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„Navigating Infinite Choices: Exploring the Impact of  
Mobile Dating Apps“

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## **Abstract - English**

This thesis investigates the complex effects of mobile dating applications on contemporary courtship. It explores how these platforms reshape users' decision-making processes, the dynamics of relationships, and self-presentation strategies. The work is rooted in digital anthropology and employs a qualitative framework, incorporating interviews and content analysis to extract rich insights into the cultural implications of digital dating. The study also integrates the exploration of gender dynamics throughout the analysis, rather than isolating it as a separate theme, offering a holistic view of the role of mobile dating apps in societal and relational changes. Central to the investigation is "infinite choice," a phenomenon facilitated by mobile dating apps presenting users with a seemingly endless array of potential partners. This abundance of choice, while theoretically advantageous, can paradoxically lead to decision paralysis and a superficial approach to partner selection, as users may become excessively selective or dismissive based on minor details. The thesis explores how these dynamics impact traditional courtship rituals and challenges the construction of meaningful relationships in a digitized world. The study also addresses the performative aspects of self-presentation in digital dating environments. It argues that users of dating apps engage in a complex process of self-branding, carefully curating their online personas to reflect an idealized version of themselves that aligns with societal expectations and their desires for romantic connection. The thesis posits that this strategic self-presentation can create tension between authenticity and desirability as users strive to navigate the blurred lines between their true selves and the images they project online. Furthermore, the research touches upon mobile dating apps' cultural and gender-specific implications. It suggests that these platforms can perpetuate existing social structures and norms, influencing users' behavior and choices that reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The thesis also contemplates such platforms' psychological and sociological impacts, highlighting the emotional challenges users face, including the fear of missing out (FOMO) and the pressure to maintain an appealing digital presence. The thesis comprehensively analyzes the cultural and social anthropological aspects of mobile dating apps. It sheds light on the complex interplay between technology and human relationships. It offers insights into the contemporary dating culture and its implications for identity, communication, and connection in an increasingly digital society. Through this research, I contribute to the academic discourse on digital dating culture and offer a nuanced perspective on the evolving dynamics of intimacy and courtship in the age of technology.

## Abstract - Deutsch

In dieser Arbeit werden die komplexen Auswirkungen mobiler Dating-Anwendungen auf das zeitgenössische Liebeswerben untersucht. Sie untersucht, wie diese Plattformen die Entscheidungsprozesse der Nutzer, die Dynamik von Beziehungen und die Strategien der Selbstdarstellung verändern. Die Arbeit ist in der digitalen Anthropologie verwurzelt und verwendet einen qualitativen Rahmen, der Interviews und Inhaltsanalysen umfasst, um reichhaltige Einblicke in die kulturellen Auswirkungen der digitalen Partnersuche zu gewinnen. Die Studie integriert auch die Erforschung der Geschlechterdynamik in die gesamte Analyse, anstatt sie als separates Thema zu isolieren, und bietet so einen ganzheitlichen Blick auf die Rolle mobiler Dating-Apps bei gesellschaftlichen und beziehungsbezogenen Veränderungen. Im Mittelpunkt der Untersuchung steht das Phänomen der "Infinite Choices", das durch mobile Dating-Apps begünstigt wird und den Nutzer:innen eine scheinbar endlose Auswahl an potenziellen Partner:innen bietet. Diese Fülle an Auswahlmöglichkeiten ist zwar theoretisch vorteilhaft, kann aber paradoxerweise zu Entscheidungslähmung und einer oberflächlichen Herangehensweise an die Partnerwahl führen, da die Nutzer aufgrund von Kleinigkeiten übermäßig wählerisch oder abweisend werden können. Die Arbeit untersucht, wie sich diese Dynamik auf traditionelle Balzrituale auswirkt und stellt die Konstruktion sinnvoller Beziehungen in einer digitalisierten Welt in Frage. Die Studie befasst sich auch mit den performativen Aspekten der Selbstdarstellung in digitalen Dating-Umgebungen. Sie argumentiert, dass Nutzer:innen von Dating-Apps einen komplexen Prozess der Selbstdarstellung durchlaufen, indem sie ihre Online-Persönlichkeit sorgfältig so gestalten, dass sie eine idealisierte Version ihrer selbst widerspiegelt, die mit den gesellschaftlichen Erwartungen und ihren Wünschen nach einer romantischen Beziehung übereinstimmt. Die These lautet, dass diese strategische Selbstdarstellung zu Spannungen zwischen Authentizität und Begehrlichkeit führen kann, da die Nutzer versuchen, die unscharfen Grenzen zwischen ihrem wahren Selbst und dem Bild, das sie online vermitteln, zu überwinden. Darüber hinaus befasst sich die Studie mit den kulturellen und geschlechtsspezifischen Auswirkungen mobiler Dating-Apps. Sie legt nahe, dass diese Plattformen bestehende soziale Strukturen und Normen aufrechterhalten und das Verhalten und die Entscheidungen der Nutzer:innen beeinflussen können, die traditionelle Geschlechterrollen und Stereotypen verstärken. Die Arbeit betrachtet auch die psychologischen und soziologischen Auswirkungen solcher Plattformen und hebt die emotionalen Herausforderungen hervor, mit denen die Nutzer konfrontiert sind, einschließlich der Angst, etwas zu verpassen (FOMO) und des Drucks, eine ansprechende digitale Präsenz

aufrechtzuerhalten. Die Arbeit analysiert umfassend die kulturellen und sozialanthropologischen Aspekte von mobilen Dating-Apps. Sie beleuchtet das komplexe Wechselspiel zwischen Technologie und menschlichen Beziehungen. Sie bietet Einblicke in die heutige Dating-Kultur und ihre Auswirkungen auf Identität, Kommunikation und Beziehungen in einer zunehmend digitalen Gesellschaft.

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## **1. Introduction**

Undoubtedly, mobile dating apps have shaped modern courtship rituals. They constitute a dramatic transformation in how people connect and form bonds in a technologically-mediated society. They have impacted user decision-making and relationship dynamics by simplifying and expediting how individuals identify and engage with potential partners. Bumble, Tinder, Hinge and OKCupid, among others, are applications designed to enable individuals to meet and communicate with potential romantic partners. This phenomenon has gained significant prominence in recent years, especially peaking during the COVID-19 pandemic. A crucial aspect of mobile dating apps is their geolocation capability, enabling users to discover people in their immediate surroundings. This has redefined the concept of spontaneous encounters and interactions potentially impacting social dynamics and relationships significantly. Such technology offers a multitude of opportunities and challenges worthy of in-depth investigation.

While earlier anthropological investigations were predominantly centered on small-scale societies, the advent of social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as well as the internet at large, has provided anthropologists with the opportunity to explore societal dynamics on a broader scale. Despite the considerable differences, the Internet and social media enable real-time connections between people that resemble an analog gathering, and they create social spaces that lend themselves to similar analytical approaches. In the past, anthropologists relied on factors like location, kinship, or language to comprehend how specific groups come together. However, digital anthropology research diverges from conventional methods as it lacks a physical location, operating within the global expanse of the internet, accessible to individuals across the globe.

From the beginning of my research, it was clear that I have a deep-rooted curiosity about the evolving landscape of interpersonal relationships in the digital age. Intrigued by the dramatic transformation in how people connect and form bonds in a technologically-mediated society, I became fascinated by the role of mobile dating apps in shaping modern courtship rituals. This fascination became further grounded by the online dating stories from friends. Their narratives further prompted my desire to explore the cultural and social implications through an anthropological lens. My thesis, therefore, represents a combination of personal interest and academic inquiry into the complex interplay between technology, culture, and human relationships.

The aim of this masters' thesis is to investigate the multifaceted effects of digital dating platforms. Readers will be guided through an exploration of the contemporary developments

in forming romantic relationships and encounters, particularly through mobile dating apps. According to my examination they symbolize a transition toward more personalized means of building connections, moving away from collective traditions. This trend aligns with the larger shift in society toward valuing individual choices and autonomy, reflecting and contributing to the trend of individualization in society. This shift provides a window into the transformation of social ties, adapting to the growing emphasis on individual choice within social exchanges. Users navigate a realm where conventional indicators of trust, like face-to-face interactions and shared social contexts, are replaced by the workings of algorithms and the crafting of digital personas. In contrast, these platforms reduce the pressure of face-to-face interactions offering a more relaxed setting for those who might find traditional social interactions challenging. They also create avenues for underrepresented and marginalized communities to find and engage with others of similar backgrounds or experiences, nurturing a sense of inclusion and communal connection. The abundance of choice may initially appear advantageous as it provides users with a wide selection of potential matches. But according to my data, this oversupply is characterized by “infinite swiping” - representing an extension of the paradox of choice. This, in turn, can lead to decision-paralysis, making it difficult to make a selection due to the overwhelming number of choices. Furthermore, the thesis will explore the strategic creation of user profiles on mobile dating apps, a process that balances personal authenticity with the desire to make a certain impression. It will shed light on the strategies users adopt to present themselves, aligning or diverging from their real-life personas, and the impact of visual elements in shaping others' perceptions.

In the forthcoming discussion, the exploration of gender dynamics will be seamlessly integrated throughout the thesis rather than confined to a distinct chapter. This approach signifies a deliberate choice to weave the analysis of gender-related aspects consistently into the fabric of the research. By adopting this approach, the examination of gender will not be treated as an isolated entity but will organically intersect with various facets of the study. Embracing this integrated perspective allows for a more holistic understanding of how gender influences and is influenced by the multifaceted phenomena under investigation. This inclusive and pervasive exploration aims to capture the nuanced interplay between gender and the broader themes of contemporary relationships, courtship norms, and the impact of mobile dating apps on social dynamics.

## **1.1 Research Question and Objectives**

The aim of the present work is trying to make a contribution to a relatively new field of scientific research. Following on from this, my research can be located in the field of digital and media anthropology. Therefore I will outline the research question and objectives of the master thesis, which aims to investigate the cultural impact of mobile dating apps on the process of courtship rituals and partner initiation. The advent of technology and the widespread use of smartphones have transformed the way people connect and interact with one another. Mobile dating apps, in particular, have gained significant popularity, providing users with a convenient platform to meet potential partners and encounters. This study aims to explore the influence of mobile dating apps on courtship rituals and the initiation of romantic relationships and to investigate how they have transformed the traditional dating landscape.

Therefore the main research question is:

**How do mobile dating apps transform cultural processes of courtship rituals and partner initiation?**

As a result of this broadly formulated main question, which serves as the foundation of the study, additional questions revealed:

**How do prevailing gender norms in Western-oriented societies influence user behavior and interaction with mobile dating apps?**

**How does the phenomenon of "infinite choice" offered by mobile dating apps affect users' decision-making processes and relationship dynamics?**

**What are the perceived differences and similarities in social preferences between online and offline dating experiences and how do these dynamics influence individual dating behavior?**



## **1.2 Methods - Data collection and analysis: methods and application**

This thesis investigates the effects of increased usage of mobile dating apps on interpersonal relationships and dating culture. To obtain more balanced data, it is necessary to apply various qualitative methods in the sense of method triangulation. The methods employed will not be used entirely but rather specific elements.

The following methods were relevant for data collection: 1) demographic data collection, 2) qualitative Interviews, 3) qualitative content analysis using Mayring's approach, and 4) informal conversations.

Although common in cultural and social anthropology, participant observation is not applied in the conventional sense in this research. On the one hand, the research question is not best answered through direct observation. Understanding how mobile dating apps alter cultural dating processes is better derived from conversations. On the other hand, access to the processes of partner initiation is not feasible. For this reason, this method was not used in the traditional sense but only in conjunction with meeting people in random situations and having informal conversations about their use of mobile dating apps.

### **1.2.1 Collection of demographic data**

All interview participants were requested to provide specific demographic data, namely their gender, age, origin, level of education, and occupation, as well as their parents' occupations and how they grew up. This can contextualize various information obtained during the conversation and potentially allows for identifying gender-specific preferences, for example, about self-presentation. Although I had initially planned to include my research participants' demographic data and biographical key points, I realized that this data was irrelevant to my research interest during the research and writing process. Nevertheless, I will give a brief overview of my interview partners in Chapter 3.1.2.

### 1.2.2 Qualitative Interviews

A total of 10 qualitative interviews were conducted. This method played a crucial role in the data-gathering process, and it was deemed reasonable to give it significant importance. The primary purpose of the research was to examine how mobile dating apps impact dating and relationship processes in the context of gender norms and representations of digital identities. This was primarily ensured through semi-structured qualitative interviews, as personal attitudes could be queried while additional methods were employed. For reasons of easier scheduling and because it gave the participants more flexible access, the majority of the interviews were conducted online. Prior to the interviews, a guideline was created that covers a variety of topics. These topics are user behavior and motivation, identity and representation, gender, and norms. The guideline was intended to ensure increased comparability of the interviews, as it guaranteed that the same topics were addressed in each interview.

Additionally, no repeated conversations with the interviewees were planned, so using the guideline facilitated a more precise preparation. Before the interviews, the purpose of conducting the interviews was presented, and the permission to record the conversations was clarified. Subsequently, I created Interview protocols (cf. Froschauer et al. 2020:83) in order to capture notes on the interview situation or conversations before and after a recorded interview.

A significant advantage of the qualitative survey is its open design and self-determined focus of the conversation since the openness of this method creates the possibility of directly inquiring about unknown aspects or clarifying uncertainties through immediate follow-up questions. In general, qualitative interviewing is a technique for producing statements. This is intended to encourage the interviewees to talk about their actions, activities, experiences, etc., because the interview is a method of verbal communication in which - by definition - it is primarily the interviewee's task to reconstruct events, experiences, actions, and knowledge actively. Thus, qualitative interviewing is an effective method for gathering attitudes and motivations and ultimately answering the research questions (cf. Froschauer et al. 2020:20).

### 1.2.3 Qualitative Content Analysis using Mayring's approach

The core of qualitative content analysis is developing a category system, the primary evaluation instrument. The category system serves to search and analyze the material according to specific structures and criteria.

For the purpose of content analysis (Mayring, 2022), the recorded interviews were initially transcribed into written form. According to Mayring, there are three different techniques for transcription: 1.) The phonetic transcription uses the International Phonetic Alphabet to reflect dialect and speech colorations. 2.) The literary transcription in which dialect in the common alphabet is preserved. 3.) The transfer into average written German. According to Mayring, the latter variant is the most suitable when content/thematic aspects are in the foreground. In the process, the dialect is cleaned up, sentence construction errors are corrected, and the style is smoothed out. The procedure of qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring, includes nine steps. In the following, some central aspects of the procedure are briefly presented. The first step is to determine the source material more precisely. The central questions are: what is analyzed? Only a section of the text or all of it? Who is the author, and what is her/his background? How is the material available? Mainly as a transcript. This is followed by the formulation of a question. At this point, the focus of interpretation is determined. This can be, for example, emotional reactions, opinions, or intentions.

The qualitative content analysis follows a systematic process model in which a distinction is made between specific techniques. These are three primary forms of summarizing, explication, and structuring content analysis (cf. Mayring 2022: 65).

In explicit content analysis, supplementary data, such as background information, are utilized. The primary aim is to enhance the comprehension of particularly unclear text sections. These relevant data should be systematically gathered and made transparent within the research process.

Central to structured content analysis is extracting criteria representing the entire text. A category system, primarily built upon predefined criteria, is devised to accomplish this. Therefore, structured content analysis is considered a "deductive" approach, which relies on precise theoretical assumptions. It is also possible in

structured content analysis for new content to emerge, leading to the formation of new categories. This process is referred to as "inductive" category formation.

In the summarizing content analysis approach, texts are condensed to their essential content, resulting in a concise text that serves as the basis for interpretation. Category formation is done inductively, meaning categorizations are developed based on the material. The methods or principles of this approach encompass paraphrasing, generalization, and various forms of reduction. After establishing a category system, it is imperative to define and differentiate these categories from one another precisely. This necessitates the collection of relevant textual examples corresponding to each respective category. Subsequently, the results should be interpreted in relation to the initial research question (Cf. Mayring 2022: 28-66).

Since the content of the spoken words is particularly relevant for addressing the research questions, I mainly focused on noting word sequences. Changes in pitch, volume, or non-verbal behavior were recorded only when they seemed to alter the meaning of statements significantly. As a means of data management (cf. Kelle 2013: 488-490), I utilized the software program Atlas.ti. After inputting all the transcripts into Atlas.ti, I proceeded to mark relevant passages using the program and created notes and memos linked to the quotes. This allowed me to develop initial categories based on the material, which I later modified and assigned to various text segments. Utilizing the codes, I then reviewed all the interviews once and subsequently decided to conduct more detailed examinations of specific text passages.

#### **1.2.4 Informal Conversations**

Informal conversations are conducted when the researcher communicates with people in the field. The conversation situation would change abruptly if one were to ask one's counterpart whether one may record the conversation. Moreover, the person would no longer speak freely because she/he might be influenced by the recording device and, in general, by the whole situation. Therefore, it is necessary to make a memory protocol after informal conversations. Whenever I happened to be in a situation where people had experience with mobile dating apps, I tried to have conversations with

them. The main focus was to have a very casual atmosphere, and after the talks, I asked for their consent to use their experiences and explanations for my master's thesis.

Engaging in interpersonal dialogues constitutes an essential component of qualitative research. To illustrate, informal exchanges served as the foundational building blocks for numerous seminal ethnographic works by prominent anthropologists such as Frank Hamilton Cushing, Margaret Mead, and Bronislaw Malinowski. In methodological discourse, Robert Burgess (1988) underscores that dialogues assumed a central role in the early instructional texts of the 1920s and 1930s dedicated to social investigation. Similarly, both Vivien Palmer (1928) in the United States and Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1932) in Britain contended that conversations not only yielded valuable empirical material but should also be recognized as a vital research technique in its own right. In fact, dialogues evolved into an indispensable means of data generation in numerous sociological inquiries conducted by scholars affiliated with the Chicago School. It is worth noting that informal dialogues are not limited solely to ethnographic research. They can be effectively employed in various genres of broader qualitative research and analysis that unfold within authentic, everyday contexts and encompass some semblance of verbal interaction, albeit less interactive. This extends to research methodologies such as narrative approaches, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, case studies, and similar frameworks. In these contexts, informal conversations may serve as an auxiliary data source, complementing or enriching the information generated through more organized or formalized techniques (Cf. Swain et al. 2020: 4).

### **1.3 Structure of the Work**

The research project is organized into several distinct chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the digital transformation of courtship rituals, partner selection, and individual identities within the context of mobile dating apps. The structure is designed to guide the reader through a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter, beginning with foundational theories and progressing to empirical research and analysis.

In the introduction, the stage for the research is set, introducing the primary research question and objectives. It provides an overview of the study's relevance, its contribution to the field, and the topic's significance in the contemporary digital landscape.

The methods chapter delves into the study's methodological framework, detailing the approaches used for data collection and analysis. It presents a detailed exposition of the methodological approach. It is subdivided into sections covering the collection of demographic data, the conduct of qualitative interviews, the application of qualitative content analysis following Mayring's approach, and the incorporation of informal conversations into the research. The emphasis on varied methodologies underscores the study's commitment to a multifaceted and rigorous data collection and analysis approach. This section is crucial for establishing the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

Serving as the foundation of the study, the theoretical basics, this chapter is divided into several subsections that cover the evolution of courtship rituals and partner initiation, the impact of digitization on society, and the concept of individualized online identities. Each subsection provides an in-depth review of existing literature and theories relevant to these topics, offering a lens through which the empirical data can be examined and understood.

The Empirical Qualitative Research part of the thesis forms the core of the study, detailing the recruitment strategies for participants and the conduct of semi-structured interviews. This section is crucial as it bridges the theoretical frameworks with real-world data, providing insights into the lived experiences of individuals within the realm of mobile dating apps.

The chapter on research results is dedicated to analyzing and discussing the empirical research findings. This section is organized thematically to address key aspects of online (mobile) dating, such as the complex interplay of online and offline dating, the phenomenon of oversupply, the implications of non-committal interactions, brief and superficial tendencies in communication in a dehumanizing context, as well as the fear of missing out (FOMO).

Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the study's findings, weaving together the theoretical and empirical strands of the research to draw meaningful insights. Including a comprehensive Bibliography ensures that the study is well-supported and grounded in a robust scholarly framework. Overall, the project presents a well-rounded exploration of the cultural and social implications of mobile dating apps, aiming to contribute significantly to understanding contemporary courtship rituals and relationship dynamics in mobile dating app use.

## **2. Theoretical Basics**

### **2.1 Courtship Rituals & Partner Initiation**

The following chapter provides a historical and cultural analysis of partner selection and courtship rituals, primarily focusing on Western culture from the 18th century to the present. It highlights the shift from arranged marriages to individualized partner selection, influenced by factors like women's emancipation and industrialization. The transformation of dating and courtship rituals, gender-specific scripts, and the impact of technology, particularly mobile dating apps, are discussed. The section also addresses the role of digital technology in contemporary courtship, emphasizing the transition from dating apps to social media messaging as a significant courtship ritual. Overall, it comprehensively explores how societal changes and technology have shaped partner selection and courtship practices over time.

#### **2.1.1 Perspectives on Cultural and Historical Changes**

This paper's cultural and historical analysis will be limited to the period starting from the 18th century. Limiting the analysis to this specific timeframe is based on crucial societal changes and historical impacts on the subject matter (Kopitschek, 2010) as well as to better manage the scope and feasibility of the research and resulting discussions. For the purpose of this thesis, western culture will be the focal point.

In most western societies, individual partner selection prevails today. That is, a young person chooses her/his partner based on romantic love. From a historical perspective, this was not the norm. Until well into the 19th century, in many parts of Europe, the decision of marriage

was made either by the family of the marriage applicants or by the village community as a group, so it was a collective rather than an individual decision (c.f. Kopitschek 2010: 20).

However, there have been decisive developments in the function of marriage and partnership, as well as the development of different concepts of partnerships. Nowadays, fewer people talk about a covenant for life; rather, partners are increasingly referred to as life-stage partners. This implies that many people are looking for a partner not just once but several times. Nevertheless, the search for a partner is becoming more complex for a variety of reasons.

On the one hand, there is a change in demands and one's expectations in a relationship; on the other, new concepts and approaches to partnerships are forming. Tendencies of individual fulfillment, personal fulfillment, and development are at the forefront. Growing out of the 1960s and 1980s women's liberation movement, most women have emancipated themselves from their economic dependency. They can act independently (c.f. Lamphere 2016: 53). Another significant change is that being single is no longer seen as just a transitional phase from one relationship to the next but can be a chosen path in life. As a result, partnerships face new challenges in relation to the independence and freedom that one can live out as a single person without compromise. People who consciously choose singledom often value their independence and freedom to make decisions without regard to a partner. In a partnership, it can be a challenge to maintain this freedom while compromising and making joint decisions (c.f. Kopitschek 2010: 1). Personal relationships face the challenge of absorbing the consequences of individualization while conveying a sense of security. At the same time, however, they should not restrict the partner's freedoms so that one's individuality can be realized. These new forms of sharing a life are seen as progress, but not ultimately. Over the last few decades, different types of partnerships have developed. In scientific contexts, there is much more discussion about the disintegration and splitting of families. (cf. Slama 2019: 10). However, this omits the negative effects of maintaining unhealthy relationships. Due to the numerous changes in the formats of living arrangements, the reasons people initiate a relationship and the type of relationship have changed. Indeed, the technological and socioeconomic changes of the 21st century have had severe impacts. The internet has radically altered the dating landscape, enhancing accessibility to partnership opportunities and even breaking geographical barriers (Cf. Kopitschek 2010: 2). Following the launch of the first online dating platforms in the mid-90s, online dating has become increasingly prevalent and received a new boom during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Duguay et al. 2022: 7). The following section will attempt to outline some of the historical aspects of partner search.



### **2.1.2 Ancient Courtship Rituals until the 20th century**

Broadly speaking, in most European countries, choosing a partner is a free choice. In earlier times, partner selection was predominantly influenced by other institutions, often driven by economic or social considerations. The approval of the church and, since the 19th century, state institutions played a significant role in legitimizing partnerships. Love was not the primary basis for marriage in the past; rather, it was regarded as a contractual arrangement between families (Cf. Möhle 2001: 57).

Chris Haywood also mentions in his remarks on contemporary dating practices that during the late medieval period in Western Europe, the formation of intimate relationships and subsequent marriages revolved primarily around the economic stability of closely-knit island communities. The expression of desires was regulated and articulated through structured rituals (Gillis, 1985). A prevalent form of courtship rituals during the 18th and 19th centuries was known as “calling,” whereby an admirer would appear at a woman’s door to request a visit to her home (Bailey, 1989). As Bailey (1989) explains, dating gradually transitioned from domestic settings to public places in the 20th century. Factors such as compulsory education, increased employment opportunities, and the influence of mass media led to the emergence of gender-specific scripts for courtship rituals. Men were expected to cover expenses, open doors, take the lead in asking for dates, and demonstrate superior knowledge during the interaction. This version of masculinity was achieved by displaying gendered etiquette, emphasizing dominance and control (Cf. Haywood 2019: 265). This transition from “calling” to dating represents a ritualistic behavior characterized by a series of meaningful actions (Jackson, 2011), serving as a means to convey romantic or sexual interest (Greer et al., 1994). It also symbolizes the diminishing parental control over intimate rituals as the 20th century progressed (Illouz, 1997; Wouters, 2004; Krause et al., 2013).

In the 19th century and until the beginning of the 20th century, the establishment of a household was often associated with marriage, and making an inappropriate choice of partner was viewed as engaging in an illicit relationship. Such actions carried the risk of punishment and social exclusion. The impact of mate selection extended beyond individuals, affecting families, communities, and even entire cities, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries (Cf. Möhle 2001: 57). Marriages deemed immoral were strictly prohibited across all social classes, as the primary goal was to preserve and, if possible, enhance wealth. Careful consideration was given to the stability of prospective spouses in terms of their economic

standing within the farming, artisan, and day laborer communities. In the case of affluent peasant families with inheritance rights, the selection of partners was primarily dictated by the family, often resulting in intermarriage among relatives to safeguard the family's assets. The opportunity to marry and establish their own families was rare for most servants and maids. In exceptional circumstances, servants and maids were permitted to cohabitate or marry to maintain their employment within the household. Illegitimate children born from such relationships were also provided for. Domestic servants and artisans were likewise constrained in their choice of partners as they sought to uphold or improve their social status through marriage. Even among the middle classes, economic considerations seldom took a back seat when selecting a partner. The concept of "rational love" gained prominence, emphasizing the importance of financial success in marriage while banishing passion to a secondary role (Cf. Möhle 2001: 58-60).

Choosing one's partner based on love emerged during the 18th century, although material gain often remained a significant factor until the 20th century and, in some cases, even today. The evolution of the mate selection process can be delineated into three distinct phases:

- **Partner specifications:** During the 19th century, the primary focus was preserving and augmenting resources through marriage. Consequently, there was limited autonomy in selecting a partner, as family interests, inheritance regulations, official marriage restrictions, guild regulations, and other informal norms played a decisive role in determining the choice.
- **Transition phase:** The transition from partner specifications to partner selection occurred due to industrialization and the consequent transformation of the family's significance. This shift led to a relaxation of stringent criteria and an increasing emphasis on individuals' self-selected social status.
- **Choice of a partner:** This phase commenced after the war, but its effects became more noticeable in the 1990s. Rather than adhering to outdated notions of marriage, the focus shifted towards perceiving marriage as a partnership. Emotional needs and love gained prominence in the process of selecting a partner. (Cf. Wirth 2000: 25-32)

Stoicescu (2019) highlights Modell's statement (1989) and claims the origins of dating can be linked to the rise in popularity of dancing events, which experienced a surge in the 1910s and early 1920s. During this period, the abundance of dance events established a tradition where teenagers sought dance partners and formed close connections with unfamiliar

individuals (Cf. Modell 1989: 71). dating has quickly evolved into a fundamental aspect of contemporary life, functioning as a precursor to marriage or even existing as an independent practice. Additionally, the growing popularity of motion pictures from 1921 to 1930 provided further avenues for unmarried young people to engage with their romantic interests (Modell, 1989). Movies also played an instructional role in shaping “the timing and order of emotional experiences throughout the life course” by presenting a range of romantic films that depicted scenarios of “marriage for love”, “winning another’s love” or “illicit love” (Modell 1989: 74). Consequently, dating has rapidly evolved into a fundamental aspect of contemporary life, serving as a foundation of a marriage or, in contemporary society, potentially existing separately from it. Patterns and ideal situations regarding dating and marriage vary across different cultures. The institution of dating encompasses a pattern characterized by ambiguity and instability, influenced significantly by cultural expressions and individual perspectives shaped by personal experiences in this realm. (Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 23-24).

Courtship Rituals, as well as Partner Initiation, were, of course, marked by many cultural and historical changes. Since it would go beyond the scope of this paper to consider all of them, only a few in particular can be briefly discussed. One of them is, without any doubt, the industrialization of the 18th and 19th centuries. It had a significant impact on women’s lives. With the emergence of factories and the shift of work from rural areas to cities, women were increasingly integrated into paid work outside the home. While this gave them new opportunities and some financial independence, it also led to poor working conditions, low wages, and long hours. Jobs were often limited to stereotypically “female activities”, such as textile or domestic work, which limited their career opportunities and led to gender inequality in the workforce.

Moreover, in addition to their professional work, women often had to take on most of the housework and child-rearing, resulting in an enormous double burden. However, industrialization also brought changes in social norms and attitudes toward the role of women. Access to education and participation in social movements such as the women’s rights movement gained importance and pioneered the way for the later emancipation of women. Women’s employment was considered merely supplementary to their husbands’ income, making it difficult for widows and single women to secure their livelihood through their work. As a result, they often lived in poverty, attempting to save on expenses by sharing accommodation with other women. The organized labor movement for women emerged in the 19th century as a response to the significant structural changes in the workforce due to industrialization. This industrialization brought about deteriorating living conditions and

increasing poverty for the working population, affecting even larger segments of the working class (Cf. Bake 1984: 121).

To ensure even the most essential supply, not only men but also women and, often, children (whose labor had already been exploited in previous centuries) had to work in factories. Consequently, trade unions, workers' associations, and parties advocating for labor rights, shorter working hours, and higher wages came into being. From the late 1860s, working-class women also began organizing themselves. In retrospect, the period from then until 1933 is referred to as the labor movement, proletarian women's movement, social democratic, socialist, and communist women's movement, with overlapping developmental lines and fluid boundaries. While the moderate bourgeois women's movement held a dualistic view of gender, advocating for both genders to contribute their specific and complementary traits to society, the labor movement operated under the notion of gender equality, considering equal treatment in the workplace as a given. Improved working conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages were intended to secure family income and enable economic independence for working-class women. Nevertheless, there was often controversy within the labor movement regarding their commitment to protective labor regulations for women, such as maternity leave, as it could lead to female employees being dismissed and replaced by men (Cf. Bake 1984: 121-124).

