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Dating Apps beyond Dating

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Introduction: Dating Apps beyond Dating

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Tentative beginnings: a meeting in digital anthropology

Since 2012, when Tinder's explosive arrival on to the global apps market generated both excitement and controversy, dating apps have been the subject of both media scrutiny and academic study. Despite early responses that attempted to stigmatise their use through attention to an imagined explosion of immorality (Sales 2015), their global reach (an anticipated 440 billion online dating users by 2027; Dixon 2023) suggests that dating apps have an established role in the facilitation of sex, romance, and intimacy in many global contexts. Anthropologists have approached dating apps in this vein, demonstrating the ways that they both reinforce and challenge dynamics associated with these themes, including the exacerbation of racial, gendered, and class tensions (MacLeod and McArthur 2019; Ong 2017). Such studies have largely approached dating apps according to their a priori association with romance, dating, and intimacy. In this Special Issue, however, we broaden our approach, situating our analysis of dating apps alongside the search for and facilitation of intimacy whilst also attending to their more non-prescriptive and creative uses, both by their global users and the anthropologists who study them.

Anthropological attention to the diverse uses of dating apps, we believe, comes with some urgency. As two scholars who have approached dating apps differently, we originally met at the first annual Digital Anthropology Day, held at University College London in the summer of 2023. The event was intended to unite scholars from divergent areas of research, all within the subfield of digital anthropology. The day was built around some of the core tenets of digital anthropology, as outlined by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2012) in their introduction to this disciplinary label, namely a rejection of the digital as homogenising, the consistent acknowledgement of digital worlds as being neither less nor more material than those that came before, and the attempt at making room for ambiguity within the wide range of studies conducted under these disciplinary pillars. The day was intended to form a touchpoint for academics working in this oftentimes disparate and interdisciplinary field. Debates ranged across a variety of topics, such as artificial intelligence (AI), digital work, and, of particular relevance to the journey that led to this Special Issue, digital intimacies. Within this topic subgroup, dating apps formed a key component of research interest. However, it became

quickly apparent that debate on dating apps was almost *restricted* by this focus on intimacy and that there was scope to widen the discourse to consider elements living in the shadow of this overarching umbrella term standing at the forefront of what these apps were seen to index.

We are both scholars with an interest foremost in digital media, but with a particular curiosity for dating apps. However, we came to this work from two slightly different perspectives: Spector with a focus on the methodological opportunities these platforms provide outside of their position as tools for matchmaking and Broeker looking to situate dating apps as part of a wider system of communication platforms inflected by the distinct cultural contexts of users. Through the connections made during the Digital Anthropology Day, it became clear that dating apps would warrant their own subfield of sorts within the realm of digital anthropology. This would cast aside the most obvious ties dating apps hold to studies centring on intimacy. Instead, they would act as a nucleus around which links could be built with other subfields inside and outside of digital anthropology, breaking down borders between research approaches, territories, and, indeed, any false binaries between the digital and the physical.

Transcending intimacy

Dating apps have woven themselves into the everyday lives of many, as part of the tapestry of technology available to the increasing number of people across the globe who, irrespective of socio-economic constraints, possess a smartphone and thus the means to participate in this network of global connectivity – but also, in many cases, hyperlocal connectivity via the geolocational functionality of these devices. A huge array of dating apps now exists, spread across different community groups, national contexts, and competing desires, alongside the globally established and recognisable stalwarts such as Grindr and Tinder, forming a polymedia environment of possibilities for anthropological scholarship and engagement. The *appification* of software has been key to embedding these, alongside other computer programmes, more deeply into all spheres of everyday activity, from commercial to leisure and education (Morris and Elkins 2015), and has freed them to move alongside their users, passing into and through spaces, physical and digital, side-by-side, or, rather, pocket to screen and palm to aluminium or plastic casing. In their ubiquity, and through their firm integration as part of the communication toolset available to smartphone users, dating apps stand alongside platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp as staples in the digital ecosystem of networked interactions.

