

# More Than Just a Pretty Profile

Exploring the Social Norms and Technical  
Affordances that Shape and Mediate Identity  
Performance on Tinder

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Benjamin Borrow – New Media & Digital Culture Master's Thesis

**Abstract:** With Tinder as a primary case study, this thesis explores the manner in which young users of dating media perform identity within the confines of the interface at hand. This investigation requires the consideration of two salient factors: firstly, the social norms Tinder users are likely to abide by when performing identity on the platform; and secondly, the limitations and affordances inherent to the technology, which shape the user experience and by extension, the nature of user of identity. Having considered such factors, the final chapter of this thesis presents five forms of identity performance practices relevant to the young users of dating media like Tinder (subversion, adherence, discrepancy, obfuscation, equivocation). These practices serve as a framework against which actual Tinder profiles collected from Munich and Melbourne are analysed and determined to represent the presence of identity diffusion amongst Tinder users, as well as a subversion of the ostensible intended use of the interface or a mimicry of user profiles standard to other forms of online dating media.

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# Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH OUTLINE</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: MAPPING YOUTH AND DATING MEDIA IDENTITY NORMS</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.1 YOUTH IDENTITY AS A <i>PERFORMATIVE</i> AND EXPLORATORY PROCESS</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.2 YOUTH IDENTITY AS EVOLVED IN THE NETWORKED ERA</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.3 DATING MEDIA AND THE <i>PROFILE AS PROMISE</i></b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: TECHNOLOGY AS MEDIATING IDENTITY PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.1 THE NECESSITY OF CONSIDERING TECHNICAL AND INTERFACE AFFORDANCE</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.2 THE MEDIATION MODEL</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.3 TINDER'S MEDIATORY ROLE IN THE USER EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>22</b>
2.3.1 <i>TECHNOLOGY</i> AS A MEDIATORY PROCESS IN TINDER USAGE	22
2.3.2 <i>SUBJECTIVITY</i> AS A MEDIATORY PROCESS IN TINDER USAGE	24
<b>CHAPTER 3: APPROPRIATING AFFORDANCE AND PERFORMING IDENTITY ON TINDER</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.1. OUTLINING FIVE IDENTITY PRACTICES RELEVANT TO TINDER</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.2 CONDUCTING TINDER PROFILE OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS</b>	<b>30</b>
3.2.1 ADDRESSING IDENTITY PRACTICE 1 - ADHERENCE	31
3.2.2 ADDRESSING IDENTITY PRACTICE 2 – SUBVERSION	34
3.2.3 ADDRESSING IDENTITY PERFORMANCE PRACTICE 3 - DISCREPANCY	37
3.2.4 ADDRESSING IDENTITY PERFORMANCE PRACTICE 4 - OBFUSCATION	39
3.2.5 ADDRESSING IDENTITY PERFORMANCE PRACTICE 5 - EQUIVOCATION	41
<b>3.3 TYING THE FIVE IDENTITY PERFORMANCE PRACTICES TOGETHER</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>50</b>

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## Introduction

*"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."* Jane Eyre

Free of her metaphorical net, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre claims to be purely autonomous and is impliedly capable of establishing an identity independent of external constraint (2007, p. 267). Now, more than 150 years after the first publication of Jane Eyre, in an era defined by an actual "net," one might wonder whether the Ms Eyres of today can justifiably consider themselves equally free to construct and perform their own romantic identities. Indeed, given the exponential rise of networked technology to facilitate and mediate social interaction, identity performance is increasingly occurring online, where users must rely on interface and technical affordance to send social cues and perform and explore notions of personal identity. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the growing field of online dating, where young people are increasingly turning to develop romantic connections, and by extension, construct online romantic identities.

So where the Jane Eyre of yesteryear may have dealt almost exclusively in the realm of corporeal identity construction in pursuit of her Mr Rochester, the modern trend towards dating websites and applications as a means to romantic connection represents a corollary shift towards identity performance as an online practice open to personal cultivation within the platform's technical limitations. As social media theorist, Sander de Ridder explains, "young people are at the forefront of developing, using, reworking and incorporating new media into their dating practices...and this is scary to adults" (2013, p. 2). This phenomenon is "scary to adults" because it is unprecedented, "an exciting new realm" (Gibbs, Ellison, Lai, & Chih-Hui, 2011, p. 152) and warrants a "reexamination of traditional theories concerning identity formulation and performance" (Gibbs et al., 2011, p. 152). This thesis then, undertakes such a re-examination to determine how young people can appropriate dating media to perform and construct a type of identity increasingly significant in contemporary society. Due to its unprecedented popularity amongst young people, I explore this topic with Tinder, a geo-locative matchmaking application, as a primary case

study to illustrate multifarious methods young dating media users practice to perform and explore notions of online identity.

