What is the preferable age of my partner?," "What kind of person am I seeking and for what reason?," "What kind of people am I attracted to/repulsed by?," "What traits (as depicted by photos and self-presentations) characterize the former/latter?," "What kind of images should I upload?," What kind of "information should I provide in order to make a favorable impression on people that I find attractive?." Whereas in "offline" everyday life, we are less reflective of our preferences and our ideas of effective self-presentation, using Tinder proficiently supposes new competencies (Hess & Flores, 2018, p. 1089; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017, p. 82). However, unlike several dating websites, Tinder does not allow users to filter searches by more fine-grained criteria (e.g., education level, occupation, skin color, religion, and so on)—so the algorithm offers matches solely based on geographical distance, age, and gender (Ward, 2017, p. 1648), and possibly on the attractivity score unknown to the user (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018, p. 6; Narr & Luong, 2023, p. 12). This, in comparison with the dating websites of the 2000s, reduces the role of reflectivity and compels users to make more "intuitive" and visceral decisions when evaluating profile images and short introductory texts. To some extent, the much-criticized swipe logic also counteracts rationality, as Tinder requires simple yes or no choices (swipe right or left) from users, and leaves no room for in-between options, shifting the emphasis to impulsivity and affectivity in decision-making.[9] While Tinder puts greater emphasis on visceral and affect-driven decisions, it does not rule out reflectivity. The degree of

users' rationality may differ according to their goals; if someone seeks a long-term love relationship, for example, they may prioritize "smart" decisions, while others only looking for a hook-up may just go with the first willing person they find attractive. However, even a higher degree of rationality needs affectivity (i.e., a smart dating decision will require one to consider one's own and the other's emotions), and even visceral decisions require some degree of reflectivity (conscious strategies for hooking up). Tinder users are constantly torn between rationality and affects, and these conflicting motives shape the unique experience of the app.

The third fundamental dualism concerns how people relate to others (and by implication to themselves): Whether they consider them to be mere means to achieve their selfish ends, or as genuine individuals with their own needs who deserve to be engaged with in an honest way. This duality is by no means a novel phenomenon initiated by dating apps, and adherents of critical theory have referred to the primacy of instrumental thinking in modernity under various labels (Habermas, 1984; Horkheimer, 2014). Habermas (1984, pp. 285–286), for example, draws a distinction between strategic and communicative action. The former considers other actors simply as means (or as obstacles) to egoistically set ends. Strategic action only regards other people's feelings and needs if they are relevant to reaching the goal at hand. Therefore, strategic action is not only bound up with deception and Machiavellianism, but also with the objectification and, possibly, the dehumanization of others, as well as with various forms of oppression. During communicative action, however, actors cooperate with each other to mutually define and interpret the situation at hand (in terms of truth, moral rightness, and authenticity). While communicative action in itself does not guarantee more humane relations, it at least renders them possible. If people treat each other merely as instruments for satisfying their own needs, they will not be able to establish relationships they perceive as committed and genuine, even if this is a self-declared goal. A life-word permeated by strategic action—which in the least-worst case would be restricted to the spheres of politics and the economy—would thus be a pathological one indeed (Habermas, 1987).

The instrumental attitude central to (late) modern societies is clearly present and further enhanced on Tinder (and other dating apps), as evidenced by the predominance of visuality and the swiping logic. Strategic tendencies on Tinder are apparent in efforts to outsmart the app algorithm, in generic hook-up and conversational lines, in rendering certain groups invisible, in tendencies of (self-)objectification, and in the treatment of others simply as flesh. Tinder's very logic enables users to perceive others simply as (possible) means to satisfy their goals (for example, sexual needs, the need for positive feedback, or the need to find a "trophy" partner who will function as a status symbol), even if these needs are quite often left unfulfilled (as evidenced in not getting matches, not reaching out to the other after a match, dates not going the way one expects, being ghosted, and so on). The application's visual logic reinforces this attitude in everyone, regardless of gender, age, or sexual orientation, and reduces other individuals to bodies or simply body parts to be consumed (Illouz, 2019). Since the instrumental mentality leads to systematically distorted communication (Habermas, 1984, pp. 332–333), its prevalence not only thwarts the possibility of committed relations to others, but also that of genuine knowledge of oneself and the realization and articulation of one's real needs. While Tinder is imbued with an instrumental attitude toward others—which also creeps into users' relations to themselves—many users also clearly have a need to find long-term intimate relationships. This is manifested in the previously cited critiques of Tinder's visual logic and users' attempts to resist it. Strategic action may be counterproductive here. The fact that users willing to engage in self-disclosure are more likely to have dates evaluated as successful and to find a partner serves as evidence of the power of communicative action in online dating (Sharabi, 2021). Communicative action and acts of self-disclosure perceived as authentic draw on life-world resources (norms of reciprocity, knowledge of others and oneself, self-reflection, interactive skills, and so on). However, the spread of strategic attitudes and behavior—or, as Habermas (1987) puts it, the colonization of the life-world by system spheres such as the economy—in contemporary life-worlds may be a threat to these cognitive, moral, emotional, and self-reflective resources. Tinder and dating apps are no exception: While they do not make communicative action impossible, many of their affordances foster rather instrumental attitudes and actions.

