Hooking Up in the "Black Mirror": Breaking, Reflecting and Refracting the Actual in Virtual Dating Worlds

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Introduction

Since the advent of smartphones, many daily activities have been digitised, automated, and simplified. Nowadays, there is an app for everything from grocery shopping to dog walking, and it is changing the way we interact with the world around us. One of the most profound changes smartphones have brought has been dating apps, where single people can see each other, meet, and date all via a five-inch device in the palm of their hand. Dating apps like Tinder, Grindr, Bumble, HER, and more are changing what dating looks like in the 21st century. However, after speaking with users of these apps[1], I argue that while the medium is new, and to some perhaps dystopian, the dynamics are at times archaic. Dating apps have inadvertently become a small-scale display of the social norms that are obeyed and created by both their users, and the societies from which they come. Obviously, there is stark contrast between the virtual and actual dating worlds, but upon closer inspection, the two realms have far more in common than they are given credit for. The structure and operation of dating apps reflect the social contexts from which they stem, and therefore cannot be wholly removed from said context. Still, because they exist in the virtual instead of the actual, they break previously-existent boundaries presented in the physical world. Finally, these apps come with their own social norms, manipulating and refracting those from the actual world that apply uniquely to the online spaces in which they are subconsciously learned and enforced by their users.

Tinder

Figure 1: Tinder homepage

Tinder is a mobile phone dating application intended for users 18+ to meet single people in their area. Tinder's basic interface is relatively simple; after creating a profile, a user will be presented with profiles of people in their area based on the preferences they set, such as age range, distance, and gender. The user then either swipes 'right' to 'like' the person, or 'left' to move to the next profile. If that person also 'liked' them, they will be notified that the two have 'matched' and they will be open to chat. There is also the option to 'super-like', in which you swipe upward, indicating that you like that person a lot and when encountering your profile, they will see that you have 'super-liked' them. A basic view of the interface can be seen in Figure 1.

Grindr:

Figure 2: Gindr Homepage

Grindr is a dating application geared toward gay, bisexual, trans and queer individuals with a heavily sexualised connotation. While queer men and non-binary people can use Tinder, Grindr is used as a more informal way to meet sexual partners. Grindr's interface is starkly different to that of Tinder's in that Grindr allows you to see any user on the app within a certain radius of you at any given moment. Because of this, Grindr relies heavily on location services and does not allow you to hide your location from potential matches. Any user on the app can view and contact any other user if they are in the same location, prompting many users to use photos without their face, pseudonyms, or no photos until contact has been made and a connection has been established. These connections are made based on the information given in their 'bio' where they have the option to list their height, weight, body type, sexual position, and HIV status. Grindr does not allow users to filter using any of this information, including age, so Grindr users can send and receive messages to anyone they see on the app. A basic view of Grindr's home page can be seen in Figure 2, though it should be noted that Grindr users do not often include their faces or real names in their profiles.

Reflecting the Actual: Gendered, Racial and Sexual Divides

Any marginalised group member (e.g. people of colour or non-cisgender/ heterosexual individuals) would be able to explain how the various intersections of their identity affects their daily life in both the actual and the virtual worlds. This is no exception on dating apps, where people are pressured to reduce themselves down to a 400-character bio and a few pictures. For people of typically oppressed identities, i.e. women, people of colour, gender non-conforming and disabled people, these apps can present a minefield of aggressive advances and offensive comments. While Tinder is meant to revolutionise dating, and make the experience on a whole much easier, for some it exists as another space they must navigate with caution. The women I spoke with were abundantly clear with me about the fact that they do not see Tinder or other apps as any sort of solution to the inequities of dating. An anonymous responder said that she frequently sees people on Tinder who are known predators and had sexually assaulted people she knew. Amanda, a 20-year-old student explained that she wouldn't use Tinder to meet casual sexual partners, as she would be "too paranoid that [she] just invited a serial killer over." For these users, Tinder emphasises the inequities they face, and in some instances, creates dangerous situations.

People of marginalised identities have experiences on these apps that are reflective of various biases and inequalities

[1]. The data presented was collected through a combination of an anonymous online survey and in person interviews. See appendix for full explanations of methods, ethical concerns, and data.

that still exist in society. Nadia, a university student in America is fully aware of how her identity shapes her experience with online dating.

