

Virtuality and Embodiedness Practices: How the Mix and Match of Corporeal and Virtual Rebuilds the Practice of Dating

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Abstract

In exploring the dynamics of dating app consumption, this study (a) explores the mix and match of corporeal and virtual realities in the practice of dating and (b) identifies the tensions emerging from these practices. We depart from a theoretical perspective on the phenomenon of acceleration to empirically explore dating practices mediated by Tinder consumption. The results indicate a process of acceleration of virtual conversations resulting in a series of mismatchings and juxtapositions when being transferred to a bodily relationship. These tensions are heightened by anachronism and asynchronism in the virtual and corporeal practice of dating.

Keywords: Virtual, Corporeal, Dating Apps

1. Introduction

Dating practices have existed since humanity existed. However, dating apps provoke meaningful disruption in this type of human practice. Its popularity has been growing since the launch of the first app that connects users in accordance with geographic location. Grindr was introduced in 2005 as a solution for men who have sex with men (MSM) to find a partner (Duguay, 2017), but this GPS-based dating app took the mainstream market with Tinder's launch in 2012, a more heterosexually-focused app (MacKee, 2016). Tinder surfed on the mobile explosion, reaching a presence in mainstream and social media discourse and overwhelming 75 million active users (Business of Apps, 2023) around 190 countries in 45 different languages (Tinder, 2023a).

Impressed by this number, most previous studies focus on dating app consumer experiences and consumer behavior (Siebert, Gopaldas, Lindridge, and Simões, 2020). Less explored is the impact of Tinder and other dating apps on dating practice. In particular, we call attention to the impact of this type of technology in substituting main corporeal flirting practices—such as nightclubbing—with a non-synchronous, textual, and non-corporeal virtual way of flirting. Thus, a dating app emerges as an appropriate context to explore the mobilization of corporeal and virtual realities in consumption practice.

Following Kozinets (2019) claim for more empirical work at understanding the transformative role technologies are continuously displaying in our individual, interpersonal, and macro social realities, this study explores the context of dating apps to describe the transformation of romantic and sexual relationships provoked by the mix of virtual and corporeal practices enabled by this technology. Dating practices preserve corporeal in-person interactions while integrating new virtual performances. However, this integration is not free of physical-virtual tensions provoked by temporality acceleration (Rosa, Dörre, and Lessenich, 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). There is still too little discussion about the tensions produced by these mismatches produced by technology acceleration.

With this in mind our study has a twofold goal. The first one is to explore the mix and match of corporeal and virtual realities in the practice of dating. As a second goal, we aim to identify the tensions emerging from this (mis)match of corporeal and virtual practices of dating. In the next sections, we build the theoretical argument, present the methods applied, and discuss the main results and tensions identified.

2. Acceleration as a theoretical lens to understand the mismatch between corporeal and virtual realities

Social reality defines and is defined by technology as one becomes a sophistication of the other (Kozinets, 2019). There is no separation between culture, consumption and technology anymore, as we live and consume in technocultures. We live in an escalatory social acceleration characterized by the ever-increasing speed of our material, social and cultural world (Rosa, 2013). To explain the acceleration of social change, Rosa (2013) uses the idea of present to distinguish it from the past and the future¹. The concept behind is that we are immersed in an exhausting accelerated reality, and we blame ourselves for not being productive enough (Han, 2015).

All these processes of acceleration rely on distinct but interrelated aspects. Social changes can demand new technologies, which in turn can demand acceleration of one's pace of life. As capitalism and technology start pacing the consumers (Rosa et al., 2016), we

¹ Rosa (2013) defends that there are a multiplicity of social time, which can lead to a dissenchronicity, which he puts as the noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous (i.e., what seems to be something of the past to one group, can be something of the future to another)

increasingly depend on technology that allows fast disembodied access (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Virtuality is not something we can choose to engage and disengage with. Embodied consumption becomes content to be fabricated in a post on social media, and the virtual practices keep their presence in our embodied reality as it is constantly interacting with others. In some sense, we do not “go online” anymore. There is no distinction between online and offline, we are living in virtuality simultaneously to our physicality, consuming a hybrid of two realities at the same time (Dholakia & Reyes, 2013; Šimůnková, 2019), greatly contributing to our acceleration and tiredness (Han, 2015).