As such, this thesis contributes to growing academic discourse surrounding identity construction as mediated in novel online platforms. It contributes a nuanced understanding of youth identity performance in dating media, where previous similar inquiries have focused more generally on youth identity in new media (e.g. Buckingham, 2008; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006) or generalist identity negotiations in dating media (e.g. Davis, 2011; Gibbs et al., 2011; Whitty, 2008). Furthermore, at the time of writing, very few scholastic publications had explored Tinder, and according to my research, no such publications had employed Tinder as a case study into youth identity performance.

However, conducting such an investigation is a difficult undertaking. To begin with, academic conceptualizations of identity render the term challenging to unravel and apply. On the one hand, individuals are believed to exhibit multiple versions of self, some (or all) of which cannot be delineated from others (Buckingham, 2008, p. 7). On the other hand, personal identity is held to be in a state of chronic flux, given meaning each time an 'audience' interprets a series of social cues (Goffman, 1959; Erikson, 1968). With respect to investigations into dating media identity then, the concept is further convoluted because individuals perform for an audience of potential dates – many of whom will never be exposed to anything more than the identity cues of the user's profile. Furthermore, with respect to Tinder, these profiles are made up of relatively spartan detail and confined to a maximum of 6 photographs and a blurb of no more than 500 characters.

Therefore, this thesis must grapple with the difficulty of first understanding identity performance norms specific to young dating media users. To resolve this challenge, I conduct an extensive literature review of research into identity from three distinct, yet cumulatively germane fields: youth identity, identity in networked media, and identity in dating media platforms. I use the results of such a literature review to inform an understanding of socially constructed identity performance norms – which in turn, inform an analysis of actual Tinder profiles. This analysis though, presents another challenge: Tinder

users, hiding behind the online cloak of anonymity, can create fake profiles that would undermine the results of my analysis. In an attempt to mitigate the impact of possibly fake profiles on the results of my research, my analysis deals in observably broad trends, ignoring idiosyncratic outliers.

Nevertheless observant to the challenges of undertaking such an investigation, the objective of this thesis is to determine how social norms and technical and interface affordances mediate identity performance amongst the young users of Tinder. It seeks then, to understand how Tinder users negotiate the treacherous path of “translating the embodied self into a relatively brief and static self description” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 46). In doing so, this thesis must tackle two salient branches of investigation: firstly, how social norms of youth identity and dating media performance are likely to shape identity as performed by Tinder users; and secondly, how the technical processes and affordances of the application also mediate the resultant identities of Tinder users. Once these two branches have been addressed, an analysis of actual Tinder profiles reveals such ideas in practice. Thus, the Primary Research Question and Sub Questions of this thesis are best phrased as follows:

*How do social norms and technical affordance shape and mediate youth identity performance on Tinder?*

- Sub Question 1: *How do social norms inform youth identity performance and identity performance in dating media?*
- Sub Question 2: *What role does technical and interface affordance play in mediating identity practices on platforms such as Tinder?*
- Sub Question 3: *How do Tinder users actually negotiate such technical and interface affordances to perform identity within the platform?*

### **Methodology and Research Outline**

In order to answer Sub Question 1 of this thesis (*How do social norms inform youth identity performance and identity performance in dating media?*) I map academic discourse relating to three specific, yet nonetheless relevant

enquiries into identity: youth identity, identity as performed in the networked era, and identity as performed on traditional dating media. I treat these categories of investigation separately because each provides a level of specificity that enables a rounded approach to understanding Tinder, which is an networked dating application, populated largely by young people. Thus, I begin firstly with a broad-level discussion of youth identity practices by referring to the influential early (yet still widely referenced) works of Erving Goffman (1959), Erik Erikson (1968), and the later work of David Buckingham (2008). Having then explained youth identity as a *performative* and exploratory practice, I then progress to a discussion of identity performance in the networked era. This section, in dealing with notions of identity diffusion and multiple online selves, informs an understanding of how Tinder users might experiment with identity through their online Tinder profiles. Finally then, I refer to work of leading dating media scholars like Katie Davis (2008), Jennifer Gibbs (2006, 2011) and Nicole Ellison (2006, 2011) to understand the negotiations involved in constructing online dating accounts. I explore the the *Profile as Promise* theory as posited by Ellison et al (2011) to deduce Tinder users are likely to present themselves online without egregious variation from their online selves. Since this theory does not specifically address young people, the preceding sections of Chapter 1 ensure a more nuanced (as relevant to Tinder) appreciation of the *Profile as Promise*. Thus, my first chapter will be primarily concerned with three inextricably related, yet distinct categories: general youth identity construction, identity in the networked era, and identity in dating media. The ensuing understanding of identity norms expected of Tinder users, informs later analysis of Tinder profiles in Chapter 3.

