

**Judging books by their covers –
Tinder interface, usage and sociocultural implications**

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Abstract

Public discourse on Tinder depicts the dating app as marking the end of traditional – as well as healthy – notions of love and romance, permeating them with a logic of consumption and commodification. Our article offers a close reading of the Tinder user interface in order to inquire into *how* – and *in how far* – the contours of such commodity culture can be traced into the design and usage of the app. Guided by critical and Foucauldian theory, we indeed find strong objectifying tendencies built into the interface. However, these tendencies are riddled with contradictions and ambiguities. Thus, while the emphasis on the visual exacerbates pressures for users to meet bodily norms of beauty, it also reinvigorates embodied intuition and ‘gut feeling’, the loss of which has been critiqued in studies on more traditional forms of online dating. Furthermore, whereas the swipe gesture appears paradigmatic of a binary consume-and/or-discard attitude, Tinder’s monetising strategies indicate the users’ wish to amend and repair this attitude. Lastly, the aesthetics of the database feed a desire of ‘swiping on’ that is insatiable. However, building on existing research, we see the consequent flattening out of personal relations on Tinder to merely displace the longing for love and romance to a sphere beyond the app’s reach.

Keywords: Tinder, LBRTD apps, interface, cultural analysis, swipe logic, database, critical theory.

Introduction

Since the launch of Grindr in 2009 and Tinder in 2012, ‘location-based real-time dating applications’ (LBRTD apps) have become firmly established in the everyday lives, as well as everyday conversations. Terms such as ‘to swipe’ and ‘to match’ have safely taken their places in our vocabularies and the idea that romance – or at least sex – is only the sliding movement of a thumb away has become well integrated into collective consciousness. When it comes to searching for a partner, LBRTD apps have reached

high levels of acceptance (e.g. Timmermans and Caluwé, 2017a, 2017b; Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2017). At the same time, ‘app-dating’ has become an object of harsh critique, dark humour and cultural satire in public discourse (see Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017). Tinder – the LBRTD app with the highest number of usersⁱ – is consistently portrayed as the arch-symbol of what is wrong with contemporary attitudes and approaches to romance and sexuality. Invariably, it is seen as symptomatic of a logic of commodification and its colonisation of the private and affective spheres (e.g Bilton, 2014; Guendelsberger, 2016; Grigoriadis, 2014; Kristiansen, 2015).

Whether Tinder is deemed to be the *product* or the *producer* of contemporary values and attitudes, discussants seem to agree that the app is symptomatic of the *Zeitgeist*. So-called ‘Tindering’ is a cultural practice and as such points beyond itself and to the sociocultural setting within which it works. To study LBRTD apps thus offers rich possibilities to better understand how the motivational and relational aspects of virtual sociability tie in with their technological conditions and how specific technological advances interact with habitual cultures and established social, political and economic realities. As Tinder’s user base grows continually, thus normalising Tinder use on an ever-wider basis, it becomes crucial to study and reflect upon the specific ways in which LBRTD-apps facilitate, mediate and shape interactions between people and the forming of their relationships. After all, in so doing, LBRTD apps channel, promote and legitimate particular norms as well as the contexts for interpreting these while making other normative possibilities less plausible and acceptable. Approaching LBRTD applications from such a techno-cultural perspective, this article sets out to map and discuss *what kinds of interpersonal, social relations are being suggested, furthered and normalised by the interactions that Tinder – and especially its interface – facilitate for and together with its users. Briefly put, we are inquiring into Tinder’s common sense.*

Our argument is structured as follows: We begin with a short analysis of the discursive climate that envelops, embeds and positions Tinder in Western countries – a climate, generated to a significant degree by traditional news (and entertainment) media. We then briefly assess the existing academic literature on Tinder in light of this broader discursive climate and give an outline of our theoretical and methodological approach, which are based on critical theory, (Michel) Foucauldian thinking about discourse, and hermeneutic interpretation. On this basis, we turn to our main analysis of the Tinder user interface, discussing three major aspects, specifically, the *central role that images*

and the visual are made to play in user interactions; the *swiping movement* that has become the app's most distinctive 'form of interaction' (Lorenzer, 1986); and the question of the *aesthetics of the user database* that is Tinder's material resource.

Overall, our findings indicate that these features bear clearly commodifying tendencies and are thus deserving of the criticism that popular discourse has subjected Tinder to. Yet, our dialectical approach also brings aspects into focus that contradict and counter this tendency. Thus, while the predominance of the visual pushes users towards increasingly objectified modes of self-presentation, this predominance, together with the possibility of a swiftly following physical date, also reinvigorates a more holistic and embodied assessment of other people. Similarly, 'the swipe' risks letting notions of carelessness and disregard seep into user relations. At the same time, the additional features offered in the app's pay versions, Tinder Plus and Tinder Gold, can be seen to amend the damage done by the 'swipe logic' (David and Cambre, 2016). Lastly, the aesthetic of Tinder's database, which is presented to users as a deck of playing cards (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015), suggests shallowness and inconsequentiality. Yet again, the connotations of fun and play also seem to offer users a way of *containing* the potentially serious emotional consequences of the dating game.