The articles within this Special Issue showcase not only the intercontinental reach of these platforms but also the way in which they are integrated into embodied experiences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms

of existence within specific sociocultural environments. The broad reach of this Special Issue across borders and socialities was not designed to contest the term *dating app* nor seek to redefine the perceived purposes of these platforms, for at their core these apps draw users through their capacity to facilitate intimacy, whether that be in the search of a potential partner, a physical encounter, or something else escaping categorisation within the exciting and sometimes illusory field of human connection. The articles in this Special Issue thus do not shy away from or seek to replace the concept of intimacy: this stands at the heart of many dating apps and indeed weaves itself through encounters and experiences across these. However, the thread which unites the anthropological investigations that follow is a desire to move beyond intimacy or, indeed, alongside, above, beneath, or through it to arrive at alternative lenses through which to see these apps and their users, particularly from an ethnographic perspective. Dating apps, via their aforementioned integration into a vast set of behaviours and practices, enmeshed within digital media – part of a larger network of connectivity – are now more than simply vehicles for intimacy; or, rather, they were always more than this, but these entanglements had not quite risen to the surface. There has been a lack of scholarly engagement with the way these platforms function beyond their label of *dating* apps – which in itself is no longer a completely apt term to describe the vast medley of platforms this label encompasses, nor the unclassifiable number of practices it seeks to index.

As the contributors to this Special Issue show, dating apps are relevant beyond notions of dating, as objects of study spanning economic, gendered, and caring relations. The apps can impact their users profoundly in areas of their lives that would seem to be located far outside of the perceived affordances these apps are seen to host. Indeed, as anthropologists, the contributors to this Special Issue are also offered the chance to be self-reflexive so as to approach dating apps not solely as objects of study but as facilitators of engagement with those phenomena and users they seek to study. The contributors speak to the methodological implications of these spaces, the fertile ground for ethnography they can unearth, but also the ethical and personal risks or quirks they carry for researchers entering these spaces.

As anthropologists, we often grapple with the blurred boundaries between our personal lives and our occupation as researchers (Hedican 2001). This is a position often taken to extremes when our field site shifts to a platform such as Tinder, for example. As researchers tasked with archiving and mapping human experience but also with remaining ourselves a part – or rather a participant – in these experiences, we are pushed to inhabit spaces umbilically linked to the centre of many people's lives, existing somewhere between their smartphone and their personal network of connections. Alongside these methodological implications, the articles in this Special Issue focus on the socio-digital spaces these apps produce to facilitate a more in-depth

examination of the particular cultural contexts these apps exist within, taking on the specific experiential viewpoints of communities in widely varying circumstances. As such, the authors, encompassing scholars from across the globe who focus on a unique and divergent assortment of platforms and user groups, unite this Special Issue into one which seeks to cross borders, both territorially and within the discipline of anthropology, to strive towards a new conceptualisation of dating apps as more than intimate media.

Our approach

Online dating has become a common form of matchmaking not only in Europe and the United States but, increasingly, globally (Albright and Simmens 2014). Early concerns with and discourses around authenticity, safety, and stigma (Albright and Conran 2003; Finkel et al. 2012; Gibbs et al. 2006) have been tempered as these practices have slowly come into the mainstream and online dating has been assimilated into dating culture more broadly (Degim et al. 2015). As regards design, Tinder brought forth the swiping mechanism subsequently adopted by many of its competitors. Profiles of potential partners are presented to a user in the form of a card stack, which users swipe through, moving profiles left or right in order to discard them or signal interest. If two users like each other, they are matched and can message one another. Tinder features in the contributions to this Special Issue, but it stands alongside a medley of other apps, which have their own design quirks and flourishes, as outlined within each piece.

At first anthropology found interest in these dating platforms via the route of intimacy, coming from a history of discourse around digital intimacy more broadly (Alinejad and Candidatu 2022; Kaya 2009). There has been ample scholarship exploring the impact that developments in online dating have had on kinship, relationships, sex, and desire (MacKee 2016; Das 2019; Stoicescu 2022), but less so on the broader methodological nuances and deeper societal implications across socio-economic spheres. We seek to build on voices which have sought to push research into this underexplored direction, as regards methodology (Atienza 2018; Spector and Sutton 2024; Esquinas et al. 2019) but also to form a holistic understanding of the broader networks these dating apps exist within, networks not solely anchored in questions of intimacy but rather in myriad forms of lived experience that permeate everyday life (Broeker 2024; Walter 2021). The articles in this Special Issue do not refute the literature that has come before, nor do they seek to distance apps and intimacy; rather they seek to apply the broader goals of digital anthropology to this emerging subfield to paint complex ethnographic portraits of the messy and convoluted lives expressed through and across digital media. There is certainly room for intimacy here, but it should not be an all-encompassing focus and it must be contextualised within each socio-digital space.