Overall, the social, economic, and cultural changes brought about by industrialization and the post-war era led to partner selection being increasingly influenced by personal preferences, love, and shared interests rather than solely by traditional and economic considerations.

In contemporary times, individual choice and responsibility take center stage in relationships, with online dating practices resembling consumer behavior, resulting in a phenomenon referred to as "relationshopping" (Heino et al., 2010; Linne, 2020; Bandinelli et al., 2022). According to Illouz (2013), individuals are perceived as quantifiable attributes in the dating context. Despite historical transformations into the 21st century, traditional gendered behavior patterns persist. Mostly, men are still expected to initiate, plan, and finance dates, as well as take the lead in sexual activity. In contrast, women are expected to be captivating, facilitate conversations, and regulate sexual encounters. Haywood states that although societal expectations have undergone some changes, most men in the US continue to cover the expenses of dates. Furthermore, men's dating success is often culturally associated with being a "real man" (Haywood 2019: 264). Bouffard and Bouffard (2011: 4) argue that these gender expectations reinforce male control and female dependence, obedience, and limited sexual agency.

### 2.1.3 The Impact of Technology and Contemporary Courtship Rituals

Investigating the impact of courtship rituals and communication patterns, as explored in studies by Degim et al. (2015), Duguay (2017), and Duguay et al. (2017), highlights the effective utilization of apps for various social purposes. These purposes encompass seeking romantic relationships, engaging in casual encounters, seeking companionship, and pursuing leisure activities (Timmermans et al., 2017). Although media representations often emphasize the association of these platforms mainly with casual sexual encounters, it is essential to recognize their functioning as environments for a wide range of user interactions, including more profound and longer-lasting intimate engagements, as noted by Sumter et al. (2017). Users demonstrate skill in utilizing dating technology and adjusting interface features to suit their requirements and desires. For instance, they employ strategic adjustments to search settings to trigger the app's cache refresh, allowing them access to fresh profiles, as highlighted by David and Cambre (2016).

Most regions of Europe nowadays allow individuals to make their own partner choices. This does not withstand the fact that specific guidelines often influence our selection. The sociologist Ira L. Reiss was the first to explore this subject. He delineates various phases in his model of partner selection:

- **Report:** The significance of shared cultural and social backgrounds is highly valued. Once a sufficient level of similarity is established, it leads to happiness, marking the onset of the second stage.
- **Self-relevance:** Personal matters and individual beliefs are thoroughly explored during this stage. When these interactions are viewed positively, it paves the way for the third stage.
- **Interdependence:** Mutual dependencies begin to surface, laying the foundation for a potential fourth stage.
- **Personality needs fulfillment:** The partnership is perceived as a mutually gratifying relationship at this stage. (Cf. Hill et al. 2001: 18)

Numerous theories have emerged about this, exploring various aspects of the subject. Among these is the stimulus-value model proposed by Bernhard Murstein (1986). According to his model, the process of selecting a mate unfolds in three distinct phases:

- **Stimulation stage:** During this phase, the emphasis is on initial contact, with physical attraction playing a significant role.

- **Value stage:** In this stage, physical attraction and romantic love become less prominent, and the focus shifts towards evaluating the values and qualities of a potential partner.
- **Role stage:** At this stage, couples increasingly coordinate their everyday behaviors and roles within the relationship. (Cf. Hill et al. 2001: 19)

Thus, our choice is not as free and self-determined as one might assume. Even today, marriages are still primarily contracted based on economic interests or shared life goals. Arranged marriages by families are still relatively common, e.g., in India, Turkey, and Japan. In western societies, partner selection is generally free from social and economic constraints. Modern partnerships are not only founded on love. While scholars, including Luhmann (1982), Giddens (1992), and Bethmann (2013), state that modern partnerships are founded on love, social structures – including education, social status, or age –are often understood as being the underlying reason for initiating engagement in a relationship (cf. Burkart 2018: 40). Nevertheless, our choice of partner is still influenced by social structures, such as education, social status, or age.

## 2.1.4 Digital Courtship Rituals

Finally, the chapter touches on the concept of "liquid love," where technology is seen as a response to increasing anxiety and insecurity about intimacy in contemporary society. It also addresses the idealized self-presentation on dating sites and the role of likes and matches in the digital courtship system. It emphasizes the significance of transitioning from dating apps to social media platforms like WhatsApp as a marker of mutual interest and intimacy.

Even in online partner selection, the social structure is reflected. Key details such as age, education, and other specific information hold significant importance within an online profile, serving as indicators that reflect the underlying social framework in the process of selecting partners online (cf. Kopitschek 2010: 23). Chris Haywood considers gender, dating, and power and suggests that new dating contexts are producing emergent masculinities. "Dating is also highly heteronormative, as it is often assumed to be a heterosexual practice" (Haywood 2019: 263). It is often supposed that heterosexuals date, whereas gays and lesbians "hook up". According to Haywood, it is essential to consider that dating as a concept is informed by various social and cultural ascriptions. Broeker also underscores that mobile dating app users obey dating scripts and norms that hold significant importance in the

relationship's progression and the users' dating and courtship rituals. The majority of Broekers' interviewees, like Gael, aged 28, demonstrated a keen awareness of this transitional ritual, employing a well-defined strategy when engaging with matches on mobile dating apps. By suggesting moving from the dating app to a social media messaging platform like WhatsApp, Gaels' statements reflect conventional gendered norms observed in dating rituals, emphasizing men's customary role in taking the lead (Cf. Broeker 2021: 2559).

According to Finkel et al. (2012), online dating platforms offer three crucial services: the ability to connect with a diverse pool of potential partners, communication through technologically advanced messaging systems, and matching algorithms that suggest compatible individuals from the start. In contrast, Broeker highlights what Chan (2017) identified as five key distinctions of mobile dating apps compared to online dating: mobility, proximity, immediacy, authenticity, and visual dominance. Unlike dating websites typically accessed via computers, mobile dating apps can operate on smartphones, allowing access from virtually anywhere. While dating websites facilitate connections across vast geographical distances, mobile dating apps primarily connect individuals close by, emphasizing rapid interaction based on visual profiles rather than written content. These apps prioritize the potential for immediate, nearby meetings, and user profiles provide less detailed information since the platform is designed for brief communication leading to in-person meetings (Cf. Broeker 2023: 56).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on career development during early adulthood has contributed to the growing acceptance of online dating. As individuals prioritize efficiency and convenience in their dating strategies, digitally enhanced alternatives have become increasingly appealing (Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 22). In daily life, media and digital tools are deeply integrated into various experiences, practices, and spaces (Bareither, 2019a, 2020; Bausinger, 1984; De Souza et al., 2006; Ito et al., 2005) and significantly influence courtship rituals and intimate relationships encompassing emotions from love to sexual interactions, regardless of whether the relationship originates from a dating app (Gershon, 2010).

While prior studies have predominantly examined the unique features of individual dating app platforms as intermediaries (Duguay, 2020; Miles, 2017; Newett et al., 2018; Timmermans et al., 2018), Fabian Broekers' work (2021) concentrates on dating apps within a broader polymedia landscape and the importance of transitioning across various platforms within this context. Broekers' research focused on individuals using three popular dating apps in Berlin, Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, emphasizing how, for these participants, the transition from these apps to social media messaging services like WhatsApp or Signal signifies

a pivotal courtship ritual. The transition highlights the mobile phone as providing multiple spaces, or spheres, where users interact within the realm of dating apps. The term "ritual" is employed here as dating is viewed as a ritualistic practice involving a series of actions with embedded meanings (cf. Jackson et al. 2011: 630). Indeed, given their diverse applications and functionalities, smartphones can be construed as polymedia environments (Madianou, 2014). Dating Apps play a crucial role in the context of a broader polymedia environment rather than existing in isolation. Broekers' article "The Evolving Digital Dynamics of Intimacy: Affordances and Dating Apps" contends that while a match on a dating app is the initial point of contact between potential partners, it is not necessarily perceived as a strong indicator of romantic interest or closeness. Conversely, transitioning communication away from the mobile dating app signifies a symbolic shift in the relationship between users, seen as solidifying their connection (C.f. Broeker 2021: 2566).

As Stoicescu (2019) states, the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has brought about significant changes in both public and private spheres, disrupting traditional norms and establishing new ones, as emphasized by Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008). Consequently, ICTs have played a growing role in enabling the development and upkeep of interpersonal connections through social media platforms and online communities (Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 22). It is crucial to approach mobile dating apps not as determinants of altering behavior but as new tools integrated into existing dating practices, akin to previous technological incorporations. While online dating introduces specific affordances, it is essential not to draw rigid distinctions between the online and offline realms. People engage across a spectrum of media, occupying both online and offline spaces simultaneously and fluidly transitioning between various identities (Miller, 2013; c.f. Broeker 2023: 54).

However, Alyssa D. Turin's research aims to investigate the impact of cultural factors on the perceived capacity of the internet to foster democracy and to explore whether social inequalities observed in the physical world are replicated within the digital realm of the mobile dating application Tinder. She states that the rapid development and extensive utilization of digital technology in the "Information Age" have been made possible by the availability of devices such as smartphones, personal computers, and gaming consoles, which offer immersive user experiences. This technological progress has granted the new generation unprecedented access to vast information and a natural aptitude for navigating a completely novel mode of human and societal interaction (Alberst et al., 1997). Moreover, the widespread adoption of cell phones has caused a transformative impact on society, with the integration of smartphones



into our daily lives completely reshaping how we structure our social networks and reconsider our fundamental comprehension of the world (cf. Turizo 2018: 8).

Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber suggest that internet dating reflects societal and technological changes that have turned modern romance into a game of commerce. Their article investigates users' experiences of digital dating and hook-up apps to evaluate the possibility of a digital revolution in intimacy. It explores the various features offered by mobile dating apps and whether these technologies have affected users' sexual practices and attitudes towards long-term relationships, monogamy, and other romantic ideals. The study reveals that dating apps act as mediators for individuals to engage in calculated performances aimed at finding love, sex, and intimacy. Overall, the article argues that some accounts of dating apps and contemporary romantic practices are overly negative and ignore the positive aspects of "networked intimacy ". The way people date and form romantic relationships has been changed by a "digital revolution ". Single adults can access numerous potential partners through their smartphones and social media algorithms, which differs from previous generations. This trend is especially prevalent in metropolitan areas, where traditional places to meet people, such as schools, universities, and workplaces, have been partially replaced by online platforms (Rosenfeld et al., 2012). This tendency is even higher among same-sex couples. Approximately 70% met their partner online (Ansari, 2015; cf. Rosenfeld et al. 2012: 530; cf. Hobbs et al. 2017: 271).

Bauman (2003) argues that computer dating results from the "liquid love "phenomenon, where human bonds are becoming more fragile in a world dominated by individualism, consumerism, and rapid technological and social change. Sherry Turtle (2011) agrees with this idea, suggesting that people are increasingly turning to technology for relationships due to anxiety and insecurity about intimacy. Research by Ellison et al. (2006: 430) and Couch and Liamputtong (2008) has shown that people create idealized versions of themselves on dating sites and use online interactions to filter potential partners (Hobbs et al. 2017: 274). Broeker describes Baumans' comments on fleeting connections in computer dating as pessimistic, suggesting that they reflect concerns about changing romantic norms and the perception of relationships as commodities to be swapped (cf. Broeker 2023: 55).

Mobile Dating apps create a digital courtship system based on an "emotional architecture" of likes and matches (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). However, users overlay their existing understandings and behaviors onto this system, as exemplified by Gael's comments. Interviews and personal experiences in Berlin underscore that while accumulating numerous

matches on various dating apps is easy, only a tiny fraction leads to conversations, and an even smaller portion progresses to face-to-face meetings.

Ultimately, modern dating practices reflect a continuum of technological incorporation and socio-cultural evolution. The online realm supplements rather than replaces the physical (Miller, 2013), underscoring the importance of understanding their interconnectedness within contemporary social dynamics. Miller et al. (2016: 7) highlighted the diminishing distinction between the virtual and the real in the context of the internet, emphasizing that online interactions are as genuine as offline ones. This notion holds particularly true for mobile dating apps, integral media interwoven into people's intimate daily lives, facilitating both tangible and intangible human connections spanning love, sex, and friendship. Dismissing these connections as merely virtual would overlook the crucial role these apps and digital devices play in users' lives (Cf. Broeker 2023: 55).

Transitioning communication from a mobile dating app to a social media messaging platform like WhatsApp is a deliberate choice among users, enabling interactions in settings where using a mobile dating app is deemed inappropriate. This highlights a paradoxical understanding of intimacy: while a dating app is associated with too much intimacy for using it in professional settings, WhatsApp, seen as more appropriate across different scenarios, embodies a heightened level of intimacy in communicating with potential partners from dating apps. WhatsApp offers continuous access and a more immediate response rate, fostering a perceived closeness. This difference in boundary-setting between the two platforms defines WhatsApp as a more intimate space (Cf. Sehlíkoglu et al. 2015: 22).

This chapter explores digital courtship rituals in mobile dating apps from various angles. It emphasizes the reflection of social structures in online partner selection, with crucial details like age and education serving as indicators of the underlying social framework. It also highlights the evolving concept of masculinity in new dating contexts and the heteronormative assumptions associated with dating practices. Users are shown to strategically manipulate dating app features to cater to their preferences, such as adjusting search settings to access new profiles. The transition from mobile dating apps to social media messaging platforms like WhatsApp is considered a pivotal courtship ritual (c.f. Broeker 2021: 2568), signifying a shift in the relationship between users. The preceding deliberations underscore the transformative role of technology, especially smartphones, in reshaping dating practices and intimate relationships. It argues that dating apps offer diverse services, including connecting with potential partners and advanced communication tools, but the transition between platforms plays a significant role in courtship. They also suggest that the digital realm replicates social

inequalities observed in the physical world and examine how cultural factors influence perceptions of online dating's democratic potential. It concludes by discussing the impact of digital technology on modern romance, where dating apps have become mediators for calculated performances aimed at finding love, sex, and intimacy (Broeker, 2021).

The shift towards online dating is attributed to societal and technological changes, particularly in metropolitan areas, where online platforms are replacing and extending traditional meeting places. Contemporary dating rituals have been shaped by technological advancements like automobiles, cinemas, written correspondence, telephones, and, more recently, the internet (Duguay et al., 2017). It is essential to perceive dating apps not as agents that fundamentally change behavior but as novel instruments integrated into pre-existing dating traditions, similar to earlier technological innovations. Although online dating introduces distinct affordances, it is crucial to avoid establishing rigid boundaries between the online and offline domains. Individuals engage in diverse media, simultaneously occupying both virtual and physical spaces and smoothly shifting between multiple identities (Miller, 2013).

Digital technologies mediate courtship rituals and intimate relationships, regardless of whether they originate from dating platforms. The advent of dating apps further normalized online dating, marking a shift from dating websites and aligning with a change in attitudes toward online interactions across generations. Presenting software as apps has played a pivotal role in integrating dating app behavior into diverse aspects of daily life, contributing to its mainstream acceptance (Degim et al., 2015; C.f. Broeker 2023: 55-56).

## **2.2 Digitization of Society**

In the 1980s, we were still grappling with all the possibilities, solutions, and efficiency gains computers could provide for society. Today, the debate has taken a turn. Increasingly, we are questioning the *boundaries* of the use of computers and their underlying algorithms (cf. Turkle 2011: 2). Computers have permeated all aspects of social life, resulting in significant changes in how society interacts. This phenomenon is also referred to as the digitalization of social life. Initially a technical term describing converting analog information into discrete data units, digitization is now increasingly recognized as a phenomenon characterized by profound and diverse social transformation processes. Nowadays, the advance of communication technology has made possible a phenomenon through which the world is more and more interconnected – becoming a genuine "global village" (McLuhan, 1962; Stiociu 2020: 172)."

Not only computers but also the daily use of smartphones have led to profound changes. In this regard, Daniel Miller (2018) characterizes the smartphone as a digital companion, acknowledging that while a phone's appearance bears less resemblance to a person compared to a robot, it nevertheless offers a more significant potential for a subtler form of anthropomorphism (cf. Miller 2018: 14). The digitalization of society has brought about transformative changes in the ways individuals interact, communicate, and perceive their social world. From an anthropological perspective, this phenomenon represents a profound shift in human culture and behavior, reshaping traditional social structures and practices. As digital technologies infiltrate various spheres of life, anthropologists are keenly interested in understanding how these advancements influence identity construction, social relationships, and cultural norms. In Joaquín Walter Linne's scholarly article, "It is not you, it is Tinder: Gamification, Consumption, Daily Management, and Performance in Dating Apps," the sociologist delves into the complex dynamics of mobile dating applications like Tinder. Linne critically examines how these platforms integrate elements of gamification and performance into the realm of romantic and social interactions. The article explores how the gamified structure of these apps, characterized by swiping mechanisms and reward systems, influences user behavior and interaction patterns. This gamification leads to a unique form of consumption and daily management of personal profiles, where users curate and perform their identities in pursuit of social and romantic connections. The study also sheds light on the broader implications of these practices, particularly how they reflect and reinforce certain societal norms and expectations in the context of modern digital dating. Linne's analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the intersection between technology, social interaction, and personal identity within the digital landscape of dating apps. The concept of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is also highlighted as a significant factor influencing user behavior on dating apps like Tinder. Linne discusses how the design and gamification of these platforms exacerbate users' FOMO, driving them to continuously engage with the app to avoid missing out on potential romantic opportunities (C.f. Linne 2020: 21-24).

The digitalization of society offers new avenues for self-expression, participation, and connectivity but also raises questions about the impact on privacy, power dynamics, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Through ethnographic research and cross-cultural analysis, anthropologists aim to unravel the intricate connections between technology, society, and humanity, exploring how digitization shapes human experiences and shapes the future trajectory of human societies.

### 2.2.1 Digital Anthropology

There is no doubt that digitization has significant impacts on social coexistence (Shannon, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; Horst, 2012) as well as for the analysis of it. The latter implies the need for theoretical adaptation and methodological innovations, especially in social science research. Be it new social practices that emerge through digitization and need to be adequately analyzed or new data types that become accessible to empirical researchers through digitization. In both cases, the changes triggered by the digitization of society should be understood as both a challenge and an opportunity for analytical development.

One of the key challenges of digital anthropology is to discover new ways to understand the relationship between media practices and the constitution of media worlds in an individual's, community's, or group's life and the different spaces, media, and modes through which such endeavors take place (Horst 2012: 73).

Therefore, my research project is embedded within the approach of digital anthropology, which correlates specifically to online and internet technology. It is the anthropological study of the relationship between humans and technology in the digital age. The field of cultural and social anthropology has evolved beyond being solely focused on "simple non-European cultures". Its scholars have conducted comparative research on intricate phenomena, processes, and transformations in various human societies for decades. Consequently, it was only a matter of time before the first anthropologists began exploring technological advancements and scientific practices in Europe and the USA (Fischer, 1999, 2007; Pfaffenberger, 1988b, 1992). Boelstorff also writes in this context that digital anthropology, once considered a literal impossibility and at best a paradox, is now on its way to becoming a fully-fledged sub-discipline, aligning itself alongside fields such as legal anthropology, medical anthropology, economic anthropology, and the anthropologies of migration, gender, and the environment (C.f. Boelstorff 2021: 44).

In order to analyze and comprehend these phenomena, along with their related social practices and cultural processes at the intersections of society, science, and technology, it is imperative to develop suitable theoretical frameworks and concepts while gathering empirical evidence (Fischer, 2007; Pfaffenberger, 1992). The conviction that technical and societal phenomena should not be examined and understood in isolation is fundamental to anthropology, science and technology research, and technology sociology (Bijker et al., 1992; Degree, 2002).

In anthropology, socio-technical systems are employed to examine the phenomena above collectively and in their interconnection. A socio-technical system can be perceived as a complex of diverse, interconnected elements, including social structures, coordination and organization of work, social relationships, communication among actors, and the production and utilization of artifacts. Technology is perceived as a material culture in anthropology (English, 2006) and other social sciences (Vannini, 2009). "It is therefore important to remember that while the digital world may often be online, it is not immaterial. There is a material side to the world of 'bits' (Blanchette, 2011), computers, memes, platforms, digital photography, or digital money" (Miller 2018: 3).

According to Daniel Miller (1997: 399), material culture can be understood as the material embodiment of the cultural process through which human groups construct and socialize. Material culture is closely connected to the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986: 13ff.), encompassing their exchange, value attribution, consumption, and appropriation. In this context, the initial step in the consumption process involves transforming an object from an impersonal commodity into something imbued with specific (personal) significance for consumers and their social worlds (Miller, 1987). Appropriation initially involves the unchanged adoption of things or objects. However, these items are often reinterpreted, decontextualized, transformed, and imbued with new (symbolic) meanings during the appropriation process. Thus, appropriation also constitutes a form of social interaction among individuals, which may only sometimes be explicitly conscious, and power dynamics and social order play a significant role in this process. Focusing on socio-cultural appropriation allows highlighting actors' agency, such as technology users, in their actions (Hahn, 2015).

In the early stages of anthropological analysis of new digital information, communication, and media technologies, the terms "cyberanthropology" or "cyberanthropologie" (Budka et al., 2004; Knorr, 2011) were commonly used. Nevertheless, these terms are increasingly being replaced by the designation "digital anthropology" (Horst/Miller, 2012). Anthropologists often delve into the connections between digital technologies, media, communication forms, and socio-cultural phenomena, which have traditionally been extensively examined in the discipline. These phenomena encompass societal relationships, organizational forms, culturally diverse communication styles, identity construction, ritual dynamics, religious processes, and economic practices (Budka et al., 2004; Horst et al., 2012; Schröder et al., 2002; Whitehead et al., 2012b).

As early as 1990, Arjun Appadurai already examined his theory of the five scapes of globalization: ethnoscaples, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes.

Ethnoscapes represent the movement of people around the world. Technoscapes refer to the ways technologies help speed up cross-border movements. Finance scapes refers to the rapid movement of money across borders. Mediascapes means the power of international media to send news information across the globe at a rapid rate. The fifth scapes, ideoscapes, refers to the ideas, symbols and narratives that have spread around the globe. Appadurai's theory of scapes posits that globalization is fueled by the interconnectivity and movement of five distinct scapes. These scapes exert mutual influence and shaping effects as cultures intersect and intertwine globally. The theory emphasizes the multidirectional character of cultural exchanges and calls into question the concept of cultural homogenization. His theory tries to explain how cultures worldwide influence each other as these five scapes have influenced each other more and more over time as globalization speeds up. Appadurai's theory comes from the concept of "global cultural flow". He contends that traditional perceptions of the world as a binary division between Global North and Global South, East and West, First World, and Third World, etc., are overly simplistic, especially in the context of contemporary globalization. According to Appadurai, the global landscape is no longer characterized by distinct and separate worlds delineated by wealth disparities. Instead, he posits that cultural interactions and influences constantly occur, engendering intersections and overlapping between diverse cultures. These reciprocal influences are channeled through five distinct dimensions of cultural flow, known as the five scapes (Cf. Appadurai 1990: 295-310).

Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000: 14), who conducted one of the pioneering ethnographic studies on the internet, emphasize that the internet is not solely a technical, technological, or infrastructural phenomenon but also a socio-cultural one. It facilitates communication, social interaction, and cultural representation, making it a subject of anthropological research (Hart, 2004). Among the conceptual frameworks that have the potential to expand the dominant community/network paradigm in understanding digital sociality, several notable ones are Victor Turner's "Communitas", "Liminality", and Social Field" coined by the Manchester School and Pierre Bourdieu (Postal, 2008, 2011); and Joanna Overing's model of "Conviviality" (Mader et al., 2009).

The primary methodological approach for investigating phenomena such as the internet in anthropology is ethnographic field research. This empirical strategy adapts to the research field, which is ultimately constructed by the ever-changing spaces of human action (c.f. Kremser 1998: 143). This implies that anthropology's methodology and methods continuously evolve due to the emergence of new Internet-based tools for data collection, analysis, and

representation in ethnographic research (Fabian, 2002; Kelty, 2009; cf. Budka 2019: 166 - 170).

Digital information, communication, and media technologies play significant roles in human culture and society, satisfying universal human needs, which are historically developed and socio-culturally specific, such as maintaining social relationships across geographical distances. For instance, global media technologies like the internet are examined as material culture in the everyday lives of individuals through ethnographic field research. Concepts such as cyberculture or cyborg have been attributed the potential to deconstruct or critically question established categories and dualisms, such as nature/culture, woman/man, or human/ machine. By investigating socio-technical life worlds, anthropology can undergo a process of renewal, challenging established notions of "the Other" and "the Self" and transcending extreme views of "the primitive Others" and "the modern Self" (Escobar 1994: 223), fostering a more critical discussion (Cf. Budka 2019: 179).

The increasing number of digital-anthropological studies and projects highlights the aptness of cultural and social anthropology to investigate the novel socio-cultural processes and practices related to digital technologies. Anthropologists encounter phenomena that have long been addressed in the discipline, such as individual and collective identity constructions, social relationships, organizational forms, and transformative socio-cultural, religious, and economic practices (cf. Budka 2019: 181). Recently, the emergence of the "gig economy" and the integration of digital technologies, such as smartphone apps, have blurred the boundaries and responsibilities of companies concerning their workforce. Ilana Gershon (2017) conducted a study on the implications of the career-focused online network LinkedIn, where workers now find themselves compelled to adopt specific appearances and claims to secure employment. This example illustrates how digital platforms can transform neo-liberal political philosophies into new forms of work and novel ways of self-visualization and self-understanding as individuals strategically present themselves within the constraints of these platforms (Cf. Miller 2018: 5).

A significant area of growing interest in digital anthropology revolves around the potential implications of amassing vast quantities of data, their utilization in formulating algorithms, and the substantial investments in Artificial Intelligence (Kockelman, 2013). One illustrative anthropological approach to address these concerns is the investigation conducted by Minna Ruckenstein and Natasha Schüll (2016) on the "datafication" process in the health context. Datafication bestows unparalleled abilities for surveillance and regulation, which not only anticipate but also influence and alter human behavior. Moreover, there is a perception of



dehumanization, where individuals perceive themselves more as data visualizations rather than distinct individuals. Furthermore, these technologies reinforce existing disparities in gender and other unequal social aspects. Most individuals in western societies interact with innovative digital technologies through smartphone apps. Artificial intelligence and algorithms manifest in practical ways for these users, such as enhanced instant foreign language translation services, improved GPS navigation, or more accurate voice dictation. Instead of perceiving dehumanization, they view their smartphones as increasingly personalized to their specific characteristics. They may experience a sense of loss if they inadvertently leave their digital companion at home (cf. Miller 2018: 12). Since the smartphone is integrated into everyday lives, the relationship between the online and offline realms holds fundamental significance for digital anthropology. This interplay carries critical ontological, epistemological, and political ramifications: it shapes our understanding of the digital domain, defines the nature of knowledge about the digital, and determines the stakes of digital engagement in the context of social justice (cf. Boelstorff 2021: 45).

In European cultures, it is almost impossible to overlook that the relationship between humans and smartphones has gained massive importance in the last decade. People hold a strong trust in their mobile phones, and some have problems even leaving them for an hour. Even regarding encounters and relationships, the smartphone is right there. Dating app companies have detected this niche and offer the possibility to satisfy these needs. Constant communication and virtual presence are new phenomena that evolved with digitization. Since digital communication functions as the new love letter of our time and language is one of the most essential mediums, I will examine communication and digital communication in the following section.

### **2.2.2 Digital Communication**

Digital communication is becoming increasingly important, not only in western developed societies (Miller et al., 2000). Written communication has also evolved through the technological development of digitization and the associated introduction of the smartphone as a personal assistant. To examine the research context of digital communication, it is necessary to briefly start with the means of understanding communication.

Communication is an inherent and essential aspect of human existence. It serves as a means by which we establish a sense of ease concerning our self-identity and connection with

the world, notwithstanding its contingent and multifarious nature. It is crucial to acknowledge that a comprehensive and cohesive scientific language, which would provide definitive and conclusive interpretations, currently needs to be created. As a result, communication liberates all expressions and notions from ambiguity, affording us lucid revelations into the world and human society's evolution. Interpersonal communication cannot be adequately defined as transmitting a message from the sender's consciousness to the receiver through a natural or artificial medium. Its limitation lies in explicitly excluding semantic and practical aspects of interpersonal communication. We humans share a common world. We are initially embedded in an implicit web of practical contexts of meaning and reference to the shared world. However, who we are is not only defined primarily in terms of personal data such as name, age, and gender but also takes place in the social process of knowing or not knowing, with many possibilities in between. Who we are is, therefore, not the same as our objectified and digitized personal data. Objectifying ourselves is beneficial because what we reveal about ourselves acquires a certain permanence and enables us, as that person or group of persons, to participate in various forms of exchange relations (Cf. Capurro 2017: 94-95).

Such forms of physical, coordinated, and valued spatiotemporal extensions always occur in a shared world, a given but open network of semantic and referential contexts. This holistic communication phenomenon of being in the world constitutes the very meaning of human communication. Developmentally, there are four identifiable stages of objectification in human communication. The initial phase dates back approximately six to seven thousand years ago, when the invention of writing took place. The second stage emerged in the 15th century with the advent of the printing press, which can be traced back to various technological roots from different historical periods and cultures. In the 20th century, the third phase materialized with the invention of audiovisual mass media, encompassing mediums such as radio, film, and television. Finally, the fourth phase materialized with the invention of the internet, which happened in the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s, the internet became accessible to the public and rapidly disseminated, leading to its current global ubiquity and significance. In the present time, we find ourselves in the era of digital communication, often called communication 4.0, within the framework of these four stages.

It is essential to recognize that digital communication remains inherently intertwined with our fundamental existence in the physical and social world despite its distinctive characteristics and the creation of an infosphere. This interconnection extends to previous forms of communication, such as writing, printing presses, and audiovisual mass media. Consequently, with each technological revolution in human communication, a diverse array of

experiences regarding temporal and spatial proximity and distance emerges. Such diversity offers both genuine possibilities and, at times, diminished forms of unity (Cf. Capurro 2017: 96). In this regard, Miller and Slater (2000) write in their ethnographic approach that the internet created an opportunity to engage with oneself, to articulate and develop understandings of the self (cf. Miller et al. 2000: 10). Users could be whom they thought they were on the portal, which Miller and Slater (ibid.) describe as "expansive realization". However, they could also develop new images of themselves, which Miller and Slater (ibid.11) call "expansive potential".