LBRTD applications in the public discourse

Since 2014, the year Tinder started to acquire a broad usership (Bilton, 2014), the app, like many other technological advances before it, triggered a moral panic and a deluge of – often harshly – negative criticism from pundits and cultural commentators. One of the first outspokenly critical pieces, published in *Vanity Fair* in 2015, sparking a wider debate, was aptly named 'Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating-Apocalypse'. Based on interviews with American College Students, the author Nancy Jo Sales reported that students were discontent with the superficial and sex-fixated courtship norm allegedly promoted by LBRTD apps. While longing for the 'good old fashioned romance' of previous generations, they were now trapped between participating in 'swiping', 'matching', 'hooking up' and 'ghosting', or nothing at all. Moreover, sexually ravenous men were thoroughly taking advantage of the opportunities Tinder afforded, and relishing it (Sales, 2015).

This conception of Tinder as a dehumanising sex-app was subsequently taken up by popular culture, including film and television, where it's been investigated, documented, narrativized and parodied, for example in the Danish TV series *Yes, No,*

Maybe (Dahl, 2016–) and the episode ‘Rat Pack’ of the series *Broad City* (Statsky, 2016). A cartoon published in *The New Yorker* (Flake, 2015) offers a poignant summary of the overall direction of this critique: two people facing each other, with one trying to ‘swipe’ over the other’s face (and thus attempting to make the other disappear). Beyond the cartoon’s biting comment on the fate of interpersonal relations, it shows how the qualities of a given technology, once it has become part of the everyday lives of a decisive number of people, will become an integral part of culture and will facilitate our understanding of the world on the basis and along the lines of its functionality. However, how did we acquire such somber habits and what is the driver of this development? When the *Urban Dictionary* defines Tinder drily as ‘the McDonalds for sex’ (quoted in David and Cambre, 2016, p. 2), it offers a fast-paced culture of consumption as the most wide-spread, common-sensical answer. This perceived expansion of consumption into the realm of love and romance is seen to be ‘unnatural’ or ‘unhealthy’ and, by these very virtues, evokes notions of the ‘natural’ and the ‘healthy’ that are thus assumed in the prior status-quo (e.g Bilton, 2014; Robbins, 2015; Sales, 2015; Spira, 2015; Wygant, 2014).

Academic literature on Tinder in light of the public discourse

Intentionally or not, academic work on Tinder connects to and interacts with the discursive climate in various ways. Seen in this context, it can roughly be divided into three categories: (1) research into uses and effects (specifically, risks and dangers) of LBRTD apps; (2) research on motivations and user activity, and (3) culture analytical and (symbolic) interactional approaches.

In line with public notions of a ‘dating apocalypse’ (see above), research in the first category has a marked tendency towards unfolding Tinder’s detrimental potential. For example, Bhattacharya (2015) investigates the connection between Tinder use and sexually transmittable diseases; Strubel and Petrie (2017) find heightened levels of body monitoring and lowered self-esteem; and Ribeiro Lopes and Vogel (2017) detect misogyny and gender stereotyping.

By contrast, the second has brought forth markedly neutral assessments of what it is that brings people to LBRTD apps and keeps them there (e.g. LeFebre, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Findings in this category indicate that the range of motivations is wider than public discourse suggests, with fun and entertainment, ego-boosting, and long-term

relationships standing side-by-side a desire for casual sex. Unfortunately, since many of these studies rely on quantitative survey data, they often lack the means to reflect on their findings in depth.

