EthnoScripts

Abstract:

Tinder's streamlined profile set-up and the dating app's binary swipe system create an illusion of instant realities and neat distinctions. However, engaging with Tinder's selection process in a meaningful way is much less straightforward than it appears. In Cape Town, a city with a historical legacy of categorical divisions, Tinder serves as a tool to connect with the unfamiliar and the strange, despite the prevalent atmosphere of suspicion. The stories shared with me during my ethnographic research on Tinder in Cape Town reveal that exploring ideals, desires, and degrees of strangeness involves renegotiating past experiences and future expectations. In a cyclical usage, tensions and ambiguities that form part of tindering are negotiated in line with what Katrien Pype has called the 'technology contract', changing with every new download. Expectations become blurred and realities gradually formed through these ongoing (re)negotiations and new encounters with relative strangers. In this manner, Tinder becomes a means through which to reflect on one's own experiences and human interconnections in Cape Town more broadly. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to contrast Tinder experiences with romanticised ideals of authenticity, rendering it tempting to flatten them to simplistic anecdotes and view the app as a metaphor for 'modern-day dating'.

Gradual Realities: Making Authentically Strange Connections via Tinder in Cape Town

Leah Junck

Introduction

'What makes Tinder dating different is that you have to tolerate ambiguity,' Emily[1] explained on one of our coffee dates in a quiet part of the city centre in Cape Town, South Africa. Expounding on her understanding of ambiguity and determining attraction via Tinder profiles, she added: 'Meeting organically is like a shop where everything is laid out nice and clear as opposed to everything being on one rail and you have to look at everything.' The remote English teacher and psychology student in her early thirties was one of the twenty-five research participants I had met during my two-year research on Tinder, most of whom via a research profile on the app itself. I had become curious about how people use the application in a city of immense inequalities, which continue to run parallel to the geographic boundaries drawn across it during the White minority-led apartheid regime. Within this prevalent atmosphere of distrust (Junck 2019), I set out to enquire how people establish connections with relative strangers. In the process, I became particularly intrigued by the question of how ambiguities and Tinder's neatly structured profiles and selection processes take on meanings in this setting of resolute divisions.

Emily's differentiation between two seemingly distinct scenarios was a common thread throughout my research. One would be referred to as organic, authentic, and intuitively navigable (meeting individuals off Tinder) and the other as inherently lacking a quality of realness (trying to connect on Tinder). On Tinder, selection criteria must be established which, no matter how often they are tinkered with, would never quite gain any meaning. In Emily's analogy, this is likened to the process of going through a cluttered rail and establishing patterns in the hopes of finding a few things that actually suit. As a result of these often-frustrating efforts, the app would be frequently deleted – just to be eventually re-downloaded again. This prompts the question of what the understandings and experiences are that underpin this on-and-off pattern.

Tinder has a clean appearance with a neat interface and easy set-up – a simplicity that is reinforced by the company's match.chat.meet mantra.[2] Yet, the different stages of choice-making involved in tindering require far more

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1 All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2 As captured on the Tinder website (accessed: 9 August 2024).

reflection, stock-taking, and time than they initially appear to. Emily's analogy alludes to the for the most part tiring, uninspiring, and overwhelming nature of swiping 'yes' or 'no' on a large number of profiles that look fairly similar.[3] But it also speaks to the aspect of Tinder that follows a match and during which visions of what might be are peered into further – via in-app messages and, once basic trust is established, via WhatsApp.[4]

According to Tanja Bosch's (2020) mixed-method study in South Africa, the main appeal of Tinder is the idea of meeting people one would otherwise not meet. My research echoes this curiosity about that which is other or somewhat strange. It also shows that welcoming strangeness is neither easy nor instant. Tinder's ambiguity lies in the tension that builds between the promise of simple access to vast amounts of different options and the fear that sincere try-ons might be revealing in unexpected ways. I draw attention to these through the lens of Katrien Pype's (2018) heuristic concept of the *technology contract.*

In her work, Pype foregrounds the societal dynamics related to technological inventions (broadly speaking). For this she draws on the concept of the 'computer contract' as developed by ethnographer Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1990) in what was one of the earliest socio-technological works on the African continent, discussing computer education in Ivory Coast and Kenya. Technology development and everyday use are typically discussed in isolation from one another. Given the significant influence corporations and their technology developments have on how people interact through these technologies, it is particularly important to look at the discursive paradigms around technologies and practices embedded in them as a form of active engagement. This perspective also allows for a focus on actors, moving beyond utopian and dystopian representations of technologies. For technology contracts to be considered successful, Jules-Rosette and Pype argue, they must align with the public discourse. Rather than focusing on the mere end product, the concept foregrounds processes of negotiation.