In 2009, cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito prompted research on American youth and their relation and use of media. In introductory words, she states:

Digital media and online communication have become a pervasive part of the everyday lives of youth in the United States. Social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites, and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are now well-established fixtures of youth culture; it can be hard to believe that these technologies were barely present in the lives of U.S. children and teens just a decade ago. Today's youth may be negotiating over developing knowledge and identity, coming of age, and struggling for autonomy as did their predecessors. However, they are doing this while the contexts for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression are reconfiguring through their engagement with new media (Ito 2009: 1).

In 2009, most people in developed countries used multiple communication channels daily. Communication media include voice calls, emails, text messages, messaging via landline, mobile or VoIP (voice-over-IP) channels, text communications via social networking platforms, and pictures and videos via various forms of social media. Most adults in Europe and the U.S. then engaged with at least four distinct channels daily. Having multiple email accounts was common among regular Internet users, while most individuals active on social networks maintained multiple personal pages. In various European nations, the number of mobile phone subscriptions surpassed the resident population, a fact widely recognized and extensively promoted. However, what remains less known is that among this abundance of channels, devices, and services, users predominantly interacted with a mere five individuals, an average of 80 times (Broadbent, 2016). The media seldom reported on the concentration of such exchanges within a minimal number of relationships, and users themselves often needed to be made aware of this phenomenon. The simultaneous emergence of social networks and

the sudden proliferation of highly assertive new forms of public communication have overshadowed the more subtle transformations occurring in private and intimate interactions. Nevertheless, even today, most individuals maintain regular contact with only a few familiar acquaintances, forming the indispensable core of significant relationships. The noteworthy change lies in the social context surrounding these interactions (Cf. Broadbent 2016: 15). In the same year, social science researchers from the Facebook data team published a report analyzing the number of communication events in a database of Facebook subscribers. Users have an average of 120 friends but were found to be actively communicating with less than 10% of them (cf. Broadbent 2016: 16-17).

Regular contact with loved ones through various digital channels has quickly become a universal behavior adopted by people of different generations and cultures. This is also the first major digital shift we have seen in media communication, and it goes back to the phenomenon of social media. Teenagers were the first to realize the power of media channels to share updates with their friends. Their elders quickly copied them. Anthropologist Mizuko Ito was one of the first researchers to study Japanese teenagers' behavior with social media. She published one of the earliest studies on the mobile cultural phenomenon and vividly describes the feeling of being heard (cf. Broadbent 2016: 21). Her opinion on writing SMS is:

These messages are predicated on the sense of ambient accessibility, a shared virtual space that is generally available between a few friends or with a loved one. They do not require a deliberate opening of a channel of communication but are based on the expectation that one is in "earshot". . . people experience a sense of persistent social space constituted through the periodic exchange of text messages. These messages also define a space of peripheral background awareness midway between direct interaction and non-interaction (Ito et al. 2005: 132).

Her explanation of SMS can be equally applied to all other media communication channels. Broadbent (2016) observed that multiple channels ensure that this sense of being in a "permanent social space" is maintained in various situations throughout the day. In her research, Broadbent (2016) noted that most news and conversations were intended to be brief updates. Throughout the day, people made short phone calls and increasingly sent short texts, messages, and photos to make arrangements or share what they were doing and feeling. These updates, caresses, or communication of small events convey the sense of constant attention described by Mizuko Ito (cf. Broadbent 2016: 21).

Regarding mobile dating apps, as Broeker has shown in his study, a match represents merely the initial step in a series of interactions spread across not just mobile dating apps but a broader array of communication platforms. Although the exchange of phone numbers did not always precede a first date, it was consistently viewed as an indication of mutual interest and a signal for ongoing intimate interactions, irrespective of whether it occurred during or after the initial meeting. All the dating app users Broeker interviewed emphasized the greater significance attached to interactions outside the app's confines, downplaying the role of a match in organizing a date (Cf. Broeker 2021: 2561).

In her thesis, Gillian Davenport explores how students use social media to construct versions of themselves and interact with others. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with 20 college students, her thesis explores how young people create mediated social selves through app-based interactions and forms of intimacy. In detail, she asks how and why people form relationships and interact in digital and mediated spaces. Davenport further argues that the prevalent vagueness and ambiguity characterizing communication on these platforms contribute to a heightened sense of anxiety, ultimately undermining perceived online intimacy. This paradox emerges as Instagram facilitates more accessible communication and connection with individuals while concurrently eroding established intimacy by instigating anxiety and uncertainty regarding face-to-face interactions. The inherent ambiguity in communication fosters a deceptive perception of situational control bolstered by the selection process employed in popular dating apps like Tinder and Bumble. Consequently, the juxtaposition between the perceived control in social media communication and the unpredictability associated with in-person interaction can evolve into a source of anxiety.

### **2.2.3 Online Dating**

Online dating and mobile dating apps have experienced a remarkable boom in recent years and have become an integral part of modern dating culture. These platforms offer a convenient and efficient way to meet potential romantic partners and build interpersonal connections. Online dating allows people to create profiles and connect with other singles over the internet. The platforms allow users to disclose their hobbies, interests, preferences, personal characteristics, and visual information like photos and selfies. This information can identify potential matches based on algorithms and search criteria.

Various studies indicate a significant trend in forming romantic relationships within online spaces. Parks and Floyd's 1996 research revealed that nearly 8% of newsgroup users developed romantic ties with individuals they met in these groups. Extending this observation, Parks and Roberts (1998) noted that about a quarter of MOO (text-based online virtual reality) users they studied engaged in romantic relationships, suggesting this is a common occurrence in MOOs. Utz's study in 2000 aligned with these findings, showing that approximately 24.5% of MUD users initiated romantic relationships in these virtual environments. Whitty and Gavin's 2010 research further corroborated the emergence of romantic connections through chat rooms, with some relationships reportedly flourishing more online than in physical interactions (Cf. Whitty 2007: 57).

Mobile dating apps have expanded these capabilities by providing access to smartphone dating platforms. Online dating and mobile dating apps offer a variety of benefits. These apps allow users to search for potential partners, browse profiles, and exchange messages on the go and in real-time. The integration of GPS capabilities allows users to find and date people in their immediate vicinity.

These platforms offer a more comprehensive range of potential partners than traditional methods of getting to know each other. People can access the platforms from their homes and search for matches at their own pace. In addition, they allow users to connect beyond geographical boundaries and build new relationships in different parts of the world.

Nevertheless, there are challenges and concerns related to online dating and mobile dating apps. One of them is the possibility of misrepresentation and fraud. Since users have control over the information they disclose, there is a risk that sometimes dishonest intentions are pursued. It is, therefore, essential to be cautious and aware that not all information on dating profiles can always be complete or accurate (Cf. Arthur 2017: 4).

Despite these challenges, online dating and mobile dating apps have the potential to foster genuine and meaningful relationships. Many people have found their partners and formed successful relationships through these platforms. Technology has changed how people meet and ushered in a new dating era.

Overall, online dating and mobile dating apps offer an exciting and convenient way to meet new people and make romantic connections. With caution and common sense, these platforms promise a positive experience and increased chances of finding a compatible relationship.

However, do these promises hold? Examining these new technologies and how they transform society and change interpersonal relationships is essential. In this regard, this present work intends to shed light on these cultural and social transformation processes.

#### **2.2.4 Online Dating Sites**

Over the past century, societal conventions related to dating, courtship, and marriage have undergone profound transformations (Coontz, 2005). The internet has been crucial in reshaping how couples come together (Rosenfeld et al., 2012). By expanding the range of possibilities beyond conventional avenues such as close-knit social networks, the internet has enabled individuals to meet potential partners who transcend the boundaries of social connections, religion, race, and geography. Studies have revealed a decrease in meeting romantic partners, such as through friends, families, churches, and local communities, as the popularity of internet dating has increased (Rosenfeld et al., 2012). Websites like Match.com and Parship.at, ElitePartner.at, and OKCupid.com, among others, have gained millions of users worldwide since their establishment in the late 1990s, as an increasing number of singles have turned to the internet to find a significant other (Couch et al., 2007; Hardey, 2008; Rosenfeld et al., 2012; Tong et al., 2016).

In the past, online dating was often associated with a negative stigma, suggesting that only desperate individuals who could not find dates through conventional means resorted to it. Nevertheless, the prevalence of internet-based experiences and mobile dating apps has invalidated these stereotypes (Lawson et al., 2006; Rosenfeld et al., 2012), making them irrelevant. Especially the COVID-19 pandemic gave online dating forms reasons to expand their offer. To remain within the scope of my work, focused on online mobile dating applications like Bumble and Tinder, the above section is merely meant to give an introduction.

#### **2.2.5 Mobile Dating Apps**

In the past decade, smartphones have profoundly impacted various domains of life, encompassing travel, commerce, immediate news updates, and even the realm of romantic encounters and relationships. Smartphone dating applications have revolutionized online dating, eliminating individuals' need to be confined to their homes and computers. These

applications have effectively mobilized the process of dating by establishing virtual environments that transcend physical boundaries, as discussed in the works of Blackwell et al. (2015) and Duguay (2017) (Cf. Arthur 2017: 5). Dating Apps are mobile applications that operate on the internet and are frequently dependent on the GPS functionality of smartphones. Individuals utilize them to facilitate the organization of intimate engagements with potential partners, with objectives that span from casual encounters to more serious and committed relationships.

From the viewpoint of communication and internet studies, some of the most widely explored research areas include self-presentation and strategies for managing impressions, the selection process of potential partners, the critical examination of algorithms, concerns regarding privacy, and the exploitation of user data. Despite lacking a systematic approach, existing literature on dating apps and gender has explored various aspects of the subject. Self-presentation strategies, mate selection, and courtship processes have been examined through a gender perspective, aiming to understand the role of dating apps in reinforcing or challenging traditional gender stereotypes (Abramova et al., 2016).

The design and the utilization of algorithms play a significant role in shaping gender representation and reinforcing gender scripts. Furthermore, the analysis of data aids in comprehending gendered patterns of user behavior and preferences, including examining gender preferences in evaluating the desirability of potential partners, among other aspects, is crucial. Mobile dating apps represent a progressive advancement from traditional online dating websites, harnessing the capabilities of smartphones, including GPS functionality and convenient access to photo galleries. This integration facilitates a more immediate and seamless user experience. Consequently, these apps have been recognized as potent tools that bridge the gap between online and offline realms. As a result of constant digitization, cell phones have developed into increasingly important objects and assistants in everyday life (Miller, 2018). Daniella Otto delves into the complex relationship between humans and digital technology. In her book, Otto explores how digital assistants like Alexa have become integral to our daily lives, shaping our habits, preferences, and thought processes. She raises critical questions about dependency, privacy, and the ethical implications of increasingly intelligent A.I. systems. Otto's work is particularly relevant in today's world, where the line between technology and human experience is continually blurring, prompting us to reflect on the nature of our interaction with digital entities and the potential consequences of such dependencies (Cf. Otto 2021: 34-36).



In the early 2000s, mobile dating practices were initially explored through mobile phones' Bluetooth feature, primarily based on proximity-based connections known as "tooththing". However, the widespread adoption of mobile dating began in 2007 with the rising popularity of smartphones. Notable early platforms include Skout, initially established in 2007 as a mobile social network platform but later relaunched as a dating app in 2009, and Zoosk, founded in 2007. Grindr, an app catering to men seeking men, was introduced in 2009, while Tinder, which achieved global recognition with 50 million users in 2018, was launched in 2012. Subsequently, various other apps emerged. Happn, Hornet, Bumble, and Hinge are some examples. Online dating websites like Match.com, OkCupid, and Badoo also developed their mobile applications and websites. Certain apps exclusively cater to same-sex connections, like Grindr and Her. Others primarily focus on heterosexual interactions, like Tinder.

Some LGBTQIA+ individuals have also begun utilizing dating apps that are predominantly popular among heterosexual users, employing innovative strategies to express their sexual identity and orientation within heteronormative contexts, as exemplified by women seeking women on Tinder (Ferris et al., 2019). These dating applications have forged an entirely new social landscape that has had a profound impact on individuals across the board, with a particularly transformative effect on LGBTQIA+ users. Research indicates that LGBTQIA+ individuals exhibit a higher inclination than heterosexual individuals to initiate romantic connections through online platforms, thereby enabling the cultivation of offline intimate relationships and circumventing the dominance of heteronormative social environments. Mobile dating applications empower individuals, particularly those who have historically faced limited agency in shaping their dating and sexual experiences (Connell, 1992; Coston et al., 2012; Grove et al., 2014; Lever et al., 2008), by granting them absolute autonomy in constructing their self-representation and communicating their preferences to potential partners (Jaspal, 2017). Presently, in the United States, online encounters have become the predominant method for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples to initiate connections, indicating a significant shift in societal norms (Rosenfeld et al., 2019; Cf. Comunello et al. 2020: 1-2).

The platform architecture of prominent dating applications, including Bumble and Tinder, provides users a flexible framework to fashion their self-presentation with minimal limitations. While this grants users a sense of empowerment, it also engenders a heightened potential for fake self-portrayals and deceit, hindering relationship development and causing frustration among users (Jaspal, 2017). To address authenticity concerns, certain dating apps, including non-specific ones like Tinder, have incorporated structural constraints within their

design to curtail the construction of counterfeit or deceptive profiles (Duguay, 2017). Such platforms may, for instance, require users to disclose their names and employ clear, identifiable photographs. Nevertheless, these design strategies may not be suitable for vulnerable communities who often require varying degrees of anonymity (Cf. Arthur 2017: 5). Another technological feature predominant in contemporary digital interfaces that has emerged as a significant area of academic interest, especially within the domains of cultural and behavioral studies, is the practice of "infinite scrolling". "Scrolling is conceptualized as an embodied everyday practice entangled in designers' intentions (Jovicic 2021: 498)". The anthropologist Suzana Jovicic conducted an ethnographic examination of the social intricacies underlying controversial, every day, and seemingly insignificant digital behaviors like scrolling through social media feeds. Jovicic suggests that seemingly mundane activities like infinite scrolling embody life-affirming acts of leisurely navigating through social and commercial spaces and symbolize stagnation and boredom (Cf. Jovicic 2021: 513). This design element, which allows content to continuously load at the bottom of a screen as a user scrolls, exemplifies the intersection of technology and user behavior in the digital age. From a cultural perspective, infinite scrolling can be viewed as a reflection of the rapid consumption ethos prevalent in modern society. It embodies a shift from traditional, finite engagements with content to an endless, seamless interaction. This design caters to and reinforces the desire for constant engagement and instant gratification, characteristics increasingly identified in digital media consumption patterns.

Marketing strategies employed by prominent online dating platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, and Match.com lead to users spending an average of 20 hours per week scrolling through profiles, resulting in 1 billion swipes per day on Tinder alone before the end of 2014. Tinder rapidly ascended to become the market's leading dating app, boasting 75 million monthly active users and 10.9 million subscribers in 2022, attributable to the game-like atmosphere it cultivates in the pursuit of romantic connections. The app made \$1.79 billion in revenue in 2022, an 8% increase from the year prior. 60% of Tinder's users are under 35 years old, and three-quarters of Tinder's users are male (Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics, 2024). The app's infinite swipe feature enables the "gamification" of relationship-seeking. Gamification refers to incorporating gaming aspects into non-gaming contexts, such as dating. This perpetual environment of unlimited swiping gives users the impression of a ceaseless availability of new acquaintances and possible matches, despite this not always being the case. Although the gamification and infinite swiping feature of mobile dating apps might theoretically be advantageous, rooted in the notion that there are "more fish in the sea", it

cultivates a hazardous and superficial mindset for those seeking a meaningful, long-term relationship (C.f. Beck 2021: 111).

## **2.3 Individualized (Online) Identities**

Individualization, identity, and the emergence of online identities are intertwined concepts that have become increasingly significant in the digital age. As society undergoes rapid technological advancements and a shift towards virtual interactions, how individuals perceive and construct their identities has evolved. The process of individualization, which emphasizes the growing autonomy and self-determination of individuals (Vibert, 2011), intersects with the multifaceted nature of identity formation. In this context, digital platforms and the internet have provided new avenues for self-expression, self-presentation, and the negotiation of identities. The anthropologist Paula Blanck refers to Bauman's argument that modern society "consume" sexuality. According to Bauman, this influences and complicates the ability of individuals to build long-term relationships. The ease with which relationships can be ended characterizes the individualism Bauman sees as characteristic of the "fluid modern era". Based on Bauman's theory of fluid relationships, the phenomenon of ghosting can be explained as a consequence of postmodern, non-committal relationships. The lack of demands or obligations in these relationships creates the basis for a sudden, inexplicable end. This concept of fluid relationships can additionally enable emotional distance and detachment in mobile app dating. (Cf. Blanck 2022: 16; Capurro, 2017). The following chapter tries to explore the interplay between individualization, traditional identity constructs, and the transformation of identities in the online realm, shedding light on how the digital landscape influences how people perceive and express themselves in contemporary society. Through the lens of anthropological inquiry, the following chapters delve into the complex interrelationships between individualization, identity, and the construction of online identities, seeking to understand the broader implications of these phenomena in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

The following chapter will discuss the relevant research terms, including individualization, identity, and online identity. At this point, it must be mentioned that the work pertains to a vast subject area. Based on this work, greater in-depth explorations could emerge.

### 2.3.1 individualization

Within the transition to modernity, a profound transformation of institutions and ways of life has occurred on multiple levels, collectively referred to as "individualization" in social science discourse (Vibert, 2011).

The anthropologist and ethnologist Louis Dumont describes individualization as a persistent process that originated in the western context with the influence of Christianity and subsequently spread globally through colonialism and globalization. Individualization entails a cultural transformation wherein the individual is perceived as possessing qualities of freedom, morality, equality, and rationality. According to Dumont (1991), the modern worldview is characterized by an ideology of individualism, which encompasses a variety of ideas and values surrounding the individual.

However, Elisabetta Costa et al. (2016) explain the process of individualization as follows: In the past, individuals resided within close-knit communities characterized by solid social connections often based on kinship systems. Over the past two centuries, a convergence of factors, including capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization, have contributed to the erosion of these social structures. As a result of this decline, there has been a corresponding emergence of new manifestations of personal autonomy and individualism. On the one hand, this development has fostered greater personal freedom and independence. On the other hand, it has also resulted in feelings of loneliness, isolation, and social fragmentation (Cf. Costa et al. 2016: 181).

Since the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the individual has been central to western political and ethical ideals. In anthropology, the individual functions as an "institution" (Mauss 1967: 150) that only gains meaning and stability by being embedded in a particular sociocultural world. In 1893, Emile Durkheim established the central link between modern individualization and the social division of labor with the concept of "organic solidarity" (Durkheim 1988), meaning a form of social cohesion based on interdependence and the division of labor in complex societies. Subsequently, anthropology focused explicitly on the "human constitution" question through its integration into symbolic orders that presuppose shared representations and ritual institutions. Durkheim's nephew and successor, Marcel Mauss, showed that humans as individuals emerge only through long-term subjectivization in a given social reality. This is expressed through various bodily techniques, the expression of emotions, or the internalization of the concept of death (Mauss, 1989).

In due course, French anthropology, in particular, has emphasized the relational character of individuality in non-western societies. From the consciousness of the self, which is open to its social and mythological environment (Leenhardt, 1984), to its constituents themselves, these may be physical (bones, blood, sperm, etc.) or immaterial (ancestral spirits, breath, shadows, etc.) (Griaule, 1980; Héritier, 1977). The anthropologist Philip Shannon also investigated the process of individualization in non-western societies in 2018. He conducted research using ethnographic data from ground-level fieldwork primarily obtained from eight middle-class, urban, educated young men in New Delhi, all between the ages of 21 and 27. His research design focused on their everyday social development and their experiences of changing gender norms from a social and cultural anthropological perspective. For a macro-level analysis of gender and youth in India, he organized 85 additional interviews. According to Shannon, researchers who engage with Indian masculinities found that young boys are socialized to follow the rules and authority of their fathers. As young adults, "they remain subordinate to the authority of a patriarchal generational and gendered social system "(Shannon 2018: 318). In his examinations, he concluded that young men enjoy private conversations on mobile phones through social media platforms and mobile dating apps to express themselves and execute their versions of masculinities away from their families' direct authority and control (cf. ibd.). These new forms of communication between young Indian men and women allow them to challenge gender stereotypes. Through being able to share emotions, desires, pleasures, and anxieties, it is possible for young men to break free from "misconceptions about girls and women being 'silly' or 'dumb'". As a result of the development of ICTs, young men can interact with women in a context where such interaction has been severely restricted and have access to new forms of self-expression and communication. In particular, the internet and social media have created new worlds of gendered expression (Cf. Shannon 2018: 320).

The branch of American anthropology that collaborated with the School of Culture and Personality in the 1930s and engaged in the question of how culture shapes individual behavior also made a valuable contribution to individualization. The hypothesis was that each culture defined certain kinds of expected behaviors. Psychology and psychoanalysis took a universalistic view of human personality, secondarily shaped by cultural patterns (Cf. Vibert 2011: 154).

Edward Sapir (1967), Ruth Benedict (1963), and Margaret Mead (1979) advocated the phenomenon of cultural "incorporation." They showed that even a person's body is imbued and shaped by social meanings (e.g., "most natural" behaviors, such as eating and sleeping).

Through anthropological studies of individualization, we understand that the modern individual cannot be considered a natural and objective reality but is the result of a long development of European concepts. This developmental process ranges from the meaning of the Latin *persona* (mask, personality) as an expression of the "moral personality" to the consideration of the philosopher's "*cogito*" and the contemporary political and legal individual (Mauss 1989). The anthropological truth is still the same: human beings are consistent, above all, social beings who develop within existing cultures. Therefore, a historical investigation of how individualism as an ideology came to be understood differently across different geographical areas in the world is necessary. This includes the notion of community and its various interpretations and weights. Dumont's hypothesis explaining individualization (Vibert, 2004), similar to the theories of Mauss or Max Weber, is based on the assumption that an "individual outside society" exists at the margins of society. In this context, this individual manifests itself first under religious aspects, such as monks or hermits, and later in the material form of philosophers and merchants. In the course of modernity, the individual increasingly claims the space of the collective sphere to realize himself as an "individual in the world" and reshape socially accepted values. This process is significantly influenced by Christianity, especially the protestant reformation, which brings a revaluation of the "individual in direct relationship with God" (Vibert 2011: 155). In the information age, social media platforms are seen as spaces (Apadurai, 1990) where individuals shape and optimize their identities. The emergence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, set a precedent for the internet to be used as a space where people could shape their real-life identities instead of exploring imagined ones. This idea is supported by research conducted by Strano (2008), Zhao et al. (2008), and Gibbs, Ellison and Heino (2006). Mobile dating applications followed this trend by capitalizing on the intersection of anonymous and anonymous perspectives. This tension arises from the desire to present an "authentic" construction of one's actual self while simultaneously idealizing one's best feature, as noted by Ranzini and Lutz (2016) and Ellison et al. (2012) (Cf. Turizo 2018: 11).

However, the humanist and secular concepts play a significant role in the context of the emergence of a postcolonial world, especially in the dissemination of human rights as a "universal" basis by international organizations. These categories legitimize the dynamics of contemporary individualization. By analyzing the relations between societies in general, anthropology aims to understand, at a conceptual level, how the individual is positioned in different systems of meaning (Carrithers et al. 1985; Cf. Vibert 2011:155).

In the current phase of globalization, individualization occupies a contradictory position. On the one hand, it is associated with the hegemony of the capitalist world system. It has given rise to the suspicion that individualization promotes the westernization of the world and is fatal for local cultures. On the other hand, the constraints imposed by established structures and norms make it an instrument of emancipation available to marginalized groups. To overcome this contradiction, theoretical approaches in cultural and social anthropology, inspired by postmodernism, de-constructivism, or cultural studies, have tried to avoid a general definition of individualization. Instead, they critique the unequal and discriminatory conditions under which it emerged. In doing so, they denounce postcolonial ethnocentrism, subjection to the disciplining institutions of the nation-state, moral prejudice, etc.

Within the numerous critical reflections on the process of individualization, four central aspects can be identified:

a) Instead of contributing to the homogenization of individuation forms, globalization leads to an "indigenization of modernity" (Sahlins, 1999) due to the dynamics of de- and reterritorialization (Inda/Rosaldo, 2008). It is, therefore, of great importance to pay attention to the specific cultural "translations". Western techniques and products are introduced in local contexts where their meaning is significantly changed, and they are even instrumentalized for traditional rituals, such as the use of Coca-Cola among the Luo in Kenya, baseball as a national sport in Japan, or the importance of cricket in India (Appadurai, 1996).

b) Cultures can react to individualization by reviving their potential for identity formation in the new context (Friedman, 1994), sometimes also with violent or fundamentalist insistence on collective (national, autochthonous, religious, or ethnic) identities (fundamentalism). In doing so, they transfer individual characteristics such as consciousness, perseverance, and willpower to the group to bring it into a conflictual and exclusionary relationship with other identities (Meyer/Geschiere, 1999). The invention of "ethnic groups" (Amselle/M'Bokolo, 1985) (ethnicity) as the realization of self-contained and homogeneous "collective individuals" represents a characteristic new political form of modernity.

c) The emphasis on hybridization, migration, and other manifestations of diaspora aims to create conditions for a new fluid and less territorialized form of individualization. This can lead to a "substantialist" view of cultures, where they are no longer seen as symbolic worlds with social bonds but are available to individuals as attributes or products (especially for cosmopolitan intellectuals of the privileged classes (Vibert, 2003). An example is Brazil, where the religion Candomblé, long a symbol of religious syncretism, has been taken up by a movement. This movement seeks to re-Africanize and revalue Yoruba culture in order to

emphasize the purity of African traditions that have been redefined by neo-traditionalist black elites (Capone, 1999).

d) A close look at gender analysis requires a differentiated perspective on the dynamics of individualization (Alés et al., 2001). Furthermore, it is necessary to critically rethink the contributions of the field in terms of their "androcentric" tendencies (Weiner, 1976), meaning a male-centered worldview (Cf. Vibert 2011: 156).

### **2.3.2 Identity**

The anthropological investigation in this context aims to explore the connection between similarity and distinctiveness within different social realms. It also seeks to understand individuals' beliefs about their uniqueness and the criteria that define their membership in specific social groups or categories. In this context, it is essential to address the correlation between the concept of individualization and the concept of identity.

Identity holds significant importance in contemporary anthropology. However, it is a concept that is fraught with uncertainties and complexities. Identity is a pervasive and seemingly straightforward concept, yet intense debates and criticism surround it, often accused of being a trendy notion without analytical clarity. Despite its relatively recent prominence in anthropology since the 1970s, it has gained remarkable popularity. Nevertheless, the underlying essence of identity, which revolves around understanding our social, cultural, and biological connections with others, can be considered as old as engaging with anthropological inquiries. Like numerous anthropological concepts, identity is not only shared with other disciplines - specifically sociology and psychology - but also accompanied by a common understanding among the general public that frequently conflicts with its academic usage. Hence, it represents a classic example of what Anthony Giddens (1976) referred to as the "dual hermeneutics" within the social sciences. Our concepts are not solely exclusive to us but shared with popular and political discourses.

However, in widespread usage, concepts mostly discarded or undergone significant transformations in academia often prevail. This further adds to the confusion, as there is an unclear distinction between identity and related concepts such as self, personhood, and individual. Each concept has distinct applications and separate scholarly traditions within anthropology (Bloch, 2011). While the term "identity" may possess certain analytical limitations, it simultaneously denotes a readily observable phenomenon or a collection of



related phenomena at the core of social science's subject matter. Among these distinctions is the differentiation between individual and collective identity, although anthropologists widely acknowledge that these two concepts are inseparable and interdependent (Cf. Finke/Sökefeld 2018: 1-2).

Gupta and Ferguson emphasize that identity is something that is both inherent and chosen, as well as externally attributed or imposed. These personal and collective identities are constructed within social practices (cf. Gupta/Ferguson 1997: 12f).

Feminist anthropology postulates that gender and biological sex are socially shaped representations and constructions (Del Valle, 1993). This perspective allows for a better understanding of the hierarchical interdependence of masculinity and femininity, a central issue for the development of modern societies (cf. Vibert 2011: 157). These socially shaped representations (Gupta et al., 1997) align with Judith Butler's understanding of the "performativity" of our identities (Butler, 1988). For Butler, gender is what you do, not who you are. Instead of perceiving gender as an innate or intrinsic attribute, Butler situates gender within external symbols and behaviors. These acts of performance do not articulate a pre-existing gender identity, but rather, they actively construct gender. In this framework, the enactment of gender generates the very identity it purports to disclose (C.f. Butler 1990: 272). Zinn and Hofmeister confirm this in their article about the gender order. Their framework conceptualizes gender as an entity that exists externally to individual agency and is actively constructed through social interactions. This dual perspective acknowledges gender's structural presence in societal frameworks while recognizing its dynamic formation in everyday encounters and relationships. The prevailing societal gender norms significantly affect both men and women by assigning distinct roles to each. These norms not only emphasize a division and assignment of life spheres based on gender but also perpetuate traditional gender expectations. Men, for instance, are often expected to suppress expressions of discomfort, reinforcing gender stereotypes. This situation contributes to the perpetuation of toxic masculinity, as outlined by Harrington (2020), where the demonstration of power and the suppression of vulnerability are part of gender role enactment. Moreover, societal pressures dissuade men from displaying perceived weaknesses, such as addressing basic needs, reflecting a stronger inclination to maintain existing norms rather than challenge them. The binary structure of gender, currently under scrutiny from feminist, queer, and trans movements, may eventually face significant challenges, potentially reducing its influence and power in shaping societal norms and perceptions (Zinn et al. 2022: 952). In this regard, it is necessary to consider that identity is also created in online spheres. Since creating a mobile dating profile involves

the creation of an online identity, it is mandatory to consider online identities in the following section.

### **2.3.3 Online Identity (in a gendered context)**

The notion that virtual environments enable the emergence of novel identity constructions has received substantial focus within the social science discourse. Interactive chat rooms and online spaces have been frequently regarded as gender-neutral and egalitarian realms (cf. Wilson et al. 2002: 457). Context inherently influences identity, as individuals shape their self-presentation and are perceived by their surroundings. For instance, how a person presents themselves and is perceived in a classroom or workplace will likely differ from their behavior and appearance in a bar setting (cf. White 2020: 1).

Numerous researchers are investigating the impact of offline power dynamics and identity constructions on online interactions. This exploration encompasses the examination of gender (Brook et al., 1995; Correll, 1995; Dietrich, 1997; O'Brien, 1999; Wellman et al., 1999; Wheeler, 2001) and race, along with radicalized discourses (Burkhalter, 1999; Ebo, 1998; Kolko et al., 2000), in various contexts. Additionally, scholars have recognized the close association between online identities and concepts of credibility, context, and framing in exploring authentic versus virtual identities (Markham, 1998; O'Brien, 1999). However, scholars have noted substantial room for further research and inquiry in this domain (Cf. Wilson et al. 2002: 457).