The third and smallest group comprises studies into impression management on dating apps, critical analysis of the applications' use cultures, and their place within a wider societal context (e.g. Hobbes, Owen & Gerber, 2016; Duguay, 2017; David & Cambre, 2016; Ward, 2017). Works in this category are more theory driven and more reflective of their own, as well as others' findings. It is to this tradition that we wish to contribute with a perspective on the dialectics of the Tinder application and the culture of commodification associated with it. This perspective, we argue, is productive in that it extends and sharpens existing findings in the field. In this respect, three contributions are particularly relevant here. As concerns David and Cambre's (2016) finding that users partly resist Tinder's commodifying logic by 'subverting or playing with its limitations and affordances' (2016, p. 9), our dialectical approach brings into view that, paradoxically, this subversion is integral to Tinder itself. Furthermore, we want to extend Janelle Ward's (2017) observation that people claim fun and entertainment as motivations for Tinder use *so as to avoid stigmatisation* (p. 1654). Notions of play and fun, we argue, are used as forms of *containment* (Bion, 1964) that the application itself gestures towards. Finally, with respect to Hobbs et al.'s (2017) argument that Tindering '...brings both new opportunities and pleasures as well as old and new anxieties' (p. 271), we want to offer a 'yes, but...' qualification. We agree that the digital and corporate facilitation of dating culture cannot dogmatically be deemed as negative. On the other hand, not everything that Tinder users report as positive should be accepted as that. Rather, our critical theoretical outlook makes us attend to the potentially harmful social effects that might result from positive individual experiences. At the same time it prompts us to remain open to the progressive potentials of commercial dating apps.

Theory and Method

As can be gathered from the above, our article is based on critical-theoretical approaches to culture-industrial objects and a way of thinking 'that identifies contradictions' as 'the source of all dialectics' (Fuchs, 2014, p. 14). Applied to the digital, such thinking is geared to bringing into view both the *particular* and the *universal interests* that are being served by online technology, the benefits to humanity as well as the 'exploitation of humanity for business purposes' (Fuchs, 2014, p. 149).

Beyond this central, historical-materialist assumption, we rely on Foucauldian discourse theory as it has been developed by Mel Stanfill in her article ‘The Interface as discourse’ (2015). Stanfill points to a central aspect relating to user interfaces, specifically, they are never normatively neutral. Rather, by inviting and facilitating users to perform specific actions through their design, they create ideals and norms about what are correct or desired actions. Inspired by Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power as productive, Stanfill claims that a user interface produces a ‘common sense’ about how one can and should act and think within its context and, by virtue of defining what is normal and ‘right’, make other alternatives less attractive and/or valid (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1016). The existence of norms does not automatically mean that all members of a cultural group follow them and live perfectly in accord with them. However, acting in line with them is to go the way of least resistance. Tying these insights back to our dialectical approach, we expect the sociocultural effects of this process of ‘common-sensing’ to be contradictory and overdetermined.

As refers to methodology, we approach the analysis of Tinder’s interface using hermeneutic interpretation of our own experiences – the associations and reactions triggered in our meeting with Tinder – as a foundation from which to assess and discuss the sociocultural dimensions of the application in light of existing theories and research (Krüger, 2017). This approach finds a main inspiration in José van Dijck’s (2013) thick phenomenological analysis of the digital architecture of Facebook and LinkedIn, in which she puts specific focus on the question of what forms of self-fashioning these platforms facilitate. Discussing and qualifying our analysis, we will refer to pertaining findings of existing studies along the way.

Analysis: the three pillars of Tindering: the visual, the swipe and the database

‘Meet new and interesting people nearby’, Tinder’s online page states as the application’s core function.ⁱⁱ Counter to such platform euphemisms (see Gillespie, 2010), however, it is put to work as a gamified dating app (Hobbs et al., 2017; Ward, 2017). Setting up a profile, Tinder requires one to choose a certain radius (within an already limited perimeter), an age-range and the gender of the people one wants to get to know. These choices can be changed after the profile is established; nevertheless, they need to be defined in order for the new user to be allowed access to the network. Setting up a Tinder profile, it is furthermore compulsory to log on via an existing

Facebook profile or with one's telephone number – reportedly so in order to verify the authenticity of the account (Duguay, 2017, p. 356–7).

In terms of users' visual self-presentation, one can choose up to six pictures with which to build one's profile. In earlier versions of the app, it was only possible to use pictures from one's Facebook account (see Duguay, 2017, p. 359), but this restriction was dropped so that one can now choose freely from the image gallery on one's phone or other devices. Additionally, a Tinder profile can be combined with a user's Instagram account in order to further extend one's choice of personal images (Parkinson, 2015). Finally, it is possible to present oneself through a profile text of up to 500 words. This is an option, however, that only few users use to a significant degree (David and Cambre, 2016).

Once one's profile is complete and online, Tinder localises other users that meet the chosen criteria within the selected geographical range. These users are presented one after the other, with their first profile picture. By clicking on the image, one enters into the extended profile of a given user where one gets access to their remaining pictures, can check whether one has mutual contacts and can read the profile text (if existing). Entering a profile, however, is not necessary for deciding whether one is interested and wants to establish contact or not. Interest in another user is indicated through the right-'swipe', a sliding movement of the thumb (or another finger) from left to right, disinterest with the left-'swipe', i.e. sliding the finger over the smartphone screen from right to left. Instead of swiping, one can also use the 'like (<3)' or 'dislike (X)' button. Yet, it is the 'swipe' movement that is characteristic of – and has become iconic for – Tinder's interface and 'Tindering' as a socio-technological activity. Whenever two users swipe to the right or 'like' each other's profiles they have a 'match' and can start to chat in the app's chat function.