The day-to-day use of Tinder reveals insights into all kinds of negotiations around strangeness in Cape Town, extending far beyond a discourse that focuses on how Tinder dating differs from traditional methods of meeting potential partners. Intrigued by how Tinder users in Cape Town managed to regain hope despite regular disillusionment in their cyclical use of the app, and by exploring participants' repeated expressions that Tinder lacks a certain realness, I came to realise how much ambiguities matter as realities are gradually constructed through interactions with past experiences and a sense of a different future. Therefore, the following pages aim to both broaden and complicate conversations about connecting via dating apps like Tinder.

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3   Thompson (2017) humorously summarises the different 'types' of dating app profiles in South Africa.

4   See Broeker (2021) for a more detailed account of these rituals of transition.

About Tinder

From its launch in 2012, Tinder has been an avenue of looking for new connections. One of the app's appeals is its quick and easy set-up, completed within mere minutes. Early on, this had to be done via a linked Facebook profile; today a phone number is sufficient. Once a profile opens, a gender identity and preference can be chosen (either man or woman),[5] a maximum radius, and an age bracket. Once the user selects a few pictures and, perhaps, substantiates these with a few sentences in the form of a 'mini biography', the search for a mutual selection – a 'match' – can begin. This is done by swiping a finger across the screen to accept or reject the next profile that appears at the top of a stack of profiles – a visually driven process. The type of connection or date that a user may be looking for is only explored afterwards in conversations that follow when a match is established. Even though profiles on the platform are pre-sorted according to some opaque logic, Tinder emphasises the role of the individual in making choices, unlike other web services that claim to have the algorithmic recipe to find one's 'soulmate' (Finkel 2015). At Tinder's launch, the concept of a mutual selection was novel and promised to reduce unwanted attention as well as the embarrassment of rejection. As co-founder Sean Rad put it, 'no matter who you are, you feel more comfortable approaching somebody if you know they want you to approach them' (Witt 2014).

The overall popularity of the brand has remained relatively steady over the years, perhaps partially because of the sense of comfort that Rad refers to. Tinder's image has, however, shifted over the years: from a hook-up app to a legitimate tool to seek a variety of connections (see, for example, Bosch 2020). Apart from that, broader developments, such as the Covid-19 lockdowns, have left their imprints on users' approaches to the app (Chisom 2021; Portolan and McAlister 2022). Creating comfortable access to 'options', however, does not equal connections. Tinder claims to have produced a total of 55 billion matches to date,[6] but few of them end up being encounters beyond the realm of the app. As such, Tinder is a sphere in which tensions between the technology's purpose-driven design and everyday practice become evident.[7] Tinder, downloaded and deleted in infrequent rhythms by all of my research participants, also formed part of a broader landscape of repertoires in which digital technologies (including other social platforms like Meetup or sexual

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5   This was drastically expanded for some markets in 2016 but not for South Africa.

6   As captured on the Tinder website (accessed: 12 December 2023).

7   Also see Broeker (2021), who describes how people in Berlin embed logics around the appropriateness of particular platforms for particular effects (like romance) into new rituals, such as that of switching from a dating app to the encrypted messaging app WhatsApp, as a more significant step in establishing interest than the initial match.

computer games) were merely an element, whilst activities that prioritise the 'face-to-face' element, like dinner parties, dance classes, and 'authentic relating games', were also explored.[8]

With time, terms like 'tindering', 'tinderella', and 'tinderitis' have become integrated into everyday language. They often decorate the titles of Tinder commentaries, with particular reference to negative psychological implications and the addictive nature of Tinder (featured, for instance, on UrbanDictionary.com). To help keep up with the ever-evolving language around app dating, Tinder released its first dictionary in Australia, explaining new dating jargon such as *kittenfishing* (changing aspects of yourself to appear more attractive to others), *affordating* (going on cheap dates), *daterviews* (dates that feel like interviews), *cushioning* (keeping backup relationships), and *beige flags* (warning signs that someone is boring).

Connecting in Cape Town

In order to talk about Tinder in Cape Town, the co-presence between frameworks of the past, the present, and visions of the future are crucial in setting the scene. Tinder's promise of access has distinct connotations in the context of South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in the world. The state laws during the system of apartheid had been designed to disenfranchise people categorised as Black and Coloured. Passes had to be carried in particular by people considered non-white, which only allowed them access to White areas to work at particular hours. As these laws were officially abolished in 1994, aspirational ideas of a 'project freedom' commenced. These were rooted in the idea that a peaceful transition from a brutal minority regime, built on ideas of White superiority, to a society that is not only democratic but that internalises equality as a principle is enough for people with different cultural backgrounds to now coexist in the same spaces and on the same terms. Parting from the painstakingly maintained puritarianism of the apartheid regime in South Africa, during which interracial relationships were penalised, also coincided with a moment in time when access to technologies increased in the late 1990s and, with it, access to a variety of conceptions of possible relationships and sexual experiences. New ideals were enshrined in a constitution that, in many ways, reflected the 'rainbow nation' ideals, capturing the aspiration of a harmonious future in cultural diversity and unity, much like the colours of a rainbow coexist next to each other.