Although related, the dualisms of superficiality and depth, reflexivity and intuitive affectuality, and instrumentality and communicative action are fundamental in that none of these pairs can be reduced to any of the others. For instance, practicing depth in the perception and evaluation of others while swiping does not necessarily translate into the ability to form committed relations, since the typifications used in perception may be indebted to instrumentality (classifying women in misogynist terms, stereotypical categories of certain racial groups, and so on). In addition, rationalism, conceived here purely as reflexivity and deliberate thought, may either stem from an instrumental/strategic rationality imbued with a tendency to (self)objectification, or from a communicative rationality paired with the ability to reflect on one's needs and connect to others. The counterpart of reflexivity, namely affectual impulses, is also variegated. This pole may include a variety of emotions, from excitement, sexual desire, romantic affection, boredom, frustration, and hostility to cynicism—which is why affectivity in itself does not lead to perceived authenticity in intimate relations. Furthermore, an instrumental attitude toward others may be rational or not: It may be intertwined with a reflected, rationalized strategy or be simply applied in a habitually and unreflected manner to satisfy unreflected needs.

Tinderers may oscillate between the extremes of superficiality and depth, rationality and emotions, and instrumentality

and the need for long-term relations perceived as mutually genuine and committed. For users of Tinder, being subjected to these oppositions may be demanding, even more so as there is no single dichotomy but three sets of extreme poles. Further research is needed to shed light on and interpret how actors cope with this ambivalence. However, from a theoretical point of view, several strategies are conceivable. For example, some may try to establish a balance between the various poles: paying attention to looks, but also trying to evaluate the profile, being rational and emotional at the same time, and not giving up their selfish goals while still trying to find "true love." Alternatively, users may try to settle permanently on one or the other poles: making constantly "smart" or affect-driven decisions, or only aiming to satisfy sexual needs and treating others as mere bodies, and so on. Whether these constant states (balancing in between or sticking to one or more extremes) are possible is an open question, as all the affordances of Tinder work against them. Others may try to construct the poles as temporal differences—for instance, a hook-up indebted to instrumental logic may lead, after a certain time, to a committed relationship. Still others may just give in to the flow and oscillate constantly, according to their moods and drives, between the extremes of the three fundamental dualisms. These contradictions and the underlying uncertainties lead to the final question, namely whether dating apps enable people to establish meaningful and engaged romantic relations.

Conclusion

This article, as a novel contribution, interpreted the experience of Tinder from a materialist phenomenological point of view, against the background of the mediatization of the life-world and shifts in how online platforms cultivate data and monetize on their users. It questioned how the application's affordances are created in the dynamic relation between developers/owners, interfacial features, algorithms, and users, and how the imagined affordances influence actors' typical attitudes and actions. The article also scrutinized users' ability to reflect upon the app's affordances and their strategies of resisting certain problems associated with it. The analysis has shown that many Tinderers are aware of the negative tendencies of the application, and that by reflecting on them, they use the cognitive, normative, and self-reflective life-world resources available to them, or create new knowledge. An additional novel contribution of the article is that it further elaborated on the inherent dualisms (superficiality versus depth, rationality versus affectivity, instrumental versus communicative orientation) of the Tinder experience.