Focus on the Visual

Pictures are the first – and sometimes the only – objects a Tinder user encounters when browsing other users' profiles. The interface is designed for images to take main stage, filling over two thirds of the screen, both when browsing between user profiles as well as when within one and the same profile. Even in in-profile mode, text on the screen is kept small and to a minimum, with name, age, occupation and an optional sentence introducing the user's personality being the sparse linguistic elements; in swipe mode, it is just first name and age. Tinder's interface thus shows itself to be made up of modes

of presentation that are predominantly image based. The means with which to construct and communicate one's identity and the means available to assess and interpret others' are visual to a significantly high degree.

What consequences can we imagine this to have? Similar to Duguay (2017) and in line with the cultural climate described above, we quickly picked up on the objectifying and commodifying tendencies that we see as inherent in this mode of presentation, tendencies that are described by Eva Illouz in her study of traditional online dating, *Cold Intimacies* (2007). Illouz observes that, despite the Internet's disembodied effects, looks and beauty are always matters of concern and worry there. Since, in the context of online dating, images become place holders of the person's presence, and since these images are located within a 'market' of similar pictures (see also Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010), online dating produces a relationship to one's body and looks that is without precedent. By having to 'sell oneself in' by means of pictures, ordinary laypersons are continually put in the position of models or actors working in the beauty industry. By incessantly (re)presenting themselves through, with and in images, users are put in a situation in which they become preoccupied with their looks – their bodies being on display at all times – and in which they have to compete with others on the basis of their bodies and in which the body becomes the main source of social and economic value (Illouz, 2007, p. 74 ff). Our impression of the Tinder interface is that these points are all the more relevant here, with a decisively bigger part of the design's focus being on the visual. By channelling the users' self-presentations into a visual template, the interface seems to promote a mentality in which outer appearance is one's most meaningful asset and the visual is given priority at all times. In this light, Strubel and Petrie's (2017) finding that Tinder users report low levels of satisfaction with their looks seems plausible in that one's competitiveness is inherently tied to them.

The algorithmic reinforcement of commodification

This pessimistic view becomes further corroborated when looking at the algorithmic features that Tinder has added since 2016, particularly, the 'Smart Photos' function and the Elo score. According to its developer (Hall, 2016), the Smart Photo technology has been introduced to help users 'put their best face forward', by optimising a user's choice of profile pictures so as to harvest the highest possible number of matches with the visual resources at their disposal. What the algorithm does is to rotate all uploaded pictures during a trial period so that the image first shown to others changes continually.

Once it has become clear which picture receives the most ‘likes’, the rotation will slow down and the image with the ‘best results’ will end up on the title page most of the time (Hall, 2016). In this way, Tinder’s user interface privileges not only outer qualities *per se*, but sets the norm for what are legitimate and/or valuable outer qualities on the basis of the quantity of positive responses. Arguably, this quantitative elaboration has a disciplining function along Foucault’s lines (see above), by bringing non-normative visual impressions in line and thus contributing to a standardisation, not only of profiles but of people. Thus, expanding on Duguay’s (2017) finding that Tinder’s promotional videos depict lifestyles ‘resembling those of the upper class, urban characters on TV dramas like *Girls*’ (p. 358), our analysis on the visual elements of Tinder profiles points to similar mainstreaming tendencies at work in the algorithmic promotion of profile pictures.

The Elo score rating system, in turn, which feeds into the algorithm determining which profiles a given user is shown and in what sequence is connected to the Smart Photo function. Tinder uses this rating system, which Arpad Elo (2008) developed for the assessment of Chess players, in order to approximate values for the relative desirability of each of its users (Cook, 2017). With the system already established in other fields, amongst them video games (Tinder founding member, Jonathan Badeen, has named World of Warcraft as an inspiration [Cook, 2017]), users gain points when being matched with a higher rated user, not as many when matching with a lower rated one and, by the same coin and in equal measures, lose points when rejected.

From the perspective of the women in Ribeiro Lopes and Vogel’s (2017) study, who felt sexually harassed by male users of the app, this rating system might have a welcome disciplining effect by punishing users for overly uncritical swiping behaviour and aggressively sexualised imagery with a low Elo score, overall, however, the introduction of this score seems to exacerbate the gamification of interpersonal relations. This tendency becomes perceivable in almost caricatured fashion from the Reddit threads in which – exclusively male – users discuss how the algorithm works and how to best manipulate it in one’s favour. One discussant, for example, explains how he set up a fake *female* Facebook and Tinder account in order to study the Tinder profiles of other men and thus map the ‘competition’, left-swiping everybody but his own profile in order to up his own score.ⁱⁱⁱ In instances such as this one the algorithm seems to feed into what Adrien Chen (2016) calls ‘gamer-mode’ behaviour which approximates ‘pick-up artistry’.