Dating apps lend themselves to more than their specific set of affordances in procuring a connection: they can be seen as vehicles for practices that go beyond those which are easily categorised within dating culture. Dating apps offer their users the opportunity to reach into the unfamiliar; they can recast spaces between the extremely local and the boundless, borderless digitality they appear to offer. As contributions to this Special Issue highlight, dating apps act as lenses through which users can view their community via a novel, and sometimes surprising, perspective. When we as researchers enter these spaces alongside users, an element of self-reflexivity emerges that casts the ethnographic lens inwards and opens us up to musings on the feelings these spaces invoke around questions of ethics and identity. Is it possible to conduct ethnography within these spaces without first considering the prominently displayed markers of desire these apps host for their users – and how does it feel to exist alone in this network of profiles looking to connect to one another?

The articles in this collection also speak to the distinctive methodological affordances that dating apps allow for. As platforms that facilitate networking amongst previously unknown individuals, the ethnographic method of participant observation and the selection criteria for inclusion are in many ways streamlined through conducting research through dating apps. The contributing articles in this collection speak to both the benefits and limitations of using dating apps as a site of ethnographic study but also a method for ethnographic research, appraising and advancing social scientific scholarship by proposing a uniquely anthropological and reflexive way of engaging with our interlocutors. Throughout this collection, authors draw attention to the benefits and limitations of the unusually easy access to research participants the apps provide.

In this Special Issue we also propose a unique disciplinary advancement on the ethical ramifications of using dating apps in research with particular attention to researcher safety. As Spector's contribution engages with in depth, whilst social scientific scholarship has offered an ethical framework for the use of dating apps in research, these largely focus on dating apps as a field site rather than as a method of participant recruitment (Condie et al. 2017). Applying a reflexive method, Spector proposes a specific approach for an anthropological engagement with apps. Noting the prejudices prevalent in our discipline surrounding the use of dating apps in research, Spector suggests the necessity of considering users' rights to privacy, paying attention to the potentially disruptive nature of ethnographic research in contexts designed with intimacy in mind, and managing participant expectations. We expand on the position of the researcher within these spaces in just a moment.

Categories of race, gender, age, and other markers of self are neatly stored and presented across the vast majority of platforms discussed in

this Special Issue, and the articles probe not only how these categories are changed online but how they inflect the platforms and practices being studied. They seek to answer these questions alongside the way in which notions of failure, economic strain, and ageing or changing bodies, removed from debates around intimacy, exist within the practices on these platforms. In this way, contributors create in-depth societal portraits through the canvas of these apps, crossing the technological borders of these platforms to grasp at the lived experiences which transcend these spaces.

That is not to say that our focus is solely on transcending these spaces. Indeed, many of the articles within this Special Issue deal particularly with the process and experience of entering these platforms as a researcher. We believe it is folly to create an all-encompassing set of guidelines, or rules, for accessing online dating spaces, to specify what researchers should or should not do, or, worse, who researchers should or should not be. This would not only be an incredibly limiting exercise but also stand in ignorance to the endless nuances of anthropological fieldwork. Any anthropological fieldwork and any attempt at participant observation may have unpredictable consequences and can more often than not lead a researcher to stumble upon moments of intimacy or, indeed, encounter experiences otherwise confined to the privacy of the individual, whether via an observation garnered through building a close relationship with a research participant, through the details shared in an interview, or simply by being within a field site as an unexpected phenomenon unfolds in front of their eyes. We would not wish to censor researchers as to where they should and should not focus their scientific gaze.