As the chapters of this article have shown, owners' and developers' intentions feed into users' attitudes and behavior through the mediation of the application's imagined affordances. It is the interest of the platform's owners to keep users relatively active, and for them not to settle down with one match, but to keep looking. Thus, the generation of analyzable and monetizable data does not come to a halt. The Tinder interface with its captivating flow serves the purpose of attracting users' attention and to habituate them to using the app. The swipe logic (David & Cambre, 2016) as an imagined affordance of the app is shaped by objective properties of the interface (itself being a mediator of corporate interests). The swipe logic manifests in Tinderers' tendency to objectify others and themselves,[10] and to treat others as goods to be consumed. Similarly, the affordance of ghosting is certainly not in opposition to the platform owners'/developers' interests, as ghosting likely results in more swiping and (for the lucky ones) matching. Along with the swipe logic, the affordance of ghosting leads to multiple conversation threads, clichéd interactions, and a sense of blasé and boredom (Narr & Luong, 2023). In a similar manner, surveillance capitalism makes it essential for platform owners aiming to capitalize on users' data to maintain secrecy regarding the workings of their app (Zuboff, 2019). For many users, this secrecy translates into resignation or ignorance, while others who actively try to grasp the algorithm's logic believe it to be manipulatory and prone to generating addictive usage patterns—these imagined algorithmic affordances not only lead to irritation, but also produce instrumentally minded strategies of outsmarting the app (Narr, 2022b).

In all cases, it is apparent that Tinder increases user engagement through dissatisfaction by enticing counterproductive swiping and interactional strategies (Narr, 2022b, p. 5349). The app's interface and algorithm work in tandem to ensure that users do not quit swiping—even though, from a common-sense point of view, it would be in the best interest of users looking for a long-term relationship to simply stop using the app if a promising new person comes along, rather than becoming entangled in multiple interactional (or dating) threads. Such self-limitations would surely run counter to the interests of platform owners, but this option is rarely realized, as all the affordances work against it.

These tendencies highlight that the mediatization of dating is entangled with the colonization of the life-world, albeit in a novel way. Habermas (1987, Chapter VIII), in his diagnosis of (late) modernity, has highlighted that the life-world, being the home of communicative action, is endangered by the system spheres of the economy and politics. According to him, systemic processes invade the life-world by infusing everyday interactions with the steering media of system spheres. Money and power permeate the life-world and threaten its reproduction by structuring social relations, norms, and roles according to their logic, rather than through communicative action. That said, this article highlighted a more subtle and less apparent mode of colonizing the life-world. In the context of dating apps such as Tinder, this colonization does not take the form of steering media invading the life-world directly; instead, it is about shaping user behavior, mentalities, and attitudes through perceived affordances created by users in response to app properties serving

corporate interests. This colonization of partner selection has similar effects to the "direct" colonization by money and power: a distortion of communicative action and the promotion of strategic/instrumental attitudes that are counterproductive for everyday actors but monetizable for corporations. What we witness here is how the interests of profit-oriented corporations feed into users' perceptions, their creation of imagined affordances, their emotions, attitudes, and, ultimately, behavior on the platform, with the result that users' behavior and strategies often do not serve their own best interests but those of platform owners.

Mediatization, however, is a complex and ambivalent process, far from being reducible to the tendency of colonization. This because many online daters, as pragmatic life-world actors, are aware of the problems surrounding Tinder or other dating apps. As the article has shown, the interfacial features and affordances of Tinder, although often producing arguably harmful effects, may also lead users to become reflexive and to strive for long-term relations thought of as committed and authentic. By trying to reflect on the logic of the app and to alleviate its negative effects, users rely on the life-world resources available to them. The very dualisms of Tinder (superficiality and depth, reflectivity and affectivity, instrumental and communicative attitudes) make this possible—whether intended by developers and owners or not. To resist the colonization of dating, actors can take advantage of these dualisms. Those looking for long-time romantic relationships should evaluate others' profiles not just based on their looks but more holistically (leaving objectification behind as much as possible). They should strike a balance between rationality and affectivity, making "smart" decisions while considering their emotions, a balance between "sense and sensibility" in times of mediatization. Most importantly, even if users have had experiences of disappointment (for example, being ghosted), they ought not be afraid to disclose themselves and engage in honest interactions with others without much of the instrumental mind-set, and simply stop swiping if someone they consider special comes along.