Even the idea of time and space can be modified when we ground our reality in virtuality. We can be co-present in multiple places at once, maintaining a conversation with several people at the same time, without necessarily maintaining the same speech with each counterpart and without the counterpart knowing about the others (Šimůnková, 2019; Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen, 2020). In recent times, the mobile has shrunk the distance between online and offline a lot more by social interactions based on GPS localization. We are better aware of the people physically around us by their virtual proximity. And that is one of the main characteristics of today’s dating apps: instead of giving us access to the other side of the world, it puts us closer to the people near us.

3. Methods

Our empirical plan utilized a multi-method approach, iterating between methods, sites, informants, and analysis (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994; Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets, 2012) to explore the transformations in dating practices tied to dating apps. For that, we adopted a consumer-centered epistemological view. For that, we conduct a series of interviews, visual methods and observations. The interviews occurred between April 2020 and April 2021. All interviews took between 2 hours and 5 hours and a half. We interviewed nine practitioners. The group of participants was largely formed by middle-class people with a leftist inclination, all born between 1986 and 1996 and residents of Porto Alegre, the major city in south Brazil. The interview participants were people who identified themselves as heavy users of dating apps.

As the subject studied is one that could cause discomfort depending on the way the interviews were conducted, women were interviewed by a woman author and men by a man. After the initial biographic question, the interview followed a gran-tour of the participant's life as a single person. The interview was mainly interested in the informants' storytelling. The script was very short-lengthen, greatly counting on our ability to use probes and floating prompts in our interview.

To gain a better understanding of Tinder's efforts to construct its own usage and the practices it supports, we analyzed all posts in its news blog (both Brazil and the U.S.). We also tracked how the app itself has structurally changed its features and monetization. We also analyzed mainstream media representations and discussions of dating apps. The analysis and collection of this research were concomitantly and iteratively conducted. With the support of Atlas.ti web, we constantly compared within and between the methods and their documents (i.e., informants, institutional articles, Tinder's social media posts, users' tweets, and news articles), creating a map of the events (ranging from the informants' narratives and practices to larger social events) related to the mix and match of virtual and corporeal practices and dating apps consumption.

4. Findings

Our results are organized in two sections in line with our research goals. We first present the mix and match of corporeal and virtual realities in the practice of dating through the matching dependency. Then, we illustrate the temporality conflicts that emerged as a tension of this matching reality, presenting the results for our second goal.

4.1 Accelerations on virtual dating producing matching dependence

Matching is a central mechanism in dating once manifests a mutual expression of interest for dating. It has become almost a necessary step in the flirting process, either virtual or embodied. However, Tinder users practice swiping right on each other's profiles, more than a matching mechanism, it is responsible for accelerating binary decisions. In physical dating practices, there may be some questions if it is a date or not. The lack of an expressed 'match' may block people from investing during a possible date. On virtual dating, matching emerges to take any uncertainties away and allow people to approach each other.

However, dating apps have made single people dependent on having a more structured basis to start a conversation, which made people rely on and adoption of the matching process to other social sites, which led them to be more insecure about flirting on a corporeal site. The dating apps made matching more exciting than the conversation itself. The conversation is hard, too difficult, and takes a lot of time and effort while matching in Tinder has a quicker satisfaction and can be as quick as sliding the finger over the smartphone screen:

"Then you keep waiting to see if it will or will not result in a match. There is always someone you like, and you think, 'holy fuck, I hope it is a match; that is the person I want to talk with,' you know? So, other matches happen, and you keep thinking, 'No, I want that person,' you know? (Then the match happens), you look at the photo and remember, holly fuck, that is the person!"