Reinjecting embodiment into online dating

And yet, there is one general aspect at the core of Tinder's focus on the visual that runs counter to, contradicts and complicates our pejorative assessment. Despite its central role in Tinder's drive towards commodifying users, it is first and foremost this preoccupation with images that also holds a liberating and 'de-rationalising' effect – at least when compared to more traditional online dating sites. Specifically, one of the critiques of traditional online dating has been that it forces participants to map, articulate and put into words their personality, needs, wishes and desires in a process of excessive introspection (Illouz, 2007, p. 74 ff; Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010) thus pushing them to over-define and over-articulate specific aspects of the self that might better be left open, undefined and ambiguous.

Interestingly, this demand to put into words and make decisions about who one is and what one likes has been criticised along lines similar to the more recent critiques of the dominance of the visual on LBRTD apps, namely, for having commodifying and objectifying effects. Again, this point can be found in Illouz's study (2007) in which she observes that, 'in order to meet a virtual other, the self is required to go through a vast process of reflexive self-observation, introspection, self-labeling, and articulation of tastes and opinions' (2007, p. 77). This requirement Illouz sees as linked to 'a textualisation of subjectivity [...], that is, to a mode of self-apprehension in which the self is externalised and objectified' (2007, p. 78). She identifies both 'visual means of representation and language' (2007, p. 78) as driving this process; however, terms such as 'textualisation' and 'self-labeling' make clear that linguistic means are the dominant force.

We agree with Illouz that, when it comes to love and romance, the building of impressions and relations is fundamentally rooted in the body. One does not fall in love with self-reported personal information or individual aspects of a person, but with an entirety that is impossible to fully do justice to through speech. However, this insight, once obtained, must then also inform our assessment of LBRTD apps. Hence, counter to popular dystopian visions and claims such as LeFebvre's (2017) that Tinder's affordances 'eliminate communicative spontaneity' (p. 15), the app's emphasis on images and geographical proximity holds the promise of retaining at least part of this spontaneity and of obtaining a holistic, embodied impression by leading swiftly over to a physical date. As one of the interviewees in Hobbs et al. (2017) remarked about the

briefness of his profile, ‘I wouldn’t say it’s you know a complete picture of who I am as a person but that’s fine too it doesn’t have to be... that’s why you’re supposed to meet up and have a conversation I guess’ (in Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 281). With visual profiles created to make possible a quick switch of modalities (Ramirez & Sumner, 2015) from the computer-mediated to face-to-face, Tinder indeed seems to allow for more room for experimentation and communication and seems more adapted to human well-being than more traditional online dating sites. Strikingly, this point has been made by Tinder’s CEO Sean Rad himself, who stated in an interview that ‘The irony of Tinder is that in some ways the lack of information, or text, is actually less superficial than having the information’ (quoted in Grigoriadis, 2014). Agreeing with Rad on this point does not mean to forego Tinder’s strong objectifying tendencies; rather, it means to acknowledge the contradictory characteristics of the digital dating industry.

The Swipe gesture

The ‘swipe’ must be seen as Tinder’s signature function. In contrast to other social media, where ‘likes’ are frequently an end in themselves, Tinder’s right swipe is a means to an end and the core form of interaction of the application. Swiping movements were part of our techno-motoric repertoire already before Tinder and are tied to the ‘slide and unlock’ function that ‘opens’ a smartphone for usage, to browsing information or goods, or to playing video games on touchscreens. Nevertheless, David and Cambre (2016) state rightly that Tinder has managed to entirely annex this movement, which had already been coded so firmly, and invest it with a new symbolic meaning so that it is now first and foremost associated with the dating app. Contrasting this with face-to-face situations again, or with traditional online dating where one to a larger extent has the possibility to accumulate impressions over time – albeit mainly cognitive ones (see above) – in the case of Tinder one is from the first tied to a binary logic: right or left swipe, accept or decline. There is no ‘perhaps’-alternative that would open for deliberation, reflection, or doubt. Nor does one get the chance to change one’s mind once one has declined somebody; a left-swipe cannot be taken back and a person that is rejected is rejected for good – at least in case of the open-access version of the app (or if one does not want to ‘reset’ the whole application and start anew; see Duguay, 2017, p. 360). The acquisition of either Tinder Plus or Tinder Gold, however, makes it possible to ‘rewind’ and correct a false swipe. (We will return to this point below)

The gesture of swiping to the left also evokes and emulates an analogue predecessor, namely, to turn over a page in a book. Additionally, the movement connotes moving forward and putting something behind oneself. Also, since the symbol the user needs to click on in order to move to the chat part of the application (in which there is also the overview of the people one has matched with before) is located in the upper right corner, i.e. the location where one conventionally finds the ‘basket’ or ‘trolley’ in online shopping apps, the swipe experience becomes further freighted with shopping associations. One drags the product one wishes over into a kind of store of goods that one might eventually acquire.