The analysis, however, has also shown that the scope, resources, and effects of critical engagements of everyday actors are limited. This also constrains the possibilities for taking advantage of the inherent dualisms of Tinder. Any criticism aimed at initiating change or simply to mitigate the negative effects of online dating apps should shun instrumental attitudes and be firmly based on the logic of communicative action. To gain traction, these voices uttering critiques in the spirit of communicative action ought to be strengthened. How this can be achieved is beyond the scope of this article, but it is surely not possible without scholarly education of wider audiences. Whether such initiatives can have a lasting impact is an open question, given the wide spread of instrumental attitudes. Nevertheless, by linking reflexivity and the need for (long-term) emotional bonds perceived as mutual and genuine with a non-instrumental attitude, it may yet be possible to secure a role for emotions in a mediatized world.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dániel Havrancsik, Ádám Havas, Ágoston Fáber, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It was also supported by the project titled "EFOP-3.6.3-VEKOP-16-2017-00007: Young researchers from talented students—Fostering scientific careers in higher education," co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund) within the framework of Programme Széchenyi 2020; also supported by the ÚNKP-22-5-PTE-1453 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

ORCID iD

Viktor Berger https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1263-6722

Notes

1. The market for dating apps is highly segmented. But as it claims the widest user base globally, Tinder provides an ideal platform for studying online dating.
2. It is noteworthy that Schutz himself did not conduct any empirical studies, for example, when outlining the figure of the stranger and constructing the model of the "well informed citizen" (Schutz, 1964a, 1964b). For an explicitly phenomenological inquiry building also on previous findings, see Sik (2021; cf. Havrancsik, 2023).
3. Media, since the invention of writing, have always been important in the constitution of life-worlds (Ayaß, 2014), and especially since the rise of modernity (Couldry & Hepp, 2017); however, this article limits itself to the mediatization processes of the present.
4. Although Tinder's algorithm aims to restrict (non-paying) users' swiping and limits the possible number of likes per day, it also has built-in incentives to keep users active: by prompting them to not settle for one match, but to keep swiping and getting new matches (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018).
5. This is evidenced by the curvilinear (inverted U form) relationship between swiping activity and profile interestingness, as well as swiping activity and matches, meaning that interesting profiles and matches are at their maximum if users are relatively active on the platform but not excessively active (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018, p. 13).
6. Communicative actions, to be precise; see the next chapter.
7. On the relation between social mobility, homophily, and partner selection, see Erát et al. (2022).

8. And even if they seemingly do, the original intentions of these critiques are hijacked by corporate interests. As Krüger and Spilde have noted, Tinder has implemented some features aimed at repairing the damage done by the swipe logic to the ideas of love and romance, for example, the rewind function, the "super like" option, or the ability to see who liked the user. Interestingly, all these features are only available to paying members who are thus able, to some extent, to buy themselves out of the swipe logic. Consequently, Tinder cynically monetizes the persistence of traditional lifeworld norms on dating and romance (Krüger & Spilde, 2020, pp. 1404–1407).
9. This only applies to the free version of the app, since subscribers may revisit profiles on which they previously swiped left and modify their decisions.
10. This tendency of self-objectification is evidenced in the results of Strubel and Petrie (2017), who highlight that users of Tinder (women and men alike) have a higher tendency of self-objectification than non-users of online dating services. They were, to a significant degree, less satisfied with their face and body, more inclined to compare their physical appearance with others, and more prone to being ashamed of their body.

References

Albury, K., Burgess, J., Light, B., Race, K., & Wilken, R. (2017). Data cultures of mobile dating and hook-up apps: Emerging issues for critical social science research. *Big Data & Society*, *4*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717720950

Ayaß, R. (2014). Media structures of the life-world. In M. Staudigl & G. Berguno (Eds.), *Schutzian phenomenology and hermeneutic traditions* (pp. 93–110). Springer.

Barna, E. (2017). "The perfect guide in a crowded musical landscape": Online music platforms and curatorship. *First Monday*, *22*(4). https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6914

Bauman, Z. (2005). From the work ethic to the aesthetic of consumption. In Z. Bauman (Ed.), *Work, consumerism and the new poor* (pp. 23–42). Open University Press.

Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1990). Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe [The Normal Chaos of Love]. *Suhrkamp*.

Brightwell, L. (2019). Feminist Tinder: Young women talk back to harassment online. In D. Ging & E. Siapera (Eds.), *Gender hate online* (pp. 233–251). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96226-9_12

Campbell, C. (1987). *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. Basil Blackwell.

Christensen, M. A. (2021). "Tindersluts" and "Tinderellas": Examining the digital affordances shaping the (hetero)sexual scripts of young womxn on tinder. *Sociological Perspectives*, *64*(3), 432–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121420950756

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments. *Communication Theory*, *23*(3), 191–202. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12019

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.