Having mapped the academic discourse pertaining to identity performance with specific regard to dating media, Chapter 2 begins answering Sub Question two: *What role does technical and interface affordance play in mediating identity practices on platforms such as Tinder?* The first section of this chapter justifies the merit of addressing interface and technical affordance in new media. Then, I review the *Mediation Model* proposed by Belgian new media scholar Sander de Ridder (2013). De Ridder's model argues for a non-linear approach to media analysis, and demands a software studies consideration to

understand the impact of technology on the resultant outcomes of its use and the identities performed and constructed within it. Pertinently for my enquiry into Tinder, de Ridder's application of the *Mediation Model* is applied to an investigation of "youth intimate stories" (2013, p. 4). More over, De Ridder identifies four Mediation processes at the heart of engagement with new media: *Technology, Subjectivity, Participation, and Representation* (2013). In Chapter 2, I adapt this model and only deploy notions *Technology* and *Subjectivity* processes in conducting a textual analysis of Tinder's interface and technical affordances. I only deploy these two processes because they relate more immediately to technical affordance. However, *Participation* and *Representation* are still discussed in my review of the *Mediation Model* because they inform an understanding of interface affordance from a user perspective – an appropriate discussion for Chapter 3.

Thus, the following chapter (Chapter 3) will use the considerations of the previous chapters and a thematic content analysis of actual Tinder profiles to determine the resultant forms of identity performance amongst Tinder users. In doing so, it answers Sub Question 3: *How do Tinder users actually negotiate such technical and interface affordances to perform identity within the platform?* As a foundation for this analysis, I identify five primary practices young users of dating media are likely to employ when engaging with the affordances available to them. These five practices are a culmination of similar strategies noted by previous scholastic investigation into identity performance as a practice mediated by technology (and thus referential to Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis). I identify and analyse the following strategies amongst Tinder users in order to perform their identities: 1) adherence; 2) subversion; 3) discrepancy; 4) obfuscation; 5) equivocation. These practices serve as the foundation upon which I analyse the results of an ethnographic observation of Tinder profile construction practices, and underscore the social norms and technical affordance limitations Tinder users encounter when constructing their online identities.

Indeed, since this thesis is concerned with identity as performed on an individual and social level, a situated, ethnographic approach to researching Tinder identity performance was relevant (Boellstort, 2006). I conducted an ethnographic observation of many Tinder profiles (this method is explained



further in Section 3.2), but my participation in the world of Tinder was merely observatory and did not extend to making contact or interacting further with the Tinder users who had created the profiles I analysed. To draw a game studies analogy to this approach, my observation might be equated to Aarseth's concept of "light play" whereby my role as the researcher did not become "serious" in the sense that I engaged with the application as would be expected of a standard user or player (2003, p. 6). As a consequence, my observations and analysis of Tinder profiles is confined to a level of interpretation that cannot immediately reflect the likely observations of other serious users. This is significant because identity cues are also capable of being sent via Tinder-mediated chats; which was outside of my "lightly" situated analysis' purview.

Nevertheless, the situated observation approach enables a researcher to explore the social practices of a technology's usage (Egenfeldt-Nelson, Smith, & Tosca, 2013). Meanwhile, my formalist textual analysis of Tinder's interface in Chapter 2 provides an insight into the technological and political implications of the technology that might otherwise be occluded from a purely situated perspective. As such, this thesis blends a formalist and situated approach, whereby each perspective forms part of a triangulation, such that the weaknesses of a purely formalist approach are somewhat counteracted by a subsequent situated approach and vice versa.

Naturally though, I must be reflexive of my role as a researcher, and recognise that the conclusions I draw about actual identity performance (particularly in Chapter 3) are shaped by my inherently biased position as researcher (Lammes, 2007). Indeed, naturally the five performance practices observable amongst Tinder users do not represent an exhaustive list. Rather, such practices are what I have deemed the most relevant and testable pursuant to the preceding discussions surrounding youth identity on dating media, and Tinder as an application pregnant with affordance and limitation. Moreover, my observation of Tinder profiles cannot possibly understand the intent behind certain identity performance practices.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More research into the intent behind particular forms of identity performance of Tinder users would certainly benefit the research conducted in this thesis. Such

However, despite such limitations of scope, this thesis presents a rounded approach to identity practice, whereby both formalist and situated perspectives yield insights into Tinder as a piece of software pregnant with affordance, and Tinder user identity as shaped by social norms and expectations.

## **Chapter 1: Mapping Youth and Dating Media Identity Norms**

In this chapter, I undertake a literature review of existing scholastic investigation and discourse surrounding the concept of identity amongst young people as well as dating media users.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, this chapter seeks to answer the first sub question of this thesis: *How is identity traditionally characterized as a performative practice amongst young people and dating media users?* To answer this question, I have divided the chapter into three sections: firstly, I explore generalist notions of identity as an exploratory performance, which in young people, is characterized by experimentation and flux. Secondly, I discuss this notion of identity performance as having evolved through the networked era, which facilitates multiple presentations of the self and results in identity diffusion. Thirdly and finally, I address identity performance in specific relation to dating media, where scholarly investigations have presented a nuanced understanding of identity diffusion whereby users are forced to reconcile their online and offline identities. The cumulative result of these three aforementioned sections orients later analysis in Chapter 3.