Moreover, the binary accept/reject structure indicates a temporal dimension – one that pushes for swiftness and determination. Here the spontaneity, in which we found redeeming features (see above), unfolds a more troubling aspect. In combination with the database, which promises users an unknown, endless-seeming number of profiles (particularly in urban areas), the right-swipe-left-swipe structure makes spontaneity and gut-feeling turn problematic in that they are turned sovereign. Based on a quick, intuitive glance, people are either discarded or approved of.

This sense of sovereignty can be unfolded when comparing the decision-making process on Tinder with that of a face-to-face encounter. During the latter, interactivity and reciprocity are possible and, indeed, necessary *before* any kind of decision to enter into further contact is made. Meeting a stranger in a bar, for example, usually requires at least an *exchange* of glances *before* an advance can be made and conversation can ensue. In the case of Tinder, this exchange is rendered asynchronous, with its sequence reversed. As users swipe through stacks of images, they respond to representations of people who themselves are absent. It is on this non-reciprocal basis – on which a glance cannot be returned – that a decision is made (in form of a swipe) which then unlocks the possibility to interact (in form of a chat). Before this yes/no choice is taken, all possibilities to modify each others’ decision-making, for example, by adapting one’s composure to the other’s behaviour, are barred. Indeed, users have commented favourably on this initial absence of synchronic interactivity, since it offers them more power to control their decisions (Ward, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2017). And yet, this sovereignty is a precarious one. Faced with the promise – and *pressure* – of many more profiles waiting to be assessed and many more swiping decisions to be made, the *freedom from reciprocity* risks becoming a *freedom from the responsibility for the other*.

Swipe logic revised

Summarising the above, we can say that Tinder's non-reciprocal, asynchronous decision-making design creates a narrative coupling between the spontaneous and immediate on the one hand and the non-committal and entertaining on the other. This results in what David and Cambre have called 'Swipe Logic' (2016) – an ephemeral, unsubstantial and unsustainable form of relationship building. However, again, we find a contradiction emerging from the midst of these critical observations. Specifically, when overlooking the various additions that Tinder has made to its swipe logic over the past years, it is striking to see how many of these additions aim at repairing the damage done by this logic to traditional – and less market-oriented – ideas of love and romance. Tellingly, it is these additions on which significant parts of Tinder's revenue model are being based. In other words, in Tinder's search for ways to generate profits from its millions of users it seems to have found exactly those doubts and insecurities, anxieties and vulnerabilities that users are faced with when using Tinder's 'free' version.

The 'Rewind' function, for example, demands payment for the possibility to retrieve a left swipe and a discarded stranger – to take back one's decision, change one's minds and repair the damage done by hasty swiping. It is in these moments that the sovereignty which Tinder affords breaks down and shows its vulnerable underside. Giving in to this vulnerability is what costs on Tinder.

Similarly, a 'Super-Like' was designed to counter the risk of flattening out personal relationship-building, which again is inherent in the swipe logic and specifically in the right swipe of 'liking'. Performed by moving the thumb upwards over the screen, the 'Super-Like' indicates that it is special, precious and rare – which is exactly what the user at the receiving end is meant to feel. *'No, really, this time it's different...'*, one might paraphrase its designed import. While users of Tinder's open-access version are offered one super-like per day, Tinder Plus and Gold users have five 'Super-Likes' at their disposal, a number which works against the gesture's import by rendering it inflationary.

A 'Boost', in turn, which is another paid feature, is designed as a remedy against a lack of positive responses from other users and against the threat of invisibility, promising to put one's profile on top of the stack of all other users in a given perimeter for half an hour. Tinder Plus and Gold clients receive one 'Boost' every month; all users 'can buy a Boosts any time you like', as it reads on the blog post announcing the introduction of the feature.^{iv}

The 'Likes You' feature, which is exclusive to Tinder Gold, allows premium users to see who has right-swiped them and so does not only abate the culturally symptomatic 'Fear Of Missing Out', but also the fear of foregoing a potential partner by not returning their affection.