Online communities can also revolve around offline ethnic or national identities, a subject researchers have examined across various contexts. For instance, anthropologist research has explored how Tongans (Morton, 1999, 2002) or Inuit (Christensen, 1999) establish shared spaces in online interactions. It is crucial to recognize that computer-mediated interactions do not simply replicate offline interactions, as online communities often exhibit notable disparities compared to their offline counterparts. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that internet users do not consistently prioritize the same national or ethnic identity in every online interaction. Multiple participatory frames and identities are accessible and employed by various internet users across different contexts (ibid.).

It is necessary to adopt an inclusive perspective by considering both technologies and identities as fluid concepts to comprehend the intricate relationship between the construction of identities and digital tools. Gender is a significant aspect that shapes the possibilities and

limitations for the emergence of diverse and autonomous individual and collective subjectivities. Research in gender studies has emphasized the dynamic nature of identity, viewing it as an ongoing process shaped through interactions and engagements with others and the surrounding environment. Researchers in the field of identity studies have emphasized the interconnectedness of identity with gender-related structural and social relations, which are intricately tied to broader systems of political and economic oppression experienced by women, as well as the prevailing system of male dominance and adherence to heteronormativity (Elliot, 2011). Additionally, gender has been recognized as an analytical framework capable of exploring the normative constructs of identity characterized by the binary categorization of male and female. In contrast, it suggests the presence of diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity that are continuously shaped and perpetuated within society (Cf. Mainardi 2020: 1).

Previous studies have explored the correlation between gender identity and media, acknowledging that media platforms can play a role in challenging oppressive and stereotypical gender norms while also providing spaces for resistance. However, the advent of the internet has introduced new complexities. The transition from web 1.0 to the interactive and user-generated participatory web has prompted researchers to examine how gender performances have evolved. Per definition, web 1.0 refers to the beginnings of the still-young internet. It is the collection of websites completely connected by so-called "hyperlinks". In 1993, web 1.0, mainly static websites, did not yet provide any interactive content. Web 3.0, also known as the semantic web, marks the latest advancement in internet technology that emerged in the second decade of the 21st century. Anticipated by simulated society platforms like Second Life, which enabled individuals to construct and engage with their personalized virtual environments, the latest version epitomizes the pinnacle of internet customization. It provides users with a perceived total control over the content they receive in their online interactions (cf. Stoiciu 2020: 173). The shift to the research of gender performances involves a transition from distinguishing between virtual and real identities to differentiating between online and offline spaces. Key areas of investigation include the phenomena of gender swapping, anonymity, and visual representation. For instance, significant concerns have emerged regarding digital safety for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. There is also an ongoing tension between regulating sexual expression and promoting freedom of gender identity, as well as issues related to sexual rights. Given this context, feminist and gender studies that concentrate on technology offer a comprehensive viewpoint that establishes a connection between gender and digital media, aiming to comprehend the present obstacles in forming gendered identities online. Some

perspectives have explored digital media as a realm for gender experimentation. In contrast, others have deliberated on the current constraints and potentials presented by the intersection of digital media and gender identity (Cf. Mainardi 2020: 1). By directing attention towards the socially and culturally shaped and interconnected aspect of gender, it has transformed into an analytical framework that enables a broader comprehension of identity formation. Through this lens, we can delve into the conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, identify instances of sex-based oppression and discrimination, and examine the diverse encounters shaped by gender disparities.

Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic with the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution. Gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in "essential" unity. There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Cf. Haraway 1980: 72).

Donna Haraway (1985) critically examined the intersection between gender identities and emerging technologies. Within her analysis, she presents the cyborgs as a model that embodies multiple subjectivities and can transcend binary oppositions. Haraway argues that the cyborg represents a subjectivity that resists patriarchal society. She identifies technology as holding radical potential for transformative change and labels the cyborg as a pioneering manifestation of a new female subjectivity. As a hybrid entity, the cyborg exists outside the boundaries of traditional gender categories, being neither strictly male nor female, human or machine. Its purpose is not to eliminate sexual differences but to surpass the dualistic framework of woman/man through the unprecedented fusion of identity, embodiment, and technology. The cyborg challenges established norms and power dynamics by challenging the hierarchical structures that arise from previous categorizations. Her perspective on identity aims not only to dismantle rigid categories constructed around identity formation but also to emphasize their historical and social nature. This viewpoint challenges gender-related identity processes and those associated with racialization and class, recognizing that these power structures generate various positions of inclusion and exclusion within society (Cf. Mainardi 2020:2).

Online identities can be constructed in ways that diverge from or do not reproduce certain aspects of individuals' physical identities. Forming an online identity typically begins

with an individual registering on a website. It is further developed in line with the available options and the social norms and terms of service established by the platform. Elements such as email addresses, usernames, profile pictures, and disclosing age, gender, and other information contribute to constructing an online identity, which individuals are required or choose to provide during the registration process. MacLeod and McArthur show through an interface analysis of Bumble and Tinder how the possibilities of these digital communication tools structure the identities of the users "as they are constructed and performed through the technology (MacLeod et al. 2019: 823)." Although identity is commonly perceived as authentic and subject to individual control, online sign-up features, including drop-down menus and form files, influence the information individuals share.

Algorithms play a role in perpetuating existing social structures and identity categories prevalent in contemporary society. These algorithms have the potential to facilitate profiling and oppressive systems that marginalize individuals based on their gender, race, and other markers of identity. For example, Google's algorithmic scanning of content and its assessment of users' interests have resulted in autocomplete suggestions that promote intolerance, such as "Jews are evil", "Islamists are terrorists", and "Women need to know their place". Critical discourse on algorithmic profiling and identity formation raises concerns about how these systems reproduce hierarchical identity categories, privileging white heterosexual men from western countries. Research on algorithms also examines technologically supported surveillance systems and how individuals self-regulate their behavior due to the fear of being watched, algorithmically evaluated, judged, and punished. These discussions of self-regulation often draw on Michel Foucault's (1995) concept of the panopticon. In this prison structure, architectural design, awareness of constant surveillance, and uncertainty regarding observation and potential punishment compel individuals to control their behavior. Internet sites' features communicate expectations regarding online identities and behaviors, often addressing individuals by their usernames and incorporating gendered content and site representations (Cf. White 2020: 2).

In her work, Katerin Haynes (1999) analyzes the widespread engagement with computer and communication technologies in contemporary society. She proposes reevaluating the connection between individuals and these technologies, emphasizing the importance of considering the embodiment process within the context of the virtual era.

Rosi Braidotti (2013) devotes attention to the evolving connections between bodies and identities within the contemporary context, shaped by the influence of digital and biomedical

technologies. Braidotti argues for perceiving these technologies as external to individuals and instead posits that they form the foundation for new posthuman subjectivities.

During the early 1990s, cyberfeminist scholars and activists critically examined power dynamics within the online sphere. They analyzed the influence of institutions on shaping online encounters and explored how gender-based power structures were replicated in the digital realm. The prevailing notion was that technology itself is not inherently discriminatory; however, the manners in which it is conceptualized, portrayed, and utilized hold the potential to engender exclusion and marginalization.

Scholars have investigated how digital spaces facilitate the emergence of flexible and expressive facets of the self, as individuals can adopt diverse identities online. Michele White maintains that "while the individuals' identity is often thought to be stable and unique, people's online practices can result in fragmented, multiple, and shifting identities" (White 2020: 1). This has led to an exploration of the ways on which digital environments enable the fluidity and performativity of one's identity. Such platforms allow individuals to experiment with various identities, particularly about sex, gender, and their representations. A prominent illustration of this phenomenon is observed in gender swapping, where individuals intentionally assume a gender identity distinct from their offline persona during virtual interactions, often utilizing characters or avatars. This practice allows individuals to explore novel dimensions of their identity (Cf. Mainardi 2020: 3).

In a seminal work on identity and the internet, Sherry Turkle identifies cyberspace as a significant social laboratory for exploring and evaluating the construction and reconstruction of one's sense of self (Turkle, 1995). Adopting a psychosocial perspective, Turkle argues that engaging in gender and sexual experiments online can serve as valuable tools for reevaluating not only one's virtual gender identity but also one's gendered self in offline contexts. These experiments align with poststructuralist theories of identity, emphasizing the discursive and non-essentialist aspects of identity, creating opportunities to negotiate identities (Butler, 1990). In this regard, the internet functions as a tool and platform that facilitates diverse representations of identity. McDermott also makes an essential contribution in this context. In her dissertation, she attempts to examine the emotional expression of FOMO about society and the self. Social media culture facilitates the creation and maintenance of self-identity in alignment with society's concept of the ideal self. Her study explores how social media platforms allow corporations to market and brand products in a manner that mimics human self-representation. Social media users often perceive the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as stemming from the pressure to project and sustain an ideal self-image. This research contributes

to understanding FOMO as an emotional experience shaped by societal influences and personal self-perception. It posits that culture is pivotal in shaping individual thought and behavior. Moreover, social technologies have broadened community scopes, so communication on social media platforms has evolved into a distinct culture. Essentially, social media has crafted a space that amplifies the emotional response to the pervasive scrutiny of the public eye. McDermott's informants articulate FOMO as the apprehension of missing out on experiences superior to their current activities. While social media fosters self-representation, it also implicitly dictates behavioral norms. These networked environments function as societal microcosms with unspoken rules influencing beliefs and behaviors. Individuals respond to the fear of judgment, conforming to these norms to appeal to the ideal self-concept. The drive to constantly align one's self-representation with this idealized image is a crucial source of FOMO for many. Social media empowers individuals to disseminate idealized images, words, and videos, which may induce envy in others and perpetuate FOMO. Conversely, people also use these platforms to demonstrate their avoidance of FOMO and adherence to the idealized self (C.f. McDermott 2017: 87-88).

Indeed, the web has transformed the evolving practices associated with its usage. The emergence of web 2.0, in particular, has expanded the scope of interactivity, immersion, and user-generated content. To be clear, the term web 2.0 is not understood to mean a fundamentally new type of technology or application, but rather, the term describes a use of the internet that has changed in socio-technical terms, in which its possibilities are consistently used and further developed. As a result, individuals have gained more excellent agency in shaping their online discursive production, thereby redefining self-narration parameters in virtual spaces. Simultaneously, the pervasive nature of online activities facilitated by social media, coupled with their mobility and immersive qualities, carries the potential risk of constructing spaces for experimentation, e.g., fake accounts. This is due to the increasing interconnectedness of online and offline experiences materially and symbolically.

Alongside the evolution of the technological landscape, there have been significant shifts in the realms of control, anonymity, corporeality, and creativity, which have initially facilitated early explorations of identity. However, as online activities increasingly permeate individuals' everyday lives, the real and virtual boundaries diminish relevance.

The evolving digital landscape has compelled researchers in the field of internet studies to reassess the established categories employed to analyze experiences of online identity, such as those characterized as "de-contextualized" or "disembodied" (Bakardjieva, 2005). Nevertheless, even within this transformed context, the significance of anonymity and the

ability to exert control over it remains pivotal for identity exploration, particularly in relation to gender. Notably, recent feminist perspectives underscore the importance of safeguarding the right to anonymity and resisting any attempts to curtail it in online spaces. Anonymity is viewed as essential for fostering freedom of expression, particularly in challenging sexual taboos and heteronormativity, engaging in gender identity experimentation, and ensuring the safety of women and individuals within the queer community who face discrimination (Association for Progressive Communications, 2016).

Scholarly discussions on the internet and the construction of identity emphasize a shifting landscape wherein spaces of self-experimentation and play are transforming and, in some cases, even diminishing. This shift is attributed to the mounting pressure to conform to and present more normative depictions of identities and subjectivities within online contexts (Marwick, 2013; Van Zoonen, 2013; Cf. Mainardi 2020: 4). According to Van Zoonen (2013), prominent social networking platforms like Facebook, as well as commonly utilized dating websites and applications, have implemented policies that increasingly require users to disclose their "real" name instead of allowing the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, these platforms mandate the registration process to involve personal information such as date of birth, place of residence, educational background, and more. Moreover, users must maintain a single account corresponding to their individual, real-life identity.

Research emphasizes that social networking sites (SNS) are not only virtual spaces but also encompass material, symbolic, and discursive dimensions that are shaped and negotiated through offline life experiences. These offline experiences, such as interactions with colleagues, friends, and family, contribute to constructing SNS cultures. Consequently, the presence of individuals in online spaces is intimately connected to their experiences and embodiment in "real" life. As a result, the everyday gender system in which individuals are immersed, characterized by its norms and codes, influences online relationships and representations. This includes societal expectations and gendered norms, such as the heteropatriarchal standard, which upholds the ideal of white, male, and cis-heterosexual identities.

Nevertheless, as Alice Marwick (2013) noted, it is essential to avoid embracing a technological determinism that posits online architectures as the sole factor shaping gender representation. While acknowledging the influence of affordances, it is essential to recognize that specific spaces are structured in a way that either facilitates or inhibits particular gender performances.



Feminist studies have long engaged with critical inquiries into the gendered nature of spaces, posing questions such as: What are the accessibilities afforded to gendered identities? Which gendered identities and bodies are marginalized or rendered invisible? In what ways do these identities challenge established norms and assumptions? Recognizing that the internet and social networking sites (SNS) are not gender-neutral spaces is essential. Women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, for example, encounter various risks and experiences of online misogyny and homo/lesbo/bi/transphobia (Gurumurthy et al., 2017). However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that the internet and social media serve as spaces of expression, self-representation, and political engagement for many marginalized gender subjectivities (O'Riordan et al., 2007; Cf. Mainardi 2020: 5). The sociologist Janet Armentor-Cota (2011) observes that although gender swapping and gender fluidity are evident in online interactions, pervasive stereotypes heavily influence online communication. For instance, in how men and women respond to resistance or defend themselves online, distinct patterns emerged, with men typically asserting and dominating their viewpoints, while women frequently justified or defended theirs. Cirucci (2017) discovered that women displayed greater consciousness and anxiety concerning their posts and comments on social media platforms. Through experimental investigations, Spears et al. (2014) demonstrated that men dominated most online discussions where gender was a salient factor (Cf. Majumdar et al. 2022: 2).

While a more optimistic perspective recognizes the potential afforded by web 2.0 (Jenkins, 2006), there is room for critical interpretations that highlight the influence of market forces in shaping the content produced online and the conditions under which new discourses and identities are formed. Moreover, the interplay between digital media and gender within the present neoliberal context has been examined by exploring the contradictory relationship between dynamics and processes of self-formation (Gajjala et al., 2012; Cf. Mainardi 2020: 6).

The connection between gender identity and online spaces has consistently demonstrated ambivalence, as it presents both the potential for cultivating more liberated gender identities and the means to fortify existing gender norms and expectations.

From a feminist and cyberfeminist perspective, a significant contribution lies in examining the body and its varied connotations in shaping gender identity as a (un)stable signifier within both online and offline realms. This investigation is particularly crucial within the prevailing regime of visibility fostered by social media platforms. Gender scholars have also made valuable contributions by challenging the dichotomous understanding of gender, which categorizes the world into two binary genders, male and female, thereby organizing

societal activities accordingly. From this standpoint, studying identity and relationships about gender entails an exploration of power dynamics and the resulting power relations. Consequently, norms are constructed around hegemonic masculinity and femininity, which are socially accepted, recognized, and intelligible, while those deviating from these norms face sanctions and exclusion. Research within internet and media studies has shed light on the enduring relevance of these gender dynamics in online spaces, particularly in the construction of identities for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, while also highlighting the ongoing struggle for recognition faced by dissonant gender identities (O'Riordan et al., 2007).

Therefore, by providing scholars and practitioners with valuable insights and practical frameworks to comprehend the multifaceted implications of a gender perspective in the study of online identity formations, we can foster the development of a more inclusive digital society in its entirety (Cf. Mainardi 2020: 7).

Persistent practices, such as associating empowered participants with masculinity, offering only binary gender options on sign-up forms, prioritizing male over female on required forms, and utilizing security questions that assume individuals have a mother's maiden name, contribute to the formation of participants, hierarchical gender structures, and assumptions about heterosexuality and traditional marital norms. The inclusion of security questions that require information about one's mother's maiden name implies the presumption that everyone has a set of heterosexual married parents and diminishes the importance of women's maiden names, which may not be widely known within society (Cf. White 2020: 4).

The diversity in how individuals can represent themselves on online dating platforms is notable, with ample scope for self-representation reconfiguration. The efficacy of attracting a suitable match largely hinges on the crafted online persona. A pivotal aspect of this online presentation is striking a harmonious balance between appealing and maintaining authenticity. The balance between an engaging and a genuine self is crucial for successful online matchmaking (Cf. Whitty 2007: 68).

## **2.4 Crafting Identities: The Dynamics of Self-Presentation and Representation in Dating Apps**

Before being able to delve into the discussion of visual and written self-representation within mobile dating apps, it is essential to consider the concept of "representation." Why do we refer

to these forms of self-expression as representations rather than presentations? In essence, these terms offer two distinct perspectives on this phenomenon.

A representation is an object or a sign that is viewed as constructed in some manner and serves as a substitute for the object it refers to. Using the term "representation," we can examine the selfie or the profile description. On the other hand, a presentation is an action or something that an individual does. By utilizing the term "presentation," we can analyze how individuals act to present themselves. Therefore, these forms of self-expression can be understood from either perspective, as each term offers a different lens through which to view this phenomenon (c.f. Rettberg 2016: 1-3). In his book *Representation* (1997), Stuart Hall states:

It is by our use of things and what we say, think, and feel about them - how we represent them, that we *give them meaning*. In part, we give objects, people, and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation that we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by using them or integrating them into our everyday practices (Hall 1997: 3).

He further outlines three theories of representation: *reflective*, *intentional*, and *constructive*. In the *reflective* theory, the sign or representation is regarded as a reflection of reality. According to this perspective, language operates like a mirror, capturing the true meaning already in the world. In the *intentional* approach of representation, it is believed that words carry the meaning intended by the author (cf. Hall 1997: 24-25). However, most contemporary scholars, including Hall himself, consider these theories inaccurate. Nowadays, representation is widely viewed as a *constructed* concept. It is understood that a representation cannot simply mirror reality since each individual has distinct experiences and interpretations of what is considered "reality". In the context of online dating and mobile dating apps, Alison Dundon points out that to attract potential partners, daters must present themselves to reflect the characteristics, values, and attributes desirable to their audience. Creating a dating profile, therefore, often entails making deliberate choices about language, images, and other forms of self-expression to project a particular image (Cf. Dundon 2021: 347).

Furthermore, words, images, and other forms of representation can be interpreted in diverse ways depending on the context or cultural framework. When representations are shared outside of their original context, their meaning is frequently constructed differently by the new audience. When representations are disseminated without their original context, the new audience interprets them in distinct ways. In studies conducted by ethnographers and sociologists, there is often a desire to understand practices within a specific group. In studying

self-presentation on, e.g., social media platforms, researchers may examine how users generally create and share images rather than focusing solely on individual instances. Dating platforms share similarities with social networks in facilitating user connections and influencing how individuals prioritize self-presentation (Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Nevertheless, a noteworthy distinction persists between dating and social network sites. While platforms like Facebook tend to encourage users to strengthen existing relationships, defined as "anchored relationships" (Zhao et al., 2008), dating sites exert pressure on users to construct an appealing identity for individuals they have yet to encounter and hope to attract (Ellison et al., 2006; C.f. Ranzini et al. 2016: 86).

Mobile Dating apps have revolutionized how people connect, allowing individuals to find potential partners based on mutual interests and preferences. In the digital age, visual and textual representations shape users' perceptions and interactions within these platforms. This chapter explores the two perspectives of presentation and representation, the significance of visual and textual elements in mobile dating apps, and their impact on users' experiences, self-presentation, and relationship/initiation dynamics.

### **2.4.1 Self-Representation & Presentation**

Throughout history, humans have utilized various forms of media to portray themselves. Visual self-representation encompasses selfies and other images and symbols we employ to express our identities, such as the photos we select to share on platforms like Bumble or Tinder. Written self-representation can take the form of blogs or (online) diaries, the numerous written status updates we share on Instagram, and the descriptions in our dating app profiles.

In her research, Alyssa Turizo examines how cultural factors influence the internet's supposed ability to promote democracy and whether social inequalities from the real world are replicated in the digital space of the mobile dating app Tinder. She implies that Foucault extensively addressed the concept of "deviance" and its creation and interpretation. Despite predating the widespread use of the internet, his theory remains relevant in our present context. The internet reinforces existing social power dynamics that favor certain groups, such as white individuals, men, and heterosexuals. Foucault also explored the notion of mirrors as "heterotopias" (1971) inhabited by those deemed "deviant" by society. Heterotopias reflect reality, enabling us to approach truth to some extent, but they are not genuine, merely projecting an image. In a similar vein, the internet can be viewed as a heterotopia because it prompts us

to project false and distorted versions of ourselves, influenced by biased self-perception and various other factors (Cf. Turizo 2018: 15).

Janelle Ward is in accordance with Turizo and states that self-presentation is prevalent during social interactions, wherein individuals consciously modify their environment, physical appearance, and conduct to influence how others perceive them. Goffman initially explored this concept in 1959, primarily in face-to-face communication. However, numerous scholars have since extended Goffman's ideas to encompass electronic environments. Additionally, Toma and Hancock's study (2010) shows that less attractive online daters tend to enhance their profile photographs and lie about their age, weight, and height. This suggests that users in these mediated environments are highly motivated to shape their image and create a favorable impression (Cf. Ward 2016: 86).

Other scientists, such as Katie Warfield (2015), choose not to employ the terms "representation" and "presentation." Warfield advocates for a phenomenological perspective, asserting that solely concentrating on the visual aspect of a selfie overlooks the embodied individual who both creates and embodies the essence of the image. Aristoteles discussed representation as mimesis, which refers to an endeavor to imitate the world faithfully. This aligns with what Stuart Hall referred to as the "reflective approach" to representation, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. In the realm of theater, some critics employ the term "representational acting" to describe a "naturalistic" style of performance where actors do not acknowledge the audience's presence. Within this acting style, a conceptualized "fourth wall" exists that separates the actors on stage from the audience, turning the audience into passive observers of the unfolding action. Audience members assume the role of unseen spectators, akin to flies on the wall. In contrast, presentational acting involves actors directly acknowledging and speaking to the audience, establishing a direct connection, and breaking the illusion of the fourth wall (Cf. Rettberg 2017: 8).

According to Ranzini et al. (2017), social network sites (SNS) have provided individuals with a platform to express and explore their identities (Kendall, 1998; Manago et al., 2008; Valkenbourg et al., 2005). Although previous digital communication forms exhibited elements of self-representation before the advent of social media (Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Manago et al., 2008; Smahel et al., 2007), the introduction of identifiable online profiles has strengthened the link between online identities and offline individuals (Zhao et al., 2008). However, with the widespread use of social networking sites like Facebook or LinkedIn, the role of online self-expression as a means of identity exploration has somewhat diminished (Strano, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). Instead, there is a greater emphasis on the dynamic between presenting one's true

self and aspiring to portray an idealized self-image (Ellison et al., 2012; Lampe et al., 2007; Manago et al., 2008).

As a result of the evident strategic inclination towards self-presentation, scholarly investigations into dating sites have primarily focused on users' authentic levels and deception. For example, Bargh et al. (2002) conducted research drawing upon Higgins' (1987) and Rogers' (1951) theories, identifying four distinct forms of self-presentation observed on dating sites: true selves, actual selves, ought-to selves, and ideal selves (Cf. Ranzini et al. 2017: 87).

The selection of profile photos on dating apps is driven by the desire to present an ideal yet authentic version of oneself and to illustrate one's desirability. According to Couch and Liamputtong (2008: 273), online dating participants filter potential partners based on various factors, including appearance, personality, sexual preferences, and risk management. On Tinder, users can only select matches based on geographical proximity, age, and gender. However, the act of swiping is about more than just finding matches. Through analyzing profiles, users also try to figure out how to present themselves in a way that will attract similar individuals (Cf. Ward 2016: 87).

Presenting and disclosing oneself is essential to finding a romantic partner, whether in a physical environment, such as a bar, or a virtual one, such as a dating app. Online dating offers individuals more control over their self-presentation and self-disclosure to potential partners, but these elements remain crucial for relationship formation (Ellison et al., 2006). Even those who approach online dating with a cynical mindset still assume the goal of finding a relationship. (,relationshopping ') (Heino et al., 2010). Bandinelli et al. also states that individuals utilizing dating apps interact within these social platforms with a mindset akin to investors, aiming to derive some form of return by leveraging individual qualities (c.f. Bandinelli et al. 2022: 437). However, some Tinder users may solely focus on seeking an ego boost or playing a numbers game without any intention of moving beyond the technological environment. While it may be easy to obtain superficial approval of one's profile on dating apps, the potential for romantic love still shrouds the environment. Further research is needed to explore why some Tinder users fail to connect beyond the superficial and whether a swipe on a dating app can truly be life-changing in ways we have yet to consider (Cf. Ward 2016: 90).

Other researchers also confirm the statements mentioned above. Hobbs et al. (2017) mention users in their study who also talked about their abilities to use Tinder effectively, particularly in terms of self-branding practices. Scholars have previously analyzed self-branding and the commodification of the self on social media platforms like Twitter and

Facebook (Bauman, 2007; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013), as well as in pre-internet dating ads, which were viewed through Giddens' (1991) concerns about self-commodification and the influence of market dynamics on self-construction (Coupland, 1996). Similarly, participants in this study viewed themselves as commodities and recognized the importance of engaging in self-branding activities to market themselves as desirable in a competitive relationship marketplace. This process of self-stylization and transformation (Foucault, 1988) involved creating a Tinder profile that would stand out and make the user appear desirable (Cf. Hobbs 2017: 280). These remarks reflect the increasing commercialization of personal data and intimate information. Once intended for user interaction and matchmaking, the profiles are now subject to exploitation by third-party entities to profit from users' personal information.

#### **2.4.2 Visual and Textual Representation**

Visual representation in mobile dating apps encompasses users' profile pictures and the images they share in their profiles. Profile pictures are often the first impression users make on potential matches, and they play a vital role in attracting attention and generating interest. Users carefully select images and contexts that reflect their best selves, aiming to showcase their attractiveness, lifestyle, and interests. Given that there is a higher degree of possible control over "impression management" in online communication, it seems unsurprising that people "are very strategic in the ways they present themselves online" and that they "are very aware of the need to construct a profile that not only attracts others but will also attract their 'ideal' romantic partner (Fullick 2013: 547).

These images often convey non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, influencing how potential matches perceive and respond to them. Representation in visual form also includes features like swipe gestures, animated graphics, and user interface design. These visual elements contribute to the overall user experience, making the app engaging and easy to navigate. Additionally, dating apps might incorporate visual features that cater to specific preferences, such as filters to adjust appearance or settings for displaying images more prominently. The process of constructing one's profile as the primary vehicle for self-presentation predominantly relies on visual media, encompassing specific motives, image formats, poses, the use of accessories, preferences for camera filters, and specific locations or situational circumstances (cf. Völcker et al. 2020: 76).

Textual representation involves the information users share in their dating app profiles, including bios, interests, and descriptions of themselves. While visuals can pique initial interest, textual information allows users to communicate their personalities, values, and relationship expectations. In her article "Partner Search in Individualized Societies", Steffi Krause also discusses that another aspect of impression management involves self-presentation based on predefined fields and categorizations required within the platforms. The degree of customization varies across portals, although certain aspects recur consistently. Individuals are consistently prompted to provide information about favorite places, relationship preferences, travel, and leisure behavior (cf. Krause 2013: 77). Using witty, creative, or humorous language in the profile can attract attention and create a sense of rapport with potential matches. "The search for romantic connection is an age-old quest, defined by rituals of self-presentation and self-disclosure. Personal advertisements - text advertising oneself to a potential mate - were placed in newspapers beginning in the late 17th century" (Ward 2016: 82). Textual representation is crucial in fostering meaningful conversations and gauging compatibility. Users often engage in text-based conversations to assess shared interests and values before meeting in person. However, this aspect of textual representation finds reference in the chapter *Digitalization of Society*. Thus, how individuals craft their textual representation can significantly influence the quality and depth of their interactions within the app.

The combination of visual and textual representation in dating apps is intricate and can shape user's perceptions of one another. An appealing visual representation might capture initial interest, prompting users to explore the textual information for potential compatibility. On the other hand, an engaging and authentic textual representation can enhance a user's attractiveness, making them more appealing to potential matches. In this regard, MacLeod and McArthur examine through an interface analysis how the specific features and capabilities of these digital communication tools shape the identities of their users, influencing how users construct and present themselves within the technological context (cf. MacLeod et al. 2019: 823).

Furthermore, the use of visual and textual elements can influence self-presentation strategies. Some users rely heavily on visual representation to portray an idealized version of themselves, while others may prioritize textual representation to communicate their genuine personality and values. Both appearances affect relationship dynamics and the potential for building meaningful connections. Despite the increased potential and misrepresentation afforded by the anonymity of the Internet, individuals' online personas cannot stray too far from



their real-life identity, as there remains the possibility of eventually meeting another user face-to-face and facing potential rejection if inconsistencies are discovered (cf. Fullick 2013: 548).

Dating apps are dynamic platforms that rely on a delicate balance between visual and textual representation to facilitate connections and relationships. Users leverage both aspects to create desirable profiles and initiate conversations with potential matches. By understanding the interplay between visual and textual representation, users can optimize their dating app experience, foster meaningful connections, and develop genuine relationships based on shared values and interests. As dating apps evolve, the significance of visual and textual representation will remain central to users' quest for meaningful connections in the digital dating landscape. According to Toma and Hancock (2010: 336), online self-presentation entails a static portrayal involving textual descriptions or photographs to convey one's appearance, while face-to-face presentation is dynamic and embodied. They posit that online dating necessitates a complex communicative process of understanding one's own attributes, being receptive to the intended audience's values, and leveraging the communication medium to one's benefit.

In the context of dating apps, cultural and social anthropological perspectives shed light on the multifaceted nature of representation. These apps offer users a platform to construct and present their identities through visual and textual means, reflecting diverse cultural norms, individual preferences, and social dynamics. On dating platforms, individuals aim to create a favorable self-image by showcasing traits, principles, and attributes they believe would be appreciated by their desired audience: potential partners. Crafting profiles entails deliberate decisions concerning language, images, and other means of self-expression and representation. Daters strategically utilize available media, such as words and images, to present themselves in a specific manner (cf. Toma 2010: 347). Exploring these representations in dating apps provides valuable insights into how individuals navigate the complexities of self-presentation, interpersonal connections, and cultural influences in the digital realm of contemporary dating culture.