As regards dating apps specifically, we are also not here to confine researchers to specific ways in which to approach these platforms. There have been fantastic, insightful, and ethically sound ethnographies where researchers have participated in dating culture (MacKee 2016) but also where researchers are fully immersed in the field site alongside their research participants solely to observe (Ong 2017). Of course, when utilising technologies such as dating apps or other social media, so firmly and pervasively embedded in everyday life, it may also be the case that researchers have experienced them in their personal capacity, either before or after turning their scientific gaze at them. This can of course inflect understandings of these spaces. However, it is impossible to enter any field site with complete objectivity. Rather, having prior personal knowledge of platforms can help to integrate seamlessly amongst users and can provide a more rounded comprehension of how to exist and act alongside research participants (Broeker 2024).

In anthropology, personal life and working life often intermingle, particularly during extended fieldwork periods. This is one of the essential principles of anthropology and one of the great sacrifices researchers often have to be willing to make to gather data. Such sacrifices can take the form of physically moving to a different territory, immersing oneself within a new

community – whether this gravitates around a physical location or is hosted on a server – and spending days, months, and even years away from friends and family. A new field site may often also become a new home. Sexuality, intimacy, and personal relationships – these are certainly not phenomena constrained to spaces designated to specifically cater to them, such as dating apps, but rather staples of human experience which may permeate any field site a researcher enters. Researchers must respond to these dynamically when conducting themselves within dating apps, but it would be an oversight to operate on the assumption that these spaces are somehow more charged emotionally than other mediators of human relationships, beyond their narrativisation. Dating apps must be approached with the same care as any other form of media through which users may share in practices and communication alongside a researcher.

It would be unwise to raise dating apps above the surrounding polymedia environment of communication platforms to seek to limit which platforms the scientific gaze should be allowed to run across, for users flit between these spaces constantly and dynamically. It is also important to note that dating apps are not private spaces; Tinder, for example, may be easily and freely accessed by anyone choosing to register. Users do not experience Tinder as a platform immediately more intimate than all others on their smartphone simply because of its promise of facilitating connections to others. In fact, the inverse is often true: it is only when matched partners move away from Tinder to a communication tool such as WhatsApp that they have more access to the private elements of a person's life, now operating within a more intimate sphere on a user's smartphone (Broeker 2021). Existing on a dating app alongside research participants does not automatically place a researcher within a heightened private or personal environment – yet they may of course be exposed to both the private and personal during their time there. There is an awareness of being observed built into these platforms. The same ethical principles apply here as they do within fieldwork conducted in other online or offline spaces, for example, preserving anonymity of research participants when appropriate and operating interviews only when explicit consent is provided.

We do not feel any researcher should be discriminated from entering these spaces. However, how, why, and where researchers enter field sites is, of course, often entwined with their personal circumstances. In anthropology, gaining access to a field site and building rapport with a community can be a laborious practice, one often constrained by financial barriers but also by language, gender, and ethnicity. As such, authors in this Special Issue often discuss their own position in regard to the field site and how the markers of their identity may open or close these spaces to them. This can be an important practice more broadly as regards building self-reflexivity into fieldwork, which can elevate ethnographies. Fieldwork should be a democratic and open

practice, and digital ethnography, or work within communities that offer access outside of physically defined territories, has the potential for new and exciting research ventures for those who may not usually be able to participate. Of course, just as in any other field site, there will be people who wish to engage with us and people who do not wish to do so, and navigating these connections delicately is the duty of the researcher.

Uniting perspectives across borders

The Special Issue features five original articles, and hopefully the thematic thread weaving these together, or rather the foundation that underpins the perspectives offered by the researchers in this collection, has been conveyed thoroughly already. To condense this expansive venture here, the contributions are united in the goal of examining the impact of dating apps beyond dating, anchoring these applications within specific cultural contexts, and moving beyond the narrow milieu of dating and intimacy to interrogate their wider societal impact on communities, on the basis of anthropological theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Indeed, as is the goal of this Special Issue, the articles are intended to form a fertile foundation for future research contributions in how we can utilise dating apps as tools to move beyond their sociotechnical borders. Moreover, the articles showcase a variety of global voices, seeking to give a more holistic and cross-cultural understanding of how dating apps are integrated in different cultural and community contexts. We have already covered Spector's contribution in detail above and now turn to give a brief overview of the remaining five articles which tie together this Special Issue.

Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza delves into the digital lives of queer Filipino men in Manila, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, United States of America, to explore how experiences of failure shape his participants' complex negotiations, both online and offline, in their quest for connection. These experiences are further complicated by the intersecting social categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, amplifying emotions and interactions. Drawing on Dasgupta and Dasgupta's (2018) findings from India, which highlight that sharing failures in virtual spaces fosters unique forms of intimate subjectivity and affective bonds, Atienza reflects on the pervasive theme of failure and disappointment as a significant area of ethnographic enquiry. The research examines how feelings of failure permeate various aspects of the researcher's life, influencing writing, thinking, and self-perception, and his study underscores the enduring nature of these emotions. Atienza grapples with what it means to be a 'native' ethnographer, and how he feels he is situated within the community he has turned his research to. Whilst the notions of native-ness have been critiqued before (Appadurai 1988), for Atienza they play a consistent role within the digital platforms he

occupies and allow him to reflect on the difficult and frustrating role he is forced to play. Atienza underscores the necessity for ongoing ethnographic research whilst cautioning against the pervasive insecurities that animate interactions within dating app socialities.

Aligned to Atienza's cross-cultural ethnography anchored within the queer community, Shannon Philip's article tilts the ethnographic lens outwards. Philip charts how rapid digitalisation, neoliberal expansion, and globalisation in countries such as India and South Africa are dramatically reshaping sexual identities and sexual politics within contexts of the Global South. Dating apps like Grindr are playing a pivotal role in redefining how young gay men construct, mediate, and embody their identities and relationships. This article presents an ethnographic exploration of how Grindr provides crucial visibility for young middle-class gay men in India and South Africa who face marginalisation under dominant heteropatriarchal structures. However, the digital and neoliberal advances also perpetuate existing inequalities of race, caste, and class exactly through platforms like Grindr. Philip's article reveals the growing commodification of gay identities and sexualities, creating hierarchies between 'classy gays' and 'poor gays'. In this process, desire itself becomes commodified, with 'poor gays' being deemed undesirable whilst class performance and consumption become key to achieving sexual desirability. Grindr's geolocating technology exacerbates these disparities, allowing middle-class gay men to spatially and socially discriminate against 'poor gays' in cities like Delhi and Johannesburg. This digital landscape gives rise to 'Grindr Wars', which expose the social and symbolic tensions, conflicts, and violence that shape queer life in India and South Africa today.

Where Atienza and Phillips examine the concrete aspects of what dating apps can offer their users as regards their identities and marginalisations, Leah Junck shifts her focus to the inconcrete: the ambiguities of the experiential dimensions of dating app users. Also focusing on South Africa, Junck shows how the strategies employed by Tinder users in Cape Town reflect the ways wider sociopolitical dynamics of distrust and suspicion coalesce with the search for intimacy and companionship. Junck's contribution explores how the ambiguities of connections with the unknown that dating apps facilitate can complicate the somewhat technologically solutionistic approaches that media and academic approaches to dating apps often uphold. In slowly building trust with relative strangers, 'reality' is something that has to be progressively co-created, with and beyond technologies, in ways that have to accommodate both a sense of control and a sense of freedom to explore. This is true not only as regards research participants but also as regards the researcher.

Junck's contribution engages directly with the criticisms of Tinder and other dating apps as producers of inauthentic and hedonistic encounters and instead suggests their role as a means of engaging with and renegotiating the

unfamiliar. In Cape Town, where Junck feels trust is uniquely complex and suspicion is a constant presence, the dating app Tinder serves as a method for exploring the unfamiliar. Despite Tinder's lack of clear definitions and boundaries, it presents a challenging framework for users to connect with both the strangely familiar and the familiarly strange. The app's romanticisation and fetishisation of authenticity makes it tempting to see Tinder as a metaphor for a world seeking to provide easy technological solutions for the complex and extremely varied canvas of human needs and experiences. Of course, in truth, these platforms operate within the same complex, unpredictable realm of experience as non-digital practices and cannot provide the simple solutions many users desire, for example, in their quest for a potential partner. These apps are embedded in pre-existing rituals and practices, and thus they cannot simply circumvent these, nor render dating a less complex field.