"A lot of the experiences that stand out to me happened specifically because I'm a black woman. A lot of the derogatory messages I receive or comments I get stem from my race."

While Tinder is, at face value, a modernised way of social interaction, it cannot and has not been removed from the socio-cultural context in which it was engendered. If a society that holds bias creates a virtual world, there is no reason why that bias would somehow disappear. In Nadia's case, living in a country with a long history of racial tensions means that her experience in the virtual world is bound to reflect, to a certain extent, those tensions. Most, if not all of the women interviewed offered a story of predatory behaviour from men they had encountered on Tinder. One woman who chose to remain anonymous said that a man messaged her "incredibly vile" messages fifteen times over three months, another received a Snapchat video of a Tinder match masturbating, while another said that she "inherently feels unsafe" when speaking with men online. The reality of being a woman and/or minority on dating apps is being forced to navigate through advances and messages like the one shown in Figure 3, which was shared by one of my informants, Sydney.

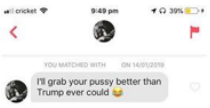

Figure 3: A screenshot from Sydney's Tinder inbox.

These virtual dating worlds, no matter how revolutionary they are, in some capacity still reflect the gender/race/sexuality binaries of the 'real' Even the organisation of Tinder emphasises a typical conception of binary heterosexual relationships. Though it is supposedly open to all, there is still a display of archaic gender roles and limiting gender binary. These spaces online reflect, to a certain extent, existing dynamics in the 'real' world, making the experience of these apps not nearly as universal as they are perceived to be. Regardless of the accessibility of the online, it does not imply that all experiences are equitable (see Nisbett 2006).

Breaking Down Walls: Collapsing Social Boundaries Through Hook-ups

It is hard to acknowledge that something as stigmatised and superficial as dating apps is reflective of our culture, but it is perhaps easier to recognise how they break down our social barriers. While they uphold some societal norms, dating apps allow for people to sever ties from social politics, in ways that are culturally acceptable, and ways that are not. This appears to be especially true among users of Grindr, an app whose users are notorious for their, at times, far-too-brutal honesty.

"It's so aggressive, and it's more so than even like: 'sex?'... it's like: 'here's my asshole', no: 'hey!' just, 'this is my asshole'." Jonah, a twenty-year-old gay man, pauses for me to finish laughing, but before I could follow up, Michael, a fellow student who recently came out as bisexual, chimed in about what he had seen on the app.

"You get 'no fats, no femmes[2], no [insert racial group here]', which you tend not to get on other dating apps." Michael acknowledges the absurdity of this blatant

[2]. 'Femme' is a shorthand expression used to describe an effeminate gay man. On Grindr, users will say 'no femmes' to indicate that they are not interested in meeting/chatting with more feminine men

discrimination, but it clearly does not shock him. Jonah concurs, continuing:

"The nature of it as this aggressive space means that people can be really rude to you and you can be really rude back … like you're not going to face a repercussion because like, what are you going to say? 'you were really rude to me on Grindr'?" The thought of confronting someone who was being offensive online gets a laugh from everyone in the room, including two female students, Emma and Amanda, even though they had never used Grindr themselves.

Both Tinder and Grindr have their fair share of aggressive users, but Grindr has garnered a reputation for a wild west-like lawlessness, in which people can do and say whatever they want without consequence or shame. The internet as a whole has become a place where bullies and 'trolls' can find sanctuary in anonymity, but it is especially prevalent on Grindr. Its position as an all-inclusive, non-judgemental, sex-seekers app has dissolved all senses of social protocols: if you are using the app, there is a sense of inherent consent to whatever you end up experiencing, and if you end up dissatisfied, there isn't much you can say because you were the one who entered the space in the first place. This is a reality that is not lost on the users.

"There's a lot of inherent assumptions that … if you're on it you're … down to clown I guess. People are like … 'do you wanna be pissed on?' and I'm like 'not particularly!'" Jonah emphasises that this type of sexually-taboo conversation is present on Grindr because it is one of few spaces where it is acceptable. Grindr exists as an oasis for a community that is otherwise marginalised: queer men/non-binary people who are often not afforded the luxury of having a large dating pool to choose from in real life. Because of this, even if someone may not want to use dating apps, they have become somewhat necessary to transcend certain cultural barriers.