The number of matches on a practitioner's routine also takes flirting to a different time-space, where multiple conversations are orchestrated, each with its own subjects and timing dynamics. Also, being virtually mediated, the matching mechanism also made flirting more textual and conversation-centered. While the nightclubbing approach could be done without saying anything or mixing verbal elements with varying intonations and bodily performances, dating apps forced people to develop and master the apathetic blank chat screen. People had to learn and overcome the 'hi, how are you?' approach, largely normalized and known as an insufficient demonstration of effortlessness and lack of charisma. Nightclubbing flirt corporal approach displays a larger array of performance resources, as one can flirt without even saying anything. Immediately after the match, dating app consumers have, basically, text and gifs to flirt. The practice also developed to demand practitioners to create idiosyncratic conversation starters for each profile (comment something on that person's profile, risking sounding invasive or dorky) or comment on an emergent topic of discussion (e.g., the political fact of the week).

4.1.1 After the match, spreading the flirt to corporeal and virtual spaces

Transformation in dating practices provoked by Tinder experience spread out to other spaces. Our explaining dating practices, our informants constantly expand the Tinder flirt to Instagram. Instagram has, in some parts, become a repository of past matches that one can rekindle after posting or reacting to some stories. This expectancy and practical knowledge and doings have turned Instagram into a sexualized space, a catcalling one. People are not followed only by people they know, by their friends, but also by several people they barely

know beyond that they have at least some interest in them. It leads Instagram to be used with them in mind since they can be more present in one's feed than the friends themselves.

Matches in Tinder are still people who go through the city, people who may be around in physical spaces. Tinder matches the user with several crushes or, using the emic term adopted by the informants, *contatinhos*. A *contatinho* is someone with known mutual interest but is usually restricted to going out or having casual sex. One may have multiple *contatinhos* on one's Instagram and WhatsApp, willing to accept a flirting conversation. A crush, on the other hand, is someone one has stronger feelings or desire to have further interactions, displaying greater effort to sustain a more meaningful relationship. While there are many *contatinhos*, crushes are a few. A *contatinhos* interaction can be sporadic, coming and going in short interactions, but a crush demands a constant conversation, avoiding letting it come to an end. A crush is someone one likes and is interested in having some kind of deeper interaction or relationship. The accelerated matches result in multiple simultaneous *contatinhos* and crushes, which, together with the fact Tinder matches people in accordance with geographic location, gives the possibility to find someone when going out, even in a big city. Thus, even though the match is virtual, it makes people even more visible in physical spaces.

Second, accelerating matches, the process of moving from virtual to corporeal dating, involves a lot of uncertainty. A match on Tinder (or even a good date and sex) does not necessarily declare one has feelings for the other one. Today's sexual and romantic contracts are blurrier than the ones from the past (Illouz, 2019). One can have little certainty if their crush also sees them as a crush or if they are a *contatinho*. Take Márcio's tale about when a crush of his suddenly stopped to answer his messages: "I met her and, wow, she was awesome. We were going along great and such. We were really excited with one another, it was going great, really good. Until one day, from nowhere, she started to cut me off." (Marcio)

Thirdly, by centralizing the flirting space to its virtuality while also representing the embodied people and bodies geographically around, Tinder also modified different social spaces. Social spaces are part of the practice of seeking a new relationship. New places or even our daily spaces are part of a magical promise of accidentally meeting a potentially romantic or sexual other. After Tinder, the search is more virtual and fabricated. The accidental love timing changes, it takes a process of liking and matching before the meeting. Matching acceleration impacts corporeal and virtual realities by transforming the practice of dating. However, these transformations are not free of tensions, as we describe next.

4.2 Conflicts and tensions on matching acceleration

We identify that Tinder interaction mediated by photos and virtual conversations provokes a particular set of conflicts when moving from virtual to corporal flirting. To avoid awkward dates, some practitioners strategically stick with longer virtual conversations before going out, doing it to develop some conversation resources when they meet on a date. The virtual conversation enriches the embodied date with an already constructed set of topics to discuss. In virtuality, people can have more time and be more comfortable talking in a more risky and provocative manner, collecting a series of subjects that can be better explored in an in-person conversation.