Courtois, C., & Timmermans, E. (2018). Cracking the Tinder code: An experience sampling approach to the dynamics and impact of platform governing algorithms. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *23*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmx001

David, G., & Cambre, C. (2016). Screened intimacies: Tinder and the swipe logic. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641976

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.

Ekdahl, D., & Osler, L. (2023). Expressive avatars: Vitality in virtual worlds. *Philosophy & Technology*, *36*, 24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-023-00628-5

Erát, D., Huszár, Á., & Füzér, K. (2022). Társadalmi mobilitás és partnerszelekció [Social mobility and mate selection]. In K. Tamás, S. Iván, & T. I. György (Eds.), *Társadalmi Riport 2022* [Social Report 2022] (pp. 93–203). Tárki.

Fáber, Á. (2019). Az autotelikus párkapcsolat és a gyerekvállalás mint "metaprojekt" [The autotelic relation and parenting as a "meta-project"]. *Replika*, *110*, 95–133. https://doi.org/10.32564/110.4

Foucault, M. (1980). The eye of power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (pp. 146–165). Pantheon Books.

Gatter, K., & Hodkinson, K. (2016). On the differences between TinderTM versus online dating agencies: Questioning a myth. An exploratory study. *Cogent Psychology*, *3*(1), 1162414. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2016.1162414

Gibson, J. J. (2014). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315740218

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Polity Press.

Goffman, E. (1956). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Social Science Research Centre, The University of Edinburgh.

Grigoriadis, V. (2014, October 27). Inside Tinder'shookup factory. *Rolling Stone Magazine*. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/inside-tinders-hookup-factory-180635/

Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1). Heinemann.

Habermas, J. (1987). *Theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Heinemann.

Havrancsik, D. (2018). Toward a general theory of understanding. Schutzian theory as proto-hermeneutics. *Human Studies*, *41*(3), 333–369. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-018-9460-1

Havrancsik, D. (2023). Book review: Empty suffering: A social phenomenology of depression, anxiety and addiction. *Thesis Eleven*, *176*, 125–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136231179787

Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge.

Hess, A., & Flores, C. (2018). Simply more than swiping left: A critical analysis of toxic masculine performances on *Tinder Nightmares. New Media & Society*, *20*(3), 1085–1102. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816681540

Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(6), 377–386. https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893

Horkheimer, M. (2014). *Critique of instrumental reason*. Verso Books.

Illouz, E. (1997). *Consuming the romantic Utopia love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*. University of California Press.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press.

Illouz, E. (2019). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford University Press.

Jacobsen, M. H., & Kristiansen, S. (2014). Goffman's sociology of everyday life interaction. In M. H. Jacobsen & S. Kristiansen (Eds.), *The social thought of Erving Goffman* (pp. 67–84). Sage.

Jay, M. (1994). *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. University of California Press.

Krüger, S., & Spilde, A. C. (2020). Judging books by their covers—Tinder interface, usage and sociocultural implications. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(10), 1395–1410. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1572771

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Basil Blackwell.

LeFebvre, L. E. (2018). Swiping me off my feet. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *35*(9), 1205–1229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517706419

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2005). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, *16*(3), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603385

Narr, G. (2022a). The coloniality of desire: Revealing the desire to be seen and blind spots leveraged by data colonialism as AI manipulates the unconscious for profitable extraction on dating apps. *Revista Fronteiras—Estudos Midiáticos*, *24*(3), 72–84. https://doi.org/10.4013/fem.2022.242.07

Narr, G. (2022b). Imagining algorithms to believe in: Comparing OkCupid and Tinder users' perceptions of algorithms to uncover alternatives to algorithmic exploitation on dating apps. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*, 5338–5357.

Narr, G., & Luong, A. (2023). Bored ghosts in the dating app assemblage: How dating app algorithms couple ghosting behaviors with a mood of boredom. *The Communication Review*, *26*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2022.2129949

Newett, L., Churchill, B., & Robards, B. (2018). Forming connections in the digital era: Tinder, a new tool in young Australian intimate life. *Journal of Sociology*, *54*(3), 346–361. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783317728584

Olivera-La Rosa, A., Arango-Tobón, O. E., & Ingram, G. P. D. (2019). Swiping right: Face perception in the age of Tinder. *Heliyon*, *5*(12), e02949. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e02949

Osler, L., & Zahavi, D. (2023). Sociality and embodiment: Online communication during and after Covid-19. *Foundations of Science*, *28*, 1125–1142. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-022-09861-1

Palmer, L. (2020). Dating in the age of Tinder: Swiping for love? In J. Carter & L. Arocha (Eds.), *Romantic relationships in a time of "cold intimacies"* (pp. 129–149). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29256-0_7

Peeters, R., & Schuilenburg, M. (2021). The algorithmic society: An introduction. In M. Schuilenburg & R. Peeters (Eds.), *The algorithmic society: Technology, power, and knowledge* (pp. 1–15). Routledge.