"As a gay person, it's harder to meet people … I can't just walk into the [student] union and say: 'alright well these are all options for me' so I guess it presents people who theoretically would be interested."

Even though it is an app with little regulation, Grindr serves to connect people who would not otherwise encounter each other. It can be seen, in some senses, as an escape from chains of social norms. How users choose to use that power is up to them. Despite the dissolving of social niceties that comes along with it, many of these interactions would not be possible without the mediation of dating apps. In the case of Grindr especially, queer men are rid of the burden, shame and stigma of trying to arrange a casual hook-up. The disappearance of social convention is perhaps merely conducive to the area of the internet these conversations exist in. Garsten and Lerdell explore the presence (and lack thereof) of 'netiquette' in particular online spaces, as well as Virginia Shea who explained in her writings on 'netiquette' that it "varies domain to domain," something that users of both Grindr perhaps know too well (Garsten & Lerdell 2003).

The Fun House Mirror: Refracting Actual-World Dynamics Online

Despite the two apps having very distinct and relative rituals, the relationship between the virtual and actual dating scenes is not wholly binary. There are dynamics that the two share. From this I argue that the two worlds inform one another in terms of what is and is not socially acceptable both on and offline. There is evidence of the virtual informing actual world dynamics, as well as the

actual world adopting norms of the virtual. Just like in any actual world group or subculture, users of apps like Tinder have developed conventions and rules that apply to the space.

One of the people I was most eager to talk to about using dating apps at university was Megan, a nineteen-year-old student who met her boyfriend, Tim, on Tinder. My enthusiasm for this particular conversation stemmed from my knowledge of Megan's use of Tinder and the fact that she is one of few users I know who entered a long-term relationship as a result of a dating app. Megan explained that to her, Tinder was more of a game than a legitimate form of meeting people:

"I basically just got it to like, find my friends— and find people and be like 'oh my god, he's in my tutorial, that's so crazy'."

She explained that her boyfriend was someone who had been on her radar since she arrived at university, but that Tinder acted as a mediating agent that broke the ice.

"Tim super-liked[3] me, and I was like oooh! ... then we were just in the union a couple days after we matched ... he recognized me ... then after that it was kind of just casual hook-ups."

She said that she had just deleted the Tinder app because they became 'official' but that she would have shown me the initial messages between the two from over a year ago. She credits their initial connection to her profile which at the time featured only one photo of her alongside multiple photos of dogs and her bio being 'pick the dumbest looking bitch', a joke she was very proud of.

Megan's approach to dating apps is one that many women I spoke to seem to have. There appears to be a universal understanding of the perception of those who use Tinder and apps like it, so they treat it lightly and allow men to come to them rather than initiate any contact. The subconscious adherence to gender roles thus creates a stigma around women who are too eager on dating apps: 65% of the cisgender women I surveyed said they rarely or never message matches first, which many said was because they did not feel as though it was their job. Even in this hyper-modern dating context, in which initial connection is unconventional, users uphold tacit, unspoken rules in a new, distorted context. Women, regardless of how they would behave in actual-world scenarios, seem to agree that it is not their role to be forward with potential dates. These norms become so ubiquitous that they are in turn followed by users instead of being determined by them. With the existence of unofficial protocols, there is thus policing that is carried out by fellow users themselves, and not the app creators/developers (See UCL 2016).

An anonymous responder told a story of an instance of this vigilante, internet-citizen's arrest. When a man she met on Tinder added her on Snapchat, he sent a series of harassing photos and videos before accidentally adding her to a group chat that contained twenty other girls he had met on Tinder. After doing so, the girls began to 'roast' him and then made their own chat separately to commiserate about their experiences. Screenshots of the accidental group chat went viral on Twitter, and the man was thoroughly shamed for his behaviour. Even though there was never a terms and conditions section on Tinder that forbade talking to multiple women at once (in fact, one could argue it encourages that), it was understood by these women and the thousands who followed the story on Twitter that it was not in proper decorum.