As well as highlighting the unfamiliar, articles in this collection draw attention to the unseen. Attending to an understudied demographic, Irida Ntalla explores the experiences of single mothers using dating apps in the United Kingdom. These women are situated between competing demands of childrearing, wage labour, and social moralities in challenging the heteronormativity of the nuclear family. Within these demands they also, Ntalla shows, compete for space to express and explore their sexual subjectivity, for which dating apps offer a convenient space. Ntalla's work demonstrates the unique socio-digital space that dating apps create in which women's sexual and romantic identities can be incorporated into their identities as single mothers. This article delves into the complex and diverse experiences of single mothers using dating apps through the application of anthropological methods, including autoethnography and digital ethnography.

Through reflective self-analysis and participant observation within online community groups, Ntalla examines the emotional, psychological, and sociocultural factors influencing single mothers' use of dating apps. The article challenges cultural and social stereotypes by exploring the intricate relationship between motherhood and sexuality, dealing with myths that portray mothers as asexual beings, and engaging with concepts such as 'MILFs' – Mum I'd Like to Fuck – and 'yummy mummy'. Ntalla asks what types of intimacies exist in this context and how the tensions between single motherhood, womanhood, and sexuality impact subjectivities and self-representations. By analysing how single mothers balance their identities as parents, women, and seekers of intimacy within online dating environments, the study enhances our understanding of contemporary social dynamics and the interaction between technology and identity. The article considers themes of self-representation, constructions of sexuality, sexual agency, negotiation of connection and boundaries, and privacy. It argues that single mothers on

dating platforms navigate the intricate landscape of sexual capital through strategies of visibility.

A final word

Whitney Wolfe Herd, co-founder of Tinder and founder of Bumble, recently spoke on how she envisions the near future of dating apps (Pahwa 2024). She introduced the notion of AI dating concierges, who would look to chat within an app on a dater's behalf, screening potential partners and bringing forward only those considered most suitable. In this future, Wolfe Herd sees a likely scenario where various AI dating concierges are in dialogue on behalf of app users, essentially outsourcing initial courtship and only progressing users to a date if the concierges conclude there is potential for the app users. Whether this appears a dystopian, or indeed utopian future is up for debate, but elements of this systematically mediated dating dynamic are certainly already in place with the algorithms that in effect sift through profiles on a user's behalf within apps such as Tinder and Hinge.

The rapid technological progress we are currently experiencing across all facets of our lives, with the further integration of AI systems and the magical properties these evoke in media discourses, brings with it the fear that research ventures dealing with digital technology, and longer-term ethnographic projects in particular, could become outpaced by societal progression. However, the role of anthropology, and indeed digital anthropology, has never been to ride the wave of technological progression and measure the crest as it races towards civilisation. Rather, as anthropologists, we float beyond the break, searching for connections between the vast ocean of human experience and the current field site, the community, in which we find ourselves. As such, this Special Issue seeks to return scholarship to a segment of digital media which has felt exhaustively mined, particularly in terms of intimacy, over the past few years and attempts to bring a fresh perspective, and indeed a diverse group of research voices, into its midst – abiding by both ethnographic and autoethnographic principles to study a set of platforms which have often been subject to rather narrow interpretations. This is not a criticism of previous scholarship, which has been rich and has provided invaluable insights not only for the editors but all authors featured in this Special Issue. Rather, the desire which brings this group of scholars together is the notion of building on our existing understandings of dating apps and revisiting these to broaden the scope of approaches available towards them, whether from a methodological standpoint, via an ethical inflection, or through a shift in the theoretical lens applied – always taking care to avoid falling into the already exhaustively mined concept of intimacy.

Scholarship around these platforms, and indeed the realignment of their functionality, as the AI boom inevitably further encircles this particular sec-

tor, will likely unearth new approaches within this field and within the anthropology of these devices. However, we are confident that there will always be room to revisit, and to reframe; to re-enter a field site which may already feel familiar, and to dig deeper.

Acknowledgements

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