### 3. Empirical Qualitative Research

#### 3.1 Guide Design

The study aims to contribute to the emerging field of digital anthropology by analyzing how technology-mediated interactions impact modern courtship rituals and relationship dynamics. It adopts a mixed-method approach, intertwining qualitative interviews, informal conversations, demographic data, and qualitative content analysis using Mayring's approach. The primary ethnographic method, participant observation, was not applied in the conventional sense as the research questions are not best answered through direct observation. Another reason for not implementing this method was that access to the process of partner initiation was not feasible. The research also integrates a gender-focused lens to critically assess how traditional gender roles in westernized societies are negotiated or perpetuated within digital dating. Utilizing thematic analysis, the thesis will identify critical trends and patterns in user interaction and decision-making processes on these platforms. A critical examination of popular dating apps' interface design and algorithmic functioning will be undertaken to understand their role in shaping user experiences and choices.

##### 3.1.1 Recruitment Strategies and Implementation

The research aims to explore the phenomenon of mobile dating apps in depth. It seeks to acquire detailed knowledge of **how these apps alter cultural processes of courtship rituals and partner initiation**. Additionally, the study **aims to delve into the nuanced craft of dating app profile creation**, where users balance showcasing their genuine selves and curating an appealing online presence. It examines the tactics employed in self-presentation, noting how they may mirror or deviate from users' identities, and discusses the significant role visual elements play in influencing the perceptions of potential matches. Hence, selecting interview participants is a crucial criterion to adequately address the scope of the research field and gain valuable data.

Before the research process, consideration was given to the target demographic for the study. As the foundation of my research revolves around the relationship between mobile

dating apps and their users, the analysis is viewed through the perspective of digital anthropology.

Due to the limitations of capacity and framework in this master's thesis, the sampling size must be restricted to 10 participants. To narrow the age range of my interviewees, I have chosen individuals belonging to Generation Y or Millennials (1980-1994). To justify my decision, I would like to mention some characteristics of this generation. A precise categorization is challenging, as neither society nor academia provides a definitive definition for this cohort. Additionally, temporal boundaries may differ among various sources. Acknowledging that each individual undergoes unique development and forms their own values and objectives is essential. The classification into different generations merely attempts to identify and summarize the main features that these generations share due to their historical background. Their coming of age during the peak phase of technological advancements is considered significant. While the Baby Boomers witnessed the development of computers and Generation X experienced the proliferation of mobile phones, Generation Y grew up with access to all these technological resources. As the most closely connected to the contemporary modern world, they offer an exceptionally advantageous foundation for exploring social phenomena and formulating future forecasts. As they reached maturity, laptops and mobile phones progressively shrank in size, the internet accelerated, and the avenues for interpersonal connectivity expanded, leading to the world's metamorphosis into a global village (Schmidt et al., 2011; Hennig, 2012; Cf. Itzlinger 2018:21-23). Millennials are the last generation to have come of age before the widespread adoption of smartphones. Born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, Millennials experienced their formative years in a world where digital technology was rapidly advancing but had not yet become omnipresent in daily life. Unlike subsequent generations, Generation Y witnessed the transformative impact of technology unfolding during their adolescence and early adulthood. This distinctive perspective positions them as a bridge between the analog and digital eras, offering valuable insights into how technology has reshaped communication, social interactions, and cultural norms.

At the beginning of my research process, I wanted to include the same amount of women and men and a balanced ratio of sexual orientation. During the process, I realized that I might have problems meeting all these requirements. Taken as a whole, these were minor obstacles that could be easily overcome without any additional effort.

In order to recruit interview participants, I drafted a call to action on social media platforms. I shared a call in an Instagram Story, and I posted a call in multiple university groups on Facebook. After a few minutes, I already received the first messages with expressions of

interest. However, searching for interview participants proved to be more challenging than expected. Many approached dating app users initially expressed interest in potential interviews, but the actual meetings still needed to materialize.

As part of the planning process, preparation for the mode of inquiry is also integral. Each form of inquiry adheres to distinct rules and behaviors during its execution. While both parties are engaged in upholding the communication during an interview, in the case of a semi-structured guided interview, an asymmetrical mode of communication exists. Initially, the research will be briefly introduced, followed by providing information on data protection and general explanations about the project. Equally important is the need to strategize the interview introduction to ensure the participant's engagement and mutual comprehension. Another pivotal aspect of planning involves designating the interview location, as specific settings might influence responses given (Cf. Froschauer et al. 2020: 50-55). For enhanced convenience and flexibility for all parties involved, most interviews were conducted online using Zoom or Jitsi. Additionally, a few interviews took place within private premises. Furthermore, appraising the interviewee of their rights during the interview is imperative. For instance, the interview can be interrupted, or the audio recording device can be paused at the interviewee's request. Furthermore, interviewees also maintain the prerogative to decline to answer sensitive questions or to avail themselves of the right to object to the interpreted outcomes. However, none of these rights were exercised by any of the conversational participants. All conversations were recorded using my smartphone, and some were captured through the recording feature provided by the respective meeting platform. At the outset of each interview, the interviewees were briefed on the recording device's functionality, and consent for recording the conversation was obtained. Following this, an introduction of the interview participant and an explanation of the interview's purpose were provided. Throughout the entire interview, the role of the interviewer entails the active engagement of attentive listening, with the formulation of inquiries reserved until the conclusion of the respondents' narrative discourse. These subsequent interrogations are poised to address ambiguities within statements or aspects that may have remained underdeveloped. In the context of my conducted interviews, participants demonstrated a propensity for candid and diverse articulations concerning their encounters with mobile dating applications. Nonetheless, owing to instances of brevity in their responses, I encountered the necessity to initiate further clarifications or solicit elucidations periodically. On the aggregate, this methodology facilitated the accrual of a substantive corpus of data, thereby affording the means for a comprehensive and finely-grained analysis.

### 3.1.2 Overview of Participants

#### **Tim O. = TO:**

Tim is a 29-year-old, white, heterosexual guy who moved from Schladming, Styria, to Vienna in 2018. His mother was originally from a farm, and his father grew up in the countryside. They met very young in Schladming, Styria, and started a family with two boys. Tim's father worked as a restaurant manager and head waiter; his mother worked as an assistant to the management at a ski resort. Tim O. grew up in a settlement in Schladming. According to his assessment, he grew up in the upper middle class. His parents divorced when Tim was 14, and he decided to live with his mother because she had more time. He started an apprenticeship in his municipality to become an administrative assistant. Later, he began an education as a social worker. For ten years, Tim worked as an assistant for disabled people. He never had any queer experiences and sees himself as: "I am straight, I am the epitome of a heteronormative cis man, which is not my fault, but that is me. A white, 30-year-old European male, I am only attracted to women and have never tried anything else (Tim Interview #00:01:09-8#)." As a social worker, he sees himself as a reflective person. He has been single for more than 1,5 years and has used Tinder since then with some breaks. His motivation for using the app was to increase his self-worth and leave his comfort zone.

So you get several forms of self-confidence from it. I get likes from women who I think are beautiful. They show me in black and white that they think I am beautiful. It is a great feeling, of course. Moreover, it boosts my self-esteem because I am a coward and do not like getting out of my comfort zone. Then, I get self-esteem by leaving my comfort zone and meeting up with them. (Tom Interview #00:04:48-8#)

For his mobile dating app profile on Tinder, he needed to create an honest picture of himself.

#### **Laurin J. = LJ:**

Laurin is a 38-year-old, white, heterosexual guy born and raised in Vienna, Austria. His father is a doctor in medicine, and his mother works as a real estate agent. Both grew up in Lower Austria. Laurin has a diploma in Sociology and a master's in Cultural- and Social Anthropology from the University of Vienna. He works as a Social Media Manager in a repair

shop for domestic appliances. Laurin is in a long-term relationship and has regularly used mobile dating apps between two relationships and within one open relationship for 2 to 3 months. He has experience with OkCupid, Bumble, and Tinder. His motivation for using the apps was meeting and connecting with new people and women. Laurin J. is very aware of his privileged male, white position. In addition to his work, he is involved in left-wing or feminist political contexts. In his dating profile, it is important to him to be detected as a left-wing; therefore, he used some scene codes in his description. "Want to share solidarity, utopia and something else. So it was important to me to be recognized as a leftist and to scare off the people, the morons, so to speak." (Laurin Interview #00:08:08-5#)

### **Selma M. = SM:**

Selma is a 34-year-old Mexican heterosexual cis-woman living in London, UK. She grew up in a sheltered and protective home. Both her parents have university degrees. Her father pursued an academic career, and her mother stayed home and gave up her career for the family's sake. Both her siblings went to university and did postgraduate degrees. Until the university, Selma did private education. She received all her academic education in Europe. Miss M. graduated with her Bachelor's in Munich and master's degree in Leipzig, Germany, and Vienna, Austria. She is a fourth-year Ph.D. student specializing in sociology at the University of Cambridge and engages in the research fields of digital sociology, critical data studies, and feminist data. She speaks three languages fluently. Selma considers herself a middle-class woman, perhaps an upper-middle-class person in Mexico. She is a cis woman, and her sexual orientation is heterosexual. Selma M. is a person who is very reflective, aware of her privileges, and often sets her position in context with the situation in Mexico. Furthermore, she is attentive to how she grew up in a normative context.

I grew up in a very gender-stereotypical context. I certainly did. You know I, not just within my household, but also like all the other spaces that I inhabited as a child and as a teenager, and perhaps as a younger adult, were all gender stereotypical normative shaping. And it was not, I guess, until I left Mexico and started studying, and I started like, you know, what they say when you put the gender glasses on, you can never see things again the same way. (Selma Interview #00:42:39-6#).

In our interview, Selma tells me about when she realized that power structures and inequalities shape our understanding of women and men.

It is just true, like, you start to become aware of all the injustice that's just been put on you, just because you are a woman. And it increases with age as well, you know, it increases with, you know, when you reach reproductive age and like when you are deciding whether you want to be a mother or not or want to have a kinship. Hence, I certainly think that that has tempered my decision-making in a partner, and I guess there are expectations in terms of in terms I guess who puts more work into things, I guess. (Selma Interview #00.42:40-2).

She used the mobile dating app Tinder in 2013 for a few days. 2018, she downloaded Bumble and used it for a month, and again in 2020 for three days. "I think I would say regularly; I mean, because it has been so sporadic and not so frequent, I would say yeah, like once a day maybe, when I had it. But not very like I was not an avid user of like constantly, not at all (Selma Interview #00:03:21-2)." Her user experience is based on a shorter period. Selmas' motivation for using the apps was curiosity, gaining experience, and meeting new people. The excitement of trying these new ways of interacting with people and sexual expectations played a central role. Another reason for her using the app was to overcome a breakup. Saide met her long-term partner in three days when using the mobile dating app Bumble for the last time in 2020. "I guess I think it is funny. It is so weird to talk about this because, as a very nonactive user of these apps, having met my partner through one of them is kind of bizarre. Like it is really bizarre" (Selma #00:29:30-6#).

### **Ben P. = BP:**

Ben is a 31-year-old cis-guy who grew up with four sisters in a middle to upper-class family in a small town outside of Dallas, Texas. His mother was predominantly a stay-at-home mom, and his father was an independent home contractor/builder. Once he and his siblings grew older, his mother worked as a legal receptionist and worked her way up to an office manager at a law firm. This was after his parents divorced after 14 years of marriage when Ben was 11. BP was the second oldest of four children. They remained in the same town for his entire childhood and teen years. He earned his master's degree in Global Studies at the University of Vienna and lived there for two years. Ben works as a trade compliance analyst in San Diego, California, and his principal residence is there. His sexual orientation is

homosexual, and he is in a long-term relationship. Ben has used mobile dating apps for approximately eight years. He started with Tinder, and later, he tried Bumble and Hinge. He used the apps daily in his active time, trying not to use them too extensively. His motivation for using the apps was to find a long-term relationship.

**Clara K. = CK:**

Clara is a 28-year-old cis woman who is half-Dutch and half-Austrian. She is a Caucasian and grew up partially in Vienna and the U.S., moving to the U.S. as an 11-year-old child. Her stepfather is an atomic physician, and her mother worked as a secretary until they moved to the States. Both worked in an international environment. Her parents worked for some time for the UNIDO, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Clara went to an international High School in Vienna. She moved to a well-known all-girls high school in the U.S. She completed her bachelor's degree in London at a highly respected university and has a master's degree in communication studies, completed in Cambridge. After university, she did some additional secondary education. During the interview, it became clear that education and an international context are essential aspects of her life. Clara currently works as a communication officer for an international organization. Therefore, this year, she moved from Vienna to Paris, France. She enjoys surfing, skiing, meeting friends, and eating excellent food and drinks. She needs to present herself in an international context. "[...] the most important part for me is to demonstrate that I am a bit of a global citizen (Clara Interview #00:08:31-3#)." Her sexual orientation is heterosexual, and she is currently single. At the time of our interview, she used the mobile dating apps Bumble, Tinder, and Hinge and was on these apps for four weeks. Since moving to a new city, she still uses mobile dating apps. Her motivation for using these apps is to find a long-term relationship, although she is also open to short-term relationships. Another reason for using these apps is to meet new people and integrate into a new environment, as she often changed her residence.

This is also quite interesting because I have traveled and often moved from city to city. I do know that I use these dating apps also as a way to integrate myself in a new area, as a way to meet new people, as a way also maybe to meet local people who bring me to excellent restaurants or to lovely places that I may not have seen as a way to discover the city that I am newly living in. (Clara Interview #00:02:14-1#)



She uses the apps on and off, and when she is on the apps, she usually checks in daily. In our conversation, she told me that she never went on a date using the Tinder app.

**Paul S. = PS:**

Philipp is a 42-year-old Austrian cis guy who moved ten years ago from Feldkirch, Vorarlberg, to Vienna, Austria. He has a bachelor's degree in Cultural- and Social Anthropology and works as a pastoral assistant and a chess coach. Before that, he worked in a finance company in Liechtenstein in the trust sector. He did not like this professional perspective, so he made an education to become a pastoral assistant. After that, he went to Paraguay for one year. Philipp would not want to do without that experience because he was able to expand his horizons. After this year abroad, he decided to start the master's degree in Cultural- and Social Anthropology. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, he has stopped studying since he does not like distance learning. Next to his job in the clerical sphere, he is a chess teacher and a passionate player. He also needs to include women in his advertisements for chess tournaments. He is single, and his sexual orientation is heterosexual. He recently used Tinder but stopped and has been using it again for one year. He also uses Bumble and OkCupid. His motivation for using these mobile dating apps is finding a long-term relationship and gaining new friends.

**David G. = DG:**

David is 32 years old and comes from Upper Austria. He has lived in Vienna for ten years. As a profession, he is an intensive care nurse. David is currently doing his master's degree in Education of Care, planning to teach Bachelor students in the future. He is a cis man, and his sexual orientation is heterosexual. After trying Tinder 4 years ago, he did not have good experiences and never used this app again. David has been using Bumble for one year with breaks in between. When he is active on the app, he uses it daily and tries to answer messages quickly. His reason for using the app is to meet new people, and in principle, he is open to everything, but his main focus lies in finding a long-term relationship.

### **Vivi L. = VL:**

Vivi is a 35-year-old white cis woman. She grew up in upper Austria and moved to Vienna in 2007. Meanwhile, she sees herself as a Viennese. Her parents divorced when she was between the ages of 4 and 5. Her mother got into another relationship, and her father moved to Vorarlberg. She had two brothers when she was 14 and another brother when she was 21. According to her, all her parents are in management positions. Her stepfather is the managing director. Her father is a self-employed management consultant. Her stepmother has her own company in the field of ball bearings.

After finishing her real gymnasium, she studied teaching and completed it all. Vivi is studying psychotherapy as a second degree and works as a Human Relations Manager for a fashion company. She loves doing yoga and attending cultural and artificial events in her pastime. She describes herself with a sense of aesthetics, an essential aspect of her life. She has been using dating apps since 2020, after breaking up a seven-year relationship in 2019. She started with Tinder and, shortly after, with Hinge, but she deleted this app because she did not like that you could not swipe. Since then, she has been using Bumble and Tinder. Regarding her user behavior, she states that sometimes she has phases of not using these apps at all. At the same time, she has phases of catching herself waking up in the morning and immediately swiping. During the day, she barely uses them, as well as when she is out with friends. She states that she also uses the apps while watching movies at night.

### **Fabian L. = FL:**

Fabian, a 31-year-old cis guy who moved from Lower Austria to Vienna almost five years ago, worked as a care worker but recently changed profession to a photographer. His father used to work as a salesman; his mother worked as an office administrator. He grew up with a three years younger sister, whom he would describe as modern-conservative. The family used to live in the same household with his grandmother. Fabian describes himself as somewhat reserved but open and funny. Before becoming a user of dating apps, he was in a long-term relationship for five years. His relationship with mobile dating apps is characterized by being on and off over five years. He turned off the notification within the app but used it daily. His motivation to use dating apps is twofold: finding a long-term relationship or a lover.

### **Deli A. = DA:**

Deli is a 31-year-old cis woman who grew up in California and used to live in Berlin for six years. She has an Austrian passport and has lived in London since 2021. She has a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art, a diploma in Film making, and a Master's in Drama Performance. She mainly works to earn money as a Copywriter and Editor. Aside from this, she is a Poet and teaches creative writing. She does a lot of Poetry Performances and has an acting agent, but she is not doing that much acting yet. Deli signed up for a dating app for the first time about five years ago and has used many different ones since then. She has a profile on the League, on Tinder, on Field, and on Hinge, but she is only active on Hinge. She uses the app daily and checks it a couple of times daily. Her motivation for using dating apps is to find a long-term relationship and have a family, but she is open to just having affairs. "It would be nice to meet someone more seriously, but in the meantime, it is also nice to have some fun connections with people (Deli #00:13:45-5#)."

### **3.1.3 Conducting the semi-structured Interview**

The semi-structured qualitative interview method played a crucial role in the data-gathering process of my research. Therefore, I conducted ten interviews, four with women and six with men. Opting for online interviews facilitated a more accommodating and flexible setting for participants. Nevertheless, I conducted some interviews face-to-face. Moreover, the online setting of the interviews allowed me to expand my geographical radius of research. As the primary purpose of my research was to examine how mobile dating apps impact courtship rituals and relationship dynamics, it was essential to construct a research design that was suitable in order to accomplish the research project. A meticulously crafted guideline steered these discussions, ensuring uniformity across interviews by consistently covering key themes such as user behavior, motivation, identity, representation, and gender norms. The focus was to capture the essence of participants' verbal expressions, with particular attention to changes in tone or non-verbal cues only when they critically impacted the interpretation of statements. Conducting the semi-structured interviews was a crucial phase, allowing for in-depth exploration while offering flexibility for participants to express their experiences and perspectives. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of individual behaviors and

attitudes towards mobile dating apps, providing rich, qualitative data that was instrumental in addressing the research objectives. The semi-structured format balanced guided inquiry and open conversation, enriching the research with nuanced insights. Informal conversations with individuals experienced in mobile dating apps, whom I have met in diverse social settings, also enriched the research, providing spontaneous insights in a relaxed environment, with subsequent consent obtained for using these discussions in the thesis. This holistic approach not only ensured depth and comparability in the data but also painted a vivid picture of the contemporary dating landscape shaped by digital platforms.

#### **4. Research Results**

An anthropological study emerges within the digital realm of mobile dating apps, a virtual universe where human interactions are staged. These online platforms serve as a dance floor, where carefully aligned interactions between users shape a novel facet of social connectivity. During my qualitative study, interviews were conducted with four female and six male users of mobile dating apps and informal conversations; I encountered noteworthy findings. The interviews consistently centered on a research perspective that sought to understand the process through which individuals engage and make decisions in digital encounters, the experimental and behavioral patterns exhibited by users of mobile dating apps, and how gender norms influence self-presentation within user profiles as well as utilization and communication in dating apps.

The ensuing subsections encompass theoretical and analytical deliberations pertaining to the outcomes that were addressed in all interviews and in some informal conversations. My informants identified these outcomes as pivotal statements relevant to my research perspective, indicating several significant trends. The ubiquity of these outcomes across all interviews and informal conversations indicates their substantive value to my study, which warrants further elucidation in the subsequent sections.

Firstly, there is a conspicuous abundance of potential partners, which entails advantages and disadvantages. So far, I call this trend "Oversupply". Secondly, the study suggests the non-committal navigation of relationships and interactions with dating apps. Thirdly, the preliminary results allude to a certain degree of "dehumanization", as communication often gravitates towards brief and superficial interactions. Lastly, the fear of missing out (FOMO) is

prominent in dating app usage. The four mentioned impacts, which I will provide in more detail below, have emerged through my research and represent the most prominent effects of mobile dating apps on seeking and initiating partnerships. It became evident not only in the interviews but also in the informal conversations that these effects unequivocally constitute phenomena of online dating. These insights offer intriguing prospects for future research, suggesting that an in-depth analysis of the impacts of mobile dating apps on contemporary relationships and social interactions could be highly relevant.

Before I delve into these four trends, I will engage with another exciting aspect of my research: the online space as an extension of the offline dating world. Since my general interest in this research concerns how mobile dating apps transform cultural processes in courtship rituals and partner initiation, it was essential to direct my interview and conversation partners into reflecting on their experiences in the context of online and offline dating and what it means for them. Each form embodies cultural and social practices in romantic connections, presenting distinctive approaches with cultural nuances and anthropological considerations. My research data suggests that all my participants have different experiences and perspectives to these two approaches to forming romantic connections and encounters, although some aspects intersect.

#### **4.1 The Online as an Extension**

Online mobile dating, facilitated through digital platforms and mobile applications, introduces a novel way for individuals to navigate romantic relationships, emphasizing the influence of technology on contemporary courtship rituals. In the early days of online dating, it had to contend with a certain stigma. People were often skeptical about the idea of seeking romantic relationships online. As Alyssa D. Turizo states in her research about the impact of cultural factors on people's perceptions regarding the internet's role in promoting democracy, perception started to change with the rise of smartphones. She further explains that the extensive use of mobile phones, particularly smartphones, has significantly shifted society. Their incorporation into our everyday routines has fundamentally reconfigured the way we organize our social connections and reassess our fundamental understanding of the world (Cf. Turizo 2018: 8). In this context, Daniel Miller (2018) describes the smartphone as a digital ally, recognizing that although the physical appearance of a phone is less human-like when compared to a robot, it still holds the capacity for a more nuanced type of anthropomorphism (cf. Miller 2018: 14).

In the past, finding a partner online may have been seen as unconventional. Traditional views on meeting and finding a partner may not have considered the internet a suitable place. However, the picture has reformed with time and the rise of online dating platforms. Successful relationships that have started online have helped to reduce the stigma, and many people now see online dating as an acceptable and commonly used method of meeting potential partners. Mobile dating apps have also helped make online dating more socially acceptable.

It felt intuitive and took it away from that like early days. Dating online was kind of dusty; it felt old-fashioned and like a place you did not want to be. It felt desperate, and I think this changed. Tinder changed that. It made it accessible for younger people at the time. (Informal Conversation with Bob)

Another indicator of how the reputation of online dating has changed, especially since the advent of mobile dating apps, can be seen in the ethnographic research of the anthropologist Philip Shannon. As stated in my theoretical part, he could also examine, with his research on young men in New Delhi, how the use of mobile dating apps helps them to express themselves and to execute their versions of masculinities away from the direct authority and control of their fathers and families. The emerging modes of communication among young Indian individuals enable them to confront established gender stereotypes. Facilitating the exchange of emotions, aspirations, gratifications, and concerns, these platforms allow young men to liberate themselves from preconceived notions regarding females, dismissing misconceptions that label girls and women as 'silly' or 'dumb' (Shannon 2018: 320). Moreover, the data of my research in the context of gender norms and gender stereotypes has shown that prevailing roles and norms continue to exist to a certain extent in digital dating and heterosexual contexts.

I often feel a bit of pressure because it still somehow feels that way. It often stresses me out on first dates, and I am nervous because the man is still expected to make the first move. Sexually. (Interview with Tim #00:28:38-9#)

Tims's statement reflects the internalized pressure in heteronormative relationships and encounters to make the first move as a man. To some extent, it confirms the patriarchal structure in which we are socialized: the active man and the passive woman. His experiences in swiping through profiles on Tinder underline these findings.

I do not think it should be like that, or everyone thinks like that, but I read this a lot in women's profiles on Tinder: 'You are the man, so you write first. You are the man, you make the first move. (Interview with Tim #00:29:00-7#)

The concept of the "active man" and the "passive woman" in societal contexts, particularly in relationships and social interactions, is a reflection of traditional gender roles that have been historically prevalent in many cultures. These roles are constructed based on societal expectations and norms and have significant implications for understanding gender dynamics. Some female interviewees also validated my findings of gender norms in digital dating. One revelation of a well-educated young woman working for an international organization confirms these results.

I very much appreciate and cherish it when a guy is the one who can cook or when household duties are shared entirely. However, this is true, and I wish it were not often true. I do not like that I feel that way, but I do know that I appreciate it when a guy is the one who pays for dinner and invites me to dinner. I appreciate it when a guy opens the door for me. I appreciate some things that we consider chivalry, you know, or what it means to be a man. I hate that phrasing, but I do know that when it comes to those things, I sometimes enjoy feeling small in the chest of a big man. Feeling the sense of protection. (Interview with Clara #00:46:00-1)

Clara states in her comment above that mobile dating apps often mirror traditional gender norms and expectations. For instance, men may be expected to initiate conversations, while women may be positioned as passive recipients of attention. This dynamic can be seen as a digital extension of longstanding social scripts that prescribe active roles for men and passive roles for women in heterosexual dating contexts. These preceding examinations regarding dating scripts are confirmed in my theoretical part through Chris Haywood, who states that elements like compulsory education, increased employment opportunities, and the impact of mass media contributed to the development of gender-specific scripts in courtship rituals. It became customary for men to cover the costs, hold doors, initiate dating, and exhibit more excellent interaction expertise (Haywood 2019: 265). The design and functionality of some dating apps may reinforce these norms, for instance, through user interface choices that prioritize male agency or through algorithms that replicate heteronormative matching patterns. Conversely, these digital platforms also provide spaces for the negotiation and subversion of traditional gender roles. Users may present themselves in ways challenging gender stereotypes, such as women adopting more assertive roles or men embracing vulnerability. This negotiation reflects broader societal shifts towards more fluid understandings of gender and increased

acceptance of non-binary and diverse gender expressions. Profiles, photographs, and interactions are stages where gender identities are performed and (re)constructed (Butler, 1988). These performative acts can either reinforce traditional gender norms or serve as acts of resistance against them, depending on how individuals choose to present themselves. The expression and interpretation of gender roles on mobile dating apps vary significantly across different cultural contexts. What is considered normative or transgressive regarding gender presentation can differ widely between societies, reflecting the diverse cultural norms and values that shape gender identities. Mobile dating apps impact gender relations and expectations in broader society. They can reinforce societal norms (e.g., by perpetuating certain ideals of attractiveness) and provide a platform for challenging and redefining them. The ease of access to a wide range of potential partners can also influence expectations around relationships and dating behaviors, which can affect gender dynamics. An intersectional approach is crucial in understanding gender roles in mobile dating apps. Factors such as race, class, sexuality, and age intersect with gender to create complex dynamics and experiences for users. These intersectional identities can influence how users are perceived and treated within these platforms, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of gendered experiences in digital dating contexts.

When it comes to my dating behavior, especially my early dating behavior, like the first date or two, I definitely take gender stereotypes into my dating behavior. I have certain expectations on how I expect the first date to go. I certainly also noticed that, especially on the first two dates. I am not as forceful or aggressive or showing more of the masculine side of myself. I think I lead with my feminine side at the beginning and only over time start trickling in my more masculine dominant sides of myself. So, I think it is still a big part of my dating behavior, especially in the early stages of dating. (Interview with Clara #00:50:08-9)

In the cultural landscape of mobile dating apps, individuals engage in a process heavily influenced by digital profiles, algorithmic matching, and virtual interactions. Creating and curating online personas become integral to self-presentation, reflecting cultural norms and expectations regarding identity construction. Gupta and Ferguson highlight the dual nature of identity, elucidating that it is both inherent and chosen, as well as externally attributed or imposed. These personal and collective identities are constructed within social practices (cf. Gupta/Ferguson 1997: 12f). technology shapes how people express desires, preferences, and personal narratives, contributing to a dynamic cultural tapestry of digital romance. My



interview partners indicated clearly that it is important to them to create an appealing identity in their mobile dating profile.

And I think for me, like what I do, you know, my research and particularly now that I am at the stage of finishing my Ph.D., it just became so much of who I am. In a way, that was also what I was looking for. You know, in deciding whether I wanted to meet someone or not. (Interview with Selma #00:13:12-8#)

Statements like the one above reflect the importance for my research partners to clearly emphasize specific aspects of their identity in mobile dating app profiles to generate a specific selection of potential matches.

The most important part for me is to demonstrate that I am a bit of a global citizen and funny. I think those are the parts because this is what is important to me. So I really do try very hard to get my humor, the laughter that I bring in my being across, and that I am more on the adventurous side in terms of traveling and seeing different places or having lived in different places. (Interview with Clara #00:08:31-3#)

Having an international identity and putting this information into a mobile dating app profile can effectively communicate one's values, interests, and worldview to potential matches. I encountered conversational partners who mentioned their global citizenship or international identity during my research.

I read a lot, I am always trying to improve and I also care a lot about having a multi cultural identity and multi national identity and being multilingual. These are for me super important components of my life and I think it would be hard for me to be my true self with someone else if they did not understand or appreciate those things. (Deli #00:19:40-3#)

Crafting a mobile dating app profile that reflects an international identity involves highlighting one's global experiences, multicultural interests, and openness to diverse cultures and viewpoints. In many cases, the bio in the dating app profiles is used to articulate the international identity. This could include phrases like "globetrotter at heart" or "enthusiast of diverse cultures and global perspectives" or mention experiences living, working, or studying abroad to emphasize one's exposure to different cultures.

And I also try to include photos taken in different environments. So maybe on a holiday or in different countries where you can see a little bit of this international aspect that I live in. (Interview with Clara #00:09:34-1#)

As Clara states, another strategy to arbitrate this identity is to choose profile photos that showcase one's travels and international experiences. Pictures in various global landmarks or engaging in cultural activities, as well as including images that represent cultural diversity, such as attending international festivals or participating in cultural exchange programs, can visually communicate one's international identity.