However, the easily of engaging in a virtual conversation with someone you just know by a couple of photos can create troubles when moving to the corporeal interaction. Informants manifest concerns and bad experiences when moving from an interaction with an avatar to some real one. It involves the mismatching of corporal representations and behavior. The most basic one is not looking like the photos. Catfishing or overflattering photos can lead

people to meet with complete strangers or someone older or less attractive than what they saw on Tinder photos (Duguay, 2017). Luka talks about this and other fears they have when going on a date if a certain man: *"So, I was really terrified of arriving on the date, and he was completely different from the photos or... I don't know, we have completely different styles, and I don't feel any attraction to him, or if the kissing is bad"* (Luka)

Second, this matching acceleration provokes conflicts on overlapping to the first corporeal date. Even after years of virtual conversation, years of knowing each other, and liking each other, informants manifest that moving to corporeal interaction is a challenge. The conflict in this process is produced by the hierarchization of corporeal relationships over virtual ones. It can lead to people feeling they need to overperform on the first corporeal date.

Following these conflicts in moving from virtual conversations to corporeal interaction, we understand they are the result of a series of mismatches and juxtapositions of deep and shallow relationships between the two parts. The matching acceleration potentializes these mismatches and juxtapositions due to mechanisms that operate the temporal relationship in virtual and corporeal dating: anachronism and asynchronism.

4.2.1 Anachronism

Matching online can lead to a frequent virtual presence of someone, talking about their daily lives, sharing their opinions on varied subjects, and telling stories. A conversation with a match can be a very sharing one. It can lead to a sensation of proximity, of deep connection. However, it is confronted with the idea that one's crush is still a stranger when they first meet embodied. There is a juxtaposition of connection and strangeness.

Virtual conversations of sexual promises, tenderness, and nicknames become distant as one needs to re-meet the other for the first time. There is a re-discovery of who that person is, a new assessment of them. Both parts are in an anachronic situation. The daily virtual presence and conversations have put their virtual relationship in a stage that their bodily date is not. They both know each other well while still being strangers. Sexual promises are left in the virtual space to start a less advanced conversation.

There is an anachronism in how both interact with each other when transitioning from virtual to corporeal. That is, the virtual interaction and relationship is too advanced to the corporeal one, that is far behind. There is confusion about what the other one is to oneself. This confusion leads to some awkwardness inconsistent with the already built interaction between the parts.

Beyond the anachronic date, it is common for people to see a match in person accidentally. It often leads to an awkward sensation of not knowing how to interact with this person, as the proximity they have with each other can be confusing, dealing with the negotiation of converting how close they are virtual to how they are personally. People question how they will be recognized or not, question if they are rememberable if they are identifiable. The time one takes virtually with one's crush can be unbalanced with embodied reality, creating anachronism when moving to the corporeal relationship.

4.2.2 Asynchronism

Asynchronism is related to how far ahead one person is in a relationship between two people while the other part is not aware of it. One person can put a lot of time into romanticizing and foresighting some future doings with a possible dating person. It is largely related to the 'stalking' practice, performed through acts such as looking at one's Instagram for a long time and imagining how that person will fit into one's life. One dedicates time to feed and reinforce their desire in another one. This person can start to get ahead in a

relationship without the other being aware. There will be some asynchrony between the two. One has already lived many future episodes with the other, while the second may not have taken that much thought for it.

It is different from the idea of a mismatch between intentions. It is the idea of how much time and thought one has put into that relationship in comparison to the other one. While a mismatch between intentions is how one person is more inclined to sexual desires and the other with more romantic ones, asynchronism detaches from that general intention. Both can have the same intention and still be asynchronous, meaning that one already lived longer and deeper in the relationship while the other may have taken it more superficially.

People usually understand the superficiality expected of dating apps, even though they also use them to seek deeper and more meaningful relationships. Tinder's social meanings as a platform for superficial relationships potentialize asynchronism. On the one hand, it potentially leads to feelings of personal responsibility for romantic frustrations; on the other hand, it offers ample information through bios and photos, fostering deeper interactions and requiring users to engage more meaningfully compared to traditional social settings like nightclubs.