### **1.1 Youth Identity as a Performative and Exploratory Process**

While Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* was first published in the late 1950s, enthusiasm for his work has remained vibrant into contemporary discussions of youth identity practices in new media. Indeed, since leading identity scholars such as Katie Davis (2011) and David Buckingham

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research would reveal a more explicit justification for certain identity performance practices.

<sup>2</sup> Naturally, these two groups are not mutually exclusive (i.e. dating users can also be young people), but since research valuable to this thesis has traditionally focused on one or the other (e.g. Sander de Ridder's 2013 work on romantic youth identity on SNS Netlog; and Katie Davis' 2011 work on identity amongst dating media users) I address "youth" and "dating media users" separately. This separation in treatment should not be read to imply conclusions about youth identity and dating media user identity do not

(2008) have drawn upon Goffman's work in their late modern discussions of youth identity performance, Goffman's fundamental ideas appear to have remained germane – and thus merit observation by a thesis so heavily concerned with youth identity practice as this.

Indeed, Goffman presents a “dramaturgical” account of social interaction and identity construction. He argues that human identity is characterised by a theatrical-like performance in which an individual (or performer) sends social cues that are subsequently inferred and interpreted by an audience of observers who help shape the notion of the said individual's identity (1959). As such, users of dating media platforms like Tinder, send social cues via their profiles in order for them to be interpreted by an audience of potential matches.

Davis adapts Goffman's theory and calls the process of performance and interpretation a “collaborative manufacture” (2011, p. 634). This highlights the importance of both the performer and the audience as contributory parties involved in the resultant product and perception of an individual's identity. Meanwhile, philosopher George Mead's earlier work on the “generalized other” (1934) and sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's “looking-glass self” (1902) also underscore the importance of social context within the process of identity construction.

Goffman though, argues that social context extends further than simply a performer and his or her audience. He claims there exists a “gentlemanly agreement” between the parties, whereby social cues are used with the promise of being truthful (Ellison et al 2011, 57). As a consequence, the audience (people interpreting the performance of particular social cues) are inclined to believe in the performance's veracity. For example, a status symbol like a gold watch is worn in accordance to Goffman's notion of the “gentlemanly agreement” such that the wearer (or performer) has a tacit understanding that the object will be interpreted by those he meets as demonstrative of his wealth, status, etc.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted of course, that people employ status symbols and infinite other social cues to mislead their audiences. For example, the gold watch may have been stolen and does not reflect the actual wealth of its wearer. Goffman's concept of identity as performance and the “gentlemanly agreement” is still applicable here because no matter the reality or motivation behind employing certain social cues, society requires the audience assume social cues to be accurate in order to arrive at an understanding of

This implied agreement affords individuals the chance to experiment with different social cues and perform identity that remains contingent upon interpretation, yet is capable of manipulation and experimentation. According to Erik Erikson's widely cited model of psychosocial stages (1968), this process is particularly apparent in early adulthood and adolescents, where people undergo a stage of "psychosocial moratorium." Erikson argues young people tend to experiment with different social cues and play varied identity performances throughout this period (Erikson, 1968). As a consequence, the profiles constructed and identities performed by the young people on Tinder are likely to be made up of social cues that are both performance-based and experimental.

### 1.2 Youth Identity as Evolved in the Networked Era

While youth identity construction and performance might be characterised by experimentation, there is a growing appreciation for the manner in which the new media of the networked age have enhanced the capacity for young people to play with different selves and perform to more varied audiences. In fact, Buckingham claims, "the internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been denied or stigmatized" (2008, p. 16). As a consequence, young people are regarded as free to experiment, as is their want, through the various avenues and mediums afforded to them online. Buckingham argues the networked era is a significant means through which young people can experiment with concepts of the self because many of the channels available to them are out of reach of the "constraining influence" of elders' observation and influence (2008, p. 15).<sup>4</sup>

Alongside their capacity to present themselves to audiences of their choosing, young people can appropriate new media platforms to present rather divergent, and sometimes conflicting identities across different platforms. While this phenomenon may not be confined to networked media (for example, people will

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the performer's identity. The performer's other social cues may yet undermine or shape such an understanding.

<sup>4</sup> Buckingham actually uses the word "liberation" in describing this phenomenon. I am reluctant to ascribe such terminology here because, as I address in chapter 2, the design affordances of new media platforms mold and mediate identity performance, which can have an inhibitive rather than liberating effect on the individual's capacity to perform his or her identity.

present themselves in a different light to co-workers than what their close friends might see),<sup>5</sup> networked media certainly render this process easier and more immediately noticeable. For example, players of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) are capable of constructing rather fantastical online identities that might have very little in common with the player's offline identity, the player's Facebook identity, or even the player's identity as performed in other MMORPGs (Davis 2011, p. 637).<sup>6</sup>

Psychology professor Sherry Turkel suggests the practice of producing multiple online personae is symptomatic of the inherent flux of human identity performance: "we should think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized multiplicities, flexible and ever in process" (1995, p. 263). Similarly, Lisa Nakamura coins the term "identity tourist" to describe the phenomenon of new media users constructing varied personae. The tourist metaphor cogently highlights the ease with which users can 'travel' between identities of conflicting age, gender and race for instance, and in the process go towards sating a desire for experimental identity performance.