The brutalisation and sexualisation of black bodies, which had long been treated as disposable, were hoped to become a thing of the past with the system change, but time has proven that the violence of racialising bodies is not as easily disrupted. Instead, it finds stimulation in the structural violence

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8   Authentic relating games are interactive games designed to cultivate self-aware, deep, and anxiety-free connections with others, often facilitated via Zoom and similar online platforms.

of a capitalist economy that is all but supportive of a levelled playing field. Whilst South Africa is considered an economic powerhouse in sub-Saharan Africa, it remains a society still riddled with socio-economic discrepancies, manifested through drastic gaps in education quality, employment,[9] living conditions, and service delivery, which is contingent on living in the 'right' area. In addition, an ongoing challenge to supply people in South Africa with electricity means that consistent technological connectivity is a privilege reserved for those with access to backup sources and living in affluent areas, which are less affected by power outages.

Differences are stark between those who live their day-to-day lives in suburbs close to the city centre with lifestyle supermarkets, door-opening schools, and access to all kinds of amenities and those in makeshift houses in informal settings where goods and services are provided in a bricolage manner. There are also formal (though under-serviced) areas into which people who used to live within the (official) economic hub of central Cape Town and were classified as Coloured or Black were forcefully moved to. These areas have been growing in the last two decades and are often thought of as 'other' and an origin of social ills, including violent crime and gender-based violence. Although the apartheid rhetoric may no longer be systematically and publicly utilised, affluent areas continue to be shielded from an invasion of what used to be referred to as the 'swaart gevaar' (Afrikaans for black danger) through considerable investments in alarm systems, private security, and neighbourhood watch groups (Junck 2019).

Unlike many of the people who live in Cape Town, my research participants were at home in areas with comfortable infrastructures, even if rendered somewhat unreliable through regular electricity cuts and insecurity produced by high crime levels. These well-serviced and surveilled areas could themselves be interpreted as algorithms or step-by-step recipes for authentication, determining who belongs and who does not. Most of these Tinderers had access to 'better education', the quality of which varies drastically between private and public schools (the latter also depending on the school's location). They also had reliable access to broader connections using various technologies. It stands to question what kinds of stories unfold in a dating environment that has become, at least in theory, open to more exploratory regimes of connecting through such technologies but that is also characterised by thick, inflexible identity categories.

Against this backdrop, Bosch (2017) found social networking platforms to be alluring sites for potential new biographies of citizenship, characterised by more individualised forms of activism. Enthusiasm around the capacities of social media as a 'prosthesis of human agency' (Mitchell and Hansen 2010) has subsided amongst scholars in recent years with the focus shifting to the

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9   Unemployment is sitting just below 40% and unskilled workers making up a third of the labour force.

inequalities facilitated through their operationality (see, for example, Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; York 2022). Notwithstanding the increasing awareness of their negative social repercussions, social media, including dating apps in their capacity to connect, remain an everyday means through which to think and imagine.

Methodological approach

I began the research on the use of Tinder in pursuit of my PhD in 2018. By far the most noteworthy dating app used in Cape Town at the time, Tinder, and the vastly different types of stories surrounding its use, had entered my circles and attracted my attention. My Tinder profile briefly outlined the intention of the research, including an offer to buy coffee for people interested in a conversation about peoples' experiences. It also showed two images of me (one in my graduation gown) and included a logo of the University of Cape Town, where I was working towards my PhD.

The twenty-five research participants I ended up meeting were between twenty-one and sixty-three with almost as many women as men (the only gender categories Tinder provided). In the context, these individuals would all qualify as middle class – although on a broad spectrum ranging between parent-supported university students and homeowners. I initially considered it somewhat coincidental that many of the people I met were experimenting with their sexuality. It was expected for those matches whose profile was marked 'woman', as they would have had their profiles either open to both women and men or just women. With male participants, I was more surprised until I realised that Tinder, despite being imbued by normative sexual ideologies (Parry et al. 2023), also provides an opportunity to 'dip one's toe' into lesser-known waters as regards intimate connections – not just in respect of gender but also regarding different relationship constellations.

Even though I had used the Tinder app previously and made some momentary and some lasting connections drawing on it (including meeting one of my now closest friends), setting up a profile to recruit participants felt quite different. Fellow scholars and others frequently suggested that my positionality as a White woman,[10] at the time on the verge of thirty, must carry extra weight in this space that is not exclusively connoted to 'dating' but strongly associated with the practice. And there certainly were occasions that required careful navigation, as in any ethnographic research. Using Tinder is a research method that welcomes depth and allows for the time that it takes to cohere intimate thoughts, which makes it all but impossible to have firmly defined lines between the 'researcher' and the 'participant'. In my previous research, these blurred lines led to complicated situations. I became,

10   My having been born in Germany was not immediately evident from my profile. Seeing that I had lived in Cape Town for many years, people often assumed that I was local.

for instance, dependent on a gatekeeper of my research setting who had taken a romantic interest in me and whose sociopolitical views and exertions of power over others I found deeply revolting. On Tinder, I did find myself matching with a person I found attractive and who conveyed at one point that he also felt attracted to me. At that particular time I had just started seeing my now partner of 6 years (whom I met on Bumble), and upon clarifying that we managed to continue our conversations. Connections are not easily characterised as sexual or romantic in any context. Tinder is a space that is often thought of as profoundly sexualising. However, those who draw on the app are not any less able to distinguish between different types of connections – they may indeed be more skilled in reading interest – nor are they necessarily just after one singular kind of connection.