Asynchronism and anachronism mechanisms are not a step before forming a concise practice, it is central to explain the virtual and corporeal tension dating practice. This type of practice in the dating app era is essentially confusing. People try to learn and develop their own rulings, but it is continuously changing due to the lack of structure of accelerated matchings. People cannot know how long the other person has interacted with their profile or how long they have been thinking about them. Next, we expand the discussions of the findings in line with the literature.

5. Discussion

Even though social media and apps have become a central part of postmodern social life (Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann, and McCarthy, 2018), we still have little conversation on how consumers transit between virtual and bodily sites (Thulin et al., 2020). In the dating apps case, one needs to be present in embodied sites to cross by virtual profiles, as near as the GPS geographic ratio is set to look after single people. On the other hand, with Tinder's dominance over single people's practices of looking for somebody else, single people only exist mediated by virtuality. Furthermore, when matching happens and both parts start talking to each other, the practice leads them to return to an embodied site on a date. The virtual conversation is not self-sufficient, as it will still be lacking, at least, a touching body. That is, embodied sites are explored with virtuality in mind, while virtuality is explored with embodied sites in mind. It is, in part, a consequence of how GPS-based dating apps shifted the virtuality premised on accessing the whole world to explore geographically close spaces (Thulin et al., 2020).

Still, virtuality is seen as a 'fake reality,' very much apparent by the usual 'in real life' expression to talk about embodied reality. Even though it has a very ubiquitous presence in our lives and constructs our perceptions of everything, it still is a lying place. Virtuality finds itself in a paradoxical space more and less real than bodily life. Much of our socially shared imagination is found in the imagetic consumption of new and old media, which greatly grounds our living experience and often makes it more valid than what we personally and bodily live (Baudrillard, 1994; Dholakia & Reyes, 2013).

There is a confrontation to how virtuality in social media has been largely constructed, largely based on self-promotion that does not need any proof. Social media have aimed at hyperreality, where everybody needs to create an idealized idea of themselves (Belk, 2013). Dating apps, however, diminish it and confront it by forcing people to meet themselves in the

fragility of embodied life, where people have lesser control over how they are represented and how they act in their idealized ways. The acceleration of virtual matchings is stimulated by the ease of swiping right on dozens of profiles and starting a virtual conversation. Therefore, It does not necessarily occur separately from the social, corporeal reality that permeates the practice of dating. Conflicts and tensions emerge precisely from the challenges in mixing corporeal and accelerated virtual realities in a common practice: having a dating.

When transitioning between virtual to corporeal relationships, there is an expectation that people must be equivalently similar between the two dimensions, but there are mismatches in these representations on how the two parts behave with one another, especially when it comes to the appearance and the sexualized performance of someone. When it comes to performance, people find themselves in a juxtaposition of knowing and unknowing the other person, a conflicting time between having talked in virtuality but not interacting in body. As a consequence, it creates conflict and tensions in which people do not have any type of structure to enable the practice of dating.

While describing deceleration practices, Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) identify that stable rules and norms enable the experience and orient resynchronization of different temporal logic. Our findings indicate exactly the opposite: the acceleration of matching in virtual flirting intensifies mismatches between the two parts when trying to synchronize the virtual and corporeal practice of dating. In particular, we highlight (a) anachronism (i.e., feeling misplaced in a bodily relationship in comparison to an advanced, virtually constructed one) and (b) asynchronism (i.e., each part of a relationship in different stages, with one expending more time with romanticized tough and exploration of the other than the second) as two mechanisms operating the tensions that intensify the (mis)match in the practice of dating

6. Final Thoughts

As a final remark, we motion the study limitations and suggestions for further studies. In particular, we recognize the context-dependence theorization provided in this study as a limitation. Our analyses focused on a specific geographic context can ignore variations in dating practices in other cultural contexts. Thus, we encourage further studies to map transformations in performance and temporality provoked by other virtual-mediated platforms and associate these analyses with cultural norms of dating. In addition, our study identifies a process of sexualizing spaces in and outside virtuality (i.e., matches on Instagram). Further studies could explore the expansion of Tinder dating practices to other spaces.

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