However, the diffuse nature of online identity comes with an inherent qualification: it is simply difficult to keep track of many varied identities that "often are not exact reproductions of offline identity" (Davis, 2011, p. 637). Indeed, according to Buckingham, "it is difficult both cognitively and meta-cognitively to monitor all of one's different selves and audiences" (2008, p. 11). This difficulty carries an implication that online identities might not be as divergent from each other as is theoretically possible. Certainly, while online personae are unlikely to be entirely consistent or homogenised, it is on nigh-on impossible to construct online identities across multiple platforms without including some consistencies. Accordingly, extensive research suggests online identities are not as fluid or disconnected from offline contexts as originally thought (Davis, 2011) (Hardey, 2002), and a study conducted by Vasalou and Joinson (2009) revealed that when asked to create three personal avatars for

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<sup>5</sup> This is highlighted by concepts such as Lifton's "protean self" (1993), Giddens' "reflexive project of the self" (1991), Gergen's "pastiche personality" (2000), and Zurcher's "mutable self" (1972).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, with specific respect to *World of Warcraft*, Bessiere et al (2007) found that users created online avatars with more favorable attributes than the players said they possessed offline.

three different sites, participants tended to manufacture online identities that bore a resemblance to their offline selves – irrespective of whether the online environment related to gaming, dating or social media.

Thus, internet users in general – but especially young users – are likely to experiment with multiple online selves. However, this experimentation is likely to be consistent with an individual’s other online personae, and these online personae are likely to have some semblance to the user’s offline persona.

### 1.3 Dating Media and the *Profile as Promise*

Although online platforms may be regarded as encouraging diffused and multifarious identity performance (albeit less so than perhaps originally thought), dating platforms are somewhat anomalous to this trend. Indeed, dating profiles are constructed with the intention of initiating contact between two strangers in the hope of eventually meeting face-to-face and establishing a romantic relationship (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 46). As a consequence, online daters must negotiate a tension between selectively positive self-representation with a need to remain reasonably representative of their offline selves – thereby ensuring neither party feels alienated or disappointed to learn their counterpart’s offline persona varies from his or her online portrayal (Ellison et al., p. 49; Whitty, 2007; Whitty, 2008).<sup>7</sup>

To understand this phenomenon as an idiosyncratic form identity performance within the scope of other types of networked media, it is necessary to address the nature of dating profiles themselves. Ellison et al. note dating profiles are often “static self-presentational portfolios consisting of textual descriptions and photographs” (2011, p. 46). In this sense, dating profiles share

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<sup>7</sup> As with most (if not, all) social networked platforms, fake profiles exist on dating platforms (Davis, 2011, p. 640). For the purposes of an exploration into identity performance though, this thesis is primarily concerned with the use of Tinder and similar platforms by individuals seeking what should be considered the standard use of such platforms: to construct profiles with an earnest intention to establish romantic connection (Davis, 2011) (Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011) (Whitty, 2008). Certainly, research into the use of fake profiles by companies, businesses, scam artists and even people simply looking for a voyeuristic experience (c.f. Whitty 2007) would reveal a great deal about the social implications of current dating media usage. However, this thesis addresses identity as performance of individuals. Moreover, investigation into “fake profiles” is unachievable without explicit awareness that such profiles are “fake” – an awareness occluded from the ethnographic nature of this research.

distinct similarities with other social media interfaces. However, unlike profiles on other platforms, dating media platforms encourage a quick appraisal to determine the suitability of a potential match (Whitty, 2008, p. 1711). Individuals either pursue or ignore potential matches by conducting a swift overview of a counterpart's profile (Heino, Ellison, & Gribbs, 2010, p. 428). In Tinder's case, the flippant nature of assessment is readily apparent (and literally 'flippant') as users swipe right or left to convey interest or disinterest respectively.

Moreover, dating profiles are constructed as a "gateway for future FtF dating" (Ellison et al 2011, p. 46). For Tinder users, constructing an immediately appealing profile is particularly important because once a potential match has swiped left (i.e. rejected the profile), neither party is ever shown the other's profile again, and further Tinder-mediated communication is rendered impossible.

However, regardless of the want for Tinder users to construct appealing online identities,<sup>8</sup> the 'veracity' of dating profiles is placed under many of the same restrictions associated with other online avenues for identity performance. Ellison et al. note, "some discrepancies between one's online and offline presence may be expected" (2011, p. 46). Their study, which investigates users of a popular dating website, Match.com, reveals that discrepancies between online and offline selves are often rationalized by an appeal to the notion of multiple selves (2011, p. 53). This is to say, users engage with dating media under the pretence that online profiles will not be an absolute index to a user's offline persona because it is both impossible to convert an offline persona into the confined space of the profile, and because individual identity is in and of itself, multifaceted.