Something I had underestimated was the willingness of people to meet a stranger for an interview on their intimate dating experience and the power of using a tool like Tinder, developed on principles of quantification. Much like in other spaces in Cape Town in which I have conducted research to date, being considered White,[11] educated, female, and relatively young did work in my favour. Those markers suggested to those who swiped my profile that I could be their neighbour – middle class and in no economic strain and, by those indicators already, not very threatening. This middle-class status is congruent with the ideology of whiteness which remains a determining factor in establishing trust in Cape Town (Junck 2019) and, as a quiet, female-presenting person, I tend to be met in an unassuming way. What quickly became evident upon meeting was that one of the main motivators for matching with me was the hope that I might be able to advise them on making meaningful connections via Tinder. Men in particular told me that they were relieved to have an outlet to share their hopes and fears around relating, as they felt uncomfortable talking about these things with their friends.

The snowball recruitment approach I had previously used in various settings, requiring a gradual crafting of relationships, never had me exposed to the questions I was facing now: who of those willing should I select and who leave out? It was an uncomfortable notion to establish not just criteria of inclusion – to identify who was interested in my project and I should match – but criteria of exclusion. Realising that I was spoilt for choice, I began with swiping – right for 'yes', left for 'no' – in an effort to put together a diverse group of research participants. Yet, I had a sour feeling in my gut every time I swiped 'no' on someone willing to share their story for no other reason than that the person was of a certain demographic. Aware of the limited capacity I had to give each of these matches the time and attention they deserved, I realised I wanted to keep my swiping to a minimum as I figured out a formula to rely upon – one that would be justifiable later on.

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11   I understand Whiteness as a social category that has different sub-categories and is fraught with tensions (Pederson 2020).

An initial tenseness around demographic choice-making and an inner resistance to swiping towards a 'good sample' slowly transitioned into a more intuitively guided swiping flow that also allowed for a paced reflection on my presence on Tinder. Amidst these reflections, I found myself waking up one day unable to access my research profile, which I had gotten into the habit of consulting multiple times a day, not necessarily to take any action on the app but to feel 'connected' to my research topic. I had been banned from the platform. Call centre staff did not provide me with any explanation or a reason and could not respond to my indication that I had not violated any of Tinder's regulations. And so it happened that I was abruptly disconnected from the platform itself, left in limbo and with a desire for clarification.

The possibility of recruiting research participants by having them choose me – by matching my research profile – felt fair and less intrusive than walking up to people in other research settings and interrupting their daily lives. I had been transparent about my intentions and only used the data I collected after I had met with my matches and explained my motivations for and approach to the study. And while social media data visible to all users is often considered public, accessibility does not equate ethics, with the latter being tied to very subjective experiences (see boyd and Crawford 2012). Regardless of the fact that I had reflected on what it means to be on Tinder as a researcher, the actual ban triggered anxiety. I simply could not know how it felt for those who did *not* match with me to come across my profile. Moreover, dealing with critical views and difficult gatekeepers is an inherent component of ethnographic fieldwork, whilst a general consensus on when and where a scientific gaze is appropriate is quite improbable. What made the situation particularly frustrating was that, after many attempts of contacting Tinder, I still could not find out why exactly I had been shunted from the app.

Ultimately, my ban from Tinder was a blessing in disguise. The experience made me reflect on the inherent problem introduced by dedicating an easily accessible space (here Tinder) to the singular practice of 'dating'. It is this unclear term, which seems to urge for privacy and isolated emotional domains, that implies that users in this space lack the ability to make an agentive choice of whether or not to be part of a research project. As I built in-person relationships with some Tinderers over the numerous coffees, foods, and walks we shared within different areas of Cape Town – whilst other matches remained one-time encounters – I came to recognise the ideational hollowness of isolating the 'dating' portion of a person's life from their larger experiential journeys. What is more, the misleading notion of privacy amongst strangers makes it easy for platforms like Tinder to sidestep accountability and transparency regarding their regulation, the logics of which have become part and parcel of connecting today.