The spirit of adventure is important to me. So that people recognize that I like to be active and on the move. That people recognize that I like to travel and that people recognize that I am sporty. And a very open-minded person. (Interview with David #00:04:15-1#)

By integrating these elements into the mobile dating app profile, one can effectively communicate one's international identity, attracting potential matches who appreciate and share a global perspective. The emergence of international identities on mobile dating apps reflects broader globalization and cultural exchange trends. Users who present themselves as global or international often embody values such as openness to diverse cultures, adaptability, and a worldview that transcends local or national boundaries. These international identities are part of broader societal trends towards individualization, where individuals increasingly emphasize their unique characteristics and experiences to differentiate themselves from others. Mobile dating apps serve as platforms where individualization and internationalization intersect. They allow users to craft and showcase identities rooted in their immediate cultural context and influenced by global narratives and experiences. This phenomenon points to a growing desire among individuals to align themselves with a global community, reflecting a shift in identity formation from traditional, community-based models to more fluid and globally oriented constructs. The adoption of international identities within mobile dating environments indicates a transformation in how social interactions and relationships are conceptualized and pursued. It signifies a move towards more globally aware and interconnected forms of socialization, challenging traditional, geographically-bound ways of forming relationships. This shift offers insights into how modern individuals navigate the complexities of identity and relationships in an increasingly globalized world. The role of technology, particularly mobile dating apps, in facilitating international identities and individualization highlights the impact of digital platforms on cultural and social dynamics. In that respect, mobile dating apps can be seen as one of Appadurai's five scapes (1990), the Technoscape. It refers to the ways technologies help speed up cross-border movements. These technologies enable individuals to connect across cultural and national boundaries and play a crucial role in shaping how identities are constructed and perceived in the contemporary digital age. The interplay between

international identity and societal individualization within mobile dating apps represents a dynamic and evolving aspect of contemporary sociocultural trends. It underscores the increasingly global nature of personal identity and social interactions in the modern era, mediated and facilitated by digital technologies. While society is changing holistically and in almost all areas of life due to new aspects such as digitalization, how people meet and initiate relationships is also changing. In this respect, the use of mobile dating apps and their side effects can be seen as a direct consequence of the individualization of Western societies and the information age. As stated in the theoretical part in chapter 2.3.1 and examined by Elisabetta Costa, Daniel Miller et al. (2016), the process of individualization is delineated in the following manner: Historically, individuals were integrated within close-knit communities characterized by robust social bonds, often rooted in kinship networks. However, over the past centuries, a convergence of influences, including capitalist dynamics, industrialization, and urban expansion, has led to the erosion of these communal structures. This decline has consequently facilitated the emergence of new expressions of personal autonomy and individualism. While this evolution has facilitated increased personal liberty and self-reliance, it has also engendered sentiments of solitude, seclusion, and societal disintegration (Cf. Costa et al. 2016: 181). Dumont underlines these descriptions of evolution with the following statement. The contemporary perspective is distinguished by an ethos of individualism, encapsulating a spectrum of concepts and principles concerning the singular person. Individualization involves a cultural shift where the person is regarded as embodying attributes linked to freedom, morality, equality, and rationality (cf. Vibert 2011: 154). In this context, one of my interviewees also talked about life as a resident of an urban context and her lifestyle.

It is clear that if you live in a city, you are much less likely to settle down earlier because you always feel that you may meet someone else. And dating apps have just increased that even more so. So ya, I definitely, even though I try to be open-minded and think like: wow, obviously there are lots of different people that I think I could be interested in or happy with, I think it is hard to shake the idea that maybe you are settling for something. (Interview with Deli #01:16:49-5#)

Mobile dating apps epitomize the shift from traditional, community-based relationship formation methods to individual-centric approaches. This shift can be viewed as a response to the broader societal movement towards individualization, where personal choice and agency are paramount. Mobile dating apps offer a platform where individuals can seek partners based on personal preferences, circumventing traditional familial and social structures that have

historically guided relationship formation and courtship rituals. Furthermore, the construction and presentation of individual identity play a crucial role. Users curate their profiles to reflect their unique personalities, interests, and lifestyles, which can be seen as a manifestation of the individualization process in digital spaces. This self-presentation is not merely about attracting potential partners and encounters but also expressing and affirming one's identity, values, and desires in a society that increasingly values individual uniqueness and self-expression. Mobile dating apps intersect with global technological trends and local cultural norms. Users navigate and negotiate these norms within the app environment, often blending globalized, individualistic values with local cultural expectations. This negotiation reflects cultural norms' fluid and dynamic nature in an individualized society, where global and local influences continuously interact and reshape social practices.

I also, and I think this is, you know, quite interesting because I have traveled a lot in my life and I moved from city to city, and I do know that I use these dating apps also as a way to integrate myself in a new area as a way to meet new people, as a way to also maybe meet local people who bring me to nice restaurants or to nice places that I may not have seen and as a way to discover the city ahm that I am newly living in. (Interview with Clara #00:02:14-1#)

This statement shows how user motivations and contexts for using a mobile dating app adjust to various forms of globalized citizenship. Mobile dating apps signify a shift like social connections. In contrast to community-oriented social networks, these platforms facilitate relationships that are more transient, diverse, and reflective of individual preferences. This reconfiguration offers insights into how social bonds and networks are evolving in response to the forces of individualization, highlighting the increasing importance of personal choice in social interactions. As stated in the theoretical chapter of Individualization by Stephane Vibert (2011: 155), throughout modern times, the individual progressively asserts their presence in the communal domain to actualize themselves as an "individual in the world" and to reformulate the values that are socially acknowledged. The mode of communication within mobile dating apps, often characterized by brevity and convenience, mirrors the broader societal trends towards more flexible and individualistic forms of interaction. This transformation in communication styles can be interpreted as a reflection of the changing priorities and lifestyles in an individualized society, where efficiency and personalization are highly valued. Mobile dating apps exemplify the increased diversity and global interconnectivity characteristic of an individualistic society. Users have the potential to connect with a global pool of individuals, transcending traditional geographical and cultural boundaries.

This global interconnectivity reflects the expanding horizons of individual experience in the modern world, where digital technologies enable personal exploration beyond local and national confines. The popularity of mobile dating apps challenges traditional social structures, norms, and relationship paradigms, often leading to tensions and negotiations between traditional values and modern individualistic tendencies. These challenges and the resulting adaptations offer a fertile ground for anthropological inquiry into how societies adapt to technological advancements and shifting cultural landscapes. Nevertheless, humanist and secular ideas play a pivotal role in developing a postcolonial world, particularly regarding the spread of human rights as a "universal" foundation by international bodies. These notions validate the patterns of modern individualization. Through broadly examining the interaction between societies, Anthropology seeks to comprehend, from a theoretical standpoint, the position of the individual within various frameworks of meaning. How individuals present themselves, communicate, and interpret social cues within these apps underscore the intricate interplay between technology, culture, and social dynamics. Furthermore, transforming dating practices through mobile apps reflects broader societal values and norms shifts. The emphasis on efficiency, accessibility, and instant gratification inherent in these platforms reshapes romance's temporal and spatial dimensions, challenging traditional notions of courtship deeply rooted in cultural histories. These findings correlate directly with the theoretical chapter on individualization and Stephane Vibert's assertions. Just as the nature of dating and social norms surrounding it change, the individual has also changed over time. Anthropological examinations of individualization reveal that the contemporary understanding of the individual cannot be perceived as an innate and unbiased truth. Instead, it emerges from an extensive evolution of European ideologies and concepts (cf. Vibert 2011: 155).

Contrastingly, offline dating reflects the embodied, face-to-face interactions rooted in traditional social contexts. Cultural norms and societal expectations play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of offline dating, influencing how individuals initiate connections, express interest, and navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships. As stated in my theory, Stoicescu emphasizes Modell's claim that the origins of dating can be traced back to the popularity of dancing events in the 1910s and early 1920s. These events created a tradition where teenagers sought dance partners and developed intimate connections with strangers (Cf. Modell 1989: 71). Offline dating practices are deeply embedded in cultural scripts, reflecting shared values, rituals, and extraordinary expectations surrounding courtship. A 29-year-old interview participant who is heterosexual and a cis man told me that he is not sure if he ever had one and did not even know what offline dating means.

Interesting question. I am 29 years old, born in 1993. What is offline dating? I have never met anyone in the supermarket and asked them out on a date in my entire life. That does not happen. Nowadays, you get to know someone while going out, having sex with each other, or at least kissing or cuddling, exchanging numbers, and meeting up at some point. I do not know if you can call this a date because the relationship started with sexual interaction. In this respect, I do not even know if I have ever had offline dating. (Interview with Tim #00:22:30-5#)

He further states that, in his opinion, having a date through a mobile dating app means having an actual date. Moreover, his remarks confirm Maria Stoicescu, as already mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, who expresses that movies play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of dating and romantic relationships. Dating has swiftly transformed into a pivotal element of modern existence, serving as a foundation for marriage or, in contemporary society, potentially standing as an independent entity. Norms, patterns, and ideal situations regarding dating and marriage vary across cultures. The concept of dating embodies a structure marked by uncertainty and volatility, profoundly affected by cultural manifestations and individual viewpoints molded by personal encounters within this domain. Movies have functioned as educational tools, influencing the sequencing and timing of emotional encounters across various stages of life. This influence is evident through a spectrum of romantic films portraying themes such as "marriage for love", "winning another's love" or "illicit love" (Modell 1989: 74; Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 23-24). In our ongoing conversation about offline dating Tim adds that in real life it is not occurring like in an American romantic TV series where everybody has dates constantly. Sasa, a 37-year-old heterosexual cis woman I had an informal conversation with, also confirmed these statements and expressed that she never had these traditional offline dates. Instead, she happened to have sexual interactions as a starting point of her relationships. (Informal Conversation with Sasa) Vivien, a 35-year-old heterosexual cis woman, confirms this trend of not having or knowing offline dating.

I have to tell you honestly, I do not even know what offline dating is like anymore. I met Hannes back then in the Pratersauna because I approached him, and we then spent the whole event, the whole rave, with each other. I have not met anyone since I have been single except once before Corona. I cuddled with a guy in a club. But otherwise I have never approached anyone and no one has approached me or rarely. My friend always says I am being approached, but I do not seem to register it anymore. It never developed into a date, either. (Interview with Vivien #00:37:36-8#)

Most of my conversational partners indicated they rarely have offline dates or encounters. Likewise, Deli stated the following when our conversation touched on the topic of offline dating.

It has been really rare that I meet people in person. Like so with this guy, Josh, we met at a bar. It was very random. It was just because I was out with friends, and then everybody I knew left. So, I ended up speaking with different people at the bar and eventually stayed late enough that I was introduced to him. So it was just good circumstances I think. What I think happens to me a lot is, first of all, people do not approach me or not very often at events, or it is quite infrequent. But even if they do, it sometimes takes me a while to react and assess whether I am interested in the person. So, I guess this is why I like dating apps: They give me a lot more time and control to decide whether I want to talk with someone. (Interview with Deli #01:12:09-2#)

The shift from traditional dates signifies a reconfiguration of social rituals and practices. The digitalization of dating alters the symbolic meanings associated with courtship, challenging established cultural scripts embedded in traditional dating scenarios. Rituals once rooted in face-to-face interactions now unfold through the mediated interface of mobile dating apps, impacting how individuals perceive, negotiate, and construct romantic relationships. The absence of traditional dates can be seen as a renegotiation of societal expectations, where the virtual space becomes a new arena for the performance of identity, attraction, and intimacy. At the same time, the concepts of dating and initiation of relationships and encounters changed with the emergence and use of mobile dating apps.

In the era of information, social media platforms are regarded as spaces (Appadurai) where individuals craft and enhance their identities. The advent of platforms like Facebook established a precedent for utilizing the internet as a realm for individuals to shape their real-life identities rather than exploring fictitious ones. This concept finds support in the research conducted by Strano (2008), Zhao, Grasnuck, and Martin (2008), as well as Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006). Subsequently, mobile dating applications followed suit, leveraging the fusion of authentic and idealized perspectives. This tension arises from the aspiration to present an "authentic" portrayal of one's true self while concurrently idealizing one's most favorable traits, as observed by Ranzini and Lutz (2016) and Ellison et al. (2012) (Cf. Turizo 2018: 11).

Examining the cultural dimensions of these dating approaches reveals how individuals negotiate cultural norms in their quest for connection. Online mobile dating may challenge

traditional cultural scripts by providing a platform for diverse expressions of identity and preferences. However, it also introduces new challenges related to the impact of technology on interpersonal dynamics and authenticity.

No doubt, mediated intimacy through dating apps has changed. Some theorists have a very negative view of it, particularly those who are older. Like Baumanns' liquid love and the mindset that nowadays, everything is disposable. I think it also goes hand in hand with a new liberal flow of this possibility of abundance, of huge choice [...] and it is super hand in hand with certain economic models that we are living in. (Interview with Selma #00:33:26-0)

Offline dating, deeply ingrained in cultural traditions, relies on established social structures and face-to-face communication. Cultural nuances shape the expectations and rituals surrounding offline dating, influencing how individuals navigate courtship within specific social contexts. The spontaneity and immediacy of offline interactions contribute to the richness of cultural expressions in pursuing romantic connections.

Another important divergence between offline and online dating lies in the uncertainty of trustworthy users in online dating.

This fear of maybe this person is just a complete creep, and maybe he does not look like what he has in his profile or presents himself as someone he is not really. In offline dating, most of the time, I will meet someone via a friend group or a friend circle, so I automatically assume that, at the very least, they are a good human being, and I give them already a lot more trust in terms of I would invite them probably to my house faster. Whereas an online person I would not invite to my house as quickly because I have this feeling that my friends have already vetted that offline person. They already have a good sense of who this person is, and at least in an offline scenario, I feel like I could potentially put myself in danger. Whereas in an online scenario I certainly see the aspect of danger a little bit bigger and I will try to make more of an effort to meet in a bright public space in a way where I am around other people (Interview with Clara #00:36:50-4#).

The uncertainty surrounding trustworthy users in mobile dating apps reflects a complex interplay of cultural and social factors shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors. In the cultural landscape of digital dating, users navigate a dynamic space where traditional markers of trust, such as physical presence and shared social contexts, are replaced by algorithmic matching and curated online profiles. From a social anthropological standpoint, uncertainty arises as users grapple with the challenges of deciphering authenticity and sincerity in a digital



environment. Cultural norms and values influence users' expectations and interpretations of trustworthiness as they transition from offline, socially embedded interactions to the inherently mediated realm of online dating.

Another notable consequence of mobile dating use could be the absence of attempts to make a real-life connection. Users tend not to approach people offline because they prefer the ease of the dating app. In this regard, Maria Stoicescu also writes that young people prefer the ease of mobile dating apps for career reasons and the underlying desire for individualization. The rising significance placed on professional growth in the initial phases of adulthood has played a role in fostering more significant approval of online dating. As people prioritize effectiveness and ease in their approaches to dating, technologically facilitated options have become increasingly appealing (Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 22). Another interviewee, David G., also tells me about the dichotomy of online and offline dating and its consequences. "Perhaps people are less likely to overcome their fear than when there were no dating apps (Interview with David #00:17:03-6#)". The utterance of another interview partner underpins this statement. Ben P., a 31-year-old homosexual man, who states that:

It can be more challenging to meet people outside of apps and initiate dates and have that kind of expectation, at least when you are on an app that's purpose is dating. It kind of removes that wonder or that question of whether or not the other person is interested. Right, because if you match, you already know that there is some interest; it is almost skipping a step that would typically be there if you are meeting someone organically. (Interview with Ben #00:41:28-0#)

Even though it can sometimes be more difficult to approach someone in real life, during the data collection process, I consistently felt that my participants rated offline encounters higher. "So I would wish to meet someone at a bar. You look at each other and then start a conversation. Like with Hannes back then" (Interview with Vivien #00:40:17-1#). The assertion of another conversational partner underlines this statement.

Offline feels a little more outgoing. It is real—the magic of real-life interaction. And just random moments where you might catch someone's eye, see someone, take a chance, have friends in common, or bump into someone. That is something innate and speaks on the deep level of how we storyfied or turn our meetings with our partners into stories. Legends. And that is the difference between online and offline. That is the magic. It is obvious, but the setup element of online dating is just so much more at the forefront. It just does not exist as much in real life. Even if friends have set us up, it feels different in real life. It is less tiring in real life,

but it is also hard to set things up. And more and more of our lives are online, so I am unsure. It has been many years since I have used the app. So that is my take on that. (Informal Conversation with Bob)

Dating apps can also help people who are shy and reserved and do not approach other people easily in public. Some of my interviewees had thoughts on this. Therefore, they appreciate the existence of online dating.

The big difference is that the moment I write to the person, I already know that they at least find me interesting. I just do not know that in offline dating. And that is a good bonus for me because I am reserved and shy. (Interview with Fabian #00:25:39-0#)

Mobile dating apps, as well as online dating, can offer valuable social platforms for reserved individuals as well as for marginalized groups. These platforms relieve the pressure of face-to-face interactions, providing a more comfortable space for those who may feel anxious or inhibited in traditional social settings. For marginalized groups, mobile dating apps present an opportunity to connect with others with similar experiences or identities, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

Yes, I generally do not approach anyone because I am extremely shy. I do not know how I managed it with Hannes back then, but I seem to have had an intuition. I think I was also very under the influence. I have no idea how that happened. I often ask myself why I could do it back then, and now I cannot get it together. I have no idea. I do not know why no men approach me. I have no idea what kind of charisma I have. Maybe I have the vibe: leave me alone, do not talk to me at all. I do not know. (Interview with Vivien #00:38:53-8#)

These apps allow users to express themselves more openly and find connections based on shared interests and values rather than immediate physical presence or societal judgments. In this way, dating apps can democratize the dating process, making it more accessible and inclusive. In conclusion, the cultural and social anthropological perspective highlights the intricate interplay between technology, cultural scripts, and societal expectations in shaping the landscape of contemporary dating practices. The choices individuals make between online mobile dating and offline dating reflect cultural dynamics, illustrating the evolving nature of romance within diverse cultural frameworks.

## 4.2 Oversupply

Most standard mobile dating apps only allow one profile to be viewed simultaneously. With a simple finger gesture, the proposed user is accepted or rejected. Thereupon, the next person appears immediately. The end of the list is not apparent. The surplus may initially appear advantageous, providing users with a wide selection of potential matches. However, it can also lead to decision fatigue, where individuals find it challenging to select due to the overwhelming number of options available. The potential partners seem to pass by in a seemingly endless queue. The association with the assembly line is in this context. Furthermore, the concept of "infinite swiping" bears conceptual similarities to "infinite scrolling" (Jovicic, 2021), a feature used on photo-sharing platforms like Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest, as well as on Twitter and Facebook. "infinite scrolling" is a design technique where the content of the page continues as the user scrolls down the page. The user can theoretically scroll endlessly and constantly see new content. It is designed to keep users effortlessly engaged within the app.

It always depends on how many people you are writing with simultaneously. Sometimes, you also favor quantity before quality, and usually, nothing good comes out of that because you do not make as much effort when writing, and then you meet fewer people in real life. (Interview with David #00:10:29-1#)

My conversational partners apply techniques in order to face this sheer number of potential dates and conversations, as stated by Clara in her interview: "But for the most part, I also think that I try to avoid overusing it on a daily basis and certainly do not necessarily engage in too many conversations with too many people at the same time" (Interview with Clara #00:03:50-3#).

However, the infinite nature of selection only applies up to a certain point. The selection becomes inherently finite if the user is in a location with fewer registered users. Within this aspect of limitation in oversupply, another factor comes into play. In addition to the unmanageable wealth of options, users use the app for various purposes. Some are looking for a long-term partnership, while others want to achieve quick, superficial encounters. Some only want to write with people, while others want to strengthen their self-confidence with positive matches. Another part of the user base is in a steady partnership using the app to test her/his "market value". Still others use the app to make new friends. The variation in user motivations and reasons is related to user outcomes. "To some people, it is just like a competition. It is like:

oh, how many matches can I collect" (Interview with Ben #00:14:24-1#). In the context of varying user motivations, Ward also posits that some Tinder users may focus solely on seeking validation with an ego boost or engaging in a numbers game without any intention of progressing beyond the digital platform. Although obtaining superficial approval on dating apps is relatively straightforward, the potential for authentic romantic connections persists in this environment (c.f. Ward 2016: 90). My interview partner Tim also confirms Ward's statement with the following words:

Because I am usually active on Tinder when I am sexually aroused because I have been out and just went home alone, and then, the next day, I chat around with matches from whom I get replies. So, all the matches whose messages I never replied to because I was not interested at the time, or simply new matches that I made but no one ever started writing, I just wrote to them. [...] If the meeting is scheduled for a week from now and I have already met up with someone else, or I am just not horny anymore, then I will not meet up with them. Then I cancel it, and then maybe we will arrange it again at some point. But at some point, you feel stupid, and then you just do not do it. (Interview with Tim #00:30:01-7#)

With her quote: "So every now and then I have the feeling I am wiping out of boredom," Vivien validates the statements mentioned above about varying motivations (Interview with Vivien #00:06:35-2). These statements confirm the impression of various motivations for using these apps.

Another limitation applies to standard membership. In the case of Tinder, the application is throttled, and the member is compelled to take a break. Both forms of finiteness in the swiping experience can be overcome when the user agrees to pay for Tinder usage. One of my interview partners confirmed that aspect with the app Bumble.

For men, the likes are limited; if you use the version that is not chargeable, then I just use it actively only if I have likes. (Interview with David #00:02:13-7)

To my question about how many swipes one can make per day, David responded the following:

In principle, it is limited, but it depends on when I swipe in between, and I have only used some of the likes. It continuously varies how many likes are still available. Sometimes, it also took a different amount of time to receive likes again. So, I do not know the algorithm behind it, but it was not always the same. (Interview with David #00:25:06-9#)

It was not possible to get a confirmed indication of when mobile dating apps like Bumble and Tinder enforce the swipe stop. Most of my interview partners stated they had the impression that the number of possible swipes varied. Participants have repeatedly pointed out that they fall into a kind of automatism when using mobile dating apps. Vivien describes her experience as follows:

Sometimes, I have phases where I do not really use it, and then there are times when I catch myself when I wake up in the morning, the alarm clock rings, and I start the app. You are not even woken up properly, and the first thing you do is look at your cell phone again. I immediately go into the app and start swiping. That is somehow already implemented and very bad. So, one does it then almost no longer consciously. (Interview with Vivien #00:05:42-2#)

Viviens' quote was confirmed by a statement from another informal conversation I had with Bob, a 39-year-old heterosexual cis man. To my question on what factors he considers when deciding whether to match with someone, he stated the following:

What they look like and the description. It is very quick. I make these decisions so quickly before moving to the next person. If the photos felt authentic, authentic, and not too posed. That was usually a good sign. (Informal Conversation with Bob)

Both informants underline the aspect of quick decision-making on visual foundations and support the connection to "infinite swiping" (Jovicic, 2021; Beck, 2021). As a result of the practice of "infinite swiping", users perceive potential partners as an abundance, and individual profiles blur into an "infinite stream", providing limited opportunities for users to pause and develop genuine interest. The concept of easy and unlimited selection without consequences encourages participants to keep swiping continuously. This aspect of using mobile dating apps was underpinned by an informal conversation with a woman at a children's birthday. Karin has two children with a man she met on Tinder. She has been in a relationship with that man for nine years, married him, and calls her kids jokingly "Tinder-Kids". She told me that she used the app for whetting her appetite after a separation and, according to her, "browsed through it like a catalog." (informal conversation with Karin)

Another effect of this oversupply of potential partners and possibilities is that users might be overwhelmed by the amount of matches they achieve. As a result, they feel exhausted and cannot communicate on the platforms with all the matches they achieve.

You really try to be clever and like to find something really funny to say or like really specific in their profile, and then sometimes you are so exhausted by this you really just say like: Hey, how is your day going? It is really basic, but I found that either way, a lot of people just do not respond. (Interview with Deli #01:33:32-5#)

This and similar statements by my interview participants underscore a prevailing sense of being overloaded by the overwhelming array of choices available to them. This sensation of being inundated with options can, in turn, lead some individuals to disengagement, resulting in non-responses or discontinued interactions. Users can end interactions as quickly as they start, sometimes even unconsciously, by simply forgetting (cf. Šiša 2022: 6). From a cultural and social anthropological perspective, this phenomenon reflects a broader societal shift in the digital age. The abundance of choices in dating apps represents an extension of the paradox of choice, which suggests that while having more options can theoretically enhance well-being and autonomy, it can also generate anxiety and decision fatigue. “It is difficult. Even if I want a relationship, I do nothing for it. So I have matches, but I am so bored of writing that I leave it.” (Interview with Vivien #00:07:29-9#) In this context, anthropologists might explore how this overload of choices affects individuals' decision-making processes and their sense of control within the dating app environment. Current psychological theories and empirical investigations have upheld the belief in the positive impacts of personal choice on emotions and motivation. However, recent experimental studies challenge the idea that more choices always result in greater motivation. These experiments, conducted in controlled and real-world settings, demonstrate that people are more inclined to purchase gourmet jams or chocolates or choose optional class essay assignments when offered a limited selection of six choices rather than extensive arrays of 24 or 30. Surprisingly, participants reported more satisfaction with their selections and produced higher-quality essays when provided with fewer options. These findings counter the common assumption that more choices lead to increased intrinsic motivation and prompt further exploration into the effects of limited choices on satisfaction and performance (Iyengar/Lepper 2000: 997). These results correlate with the data of my research. Moreover, the decision to disengage or not to respond can be seen as a strategy for coping with this sense of overload. It raises questions about negotiating personal boundaries and preserving mental and emotional well-being in the face of digital abundance. Anamarija Šiša confirms my finding and states that ghosting has become a means for users to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of online dating, offering a semblance of stability in an

environment characterized by constant pressure for self-improvement and lack of clear guidelines. Though generating uncertainties, this practice serves as a protective mechanism in the volatile conditions of online dating (cf. Šiša 2022: 11). Ghosting in that context is defined by individuals abruptly ceasing communication without explanation or consideration of the other persons' feelings. Anthropological research could delve into individuals' coping mechanisms when confronted with such challenges, offering insights into how technology shapes contemporary social behaviors, emotional experiences, and social dynamics.

Well, he simply texted me questions afterward, and because of that, I developed such a defensive attitude based on his questions, which were not bad at all. But I do not know if you know this. I can only describe it like this. You hear or read something, and suddenly, the curtain falls. And with these sentences, questions, etc. you feel uncomfortable or somehow annoyed and it causes rejection. He did not mean anything wrong, he was very nice. He is a very appreciative guy, I am just not appreciative. (Interview with Vivien #00:56:48-6)

To my question if he remembers the last person he swiped positive, one of my interviewees, who is very active on dating apps, stated that "he cannot remember his last swipe because there were too many." (Interview with David #00:24:42-7)

Overall, my interview participants' experiences of feeling overwhelmed and occasionally disengaging from dating app interactions offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between technology, choice, and emotional well-being in the modern dating landscape. Anthropological investigation could help illuminate the cultural dynamics underpinning these phenomena and their implications for individuals and society. In this context and as already mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, Stoicescu (2019) highlights that the rise of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) has caused substantial transformations in societal norms, impacting both public and private domains. This shift, emphasized by Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008), has established new norms while disrupting traditional ones. As a result, ICTs have increasingly facilitated the formation and maintenance of personal relationships through online communities and social media platforms (Cf. Stoicescu 2019: 22). Turizo (2018) also supports these statements with the following addition. She emphasizes that the rapid advancement and widespread use of digital technology during the "Information Age" have been facilitated by the accessibility of gadgets like smartphones, personal computers, and gaming consoles. These devices provide engaging experiences for users. This technological evolution has given the younger generation

unparalleled access to extensive information and a natural skill to adapt to an entirely new form of human and societal interaction (Alberst/Papp, 1997; Cf. Turizo 2018: 8).

From a cultural and social anthropological standpoint, the proliferation of potential partners in mobile dating apps reflects a fundamental shift in how individuals perceive and engage in romantic relationships. Emma, a former mobile dating app user I met at a Summerfest in a Viennese park, addressed during an informal conversation about her experiences "that you always have the feeling there could be something better at the next swipe." (Informal Conversation with Emma) Another interview I had with a woman who is currently very engaged in using mobile dating apps supports this statement with the following quote: "[...] maybe this culture in apps like the Berlin dating scene, which is crazy and which is a kind of toxicity of always feeling that you might find someone better" (Interview with Deli #00:59:43). This phenomenon may signify a move away from traditional partner selection processes, often rooted in local communities and guided by social norms. Instead, the digital realm offers a globalized platform where individuals can encounter many potential partners, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. In this context, McLuhans' (1962) and Stoiciu's (2020: 172) evidence should not go unmentioned: The process of digitizing social interactions, initially referring to converting analog data into distinct digital units, is now acknowledged as a significant occurrence marked by extensive social changes. The progression in communication technology enables a phenomenon where the world is progressively interconnected, resembling an actual "global village". Anthropologists might explore how this abundance reshapes notions of choice, identity, and belonging in the context of modern dating. The rising volume of digital-anthropological research and initiatives underscores the suitability of cultural and social anthropology in exploring the new socio-cultural developments and behaviors connected to digital technologies. Anthropologists are confronted with phenomena that have long been examined within the discipline, including the constriction of individual and collective identities, social connections, organizational structures, and the transformative impact on socio-cultural, religious, and economic practices (Cf. Budka 2019: 181). Ilana Gershon (2017) researched the impact of the career-oriented social network LinkedIn. This platform prompts workers to present themselves in specific ways to secure jobs. This instance shows how digital platforms can create new types of work based on neo-liberal ideologies and shape fresh methods of self-presentation and self-perception. Individuals strategically present themselves within the limitations of these platforms (Cf. Miller 2018: 5). Some dating apps try to counteract this oversupply with the function to limit the possible likes to 10 per day. Clara



tells me about the mobile dating app Hinge and the fact that you can only like ten profiles per day.

And then you do not even know whether the ten people that you liked are going to match with you. So it does not suddenly overload you with so many matches that you do not know where to start. So, it slows the process down a bit more and does not overload you with matches. So, I think also one of the reasons why I have not been on dating apps that much is because they are overwhelming to me. When you suddenly have, you know, I do not know a hundred people that are still waiting to match with you, and you know you open your app and suddenly you have matched with 15 in a day or whatever, 15 even in a week. You do not know where and with whom to start the conversation. (Interview with Clara #00:54:47-1#)

This statement shows that while few mobile dating apps implement technical conditions to counteract the overload of the unmanageable amount of possible dating partners, at the same time strengthens the fact that most of them have the character of constant oversupply. Together with the fact that cell phones have now taken on a significant role in our everyday lives and are considered a daily companion and personal assistant, the fact of the constant oversupply of mobile dating apps is becoming evident. Because the cell phone is always within reach, it is apparent that one opens certain apps or applications more often than one wants. The smartphone provides us with much helpful information every day. At the same time, it exposes us to many stimuli we must process. To a certain extent, we can handle this well. However, excessive cell phone use can stress and overwhelm us with negative consequences for our behavior and health. Moreover, as more and more people are dependent and, to a certain degree, addicted to their smartphones, „we can say without exaggeration: the digitized society has the biggest collective addiction problem of our time“ (Otto 2021: 35). My interview partners likewise confirm these examinations as Vivien states in our conversation.