So what then, are we to make of online dating profiles as a portrayal of veracious identity? Ellison et al.'s theory of *Profile as Promise* goes some way to understanding the motivations behind identity performance amongst dating media users with the bona fide intention of using the platform to strike up an offline romance. The *Profile as Promise* conceptualises the dating profile as a

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<sup>8</sup> Davis states, "the success of online dating profiles ultimately depends on a couple's ability to bring their relationship offline" (2011, p. 634).

“psychological contract between the dater and future potential dates” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 56). The authors agree that although discrepancies will exist between a user’s online profile and offline persona or “corporeal self,”<sup>9</sup> users are bound to represent themselves in such a way that their online profile “acceptably” reflects their offline persona. The profile then, becomes a promise to future potential partners that it is a fair, or “realistic and achievable” representation (Ellison et al., 2011, 57). In other words, dating media users tend to construct profiles in a positive light, which is not so positive that it becomes implausible and likely to alienate a match once face-to-face contact is made.

Interestingly, this notion of an implied agreement between users recalls the ideas put forth in Section 1.1. Indeed, where Goffman writes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century about the “gentlemanly agreement” between individual and audience to interpret social cues as representative of said individual’s true identity, Ellison et al.’s *Profile as Promise* adds a nuanced understanding of a similar idea within dating media. Dating media, by virtue of the oblique outcome to encourage face-to-face contact ensures users are obligated to convey online social cues without an unacceptable deviance of the user’s offline identity.

Furthermore, Ellison et al.’s *Profile as Promise* is supported by other research into dating media and social networking platforms, too. For example, widely cited dating media theorist Katie Davis (2011), observes four spheres of obligation that define identity representation in dating media platforms: the self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms and broad community-level values (Davis, 2011, p. 645). Davis states, “each sphere serves to limit multiplicity online and contributes to the intertwining of online and offline identities” (2011, p. 646). This argument supports the thrust of the *Profile as Promise* in highlighting the obligation for users of social (and dating platforms) to construct profiles and online identities without egregious variation between their online and offline selves.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is especially likely because creating discrepancy and elaborating a personal profile is “technically effortless” (Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011, p. 46).

<sup>10</sup> This contention is also supported in Kendall’s relatively early study into profile construction, which found that participants in an online forum cultivated online identities that were consistent with and connected to their offline identities (1999). These results have been supported by subsequent studies that have found online



Thus, dating media profiles, although subject to identity diffusion and indicative of the ‘multiple self,’ are characterised by an underlying attempt to represent as positively and truthfully, the user’s offline persona. Importantly, this conclusion asserts that young people are still capable of identity performance, exploration and play, but are nonetheless confined to such experimentation within confines that other users would deem appropriate and acceptable.

In conclusion, this Chapter has explored the concept of identity as a performative process requiring a performer’s social cues and an audience to interpret such cues. This chapter has also highlighted identity performance as often multifaceted and diffuse amongst young people, users of networked platforms, and users of dating media – all which categories define Tinder’s demographic of users. To qualify this notion that networked media encourage experimentation with multiple selves, this chapter has also notes engrained social expectations amongst dating users, such that their profiles are regarded as a promise - rendering dating users inclined to cultivate online identities that are not so extravagantly positive as to disappoint a potential future date upon meeting face-to-face. Thus, such conclusions provide an answer to Sub Question 1 of this thesis (*How do social norms inform youth identity performance and identity performance in dating media?*) and will inform the structure and content of my analysis of Tinder profiles in Chapter 3.

## **Chapter 2: Technology as Mediating Identity Performance**

Where Chapter 1 investigates online identity as a performative process limited by social norms, this chapter explores the technical and interface affordances Tinder users must negotiate in order to performing identity and thereby addresses Sub Question 2: *What role does technical and interface affordance play in mediating identity practices on platforms such as Tinder?*). In answering this Sub Question, this Chapter is divided into four sections: firstly, I explore the merit in approaching enquiries into new media platforms such as

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identities often reflect offline gender and racial dynamics (e.g. Elias and Lemish, 2009; Grisso and Weiss, 2005; Herring et al., 2004).

Tinder with an eye to the technical and interface affordances users must negotiate. Secondly, I explore the role of technology as a mediator of identity performance and communication on networking and dating platforms, and in the process elucidate Sander de Ridder's *Mediation Model* (2013). And thirdly, I explicitly deploy an adapted version of the *Mediation Model* to glean an insight into Tinder's politically imbued and socially shaping technical and interface affordances.