Tindering as a process

Research on Tinder tends to focus on isolated aspects of the way the app is used, such as the motivations for using the app (see, for example, James 2015; Sumter et al. 2017; Kallis 2020; Ciocca et al. 2020), the type of people who use it (Gatter and Hodkinson 2016; Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017), or the behaviour patterns developed in its use (Rochat et al. 2019; Dai and Robbins 2021; Medina-Bravo et al. 2023; Roca-Cuberes et al. 2023; Kristy et al. 2023; Drunen 2023). This research is also drawn on to trace current social trends (March et al. 2017; Fansher and Eckinger 2021) and shifting social trajectories in broad terms (Rosenfeld 2018; Palmer 2020). Maria Stoicescu (2020: 1), for instance, argues that we are witnessing a 'McDonaldization of romance in which fast love and intimacy are pursued and consumed in an accelerated fashion, redefining socially expected scenarios for relationships'. What these conversations rarely touch on is that Tindering is a process that connects different stories and timelines.

Whilst 'McDonaldised' features of Tinder are exported across the globe, for instance in the form of standardised profiles, algorithms, and marketing strategies, what this means for day-to-day experiences remains under-explored, particularly beyond what is often referred to as the Global North. African settings are generally not foregrounded in studying technology use, with the notable exception of innovative technologies being framed as part of development efforts. When relationships in the region are considered, it is often against the backdrop of kinship and population patterns, violence, or disease. This produces a scholarly backed understanding of intimacy as contingent only on external factors rather than considering what forming relationships entails (see Spronk 2012).

Reflecting on everyday interactions between bodies and technologies, Christopher Bareither (2019: 19) stresses their emotional affordances, which 'offer specific ways of doing emotion in a process of reflecting one's own body through media'. In the form of their design, speed/repetition, materiality, and narratives, platforms do seem to have profoundly economising effects on the body. But *what* effects is not at all apparent. Gaby David and Carolina Cambre (2016: 9) argue that the extent of technology's objectifying effect depends on whether there is an acknowledgement of the self as 'non-continuous, non-unitary, with fuzzy, porous boundaries and sensitive to social context'.

Amongst the Tinderers I met in Cape Town, the self was certainly considered to some extent infringed upon by the set-up and logics of the platform. Nonetheless, the own person was situated outside of the app, not as a subject that is fully in control but one that is willing to make certain trade-offs at certain moments. I understand these trade-offs to be part of ongoing negotiations of the possibilities and challenges of technologies, akin to Pype's (2018) technology contract, determining how different knowledge systems

are configured. Embodied learnings and the ability to nourish visions that encompass that which is beyond the immediate experiential sphere play a crucial role in this process.

Knowing and unknowing

When it comes to the intersection of basic human desires of feeling connected with technologies in particular, 'modern love' is described as having an alienating trend characterised by a lack of solidarity. Eva Illouz (2018) refers to this as the end of love and Zygmunt Bauman (2013) as love being liquified. When we consider Bosch's (2020) findings, which demonstrate that Tinder users in South Africa *build on* the tech promise of creating spaces for new possibilities, attitudes, and expectations, Bauman's assertion about the erosion of traditional ideals seems to be misguided. My own research aligns with this. It shows that, grounded in the everyday – encompassing both past memories and careful visions of the future – thinking through relationality via Tinder (and other technologies) becomes a process of negotiating ways of knowing and connecting with relative strangers in Cape Town.

Lisa Portolan and Jodi McAlister (2022) speak about how, during the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in Australia, heightened levels of uncertainty accelerated the search for certainty in the form of the dominant romantic master plot, only for people to quickly lose faith in it. In their study, realities such as loneliness interfered with the ways in which people could embody the protagonist of their romantic story, which had been internalised as typically involving two people meeting, having sex, falling in love, marrying, having children, and living happily ever after. Rather than the gradual liquification of love that Bauman described as a general social trend in 'modern societies', dating app users were more jaggedly shifting between desperately looking for stability in a partnership and being profoundly disenchanted (Portolan and McAlister 2022).

In Cape Town, similar shifts became evident in my research, and this before the global pandemic. They were informed by a more permanent sense of social instability and undergirded by universal ideas of romance. Sometimes Tinder was embraced as an opportunity to explore the unknown. In others, it was described as symptomatic of an inability to connect meaningfully in contemporary Cape Town. Nick, an English South African architect in his late twenties,[12] elaborated on the appeal of creating a connection with someone unknown to him and meeting up before learning much about them:

> *I really just want to have that experience of talking to a complete stranger that you know nothing about. My standard thing*

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12   Identity politics in South Africa continue to differentiate those who are categorised as 'White' as either being English South African (generally of British ancestry) or Afrikaans South African (originally of a Dutch heritage).

to say is, 'Would you like to go for a drink? Let me know if you do or don't.' Some say it's very forward, but for some it's fine. I like the spontaneity. Suddenly you're in a space with this person that you know nothing about. I find this really ... exciting. If it's a stranger, you can open up. Even if it's just for one night.