Ranzini, G., & Lutz, C. (2017). Love at first swipe? Explaining Tinder self-presentation and motives. *Mobile Media & Communication*, *5*(1), 80–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157916664559

Rollero, C., & de Piccoli, N. (2017). Self-objectification and personal values. An exploratory study. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, Article 1055. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01055

Rosenfeld, M. J. (2018). Are Tinder and dating apps changing dating and mating in the USA?. In J. Van Hook, S. M. McHale, & V. King (Eds.), *Families and technology* (pp. 103–117). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95540-7_6

Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a mate. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(4), 523–547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412448050

Rosenfeld, M. J., Thomas, R. J., & Hausen, S. (2019). Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *116*(36), 17753–17758. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908630116

Rövid, I., Erát, D., & Füzér, K. (2021). A párkapcsolat, a gyermeknevelés és a társadalmi tőke szerepe a szubjektív jóllét alakulásában [The role of intimate relationships, parenting, and social capital for subjective well-being]. *Socio.Hu*, *11*(1), 62–83. https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2021.1.62

Ságvári, B. (2017). Diszkrimináció, átláthatóság és ellenőrizhetőség. Bevezetés az algoritmusetikába [Discrimination, transparency, and accountability. Introduction to the ethics of algorithms]. *Replika*, *103*, 61–79.

Schulze, G. (1992). *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* [The Experience Society. Cultural Sociology of Contemporary Times]. Campus Verlag.

Schutz, A. (1962). *Common-sense and scientific interpretation of human action*. Martinus Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-2851-6_1

Schutz, A. (1964a). The stranger. In A. Brodersen (Ed.), *Collected papers II: Studies in social theory* (pp. 91–105). Martinus Nijhoff.

Schutz, A. (1964b). The well-informed citizen. In A. Brodersen (Ed.), *Collected papers II: Studies in social theory* (pp. 120–134). Martinus Nijhoff.

Schutz, A., & Luckmann, T. (1973). *Structures of the life-world* (Vol. 1). Heinemann.

Sharabi, L. L. (2021). Exploring how beliefs about algorithms shape (offline) success in online dating: A two-wave longitudinal investigation. *Communication Research*, *48*(7), 931–952. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219896936

Sik, D. (2021). *Empty suffering: A social phenomenology of depression, anxiety and addiction*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003197355

Strubel, J., & Petrie, T. A. (2017). Love me Tinder: Body image and psychosocial functioning among men and women. *Body Image*, *21*, 34–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.02.006

Sumter, S. R., Vandenbosch, L., & Ligtenberg, L. (2017). Love me Tinder: Untangling emerging adults' motivations for using the dating application Tinder. *Telematics and Informatics*, *34*(1), 67–78. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.04.009

Thompson, L. (2018). "I can be your Tinder nightmare": Harassment and misogyny in the online sexual marketplace. *Feminism & Psychology*, *28*(1), 69–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517720226

Timmermans, E., & Courtois, C. (2018). From swiping to casual sex and/or committed relationships: Exploring the experiences of Tinder users. *The Information Society*, *34*(2), 59–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2017.1414093

Tyson, G., Perta, V. C., Haddadi, H., & Seto, M. C. (2016). *A first look at user activity on Tinder* (arXiv:1607.01952). https://arxiv.org/pdf/1607.01952.pdf

van Hooff, J. (2020). Swipe right? Tinder, commitment and the commercialisation of intimate life. In J. Carter & L. Arocha (Eds.), *Romantic Relationships in a time of "cold intimacies"* (pp. 109–127). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29256-0_6

Ward, J. (2017). What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(11), 1644–1659. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1252412

Zhao, S. (2015). Constitution of mutual knowledge in telecopresence: Updating Schutz's phenomenological theory of the lifeworld. *Journal of Creative Communications*, *10*(2), 105–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0973258615597376

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.

Author Biography

Viktor Berger (PhD, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary) is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Pécs. His research interests include phenomenology of the online world, sociological theories of space, and history of sociological thought.