During the day, I do not use the app at all, not at work or when I am out with friends, because I just do not think about it at all. But I use it in the evening while watching a movie. So, every now and then, I feel I am wiping out of boredom. I also noticed that I can no longer watch a movie without a second device. I always have the cell phone in my hand. It does not work without it. At least for me. And I do that out of boredom. (Interview with Vivien #00:06:35-2#)

The ubiquitous nature of mobile phones as constant companions has significantly contributed to the proliferation of engagement with mobile dating applications. The research of Anamarija

Šiša, a 29-year-old woman, also elaborates on this experience, which correlates with my findings.

At some point, there was such an overload of it all, and you say to yourself—fuck, I cannot talk to five people at once right now. You hope something might come out of it, and then one by one fails. In the end, I was just exhausted, actually. I noticed I was doing nothing but texting. I probably spent more than two hours a day for these things. I bought a new bass guitar and didn't practice it for the first month because I was wasting my time on Tinder. (Šiša 2022: 15)

The abundance of matches and potential conversations on dating apps is often seen as a drawback. This leads to an overwhelming influx of information and emotional labor, culminating frequently in ghosting. The excessive interactions and the effort required to maintain them contribute to a saturated and demanding online dating experience (cf. Šiša 2022: 15). The accessibility and convenience offered by handheld devices have facilitated a notable surge in the use of these dating platforms. The handheld nature of smartphones, enabling swift and continual access to these apps, has intensified the inclination towards mobile dating. This continuous connectivity fosters an environment conducive to frequent and immediate interactions, thus augmenting the allure and utilization of mobile dating applications among individuals. The constant connectivity offered by social media and new technologies leads to a state of perpetual networked attention, as described by Luthar and Pušnik (2021). This hyperconnectivity often results in overload, divided attention, and ghosting as users struggle to manage multiple relationships simultaneously. Ghosting thus becomes a form of digital disconnection, a strategy for users to disengage from overwhelming hyperconnectivity. Kaun (2021) notes that digital disconnection is a response to the information overload induced by digital media, representing a choice to disengage or navigate the complexities of hyperconnectivity (Cf. Šiša 2022: 15).

### **4.3 Non-Committal:**

Another noteworthy research finding, directly interconnected with my findings above, points to the prevalent casualness of interactions within mobile dating apps. These platforms often facilitate low-investment, brief, and informal exchanges between users. While this casual atmosphere can enhance the ease of initiating contact and reduce social pressure, it also promotes surface-level connections and a lack of commitment. It refers to the prevalent

tendency of users to engage in casual interactions without the immediate expectation of forming severe or committed relationships.

Commitments are 100% much more difficult because there are always many choices, in my opinion. As soon as one little thing does not fit, people give up. This fact can impact relationships with massive developments in the next few years. It is just so easy to give up on it and not invest too much. You can download the app and theoretically meet someone the next day. (Interview with Fabian #00:26:37-1#)

The non-committal nature of mobile dating apps challenges traditional notions of romance and courtship. Users often prioritize short-term connections and experiences over long-term commitments. The implications of these casual interactions on the development and sustainability of meaningful relationships merit thorough investigation. Furthermore, understanding how users balance casualness and pursue more profound connections is essential for a comprehensive analysis. Mobile dating apps facilitate a range of relationship definitions, from hook-ups to friends with benefits. Cultural anthropology allows us to explore how these fluid definitions emerge within different cultural contexts and the factors influencing these distinctions.

I just notice it myself, and every now and then, I think you are just wiping, you are wiping people away. So, I find that almost a bit worrying. People are judged by their photos. Somehow, the way you are treated is worse because you are only digital. You are not vulnerable. You do not know the facial expressions and gestures of the people on the other side. So I think the esteem is lost in a big way. (Interview with Vivien #00:42:09-7#)

While my interview partner noticed a lack of esteem for the counterpart in her behavior, some users might also feel an impact on their self-worth and self-esteem. Some users may feel validated or bolstered by the attention and matches they receive. In contrast, others may experience negative effects on their self-esteem, such as rejection or unrealistic beauty standards. The prevalence of informality within dating app interactions is intriguing from a cultural and social anthropological lens. It raises questions about contemporary society's evolving dynamics of intimacy and commitment.

I had an example the other day. I matched her for the second time. It is the first time we have not had a date. I found her extremely interesting. We texted each other about a possible date.

Then she asked me what I was looking for. I said that for now, I want to meet and be open, and if it really fits both, then I am also open to something long-term. At the moment, I have a lot going on with my new work, photography, and so on. I have to get everything back on track after my coccyx fracture. And then she said we should not meet. So both are interested, and only because a sentence apparently does not fit, because she is looking for something quite casual. I mean if she would explain to me the situation in 2 sentences then I could say yes or no. But to not meet at all, especially if there is a certain sympathy, I do not understand that. (Interview with Fabian #00:27:39-1)

This experience underlines the tendency of people becoming increasingly selective regarding non-committal encounters. The traditional concept of dating often involves gradually getting to know someone before committing. However, mobile dating apps have ushered in a paradigm shift, where individuals can engage in non-committal encounters with greater ease and a seemingly limitless pool of potential partners. While this newfound freedom is liberating, it has also led to a fascinating cultural and social phenomenon - heightened selectivity. One aspect of this selectivity is emphasizing individual preferences and pursuing partners who fit specific criteria. If even one criterion does not meet expectations, the match may be neglected, leading to the absence of a subsequent meeting. "I think in the background there is still the hope that you have that one match that will change everything. Maybe I am somehow too romantically inclined or too naive" (Interview with Vivien #00:08:08-2#). My informants have made these and similar statements regarding a specific idealism. Also, Deli states in this context: "I do not know if it is so likely that I will find this so-called perfect person, you know, ideal person" (Interview with Deli #00:10:23-0). As mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, the criteria for partner selection were different in former times. Chris Haywood expresses that during the late medieval period in Western Europe, the development of intimate relationships and ensuing marriages predominantly centered on the economic stability of tightly interconnected island communities (Haywood, 2019). Furthermore, the shift from "calling" to dating signifies a ritualized conduct marked by a sequence of significant actions (Jackson, 2011) utilized to express romantic or sexual intentions (Greer/Buss, 1994). Additionally, it represents a decline in parental influence over intimate practices as the 20th century advanced (Illouz, 1997; Wouters, 2004; Krause/Kowalski, 2013). In this context, Philip Shannon examined in his fieldwork with young men from New Delhi that the capacity to exchange emotions, desires, pleasures, and concerns enables young men to liberate themselves from prevailing stereotypes that perceive girls and women as 'silly' or 'dumb.' The advancement

of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilitates interactions with women in contexts where such exchanges were previously limited, providing access to novel modes of self-expression and communication. The internet and social media have particularly catalyzed the emergence of diverse new realms for gendered expression. These new forms of digital communication provide these young men with the possibility of a new form of selection criteria (Shannon, 2018).

Yes, I think it has become more idealistic. It is probably also more sexist. You think: no, I do not like this person. Here, I do not like this and that. But when you interact with each other in person, that tends to fall away, which is perhaps better. Or maybe not. (Interview with Paul #00:36:42-3#)

This statement once again underlines the trend of being fastidious, which characterizes the process of selecting a dating partner.

Even when users have been dating each other for an extended period, they may still secretly wonder whether their dating partner remains active on dating platforms. Sometimes, individuals receive such information from friends who have spotted their dating partner on these platforms.

I think now that we have online dating apps, everyone feels a little bit more like maybe he is continuing to match with other people, so I should continue to match with others so I will continue seeing other people. It actually creates a scenario where you end up dating multiple people at the same time, or you feel the need to date multiple people at the same time because you might also be concerned that if you do not, then you are the only one in this relationship that you are creating that is trying to be monogamous. So I think it makes it harder to commit to one person to really go deep with one person because you are spread across multiple people or you know multiple people you are dating simultaneously. So getting to know that one individual takes longer because you are meeting four people in the span of a week, and you only meet them once a week, so really building a more profound connection in that sense takes longer. (Interview with Clara #00:42:05-7#)

Clara addresses a side effect of the non-committal aspect of mobile dating apps in her statement. They are exploring anxiety about a dating partner's continued presence on mobile dating apps. With the proliferation of mobile dating apps, a new layer of interpersonal dynamics has emerged, influencing how individuals navigate romantic relationships. My

research seeks to provide a nuanced perspective on the interplay between technology and identity in modern dating. This new interconnection introduces new elements of uncertainty and insecurity. This section examines a specific aspect of this experience. There is a constant fear that one's romantic partner is still actively using mobile dating apps. Though deeply personal, this fear is situated within a broader cultural and social context, where norms of trust, identity, and commitment are constantly being renegotiated. Trust is a foundational element of any relationship, but the digital age has introduced new complexities. As mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis by Capurro (2017), Claras' statement above exemplifies how each technological revolution in human communication, a wide range of experiences related to time and space, both in terms of closeness and distance, comes into existence. This variety presents real opportunities, but occasionally, it leads to reduced forms of unity. The cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito also writes about contemporary young people who are involved in acquiring knowledge and forming their identity, experiencing the transition to adulthood, and striving for independence. Their experience is distinct as the environments for interaction, friendships, leisure, and self-expression are transforming due to their interaction with new media (Ito, 2009). Smartphone and app users must continuously learn to cope with the new socio-cultural demands that new technology brings. Broadbent (2016) mentions what is less recognized in this context. Within this abundance of platforms, gadgets, and services, users primarily engaged with just five individuals on average. In this sense, my informal conversational partner Sasa also mentioned that during the week, she is overwhelmed by the multiple group interactions and chats in her WhatsApp application. She mutes these chats and never replies (Informal Conversation with Sasa).

Even if you may have kissed on the first date, then often, a second date will not happen because there are already five potential dating partners in the background. (Interview with Fabian #00:29:20-2#)

As individuals engage with potential partners in the virtual realm, traditional trust markers, such as monogamy and exclusivity, are being redefined. The fear of competing with the digital realm is rooted in the uncertainty when individuals suspect their partners are maintaining a dual presence - one in the physical world of their relationship and the other in the digital world of mobile dating apps. This specific side effect of mobile dating app usage is particularly pronounced when dating is in its nascent stage and partners are still negotiating the boundaries of their relationship. This fear is not only about trust but also about self-worth. Individuals

experiencing this fear may question their desirability or wonder if their partners are searching for someone "better" on these platforms. This highlights the profound intersection between technology and self-identity. As stated in the theory, Gupta and Ferguson highlight that identity is simultaneously an intrinsic and chosen attribute while being externally ascribed or enforced. These individual and collective identities are formed within the framework of social practices. In this context, it becomes evident that identity formation experiences a profound change when intertwined with technology, as addressed by Hobbs (2017) and Budka et al. (2004). In this sense, MacLeod and McArthur, via an interface analysis of Bumble and Tinder, demonstrate how these digital communication tools shape user identities as they are "constructed and performed through the technology" (MacLeod/McArthur, 2019).

The cultural and gender-specific dimensions of this fear grew apparent in my research. Some cultures may be more permissive of dating app use within relationships, while others may stigmatize it. Gender dynamics play a role, as societal expectations and double standards influence how this fear is experienced and expressed. The fear that a partner is still active on dating apps is a multifaceted phenomenon that reflects the dynamic interplay between technology and intimate relationships in the digital age. Through a cultural and social anthropological lens, my deliberations offer insights into how individuals negotiate trust, identity, and commitment in the digital era. As mobile dating apps continue to shape the landscape of modern romance, understanding and addressing these formations become essential for individuals, couples, and society. In this regard, the following statement of one of my interviewees underlines the above.

And then, of course, I did not use it much because now, for example, I still have the app on my phone. I have an account, but I have turned it off so that people cannot see me. But it also means I cannot see anyone. It is like 'I do not dare delete the app yet'. Because then I would have to download it again, which is annoying. I have always had it like that. (Interview with Tim #00:03:11-0#)

Whenever Tim sees a person for a longer period, he is still unable to delete the app. Instead, he developed the tactic of hiding his profile. This statement reflects the non-committal element of mobile dating apps.

In the digital realm, where countless profiles are at one's fingertips, users have developed a habit of meticulously filtering potential matches based on criteria ranging from physical appearance to shared interests and even alignment of life goals. This meticulous

scrutiny has given rise to a culture where users have grown remarkably picky, leading to a few noteworthy findings in cultural and social anthropological research. Users on mobile dating apps often aspire to find the perfect match, leading to meticulously curated profiles and a search for partners who align with their idealized vision of a significant other. The wide array of options can lead to elevated standards for potential partners, with users swiping left or right based on even the minutest details. This can sometimes result in a paradox of choice, where the abundance of options leads to increased selectivity. The apps' algorithms, which offer personalized recommendations, further contribute to users' selective behavior by catering to their specific desires, feeding the desire for the "perfect" match. In this sense, as stated in the theory of this paper, White (2020) found that algorithms contribute to the reinforcement of prevailing social structures and identity categories within modern society. They hold the capacity to enable profiling and oppressive mechanisms that marginalize individuals based on attributes such as gender, race, and other aspects of identity. People may engage in non-committal relationships but are often discerning about whom they choose for such encounters, seeking individuals who fulfill physical desires and align with their values and preferences. This heightened selectivity can impact users' self-esteem. Repeated rejection or perceived lack of attention can negatively affect individuals, underscoring the complex relationship between selective behavior and self-esteem in digital dating. The emphasis on physical attributes and initial impressions can lead to a shallower understanding of potential partners and missed opportunities for deeper connections. In a world where choice and convenience have become paramount, users of mobile dating apps have adapted by becoming more discerning in their non-committal pursuits, a phenomenon that continues to shape the cultural and social landscape of contemporary dating.

Social anthropological perspectives can reveal the regional and cultural variations in non-committal dating practices. Different societies have unique norms and values regarding relationships, and studying these variations can provide insights into the impact of culture on dating behavior. As stated by Wilson et al. (2002) in the theoretical chapters of this thesis, online communities frequently center around offline ethnic or national affiliations, an area extensively investigated by researchers in diverse settings. For example, anthropological studies have explored how Tongans (Morton, 1999; Morton, 2002) or Inuit (Christensen, 1999) create communal spaces through online engagements. It is vital to note that computer-mediated interactions do not merely mirror offline interactions; online communities often manifest distinctive differences compared to their offline equivalents. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that internet users do not consistently prioritize the same national or ethnic identity



in every online interaction. Various participatory frames and identities are accessible and utilized by a diverse spectrum of internet users across varying contexts (Cf. Wilson 2002: 457). The non-committal nature of dating apps often encourages users to curate and present their idealized versions. This can be analyzed through the lens of performativity, where individuals enact roles in a highly constructed manner. Social anthropology can explore the reasons behind this performative aspect and its implications for self-identity.

Anthropologists may explore how this informality impacts notions of trust, reciprocity, and emotional attachment within relationships. Additionally, there is potential for research into how cultural variations influence the degree of informality in different societies, shedding light on the intersections of digital culture and traditional values.

#### **4.4. Dehumanization:**

Mobile dating apps have revolutionized seeking love and companionship, but they also serve as a window into some complex and often unsettling aspects of modern relationships. Dehumanization in the context of mobile dating apps can manifest in several ways, and my research findings have shed light on the following critical aspects. Before I can go into these aspects in more detail, I must attempt a definition. According to my data, dehumanization in the context of dating apps refers to reducing individuals to mere profiles or avatars before in-person interaction occurs. As users engage with potential partners solely through the app interface, the full complexity of human identity is often distilled into curated photos and texts. This can lead to an impersonal or objectified view of others, where they are not yet perceived with the fullness of human qualities and attributes more naturally recognized in face-to-face encounters. The data of my research hint at a trend towards dehumanization in communication within dating apps. The digital barrier between users can lead to dehumanization through curt or inconsiderate messaging.

And, of course, there were also situations where I simply did not get in touch and just unmatched people. But I also felt so bad in these situations and thought to myself: Dude, you are a terrible person, you do not do that. But it is so easy. It is not good at all. Nobody goes into conflict situations, unpleasant situations, or confrontations anymore. (Interview with Vivien #00:43:56-5#)

The absence of face-to-face interaction can sometimes result in a lack of empathy or regard for the person's feelings on the other side. Conversations tend to be characterized by brevity and a focus on visual elements, such as photos and profile descriptions. This can reduce interpersonal interactions to a somewhat mechanistic process of swiping and liking, where individuals are evaluated based on superficial criteria. As stated in the theoretical part of this thesis, Dundon (2021) examines that in the contemporary landscape, the notion of representation is widely recognized as a constructed concept. It is acknowledged that representations cannot merely mirror reality as each person's understanding of "reality" is subjective. Regarding online and mobile dating, Alison Dundon notes that individuals seeking potential partners must present themselves in ways that resonate with the traits, values, and characteristics desired by their audience. Consequently, crafting a dating profile involves intentional choices in language, images, and self-expression to project a specific image (Cf. Dundon 2021: 347). Dating app users often encounter a milieu where the focus is primarily on aesthetics and immediate physical attraction. People are reduced to a collection of photos and a brief bio, prompting quick swipes based on looks rather than an appreciation for their multifaceted personalities. The data highlights how this superficiality can dehumanize potential partners, reducing them to mere objects of desire. Such issues of dehumanization can impact the quality of connections formed and raise questions about the objectification of individuals within the app environment. Investigating the psychological and sociological consequences of this dehumanization is vital. Numerous scholars have already investigated how offline power dynamics and the shaping of identities influence interactions in online spaces. This investigation includes the scrutiny of gender (Brook/Boal, 1995; Correll, 1995; Dietrich, 1997; O'Brien, 1999; Wellman/Gulia, 1999; Wheeler, 2001) and racial elements, incorporating discussions related to marginalized perspectives (Burkhalter, 1999; Ebo, 1998; Kolko et al., 2000) across diverse contexts. Furthermore, researchers have acknowledged the close relationships between online identities and notions of authenticity, contextualization, and framing when exploring the contrast between genuine and virtual identities (Markham, 1998; O'Brien, 1999). Nevertheless, scholars have underscored the substantial scope for additional investigation and exploration in this field (Cf. Wilson et al. 2002: 457). The observation of dehumanization in mobile dating app communication invites anthropologists to explore the consequences of reducing human interaction to brief, often superficial exchanges. This process may indicate a broader trend towards digital mediation of social interactions.

A friend of mine says that the people who write to you are not people until you meet them. Of course, they are people. This is not meant to be a devaluation, but he meant that they are there and maybe even immediately gone again. So they write to you, and you answer. Although they have established contact and you answer, but they no longer write. (Interview with Laurin #00:28:32-4#)

This statement also led me to reflect that people might treat the other person in digital communication differently as if they know each other. The notion of dehumanization within dating apps is a thought-provoking observation made during my interviews. It highlights a phenomenon where individuals are perceived as less than fully human or are devalued in the digital realm, mainly before they are encountered in person. This perception can facilitate behaviors such as ghosting.

And then just like that, I do not want to be with you anymore, I am going to unmatched you. So, nobody is ready to go into confrontation or is just honest. After deciding to do so, I have already told three or several men after the first two dates: Hey, it was a lovely evening, but up to here and not further. I would like to leave it at this. And I have noticed that I feel much better when I show appreciation to others. (Interview with Vivien #00:43:19-2#)

The anonymity and ease of ghosting, the act of suddenly and completely cutting off communication without explanation, on mobile dating apps contribute to a culture of dehumanization. It has become a notorious and all too common phenomenon in mobile dating apps. Normalizing ghosting has become a common and almost accepted practice in digital dating. It is associated with a sense of detachment that often characterizes digital interactions, making it easier for users to disconnect abruptly without considering the impact on the other person. Anamarija Šiša also concludes in her article about the phenomenon of ghosting that ghosting is a socio-cultural practice shaped by the technological milieu of mobile dating apps and, therefore, has become a normalized breakup strategy. Ghosting, facilitated by dating apps' gamified interfaces and uncertain environments, allows users to offload the emotional burden of ending relationships to technology, aligning with the apps' broader goal of prolonged user engagement, akin to digital games that prioritize extended play. Users experience ghosting both as initiators and recipients, balancing control with unpredictability. This practice reflects the design of dating apps, which encourage spontaneous, informal interactions, making ghosting a convenient, albeit emotionally taxing, option (cf. Šiša 2022: 17). Individuals are treated as

disposable, and the emotional impact of abruptly severing contact with someone is often overlooked. Ghosting is often linked to the inherent uncertainty of early-stage online connections. The research reveals that many users of mobile dating apps view their connections as tentative and fragile. This uncertainty can lead to a greater willingness to ghost, as the emotional investment in these relationships may be perceived as low. The digital realm provides a degree of anonymity that emboldens individuals to engage in ghosting. Users may not witness the immediate emotional repercussions of their actions, which can lead to a lack of empathy or accountability. While some individuals ghost to avoid confrontation or discomfort, others do it to gain power or control. The research underscores the varied and often conflicting reasons that drive this behavior. Users who choose not to engage actively on dating apps can still collect and archive matches, similar to "likes" on social media. This collection provides positive feedback, keeping users engaged with the app. The gamified nature of these apps creates a "virtual reality" where actions seem to have no direct outside consequences. Consequently, ghosting, as a technologically mediated act unique to mobile apps, operates within a realm of relaxed moral codes and ambiguous rules, seemingly without impacting relationships outside this digital context (cf. Šiša 2022: 14). A significant finding is the profound emotional impact of ghosting on victims. Those who experience ghosting feel confused, rejected, and anxious.

It has removed some of the humanity behind, you know you are interacting with a person who has feelings and who has their own struggles. I know I have talked to friends about this many times. People jump into a relationship on a dating app and then end up ghosting people. And then, you know, they might have gone on a couple of dates, might have been talking for a few weeks, and then no explanation, just no response, just cut off. To me, I think that is kind of a symptom of dating apps and a dehumanizing of profiles. It is like: oh well, this did not work out, I do not really want to go through that process. I mean, we already skipped the part of figuring out whether that person is interested or not. It is like, oh, I can just swipe on this person in real life even though we have gone on dates and had a connection, and I can leave without an explanation. (Interview with Ben #00:43:05-1#)

Ben further states that this aspect removes some of the responsibility in dating. When he was using mobile dating apps, he always tried to give the person an explanation and at least end things on what he felt were good terms. He was often ghosted, and some of his friends have

been ghosted. In these cases, he reminded them and himself that it was not personal, probably nine times out of 10.

That person has their own struggles and does not necessarily realize that their actions might hurt that person. But it does go back to that kind of dealing. The fact that people view dating very differently is almost like you can just swipe through these profiles, collect these matches, and if you are not interested, then just cut ties, and it does not have an impact. But in reality, it does impact the people on the other side of that profile. (Interview with Ben #00:45:20-1#)

His statement underlines the emotional toll this practice can take on individuals left in the dark, questioning their self-worth and the nature of their digital connections. Research can also delve into the unique nature of rejection in the digital age. The absence of closure or explanation can make rejection through ghosting incredibly challenging to navigate, with victims often left to grapple with unanswered questions. How does the prevalence of ghosting influence user behavior on mobile dating apps? It can lead to guarded interactions, a reluctance to invest emotionally, and even a cycle of mutual ghosting as individuals protect themselves from potential rejection. Cultural and social anthropological research on ghosting in the context of mobile dating apps paints a multifaceted picture of this practice. It reveals the interplay between technology, social norms, and emotional consequences, shedding light on the complexities of modern dating behavior. As researchers continue to examine this phenomenon, we might better understand the factors driving ghosting and, in turn, contribute to more considerate and empathetic digital dating practices.

From a cultural and social anthropological perspective, this observation invites a critical examination of how technology-mediated interactions shape how individuals perceive and engage with one another. It underscores the potential detachment from empathy and emotional connection that can occur in virtual spaces, where the absence of physical presence may lead to the devaluation of other's experiences and feelings. This becomes evident by how the informants of Paula Blancks' research on ghosting describe the phenomenon as impersonal. Something that is a part of a type of behavior on Tinder that you have to accept. Almost as if it were a matter of course. In other words, informant Lisa's strategy of not seeing ghosting as something personal to get ahead can be seen as taking off her cloak. Her strategy allows her to distance herself from the situation. Like "external goods", ghosting becomes something external that does not affect her personally. The phenomenon becomes tangible and enables physical distancing by objectifying the practice of ghosting into an external good, a commodity.

By distancing herself, Lisa does not have to deal with it emotionally or personally, and her self-image remains intact. This can be interpreted as her re-evaluating the digital event into something physical to distance herself from it. This shows how the virtual world is embodied and becomes part of the physical world (C.f. Blanck 2022: 29).

Social and cultural anthropological research can delve into the broader implications of this dehumanization within dating apps. It may explore how these digital interactions intersect with established courtship and relationship formation cultural norms. Additionally, it can investigate the impact of these behaviors on individuals' emotional well-being and overall experiences in online dating. Furthermore, anthropologists might consider how dating app interfaces and algorithms contribute to or relieve this dehumanizing trend. They could explore design choices encouraging humane interactions, such as fostering empathy or discouraging ghosting. In summary, the concept of dehumanization in dating apps provides a rich area for anthropological inquiry, shedding light on the intersection of technology, culture, and interpersonal relationships in the digital age. It underscores the need to critically assess how these platforms influence the way we perceive and interact with one another. Anthropological inquiries could examine the emotional toll of depersonalized interactions, exploring how individuals navigate the tension between technologically mediated connections and their innate need for human connection and empathy.

#### **4.5 FOMO becoming FOBO:**

Another trend in my research results is the prevalence of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon, which stands out among my research participants using mobile dating apps. Fear of Missing Out on mobile dating apps is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. On the one hand, users experience FOMO due to the vast array of potential matches and the fear of passing up a chance for a meaningful connection. This fear intensifies as users perceive others engaging in successful interactions or finding relationships through the app. Conversely, FOMO is also triggered by the constant influx of new profiles, creating a sense of urgency to continuously swipe and explore, lest an ideal match be overlooked. Additionally, the fear of missing out on experiences, such as exciting encounters or novel connections, drives users to remain consistently engaged with the app. This multifaceted FOMO within mobile dating apps influences behavior, leading to increased app usage, constant checking for updates, and heightened anxiety surrounding potential missed opportunities for connection. FOMO

manifests as a fear or anxiety that one might miss out on exciting opportunities or experiences if they do not continually engage with the app. After researching this term, I found the following definition: "The term "Fear of Missing Out" or FOMO was coined in 2004 to characterize a phenomenon identified on social networking platforms. FOMO encompasses two primary processes: the initial perception of being left out, succeeded by a compulsive behavior aimed at sustaining these social connections" (Gupta/Sharma 2021: 4881). The anthropologist Rachel McDermott explored in her dissertation the emotional expression of FOMO about society and the self. She points out that the term FOMO in the context of Social media contains "[...] the fear of missing out as well as the fear of being perceived as missing out" (McDermott 2017: 6). According to McDermott, FOMO is an emotional state characterized by apprehension about missing out on important, self-affirming, or socially valuable events. While FOMO is not a novel emotional experience, its context in societal dialogue and technology is contemporary. The emotion at the core of FOMO, envy, has evolved in its societal relevance as societal norms and behaviors have transformed. Thus, FOMO represents a modern interpretation and labeling of a historically prevalent emotion, reflecting its interplay with current societal dynamics and technological influences.

Social media platforms, such as Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram, provide a venue for individuals to experience events they did not physically attend vicariously. These platforms offer brief glimpses into others' lives, highlighting critical moments while lacking comprehensive context. This phenomenon fuels the Fear of Missing Out as individuals witness the curated, idealized portrayals of others' lives, prompting a desire to match these socially desirable traits. Consequently, individuals engage in self-marketing and branding, creating a mediated ideal self. This dynamic not only perpetuates FOMO among users but is also leveraged by companies in their strategic product marketing, mirroring personal self-branding techniques (Cf. McDermott 2017: 6). While in social media, it is about sharing actions such as stories and posts to show presence or to see what others have experienced, FOMO in that context is about missing these actions. FOMO in mobile dating apps is more about missing potential partners or encounters and being missed by others. Although some users may have a contradictory relationship with mobile dating apps, they cannot completely delete them. Even if they prefer offline encounters, they keep returning to dating apps for fear of missing someone. Sasa also confirms this in an informal conversation: "I never delete my mobile dating apps, and even if I am frustrated about the outcome of digital dating in general, I always come back in times when I feel I cannot meet people in real life." (Informal Conversation with Sasa)

Sasas' statement reflects the basic idea of FOMO. Out of a constant fear of missing out, she cannot completely leave the app.

As stated before, FOMO in the context of mobile dating apps can be one of the causes of compulsive app use and influence decision-making processes. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as the following: "a worried feeling that you may miss exciting events that other people are going to, especially caused by things you see on social media" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/fomo>). Understanding how FOMO impacts users' behaviors, emotions, and well-being within the dating app context is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of app-based dating on contemporary social dynamics and individual dynamics.