During our lunch at a bustling restaurant in downtown Cape Town through his work break, Nick initially described Tinder as the perfect tool to initiate 'love without the fall', an idea he credited to the popular philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek. And certainly, the theme of wanting to use Tinder as a means to avoid torment recurred in different conversations with participants, who described the rejection and pain, at least in the early stages of connecting via Tinder, to be somewhat removed from 'real life emotions'. Tom, a postgraduate biology student with a humorous Tinder profile in which he caricatured himself in a form of comic illustration, reflected as follows:

The fact that I can talk to multiple people at once makes it so different. If I can talk to like ten people and one person doesn't reply to my message in the middle of the conversation, I don't get this 'Why didn't you reply, did I say something stupid?' or like 'What's going on?' ... It doesn't feel like that at all. It's light-hearted and there's a lot of people, right? Whereas when you're at a party and you're having this great conversation and you're like, wow, this is amazing, and then they just walk away from you [laughs], you're, like, I guess you're not obligated to talk to me because we don't know each other but that was weird, right? That can mess up your whole night.

Phoebe, in her early thirties and working in information and communication technology after moving to the city from a small university town, thought there was something not just inherent to the app itself that allowed people to behave in a particular way but the idea of finding a 'romantic fit'. She critically assessed her own strategic dating approach: 'I think we're arseholes in the romantic context in a way that we're not allowed [to be] anywhere else. Like checking education ... [and checking] this and that, thinking that we're going to have lots in common.' She added:

I've met a lot of brilliant people [via Tinder]. That's, like, the coolest thing. And a lot who have lots of stuff I'm interested in or other stuff that doesn't work ... and that, like, gradually builds the spectrum of what works and what doesn't. The problem with Tinder is that it's so ... not superficial, but so ... calculating. You start with a lot of things that, if you met the person organically, wouldn't be deal-breakers, but here you're like, 'No, wait!' [grimaces].

Whilst Phoebe did not particularly like this side of herself, she was also determined to accumulate some experiences within the fast-paced environment of Tinder to get to know herself better in connection with the relatively strange other. She had not dated any men since being sexually assaulted at the age of nineteen. Having dated her best friend for a long time and now separated from her, Phoebe was now ready to explore what she described as 'heteronormative dating' and a 'balance match', or as 'falling in love with someone on purpose'. Despite this element of control and an understanding of Tinder as an avenue for adventurous self-exploration without much risk of a fall, practices of relating were not untouched by some romanticised vision of an 'authentic encounter' – expectations Phoebe thought of as part of a Victorian hangover.[13] As for Nick, having spent the greater part of our first conversation talking about Tinder as a hedonistic tool and avoiding getting hurt, he later reported having downloaded an additional dating app, Happn. This is an app that matches users they have crossed physical paths with. He explained the app's intriguing effect on him, saying:

> *I got it recently. I like the idea, but in practice it doesn't really work that well. I love the idea ... But there aren't enough people on it in Cape Town for it to work properly, so it ends up like Tinder. Oh, you crossed paths with me today! Often you cross paths once. I envisioned it, like, you cross paths with that person every day but you just never met. But it's probably [more like] we're sitting here and someone just drove past. Imagine you work together and you cross paths often, that could be something interesting. But it wasn't as exciting as I thought.*

Nick was not the only one who romanticised serendipity whilst also appreciating the notion of control that dating apps give the impression of providing. Happn is inspired by the idea of destiny and an evocative moment of crossing paths. Even though the match might happen with a delay and whilst the two individuals are no longer in the same vicinity, the app projects this as an unambiguous, world-stands-still moment, a notion portrayed as a crucial sign for compatibility through Hollywood movies. Tinder, on the other hand, is considered the calculating, ideological counterpart to this. What the concept of Happn seems to allow for is a warmth towards strangeness that is tied up with understandings of romance that have come to be recognised as traditional and authentic. Even if a 'meet-cute moment'[14] never actually happens in this serendipitous form, being able to imagine it chips away at some of the <u>lack of realness</u> that is assigned to the materiality of dating apps. This serves

13   Phoebe used the term 'Victorian hangover' a few times in the context of what she considered to be archaic social practices, including gender roles.

14   A 'meet-cute moment' is the moment typically depicted in romantic comedies as the charming, unexpected, sometimes humorous encounter between two people, setting the stage for their romantic connection.

to show that technological affordances do not just lie in an ultimate result, tying expectation/promise to output. It also lies in the ways in which the past, the present, and possible futures become merged in a realisation of our inherent interconnectedness as human beings, involving pushes and pulls between that which we think we know in our bones and a curiosity for the unknown. The affordance of technology, then, integrates its operationality and infrastructural offerings with its capacity to render embodied experiences part of negotiations around possible futures in newish ways.

Longing for strangeness and authenticity

Tinder as one of the most firmly established dating apps is part of a large assemblage of online dating tools. The conglomerate Match Group owns over forty-five online dating providers (including Tinder) across the globe but despite this market share spends a growing amount of money on marketing these platforms (Statista 2023). The company's first global Tinder marketing campaign in 2023 specifically targeted 'Generation Z',[15] exporting notions of what 'authentic relating' today looks like (Tinder 2023). The marketing effort underlines the normatively blurry and relatively scriptless concept imbued in the practice of connecting with relative strangers within a certain radius and yet outside a sphere of familiarity. Relationships are depicted as fluid, not in need of clear (especially heteronormative) categories, so long as they are 'authentic'.