Furthermore, with respect to calling Tinder Gold a 'First Class Swipe Experience',^v this nod to air travel rings true, not only because of its sexualised connotations of luxury comfort, but also because many of the so-called 'gold' features in air travel are likewise about reducing and containing stressful and anxiety-provoking situations – getting stuck in line, not making it on time, having to squeeze into narrow and uncomfortable aisles etc.

Thus, as much as Tinder's overall experience, as well as the slick choice of words with which it introduces its features, might suggest a rather careless shopping experience and the shaping of people in line with this experience, the monetising strategies still take aim at – and paradoxically revive a belief in – human frailty and neediness. This neediness is not so much coopted by its swipe logic as it is its victim. Pushing further Hobbs et al.'s (2016) observation that 'traditional views on dating, relationships, and monogamy are still largely prevalent' (p. 278), we argue that it is exactly this prevalence that Tinder seeks to monetize. And here lies the real cynicism of the platform – to 'dish out' for free what people *want*, but to let them pay for what they *need*.

Database aesthetics – Database ethics

Beyond the emphasis on the visual and the swipe function there is one more characteristic aspect of Tinder's user interface that is central to its socialising potential, specifically, the game-like way in which it constrains users' access to its database. Tinder shares this strategy of limitation not only with other commercial online dating services, but with corporate digital platforms in general. It is the database that determines the platform's worth, and restricting others – including the users – from fully accessing this database as well as the analytics that guide its usage is the central precondition for making any profit from it (e.g. Srnicek, 2017). In this respect, it is not the point *that* Tinder limits access to its database, but *how*. When Lev Manovich, in his classical *The Language of New Media* (2001), claims that the database has replaced the narrative as the key form of cultural expression and then continues to observe the novel narrative effects resulting from combinations of databases with algorithms (p. 194 ff),

this points us to Tinder's central cultural function. As discussed above, Tinder's 'narrative effect' lies in the experience of thumbing through a menu of available faces and bodies, designed along the aesthetics of playing cards. Further below we will look closer at the implications of this gesturing towards card games, with their connotations of playing, gambling, luck and chance. First, however, we want to establish the effect of how the game is played.

Like with a deck of cards, the app deals out profiles one by one. Users cannot 'zoom out' of this close-up view, they can only move closer by entering a profile in search of further information or, alternatively, move on to the next profile. To a degree, this view seems to follow the necessity of a design that is first and foremost intended for the smart phone. Zooming further out so as to show images of several profiles at the same time would make the people in the images hardly visible anymore. Yet, visibility and assessability are not the decisive concerns here. Rather, the limitation of one profile at a time without knowing how many profiles there are constitutes the game principle; it is what brings users to the application and persuades them to return again and again. This principle creates a drive to swipe that has no logical endpoint. Even if users come across people they find attractive, they are tempted to play on.

This desire, in turn, combines with and feeds into the question of *What if I have not found my ultimate match yet?* Both, the question and the desire to play on, we argue, point to Tinder's core narrative; specifically, that, no matter what, the 'ultimate partner' – the ultimate match – is still out there, waiting in the depths of the platform's database. What the card-game aesthetic thus creates is an *objet petite á* in Jacques Lacan's (1978) definition: an object of desire that is never identical with objects (or people) in the real world, never to be obtained and thus ever elusive. Chasing this object, our fate is to move on continuously and unrestingly from one 'swipe' to the next. Again, this dynamic triggers associations of consumption and the amassment of things. The minute we own them, we lose interest and shift our attention to the next point on the horizon.

Containment through entertainment

Summing up the above point, the metonymic, principally endless movement from one profile to the next is by no means an accidental byproduct of Tinder usage, but the logical consequence of the principle of play that emerges from the specific way in which the access to the database is limited. Approaching this from a political economic perspective, Tinder's business model is not so much about facilitating relationships, as

it is about increasing the number of users in the database and interactions on the app. From the application's perspective, then, it is desirable that users 'swipe on'^{vi}, no matter how 'ultimate' their last 'match'.

With this in mind it is worth revisiting the findings of a number of studies, specifically those referring to fun and entertainment as central motives of Tinder usage (e.g. Timmermans and Cawulé, 2017). What our observation of the metonymic principle of play offers here is a context in which to deepen the understanding of this finding. Hence, if we agree that retaining users on the platform is Tinder's priority, fun and entertainment as central motivations take on a consequential and, not least, defensive meaning. After all, if users are supposed to swipe on regardless of their situation, there are good reasons for them to remain at a safe emotional distance to the kinds of relationships the application produces. Becoming invested in and attached to other users who are themselves enmeshed in Tinder's swipe logic holds a high risk for disappointment (see Ward, 2017). Consequently, (pre)defining the Tinder experience as entertaining gives users the possibility to protect themselves, not only from the stigma that still comes with app dating, as Ward (2017) observes rightly, but also from the overall impact of the Tinder experience.