The internet fluctuates between spaces with no regulation, to ones with intense

[3] 'Super-liking' is a function in which a user can indicate that they like a person more than normal, and it lets the recipient know that that person has liked them (they do not know when someone has liked them regularly).

censorship, and it is the user's role to decide which spaces to enter and adhere to the rules of said space, despite how implicitly they are learned. Instagram is notorious for their censorship of disproportionately female nudity (Byström and Soda 2016), while on Grindr, male nudity is constant and encouraged by fellow users. On dating apps, there are few rules that users are forced to abide by, and most policing happens via reports from fellow users; it is thus the responsibility of each user to be aware of the virtual cultural norms of the space they are in and how they may or may not differ from how they would behave in actual life. Garsten and Lerdell explain:

"[the Internet] is a neighbourhood with particular cultural preferences, norms and expectations. What at first hand looks quite informal, sub-cultural and to some extent even rebellious, appears at closer scrutiny much more mainstream" (2003: 20).

The internet and communicating on the internet is relative to the realm you are in, as is the case in the actual world: you would not speak to a romantic partner the same way you would to a parent, nor would you wear the same outfit to work as you would to a nightclub. Yet, in these dating app contexts that meld sexualisation with emotional connection and inherent superficiality, the social protocols are determined by the user and what they are looking to find. Thus, norms are engendered from a combination of the app's terms and conditions, the user's personal preferences, and the user's social conventions.

Conclusion

Dating apps have certainly had an impact on dating in the modern age, but they have remained tethered to the dating culture they were born of. While dating apps have erased the boundaries of space and time, and completely reconfigured how initial connections are made, they remain somewhat faithful to the dating conventions that existed prior to their creation. The binary systems under which they operate, both the presence and lack of anonymity, as well as the subliminal but pervasive gender roles that are enforced all combine to make a uniquely modern yet also slightly archaic space. Still these apps cannot be taken as a direct reflection of the culture we live in, as they also come with their own sets of rules and boundaries and norms, even if those exist outside of or in direct opposition to the ones in the actual world. Regardless of how advanced these apps become, they will reflect, break, and refract our actual world dynamics through a five-inch black mirror.

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APPENDIX

Methods

The initial survey consisted of roughly twenty basic questions to do with demographics (age, gender/sexual identity, etc.), what apps they use/how long they have used them, as well as general attitudes toward dating apps. Participants were given the choice to remain anonymous or provide their contact details for further conversation. Anyone with access to the survey, which was shared via social media, was welcome to respond to it, though the responses were overwhelmingly from students in university in both the United Kingdom and the United States, aged 17-25. Over sixty responses to the survey were recorded, 70% of whom identified as 'cisgender woman', 25% as 'cisgender male', and 5% who identified under the umbrella category of 'non-binary'. 50% of those surveyed identified as heterosexual, while the other 50% identified somehow within the LGBTQ community. All participants had used Tinder for an extended period of time, while other used apps like Grindr, HER, Bumble, and Hinge. Of the sixty people who were surveyed, twenty were willing to speak further, and in-person interviews were conducted with six of those twenty. Interviews were informal and took place in the same room in the University of St Andrews Library, one consisting of a group with four participants, while the other two were interviewed individually. Five of the six interlocutors I spoke with were people I had met or known personally prior to this project, which informed some of the questions I asked those participants, as I may have had prior knowledge of their experiences on these apps, their dating life, their sexual preferences, etc. Most of the data that will be referenced comes from the in-person discussions, though some relevant stories were taken from the survey from those who wished to remain anonymous.

Ethical Concerns and Limitations

There were numerous ethical obstacles in preparing for this project, first and foremost being the privacy of my informants. For that reason, all names have changed to protect their anonymity, and any informants who remained anonymous in their initial responses to the survey will be given a name and/or referred to indirectly. No stories that containing easily identifying stories will be shared verbatim, and instead I have extracted the relevant details to protect the privacy of the person who shared it.

It is important for me to acknowledge to limitations of this project. While the initial survey was open to any and all participants, the pool of responses was largely homogenous.

All responders were between the ages of 17 and 25, and while there was no data collected on racial identity, when asked directly about their experiences of discrimination on dating apps, very few responses included details of racial discrimination, while many others blatantly admitted to not having experienced such discrimination as a white or white-passing individual. I acknowledge that the experience of people with marginalised identities (whether that be on the basis of sex, race, religion, age, ability, size, etc.) is incredibly different to those from more privileged circumstances, which will be further discussed in this piece.