Apart from the community code of conduct that is mainly meant to preclude harassment, clues as to what makes an appropriate and authentic Tinder encounter are subject to experiential uncovering. This produces frictions that sometimes are intriguing and at others frustrating and disillusioning. In its digitally delegated form, authenticity is reduced to particular data points – for instance by making sure the details of Facebook and dating app profiles match, only tangentially touching on more layered understandings of what this may mean (Duguay 2017). And whilst there is an acknowledgement that Tinder operates upon superficial, searchable factors that may at a certain point clash with experiential attributes, there is also a notion that risk and disappointment can be mitigated and hope kept in check.

What authenticity means was subject to individual exploration for Tinderers in Cape Town. Sophia, well educated, in her late twenties, and working for a non-governmental organisation, recounted having felt the need to explore dating people with whom she has little in common. This is after she had been in a long relationship with someone who had quite a similar background to her. Only by broadening her perspective, she reckoned, would she be able to understand what she actually wants. She matched with someone from an area that is poorer and is commonly described as 'Coloured' (from one of

15   Generation Z is defined as the generation born roughly between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s.

the areas people were forcibly removed to during apartheid). Sophia invited him to her home in a suburb of Cape Town that is popular with students and that is often described as bohemian. As they sat in the backyard drinking wine, Sophia realised that the previously playful mood suddenly shifted. Her housemates, both men and a couple, had come out to greet her guest, after which Sophia's date kept on asking her about their sexuality. 'He became totally obsessed with the idea that they were gay and together, and he kept asking about it … it was so uncomfortable!' After hinting multiple times that she had to get up early, her date finally left, and she felt relieved it was over.

I was surprised that Sophia had invited this man into her home, as most female participants would, like me, follow the protocol of meeting a new person in a familiar public space first. The match had been the result of an impulse – an urge to experience something new, the expectations of which quickly collided with the uncomfortable reality of two divergent experiential domains. Distorted expectations of what authenticity will look and feel like on a first Tinder date – and consequent disillusionment – did sometimes reinforce tenacious barriers. Soon after this experience, Sophia started a relationship with someone she had met at university some years earlier. However, such experiences did not necessarily mean that strangeness was avoided altogether.

Frictions

Stretching towards the authentic *and* the strange posed challenges to and meant different things for different participants – and at varying moments in time. Matt, for instance, was in a new relationship, for the first time with another man, but secretly continued seeking additional bondage experiences with women via Tinder. His partnership, grown from a long-term friendship, was familiar and new at the same time, as were his secret sexual escapades, in a way. And then there was Willem, who had not dated anyone for nearly a decade after his divorce. He now drew on Tinder to take cautious and deliberate steps to reconnect with the idea of dating and what assumptions and expectations it might entail doing so via the app.

Frequently, Tinder was embedded in a process of getting over someone or something and not being ready for a full commitment yet. Unlike common definitions of what has entered the public vocabulary as 'situationships', these explorations were never free of expectations, imaginations, and lingering feelings; they were very much part of experiencing the various dimensions of relating with another human being. Tinder as a means to connect and a carrier of meanings was an unsteady element in these negotiations – quickly deleted and re-downloaded at different stages. At the same time that <u>negative social</u> behaviour such as 'ghosting'[16] was closely associated with the

16   'Ghosting' is commonly defined as the disappearance from a relationship without any explanation.

emergence of dating apps and critiqued as a form of social decay, Tinder was frequently opted for precisely because it allowed for ambiguity. Tinder was, for instance, welcomed as a tool to 'sort-of-date' and have a 'sort-of-intimacy', one that lacks definition at its early stages – but will, at a particular point, metamorphose into either a something or a nothing. 'Getting over' someone was not a rare motivation for (re)downloading the app. This was done by creating *newish* moments with relative strangers, which seemed to provide opportunities to discover meaning through novel connections but grounding them in the logics of an accumulated wealth of experience.

In all their pluralism, the intimate narratives of my research participants tugged at embodied assumptions of what is desirable, strange, and authentic. They also revealed frictions of negotiating a technology contract through Tinder as a means imbued with the potential of extending one's desires, on the one hand, and exposing oneself to risks of the unfamiliar or unexpected, on the other. Sylvester's story is illustrative of this. Self-made, from a historically strategically disadvantaged area, and describing himself as Coloured, this fifty-two-year-old had a particular vision of his future with someone. He started his Tinder adventure by looking for a woman who would correspond to all his selection criteria: never married, childless, of Catholic faith, self-sufficient, modest, and preferably still of childbearing age. 'If things work out, I would settle down. Get married, have kids … ,' he said to me at our first meeting over coffee in Sea Point, an affluent coastal area of Cape Town where he had suggested meeting. When I saw him again some months later, Sylvester's approach had drastically changed: he was no longer looking for the perfect romantic match but had, instead, started drawing on Tinder to explore connections without confining them to the notion of a 'date'. He described this as a way to keep his expectations in check and embrace different kinds of connections, not necessarily in line with the 'traditional dating route' in the way he had envisioned at the outset. It also meant less pressure to becoming physically intimate, since he had not had sexual contact with anyone else for years, apart from a guilt-laden experience with a sex worker.