Delving a little deeper into this defensive logic, the move towards decathecting this experience by stripping it of notions of seriousness and consequence brings the *screens* of our devices back into view and reminds us of their core function of *mediating* between us and our lifeworlds. Regardless of what it is that comes towards us via our screens, the process of mediation removes it by at least one step from any immediate effect. Indeed, this is the main point of the concept of *virtuality* which, according to Rob Shields (2006), always needs to be *actualised* in order to become 'actually real'. Such a form of mediation – such a form of something in need of becoming actual – we argue, can function as *containment* (Krüger, 2019).

In the case of Tinder, what the concepts of virtuality and containment point us toward is that the emotional distance, indicated by the users' claims of entertainment as their motivation, should not automatically be subsumed under the commodifying logic of the app itself. Rather, we want to argue that they are *attempts at containing this logic* – attempts which find their adequate articulation in the assurance that Tinder is *not* 'actually' about love. Put differently, what we see as lying behind the claims of fun and play is the liberating insight that, in order to live reasonably well with Tinder, one needs

to relate to it as something virtual and, consequently, as something that is *one step removed from actual romance*.

In this respect, Gordon Graham's (2017) observation that Tindering and casual sex are fundamentally different from love holds true (p. 16). Only we suggest a less pessimistic and less morally damning reading of this difference. Instead of expecting the playful urge to 'swipe on' to have a directly diminishing effect on users' morals, as Graham (2017) sees it, we want to interpret the notions of entertainment, fun and inconsequence in the statements of user motivations to point to a *suspension*, and ultimately *displacement* of romance and love.

It is these notions of suspension and displacement that we also want to suggest as qualifications of Hobbs et al.'s (2017) observation that, 'At best, dating and hook-up apps could be said to *augment* courtship and sexual practices' (p. 276, our emphasis). Different from augmentation, suspension and displacement indicate a more ambiguous – ambivalent – outcome of the mediat(is)ation of dating as entertainment. This is not to say that romance might not be triggered and facilitated by Tinder; however, if it comes about it seems to do so *despite* Tinder's attempts at keeping users on the platform. And this, we suggest, is the – very traditional – dynamic through which Tinder dates eventually result in long-term relationships, explaining to their families, friends and acquaintances that they had *absolutely no expectations* and that it *caught them by surprise*.

Concluding remarks

The above analysis has focused on Tinder's predominantly visual focus, its premise of a binary decision-making process, and its game-like presentation of profiles. These aspects evoke market rules, suggesting a 'common sense' understanding of Tinder users and their relationships as commodifiable, as well as social relations that can be assessed, ranked and selected based on outer traits in the course of a short moment. Tinder's proposal to its users could thus be paraphrased as '*You CAN judge a book by its cover.*' Against this background, we acknowledge that our analysis echoes, at least in parts, the public discourse that surrounds it. Yet, contradictory aspects complicate this assessment. Firstly, by reinvigorating notions of embodiment and 'gut feeling', LBRTD apps seem at least more conducive of holistic assessments of other people than more traditional, language-based online dating sites. Secondly, while Tinder's swipe logic

suggests rather careless, objectifying relationships, this tendency is countered by additions that have been made for profit-making reasons. Whereas the bare commodifying logic of the app comes ‘for free’ (or at the exclusive expense of users and their data), what the premium options offer is for users to buy their way out of this logic. Thirdly, whereas the principle of play, which emerges from the limited access to Tinder’s database, primarily feeds into a structure of desire that produces ‘swipes’ rather than relationships, this principle also points towards a (relatively) healthy way of living with the app. With users ‘only wanting to play’, more meaningful and nourishing relationships are not eliminated, but relocated to a point beyond Tinder’s reach.

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ⁱ Available numbers are from late 2014, when about 50 million people used the app, which is downloadable in 40 different languages worldwide. However, with global dating networks, such as Badoo, which have an even wider reach and penetration, introducing geolocation services to their customers, this position is a contested one.

ⁱⁱ <https://tinder.com> (last accessed 24/09/2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.reddit.com/r/Tinder/comments/7pqy3i/how_does_tinders_elo_score_actually_works/ (last accessed 24/06/2018).

^{iv} <https://blog.gotinder.com/skip-the-line-with-tinder-boost/> (published 27/09/2018, last accessed 25/09/2018).

^v <https://blog.gotinder.com/introducing-tinder-gold-a-first-class-swipe-experience/> (last accessed 23/06/2018).

^{vi} ‘Swipe on!’ is the motto at the end of many of the Tinder Blog posts. E.g.

<https://blog.gotinder.com/introducing-tinder-online/> (last accessed, 25/06/2018).