## 2.1 The Necessity of Considering Technical and Interface Affordance

Software studies scholar, José van Dijck notes a tendency of previous (and to a certain degree, current) scholastic investigation into the implications of new media technologies to narrowly focus on "human actors"<sup>11</sup>(2012, p. 18). This focus, van Dijck argues, has led to a blindness of scholars to the importance and function of technological, architectural and design components of the respective medium (2012, p. 18). While van Dijck suggests this trend to be true of the theoretical academic treatment of new media, it is particularly evident in empirical studies such as Katie Davis' (2011) and Gibbs et al.'s (2011) studies into identity construction as observed in dating media users. However, where van Dijck's observation of such a trend is in and of itself normative, other media scholars (e.g. Beer, 2009; de Ridder, 2013; Carpentier, 2011; Bell, 2001) argue that research into the impact or role of new media in society should centre upon a more holistic approach, whereby technical components and affordance are observed. In so doing, a more rounded view of the medium's impact on society is brought into view (de Ridder, 2013, p. 14).

As a consequence of the observable need to for a rounded view, software studies is an increasingly popular field of inquiry in new media scholarship. Sociologist, David Beer for example, posits the importance of software affordance in his *Power of the Algorithm* (2009), where he suggests non-human actors (i.e. the algorithms upon which online platforms and media operate)

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<sup>11</sup> The term "actor" is borrowed from Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, which at its publication, presented a novel (yet controversial) approach to the study of media (or other processes – see for instance Michael Callon's application of the ANT to scallop fishing in a small French bay 1986). ANT is concerned with actors – both human and non-human – as objects contributing to the function of a greater network (Latour, 1991; 2007).

inform the ultimate nature of a user's engagement. Similarly, design scholar Paul Newland's earlier work on computer-mediated communication suggests we should interrogate new media in order to understand technology as an enforcer, stabiliser, circulator and creator of social norms" (1999, p. 89).<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, an approach that regards software and technical affordance alongside human actors enables a treatment of the "inherently political nature of technology" (de Ridder 2013, p. 9). Indeed de Ridder notes, "social networking sites (SNSs) are not neutral," and concepts of participation and agency are contestable as a consequence (2013, p. 10).<sup>13</sup> This contention is supported by media sociologist Ann Light's conclusion that neither human actors nor the technology with which they interact are apolitical (Light, 2011, p. 437).

Therefore, in fairness to the inherently political and *shaping* nature of technology, this thesis must address the role of interface and technical affordance as a salient process in the usage of Tinder, and the identities users ultimately perform through it.

## 2.2 The Mediation Model

Where the previous section of this Chapter justifies the merit of approaching and analysing platforms like Tinder as pieces of technology pregnant with socio-political and socio-cultural implication, Sander de Ridder's *Mediation Model* provides an elucidating framework through which we may understand networked media as an integral component of "young people's intimate stories" and their online identities (2013, p. 6). At its heart, de Ridder's framework argues, "identity is *mediated* through particular software platforms that are more than merely *intermediators*" (2013, p. 2). This is to say, platforms such as Tinder are not simply conduits of social cues a user (or *performer*)

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<sup>12</sup> At this point, it must be noted that the study of technology as an enforcer (or at least, conduit) of social practice is not entirely new. For example, Raymond Williams's work on the television (1974 republished in 2003) argues for a 'dialectical approach' to media scholarship, where technology is regarded as both socially shaped and socially shaping.

<sup>13</sup> I address the concepts of participation and agency in the subsequent section of this chapter. For now, it is enough to regard "participation" and "agency" as denoting the free will of the user to engage with a medium in a particular manner. De Ridder's statement thus highlights how technological affordance informs usage and undermines the user's ability to interact with the platform in a manner genuinely of their own choosing.

presents on his profile, but rather the social cues a user may send through computer-mediated communication will be shaped by the interface and technological affordances through which they are conveyed. As such, identity performance and the ultimate interpretation of such performance are shaped by the mediatory process of Tinder as a piece of software.<sup>14</sup>

To specify his argument, de Ridder poses four processes regarded as “working in continuous articulation, ultimately creating a mediated discursive place to tell, share, build and comment on intimate stories”<sup>15</sup> (2013, p. 4). They are: 1) *Technology*; 2) *Participation*; 3) *Subjectivity*; 4) *Representation*. Each of these processes merits further exploration, because each element is relevant to identity as mediated through Tinder and informs my textual analysis of Tinder (in Section 2.3) and my thematic content analysis of actual Tinder profiles (in Chapter 3).

Firstly, de Ridder devotes the most space to the process he calls *Technology* – perhaps because he shares van Loon’s sentiment that “technology should be regarded as the very essence of the mediation process” (2008, p. 8). Nevertheless, de Ridder justifies *Technology* as a mediatory process because the basic algorithmic nature of networked platforms has a material impact upon the manner in which the platform can be used and appropriated (de Ridder, 2013, p. 4). This material impact, therefore influences the manner in which identity is performed (on the user end), to the manner in which an individual’s social cues are communicated, to the manner in which social cues are interpreted by an *audience* of fellow users. This argument suggests that so long as two pieces of software or interface design vary (even to a miniscule degree), the nature of engagement and identity performance will differ between them.