So I think dating apps have made it harder for you to feel like the person you are currently on a date with is someone that you just want to continue moving forward within seeing something because of this thing in the back of your head: maybe the next one I swipe on is better. Maybe the next one I swiped on is better, so I think I sometimes notice it in my own being, but I also assume it in my counterparts. (Interview with Clara #00:38:14-1#)

This fourth aspect stands in FOMO within dating app usage and can be understood as a reflection of broader societal anxieties and desires. In her examination, McDermott delves into the reciprocal relationship between the self as a byproduct of FOMO and FOMO as a societal construct. Her study highlights how emotional expression varies across contexts, particularly socially mediated spaces. It emphasizes the cultural dependency on emotional expression and understanding, using FoMO as a case study to explore how it stems from social norms surrounding envy. As societal dynamics evolve and technology progresses, FoMO's relevance in social media discussions becomes apparent. Individuals respond to societal expectations by crafting and marketing their identities consistent with social norms. While having historical roots in social anxiety, FOMO has adapted to contemporary contexts, signifying the evolving nature of emotional states in response to societal and technological changes (Cf. McDermott 2017: 7-13). In the context of mobile dating apps, users often experience FOMO because these platforms present a seemingly endless array of potential partners and opportunities for connection. This abundance of choices can be overwhelming and lead to anxiety about making the "right" choice. From a social anthropological standpoint, FOMO in mobile dating apps highlights the performative nature of online dating. Users are acutely aware of the need to craft attractive profiles, engage in witty conversations, and maintain a constant online presence to



avoid missing potential matches. In his 2020 study, McGinnis delineates the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as an unwelcome anxiety stemming from perceptions, often exacerbated by the influence of social networks. This form of social anxiety, characterized by FOMO, emerges from the evolution of new technologies and social media, leading to a psychological dependency, as noted by Vaughn in 2012. FOMO propels individuals to believe that others are partaking in more gratifying experiences than they are. Conversely, the Fear of Better Options (FOBO) is identified as an anxiety-driven aversion to commitment triggered by the apprehension that a more advantageous or appealing choice might exist, whether real or imagined. This type of social anxiety impacts the personality and induces behavioral changes, leading to what McGinnis terms as Fear of Doing Anything (FODA) in 2004 and 2020. FODA is described as a state of paralysis brought about by the combined anxieties of FOMO and FOBO, impacting an individual's ability to act or make decisions (C.f. Ortiz 2022: 2). Ortiz's contribution confirms Clara's interview statement, in which she says that while using the mobile dating app, she often has the fear of missing out on a better option in the form of a partner. My conversation partner Deli also confirmed this effect in the following quote:

So I found a guy, and we ended up spending a lot of time together over a two-week period. And then I was still checking, but I was not so eager to meet anyone because I had such a lovely time with this guy, and I thought already like it was enough. (Interview with Deli #00:06:20-1#)

This statement shows that mobile dating apps are designed to keep you swiping and "play the game". Although Deli already entered the next step with a person she met on an app and was meeting them for longer, she could not stop swiping. In the course of the interview, she underlines the statement above with the following declaration:

I had it also five years ago when I first tried dating apps and got out of a long relationship. Around then, I also had this compulsion, I would say, and I think it can be obsessive. I also think that I probably have ADHD, which is not diagnosed, and I think, of course, like any apps, they are designed to make you want to use them all the time. And so there have been times where I am always on and really excited, actually. (Interview with Deli #00:08:31-9#)

Cultural norms and expectations regarding dating and relationships influence this performance. For instance, some cultures may place a higher premium on traditional dating practices, while

others may embrace the convenience and speed of online interactions. Furthermore, FOMO can intersect with identity, self-presentation, and self-worth issues. Users may experience pressure to conform to specific beauty standards or societal expectations related to gender roles. This, in turn, can impact how individuals present themselves in mobile dating app profiles and interactions. In this context, McDermott states that in social media, individuals are influenced to curate a self-representation that aligns with societal norms, a process subtly governed by the unspoken rules of these networked publics. This dynamic fosters a behavior driven by the fear of judgment, compelling individuals to emulate an ideal self. This pursuit of an idealized self-image is often the underlying cause of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Social media platforms facilitate the projection of this idealized self through various forms of content, which can simultaneously evoke envy in others and serve as a demonstration of one's success in circumventing FOMO (Cf. McDermott 2017: 87). In an informal conversation, I had with a 39-year-old heterosexual cis man, who engaged in mobile dating apps from 2014-2018, I once again received the insight that this modern form of dating is overwhelming and exhausting. "[...] It just totally oversaturated the dating experience till the point where it just wears you down, it drains you until you are disillusioned because it is just a game of light. And that was a negative for me anyway. The devaluation of actual interaction with someone that you might be interested in." (Informal Conversation with Bob) After his mobile dating app use of 4 years he decided to give up on this form of modern dating.

The fear of missing out (FOMO) within mobile dating apps illuminates a profound societal shift in the pursuit of connections. It signifies a contemporary cultural pattern where individuals, influenced by digital interfaces, experience a persistent sense of uncertainty and dissatisfaction. As Linne states, the anxiety linked to being disconnected from digital screens, termed FOMO, arises from their captivating allure. Bilinkis (2019) describes this as a compulsion for continuous connection, particularly prevalent among younger generations. This demographic's urge to stay at the forefront of sociability, visibility, and popularity through social networks and trendy cultural consumption underscores this phenomenon. This fear partly fuels the popularity of dating networks, as no one wishes to be excluded despite uncertainties regarding their utility. This behavior aligns with digital voyeurism, a curiosity to peer into others' private lives through these networks (Cf. Linne 2019: 7).

And then fortunately, when I came to the point of deciding that I would come back to Berlin because I wanted to make the relationship work he r,eally freaked out. And around that time a

friend of mine found him on a dating app. It was not a nice feeling, but it was not breaking a rule because we had not talked about it so explicitly. (Interview with Deli #00:59:04-1#)

This phenomenon suggests a transformative change in social interactions, reshaping the traditional dating landscape. The infinite scroll or swipe feature, emblematic of dating platforms, introduces an ongoing quest for an elusive perfect match. "And it becomes tough to really focus on people or even have the feeling you are missing out on someone" (Interview with Clara #00:57:13-3#). Anthropologically, this reflects a cultural narrative that values perpetual choice and possibility, fostering a mentality where the next potential connection is perceived as superior, perpetuating a cycle of fleeting interactions and undermining the depth of meaningful engagement.

But I think, in a way, it connects to maybe this culture in apps like the Berlin dating scene, which is crazy and which is a kind of toxicity of constantly feeling that you might find someone better. And he said to me in the end that he was looking for a perfect relationship, which I thought was crazy after almost a year to tell someone. (Interview with Deli #00:01:01-5#)

The guy Deli had been dating for almost one year and was still searching for the perfect relationship. This circumstance highlights the trend of FOBO, where one constantly feels anxiety about missing a better option. In another conversation with Sasa, she confirms this aspect with an incident she had on Bumble. While she was dating a guy and seeing him for several months, her colleague had a match with him on Bumble. Even though they defined their relationship already as exclusive, he could not stop being active on mobile dating apps. After receiving the information that he still had an active profile, she continued using the apps to find a better option. Fear of Better Options (FOBO) in mobile dating apps reflects a societal paradigm where abundant choices foster a non-committal attitude among users. This phenomenon underscores the cultural shift towards prioritizing potential over permanence in social relationships, influenced by the digital landscape's vast array of alternatives.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis aims to contribute to a relatively new field of anthropological research embedded in digital anthropology. My main research question aims to investigate the sociocultural impact of mobile dating apps on courtship rituals and partner initiation and how these apps transformed the traditional dating landscape. Therefore, my main research question is:

### **How do mobile dating apps transform cultural processes of courtship rituals and partner initiation?**

The thesis posits that mobile dating apps have led to signifying trends and effects in the search for potential partners and encounters, as well as in dating behavior and courtship rituals. The interviews and informal conversations predominantly focused on exploring how individuals initiate and develop digital acquaintances, particularly through dating apps. This exploration included examining the patterns of behavior and experimentation users exhibit, as well as understanding how prevailing gender norms shape the way users present themselves in their profiles and execute courtship rituals.

The shift toward online dating reflects societal and technological transformations, reconstructing contemporary romance into a transactional endeavor (Heino et al., 2010; Linne, 2020; Bandinelli/Gandini, 2022). Mobile dating apps serve as intermediaries through which individuals engage in calculated and strategic acts to discover love, physical intimacy, and emotional closeness, but also to outlive boredom, get an ego boost, or increase self-esteem. The process of dating, courtship rituals as well as the development of romantic connections have been significantly influenced by the advent of the "digital revolution". Singles have access to many potential partners through their smartphones and social media algorithms, highlighting a remarkable difference to the dating practices of former generations. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in urban areas, where conventional venues for meeting people, such as educational institutions and workplaces, have, to some extent, been partially substituted by online platforms. This thesis offers an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of mobile dating apps, particularly focusing on four major trends and their side effects, which were outstanding among my informants. It sheds light on how these platforms, while revolutionizing the landscape of modern relationships and courtship rituals, also contribute to a loss of empathy

and genuine connection in human interactions within these digital environments. In order to answer the main research interest, I will return to my findings on the four trends. Subsequently, I will engage with the sub-questions of my research and attempt to provide answers to them.

My thesis provided a detailed exploration of the dynamics of mobile dating apps from a cultural and social anthropological perspective. The first significant trend is the side effect of mobile dating apps, which I call constant "oversupply". This significant trend builds one element of the answer to the main research question. Exploring mobile dating apps reveals significant insights into contemporary relationship dynamics and societal behaviors. The primary themes within this context revolve around the paradox of choice, the impact of technological ubiquity on human behavior and dynamics, and the transformation of social norms in the digital age. The functionality of these apps, which allows users to view and interact with one profile at a time, has transformed the traditional approach to forming relationships. In the following paragraphs, I will mention some byproducts of this first trend of "oversupply". The "infinite swiping" (Beck, 2021) feature, akin to "infinite scrolling" (Jovicic, 2021) on social media platforms, engenders a sense of endless possibilities, closely mirroring the consumerist tendencies of the contemporary digital culture (Heino et al., 2010; Linne, 2020; Bandinelli/Gandini, 2022). While many choices appear beneficial, they can lead to decision fatigue and a diminished ability to make meaningful connections. My research participants feel overwhelmed by the endless stream of potential matches, leading to superficial engagement and a lack of depth in interactions. This reflects a shift in how individuals approach decision-making and relationship formation in an era of digital abundance.

The data gained touches on the concept of a collective addiction to digital technologies, especially smartphones, as Otto (2021) noted and included in the theoretical part of this thesis. This addiction impacts social behaviors and health, underscoring the need to understand and address the broader societal implications of this dependence. The constant presence of smartphones and the accessibility of mobile dating apps create a unique behavioral pattern among users. As observed in the interviews, this leads to habitual use, often driven by boredom or a subconscious inclination to engage with the apps, or as my interviewees call it "automatism". This behavior underscores a more significant societal trend where technology, particularly mobile devices, profoundly influences daily routines, social interactions, and even cognitive processes. Not only motivations like boredom but also other reasons like sexual excitement, sexual frustration, or loneliness can lead to an app engagement characterized by automatism.

It could be determined that mobile dating apps transform social norms and courtship rituals. The digital dating landscape signifies a departure from traditional partner selection processes, which were more localized and socially guided. The globalized platform of mobile dating apps allows for interactions beyond geographical and cultural confines, challenging previous notions of identity, community, and belonging. This global connectivity, termed the "global village" concept (McLuhan, 1962), underscores the significant societal changes caused by digital technology, reshaping personal relationships and broader social dynamics.

Interviews with users like David and Clara highlight a common theme of quantity over quality in online interactions. This tendency towards superficial engagements with many potential matches often results in decision fatigue, a phenomenon where the overwhelming abundance of choice impedes meaningful connection. The endless nature of these interactions creates a paradoxical situation where the vastness of choice leads to diminishing engagement. Most of my conversational partners are coping with digital abundance in mobile dating apps. My research participants develop various strategies to manage the overwhelming choice and engagement on dating platforms. This includes selective engagement, disengagement, or focusing on quality over quantity. These strategies reflect an individual's negotiation of personal boundaries and mental well-being in a digitally saturated environment.

It could be established that mobile dating apps can impact self-perception and social interaction. The way users present themselves on these platforms and the norms and constraints of the digital environment shape the interactions they engage in. This has implications for self-perception and social behavior as users adapt to new forms of interaction that are heavily influenced by technological parameters.

From an anthropological perspective, the diversity in user motivations for using these apps - ranging from seeking long-term relationships to enhancing self-esteem - reflects individuals' varied social and psychological needs in the digital era. In addition, by looking at the different user motivations and strategies, it becomes clear that it can be challenging to find a suitable counterpart among all users with their different motivations with whom the reasons for using the app are in harmony. The impact of these apps extends beyond the digital realm and can potentially influence users' perceptions of relationships, self-identity, and social interaction.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal an underlying adherence to traditional gender roles within the digital dating landscape. Despite the potential for challenging these norms, many of my research participants, including Tim, express feelings of being bound by societal expectations of male initiative and female passivity in dating contexts. This adherence suggests

that while digital platforms offer new modes of interaction, they are still influenced by long-standing societal norms and gender stereotypes.

The prevalence of mobile phones and the resultant constant connectivity have significantly affected how relationships are initiated and developed. The accessibility of mobile dating apps has led to a shift in how individuals engage with potential partners, with the smartphone becoming a central tool in navigating the intricacies of modern dating. However, this constant engagement has also led to an overreliance on digital communication, as noted by Vivien, indicating a broader societal challenge of balancing digital and real-life interactions. My study seeks to reveal a complex interplay between technology, societal norms, and individual behaviors. The proliferation of mobile dating apps and the behaviors they engender offer rich insights into contemporary societal shifts. It underscores the transformative impact of digitization on personal relationships and highlights the need for ongoing exploration into how these platforms are reshaping societal structures and individual identities. These platforms are tools for finding romantic partners and encounters and reflect broader changes in how individuals interact, make decisions and perceive themselves and others in the digital age. As technology continues to evolve, it is imperative to understand its implications for human behavior and social interaction in an increasingly digitized world. The research highlights the need for a deeper understanding of these dynamics and their implications for individual and societal well-being.

According to my research, another aspect that forms a significant development in the context of mobile dating apps and the second trend is the tendency of these apps to promote a non-committed attitude in dating and interactions. One of the reasons for this effect is that the apps are designed and created to keep the user in the app. This is a paradox, as the actual reason for using the app is to find a potential partner and leave the app. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will explain the side effects of the second trend of non-committal.

The prevalence of casual interactions and the ease of having numerous encounters and communications facilitated by these platforms have profoundly transformed the dynamics of intimacy, commitment, and social interaction.

The casual and non-committal nature of interactions within mobile dating apps hints at a departure from traditional notions of romance and courtship. Users often lean towards short-term connections, prioritizing immediate experiences over long-term commitments. This shift has significant implications for the development and sustainability of relationships, challenging established norms and expectations of romantic partnerships. The ease of initiating contact on these platforms, while reducing social pressure, can promote superficial connections. Users

judge potential partners based on digital profiles, often disregarding the deeper aspects of personality and compatibility. My research participants confirmed the tendency to superficiality in mobile dating apps as the amount of possibilities sometimes even demands a strategy towards a rational treatise. This digital mediation influences how esteem and value are assigned in interpersonal interactions, potentially leading to reduced empathy and understanding. At this point, it is essential to mention that the ease of mobile dating apps also helps introverted, shy, and marginalized groups to socialize.

According to my data, it can be assumed that perceptions of identity and self-worth can be affected through the use of mobile dating apps. The digital environment of these apps influences users' self-perception and self-esteem. The attention and validation received through matches can bolster self-worth, while rejection or pursuing unrealistic beauty standards can have negative effects. Selecting a partner based on thoroughly curated profiles reflects a broader cultural trend towards idealized self-presentation and heightened individualism. The research highlights users becoming increasingly selective, a side effect that contrasts with traditional dating practices that involve a more gradual process of getting to know someone. This heightened selectivity, enabled by the vast choice available on these platforms, has led to a culture where even minor mismatches can neglect potential relationships. Culturally, this byproduct of selectivity echoes broader consumerist attitudes prevalent in many societies, where abundance and choice are highly valued. Socially, it indicates a shift in relationship dynamics, emphasizing immediate attraction and compatibility over gradual, deeper connection-building.

There is a tendency to a redefinition of trust and commitment. The research also delves into the anxieties surrounding trust and commitment in the digital dating era. The fear that a romantic partner might still be active on dating apps adds a layer of uncertainty and insecurity to relationships, prompting a reevaluation of trust and fidelity norms. This fear is reframed within the digital context.

The study suggests that regional and cultural variations significantly impact non-committal dating practices. These variations offer a rich area for anthropological research, revealing how digital culture intersects with and diverges from traditional values. The performative aspect of self-presentation on these platforms is also a critical area of interest, shedding light on how digital identities are constructed and perceived.

In summary, this second trend underscores the profound impact of mobile dating apps on contemporary social and romantic dynamics. It highlights the complexities of navigating



intimacy, identity, and commitment in an increasingly digitized social landscape, where traditional norms are being redefined and challenged.

The research findings underscore the third trend, which was outstanding in my analysis, toward a mechanistic approach to relationships in the digital realm. The ease and impersonality of app-based communication often result in superficial exchanges, where individuals are reduced to mere profiles comprising photos and brief bios. This reductionist view fosters a culture where people are valued primarily for their physical attributes, overlooking the richness of their personalities and experiences. I call the third trend "dehumanization" and will explain it together with its side effects in the following paragraphs.

Moreover, the thesis delves into the phenomenon of ghosting, a prevalent practice in online dating that epitomizes the dehumanization trend. According to my data, dehumanization promotes, justifies, and relativizes ghosting. Ghosting, characterized by abruptly ending communication without explanation, reflects a broader cultural shift towards detachment and avoidance of emotional confrontation. The anonymity and convenience afforded by mobile dating apps facilitate this behavior, often leaving individuals on the receiving end feeling confused, rejected, and devalued.

Through interviews and analysis, the thesis provides personal insights into how users of dating apps perceive and engage with other individuals on these platforms. These narratives reveal a complex interplay between the desire for connection and the protective mechanisms individuals employ against the vulnerability inherent in online dating. This study highlights the paradox of seeking intimacy in an environment that often promotes disconnection, superficiality, and individualism.

In essence, this thesis contributes significantly to the discourse on digital dating culture and courtship rituals. It illuminates the challenges and complexities of seeking romantic connections in an age dominated by technology. As we navigate this evolving landscape, it becomes imperative to understand and address these platforms' psychological, sociological, and anthropological impacts on human relationships. This thesis attempts to step toward a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the role of technology in shaping contemporary romantic interactions and encounters.

In the realm of mobile dating apps, the prevalence of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon, as revealed in my research, highlights a complex interplay of modern relationship dynamics and digital culture. It constitutes trend number four. FOMO within these apps is multifaceted: it manifests as anxiety over missing potential matches and meaningful connections, spurred by observing others' successes and a ceaseless flow of new profiles. Users

feel an urgency to remain constantly active, propelled by a fear of overlooking ideal matches and missing out on novel experiences. This layered FOMO significantly impacts user behavior, leading to compulsive app usage and heightened anxiety over potential missed connections.

Cultural and social anthropological perspectives suggest that FOMO within mobile dating apps is not merely about missing out on potential partners but also about a fear of being missed or overlooked by others. This fear is further compounded by the societal pressure to present an ideal self, as McDermott (2017) points out. The representation of self on social media platforms, governed by unwritten social rules, fosters a behavior driven by fear of judgment and the compulsion to conform to an idealized self-image. This dynamic is leveraged by companies in product marketing, mirroring personal self-branding techniques. The phenomenon of FOMO in mobile dating apps reflects broader societal anxieties and desires. It is shaped by cultural norms and expectations regarding dating and relationships, where users feel the need to craft attractive profiles and maintain an online presence to avoid missing out on potential matches. The endless choices on these platforms can be overwhelming, leading to anxiety about making the right choice and conforming to societal beauty standards and gender roles. FOMO intersects with identity, self-presentation, and self-worth issues, impacting how individuals present themselves on mobile dating app profiles and interactions.

Furthermore, FOMO, in the context of mobile dating apps, highlights the performative nature of online dating. It underscores the cultural narrative that values perpetual choice and possibility, fostering a mentality where the next potential connection is perceived as superior. This leads to a cycle of fleeting interactions, undermining the depth of meaningful engagement. The fear of better options (FOBO) reflects a societal trend towards prioritizing potential over permanence in relationships, influenced by the digital landscape's vast array of alternatives.

In summary, as explored in my research, the concept of FOMO within mobile dating apps provides a rich area for cultural and social anthropological inquiry. It sheds light on the intersection of technology, culture, and interpersonal relationships in the digital age, underscoring the need to critically assess how these platforms influence how we perceive and interact. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of modern dating behavior and the factors driving phenomena like FOMO and FOBO in the digital dating landscape.

The thesis tries to contribute through a cultural and social anthropological lens to understanding how digital interfaces shape human behavior and interaction. It calls attention to designing more empathetic and human-centered digital dating environments. Future research might explore strategies to mitigate the dehumanizing aspects of these apps, perhaps through

algorithms that promote more profound, meaningful connections or features that encourage respectful communication and closure.

Transitioning from the analysis of my research findings as well as attempting to answer the main research question, I now proceed to address the sub-questions of my research. This shift marks an essential progression in my study, moving from empirical observations to a deeper theoretical understanding and interpretation within the framework of cultural and social anthropology. The present research and the research question of how mobile dating apps influence cultural processes of partner initiation and courtship rituals gave rise to the following sub-question:

**How do prevailing gender norms in Western-oriented societies influence user behavior and interaction with mobile dating apps?**

During my research, it was clearly established that prevailing gender norms in a westernized society have an influence or even different effects on user behavior and dynamics in mobile dating apps. It affects how users present themselves in the digital dating landscape and how they interact and engage. The ways and forms in which these gender norms manifest themselves vary from culture to culture, suggesting that the interpretation and expression of gender roles are not uniform but are influenced by broader societal values and norms. There are different expectations for women and men. These influences and differences affect self-presentation within these dating apps on the one hand and the dynamics of courtship rituals and relationship formation on the other. While traditional gender scripts are widespread and still exist, mobile dating apps also offer the opportunity to challenge these norms. Users can take on different roles, such as independent and confident women or sensitive and vulnerable men, reflecting broader societal shifts towards fluid gender identities and social roles. At the same time, gender norms determine and shape the way users interact and participate in courtship rituals. Men may feel pressured to conform to expectations of masculinity, such as making the first move, while societal norms of femininity may guide women. The individual experiences shared by interviewees like Tim and Clara further underscore the internalization of these gender norms. Men are expected to take active roles, initiating conversations and interactions, while women are often positioned as passive recipients of attention. This dynamic reflects Western-influenced social and cultural gender norms, expectations, and assumptions. Their accounts reveal the pressures and expectations shaped by societal standards, even within the seemingly liberal and flexible realm of online dating. Such insights are crucial for understanding the

complex interplay between digital dating practices and traditional social constructs. The expression, interpretation, and performance of gender roles on mobile dating apps vary from culture to culture. What is considered normative or transgressive regarding gender presentation varies greatly and is influenced by cultural norms and values. The gender norms and roles mentioned above can impact the development of relationships initiated via mobile dating apps. They influence decision-making, partner selection, and some aspects of the dynamic of the dating process. Additionally, the dating experience on these platforms becomes even more complex as gender intersects with other identity markers such as race, class, and age. These intersections lead to diverse and unique user experiences and highlight the complexity of gender norms in the context of mobile dating. Overall, cultural and social anthropological analysis of mobile dating apps shows that prevailing gender norms and scripts can influence user behavior, interaction patterns, and the dynamics of online dating. The app environment reflects and challenges these norms, highlighting the complicated relationship between technology, social norms, and individual behavior in digital dating.

Having explored the significant role of gender norms in mobile dating apps, I will examine the next sub-question of this thesis. This aspect delves into the effects of "infinite choices" these apps provide and examines how such abundance influences users' decision-making processes and relationship dynamics. Since the contemporary form of dating via mobile dating apps promises an absolute variety of possibilities achievable with the ease of using a smartphone, I asked myself which side effects this aspect of mobile dating apps can have. As a result, I formulated another sub-question, which reads as follows:

**How does the phenomenon of "infinite choice" offered by mobile dating apps affect users' decision-making processes and relationship dynamics?**

It became evident that mobile dating apps' "infinite choice" significantly impacts users' decision-making processes and relationship dynamics. Users are confronted with an overwhelming number of potential partners, which can lead to decision fatigue. This abundance of choice can paradoxically make it more challenging to choose and commit to a single partner, as there is always the possibility of finding a "better" partner (FOBO). These observations are possibly consistent with both the statements of my interviewees and the comments of my informal conversational partners. The paradox in this matter is that the ease of finding an abundance of potential partners and encounters can lead to superficial interactions and make it harder to build deep relationships. In addition, focusing on one (conversation) partner can be

difficult if you have too many options. As a result, individual matches or contacts may be handled less carefully. Easy access to numerous potential partners can lead to a change in dating dynamics. Digital environments allow users to have more casual and non-committal interactions as they allow quick hook-ups and break-ups without the traditional social consequences of face-to-face encounters. This can lead people to no longer seek and engage in long-term relationships, preferring short-term encounters. However, the abundance of opportunities can also lead to being overwhelmed and unable to respond appropriately to individuals. Based on my data, I was able to determine that this excessive demand can and sometimes does influence the behavior of users. On the one hand, it can change the self-perception and assessment of oneself and society. On the other hand, it can also lead to no decisions about dating apps because it is easier not to make a decision. The way users express themselves on mobile dating platforms can have an impact on their self-perception and social interactions as they can appeal to a broader audience. The pressure to create an attractive profile can lead to an emphasis on physical appearance and other superficial features, potentially impacting users' self-esteem and leading to a more objective view of themselves and others. This phenomenon reflects broader socio-cultural trends. It highlights the impact of technology on traditional social constructs and structures such as courtship rituals and relationships. Contemporary digital dating in the form of mobile dating apps on smartphones, emphasizing abundance and choice, reflects the consumerist tendencies of contemporary society that emphasize individualism and the commodification of romantic interactions (Heino/Ellison/Gibbs 2010). Mobile dating apps enable interactions and can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Therefore, they contribute to a globalized approach to dating. As users can navigate through a diverse pool of potential partners and encounters from different cultural backgrounds, traditional notions of identity, community, and belonging are challenged and transformed. Facing the psychological impact, it becomes clear that users can experience stress and dissatisfaction due to the pressure of making 'right' choices and the fear of missing out on better opportunities. In conclusion, the "infinite choice" phenomenon in mobile dating apps marks a shift towards more fluid, transient, and technologically mediated forms of romantic and social interactions. It presents new challenges and opportunities for understanding human behavior and relationship dynamics.

During my research and the conversations with my research participants, it became clear that they repeatedly referred to online and offline dating and that this aspect was present throughout. I therefore formulated the following third and final sub-question:

## **What are the perceived differences and similarities in social preferences between online and offline dating experiences, and how do these dynamics influence individual dating behavior?**

Before diving into the research question, it must be noted that the online should not be seen as a counterpart to the offline. Instead, I will approach the online as an extension of the real world. Scientists in digital anthropology have already stated this, and I agree entirely with their perspective and approach (Miller, 2013; Broeker, 2023). Within my research, I tried to contribute to present an academic analysis of the distinctions and cultural implications of online mobile dating compared to traditional offline dating. At this point, I want to emphasize that my intention is not to contrast online and offline dating as opposites. I intend to use the conversations with my research participants to work out their individual experiences in both the virtual and the natural world to generate a more holistic view. Online interactions often occur before meeting in person, allowing for a different kind of connection development based on digital communication. In conclusion, integrating mobile dating apps within modern contemporary society, as explored through a cultural and social anthropological lens, reveals profound shifts and transformations in courtship rituals, partner selection, and the reproduction of traditionally oriented gender roles. Mobile dating apps, primarily seen as tools for facilitating romantic connections and interpersonal encounters, have evolved into complex cultural artifacts that can mirror and potentially reshape societal norms and individual and interpersonal dynamics.

Initially facing skepticism, online dating platforms like Bumble, Tinder, OkCupid, and Hinge have transcended their stigma, becoming a normalized and widely accepted medium for initiating romantic relationships. This transition, significantly influenced by the ubiquity of smartphones, marks a critical shift in societal attitudes toward finding love and companionship online. Smartphones, serving as "digital allies" and providing an enhanced opportunity for a more nuanced expression of anthropomorphism (Miller, 2018), have reconfigured traditional forms of socializing, influencing how individuals form connections and perceive potential partners (Turizo, 2018).

Through conversations with my research participants and sharing their experiences in dating, I could gain some insights and distinct dynamics into how individuals engage in dating processes. As already mentioned, online dating, enabled by mobile dating apps, presents an environment of "infinite choice," where users can browse and navigate through an extensive range of potential partners. This digital realm often leads to a paradox of choice, where my

research participants are often overwhelmed by the abundance of options, sometimes resulting in superficial interactions and difficulties in making meaningful connections. Digital interfaces allow for selective self-presentation and can reduce the spontaneity and authenticity of offline encounters.

While offline dating is traditionally used to build romantic relationships, it is often perceived as more authentic and encourages more profound, more spontaneous interactions. Face-to-face meetings allow individuals to experience the nuances of non-verbal communication and develop a more holistic understanding of their potential partners. However, social and geographical constraints can limit offline dating, making meeting a diverse range of people challenging. The interaction between online and offline dating experiences influences individual dating behavior. While online platforms offer greater accessibility and diversity of potential partners, they may also encourage a more transactional relationship approach. In contrast, offline dating emphasizes natural interactions but can be limited by social networks and opportunities to meet new people. Users often navigate between these two areas, trying to balance the efficiency and breadth of online dating with the depth and authenticity of offline encounters.

The ethnographic research by scholars such as Philip Shannon on young men in New Delhi illustrates how mobile dating apps provide a platform for self-expression and challenging established gender norms. The apps offer a space for young individuals to navigate their identities, free from the direct authority of traditional familial structures. This aspect highlights the role of digital platforms in facilitating personal autonomy and redefining gender dynamics (Shannon, 2018).

However, these platforms also reflect enduring patriarchal structures, evident in the active/passive dichotomy of gender roles within heterosexual dating contexts (Zinn/Hofmeister, 2022). Despite the potential for subversion and negotiation of these roles, traditional scripts persist, as seen in the expectations of my informants around who initiates interaction and covers dating expenses. These observations align with Chris Haywoods' findings on gender-specific scripts in courtship rituals, shaped by factors like education, employment opportunities, and mass media influences.

In examining online and offline dating dynamics, a clear preference for the spontaneity and authenticity of offline encounters emerges among my conversational partners. Research participants long for the "magic" of real-life interactions, often seen as more genuine and fulfilling than their online equivalent. This preference indicates a more profound societal yearning for meaningful connections that transcend digital interfaces. Online and offline



worlds in terms of dating are complementary rather than opposing. While online dating provides access to a broader range of potential partners through apps and websites and allows people to be filtered based on specific preferences, offline dating offers the opportunity to meet people in more personal and spontaneous contexts. Online interactions can prepare for or complement offline encounters, with online communication helping to clarify interests and compatibility in advance. In the modern dating landscape, many people use both methods to increase their chances of successful and satisfying relationships. However, online and offline dating each provides different experiences and opportunities, and individuals may prefer one over the other based on personal preferences, comfort levels, and goals in their dating life. In summary, exploring online and offline dating dynamics provides insights into contemporary relationship formation and highlights the evolving nature of courtship in the digital age. The choice between online and offline modalities reflects individual preferences, societal norms, and the broader cultural context of dating.

Reflecting on the journey of this research, it is evident that the 'infinite choice' paradigm within mobile dating apps introduces a dynamic yet complex dimension to modern courtship. The impact is not to be overlooked with users navigating a sea of potential matches, often leading to stress and the anxiety of possibly missing out on better options or even having decision paralysis. This phenomenon has propelled a shift towards more fluid and transient romantic and social interactions intensely mediated by technology. The research underscored the nuanced interplay between online and offline dating realms, revealing that they should not be viewed as distinct entities but rather as extensions of each other. This perspective enriches our understanding of individual dating behavior, spotlighting the differences and similarities in social preferences across the two spheres. Interviews and informal discussions regarding user experiences indicate that although acquiring many matches on different dating apps is straightforward, only a limited number of these matches evolve into actual conversations, and an even smaller number advance to in-person encounters. In essence, this thesis paints a vivid picture of the current dating landscape and poses intriguing questions about the future of human connections in an increasingly digitized society.



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