As a result of his new approach, Sylvester had started seeing women from different cultural, social, and racial backgrounds within those few months. 'I never thought I would someday go out with a Black woman, and on top of that a foreigner,' he explained. Sylvester's new method brought him into contact with a woman from Malawi, with whom he shared an unexpectedly pleasant evening and even his first kiss in years. 'It was easier than I thought, maybe also because she was gonna leave Cape Town soon,' he elucidated. 'I did not even feel uncomfortable holding hands in public – I enjoyed it.' Recounting the kiss, Sylvester compared his feeling to a television show, in which participants are blindfolded and explore their attraction to a stranger by relying on their senses. The blindfold metaphor avails itself quite readily to describing

both the allure of the unknown and Sylvester's use of the dating app to play with normative categories and the restrictions they come with.

However, when the blindfold comes off, other elements may enter the equation. When later on Sylvester started seeing a woman from Zimbabwe via Tinder, economic and social status became more significant. She worked as a live-in house help, he explained in a hushed tone, and that he was not initially physically drawn to her. Providing cheap domestic work was one of the few ways during apartheid to get access to the wealthier parts of the city, and the same labour and living patterns (still in exchange for minimal and informal compensation) have persisted over time. As such, it is an area of work that exemplifies the endurance of old power dynamics and attributions of worth. When his match invited him to visit her as her employer was not around, they lay in bed together naked for a while. For Sylvester, it was a re-assuring experience as regards possible connections, adding nuance to himself by reaching towards the unfamiliar to comfortable degrees. By detaching the idea of meeting someone from meeting 'the one' made possible for him, even if only momentarily, to expand the tight moral frameworks that stipulate what feels authentic, even if they did not fundamentally alter his frame of reference.

Conclusion: authentically strange

Dating app profiles are often laughed at in online commentaries, with users decoding the strategies and archetypes drawn on, and Tinder and similar apps are directly linked to an entirely new (partly humorous, partly disillusioning) reference system evolving around it. Yet there is something about Tinder's promised affordance to match with someone beyond one's direct physical reach that keeps people swiping despite often feeling disillusioned.

Tom McDonald (2019) observes that 'the stranger' has been a recurring figure in anthropology and sociology, often taken to represent the antithesis of kinship and friendship. It represents an absence of relations or a lack of sorts, associated with what is thought of as an anomie of life today. Yet, connecting with strange people and ideas is integral to living in a world of movements, flows, and ideological shifts. Matching with relative strangers over and over again via Tinder can be interpreted as a willingness to renegotiate realities, though this does not happen in an instant.

The ethnographic examples presented in this article might, at first glance, seem to support Phoebe's view that dating apps and old tales of 'romance' lead people to behave 'like arseholes', searching for new ways to have their individual desires met without necessarily foregrounding the feelings of the other individual/s involved in their 'learning moment'. I argue that this is not reflective of a hedonistic trend, fuelled by technologies, or a liquification of love as per Bauman (2013). Instead, the depth of these narratives,

processed as personal learnings and retold to me in my role as a researcher and attentive listener, reflects an urge to grapple with what it might mean to be human in the time of Tinder and co., much like in Pype's (2018) contemplations of 'technology contracts'. These negotiations are very much tied up in specific societal climates and histories, which have to be carefully looked at through individual accounts before making any generalising claims about technologies and their social impact.

However brief they sometimes are, Tinder encounters are consequential – they become part of one's fabric and constitute an embodied reverberation in encounters yet to come, even when experiences are treated as somewhat removed from reality. Following dating accounts over time gives credit to embodied memories – as well as efforts to build new ones. Yet, in turn, attributing too much weight to specific moments of using dating apps glosses over the ambiguities, contradictions, and frictions that afford meaning. It also plays into persistent affinities towards simplistic, binary assumptions around technologies: human versus artificial; authentic versus strange. Tinder does not dictate realness but forms part of a process of moving in and out of conversation with different realities.

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Leah Junck considers herself a digital anthropologist, fascinated with questions of what the integration of computational technologies into peoples' lives means for our ability to relate to one another and envision a shared future. This interest was fuelled through her work on the Tinder dating application, the role of social media in neighbourhood surveillance in South Africa, and understandings of artificial intelligence in healthcare in Mozambique. She is now working as an applied anthropologist, seeking to encourage contextually grounded and inclusive conversations around technologies.