Secondly, de Ridder explains the process of *Participation* as the use of a particular platform in a particular manner (2013, p. 5). De Ridder argues, that the nature of such use is autonomously decided on by the user, but only in so far

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<sup>14</sup> De Ridder’s argument is supported by Silversone’s statement, “institutions [such as SNS and networked technology] should be recognized as crucial actors in the transmission process” (Silverstone, 2012, p. 765). It is also inkeeping with the notion of technology as a political force in the transmission process (e.g. Light, 2008; van Loon, 2008; van Dijck, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> De Ridder speaks of “intimate stories” synonymously with identity throughout his article.

as the affordance of the technology will allow. Importantly, this notion is nuanced by Buckingham's discussion of affordance with respect to online identity construction: "naturally affordance makes some forms of performance easier than others" (2008, p. 16). Similarly, communications scientist Nicco Carpentier's observation that "technology is a site of democratic struggle" for user autonomy (2011, p. 193), highlights that participation may in part be autonomous, but is guided and limited by the boundaries and affordances of the platform.

Thirdly, de Ridder argues *Subjectivity* highlights the mediation process as grounded in an understanding of social and cultural norms (2013, p. 4). He argues that the choices made by designers and engineers when conceiving a given platform, are ingrained within the technology, and sometimes, within technologies that succeed it (2013, p. 3). Livingston agrees, claiming software design often operates according to "highly standardised formats for identity expression" (2009, p. 9). In Tinder's case then- as will be addressed in Chapter 3 – the *Subjectivity* process may be present in the way users can only identify as one gender, or the way some users might construct their profiles to include identifiers typical of previous dating media formats. De Ridder also explains that *Subjectivity* need not be an attempt by the designers to enforce a particular norm upon users (such as Gender norms), but simply that the subjective choices of the designer are often done for efficiency (2013, p. 3). Light supports this contention, arguing software designers go for "optimal and efficient design" that fundamentally relies on social and cultural standards (2011, p. 434).

Fourthly and finally, de Ridder identifies *Representation* as another crucial process in the *Mediation Model*. He states, through *Representation*, "symbolic power of the mediation process situates itself" (2013, p. 6). He goes on to argue that this "symbolic power" manifests itself in the manner in which a technology's users can assert (so far as technical affordance will allow) representation of the self.<sup>16</sup> As distinct from *Participation*, *Representation* deals exclusively with perceptions and projections of the self according to the use of

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<sup>16</sup> This argument is supported by media scholar, Stuart Hall's "*The Work of Representation*" (1997), which argues users of technology are empowered to signify idiosyncratic and highly personalized online identities – but that such identities are confined to the limitations of the technology with which they interact.

the medium – and as such, is a significant process for this thesis’ exploration of youth identity as actually performed in Tinder.

In conclusion, de Ridder’s *Mediation Model* highlights the pluralistic and salient influences at operation when individuals engage with a piece of technology or software to construct their online identities. Of the four processes that make up this model, I am only concerned with *Technology* and *Subjectivity* in the next sections of this chapter, which uses such notions as a framework upon which Tinder’s interface and technical affordances may be analysed. However, I have addressed de Ridder’s processes of *Representation* and *Participation*, because while they may not specifically address interface, their focus on the user involvement with particular affordances informs my analysis of Tinder profiles in Chapter 3. As such, I employ de Ridder’s complete mediation model in this thesis, albeit adapted such that the processes of *Technology* and *Subjectivity* inform a textual analysis of the platform (Sections 2.3.1-2.3.2), why processes of *Participation* and *Representation* are treated in Chapter 3.

### 2.3 Tinder’s Mediatory Role in the User Experience

Now equipped with an understanding of de Ridder’s four processes of mediation, this section undertakes a textual analysis of Tinder’s technical and interface affordances and restrictions appreciate the role of affordance and the ultimately shaping and mediatory nature such affordances can have on a user level. This section finally answers Sub Question 2: *What role does technical and interface affordance play in mediating identity practices on platforms such as Tinder?*

#### 2.3.1 *Technology* as a Mediatory Process in Tinder Usage

Like users of other dating media platforms, Tinder users are motivated to “form impressions about others based on relatively limited nonverbal and physical cues available via the CMC [computer mediated communication platform]” (Gibbs, 2011, p. 155). In Tinder, such cues exist in the form of a maximum of six photographs and a maximum 500-word blurb each user can personalise.<sup>17</sup> Crucially though, the profiles users create on Tinder are highly

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<sup>17</sup> Some of the most popular dating platforms in the world like Match.com, plentyoffish.com; zoosk.com, okcupid.com, and eharmony.com give users more profile

contingent upon their Facebook accounts. Indeed, to create a Tinder profile, the user must login via his or her Facebook account, which is used to automatically glean the user's first name, age, and gender. Similarly, the user can only upload photographs onto their Tinder profile if the photographs originate from the user's Facebook account.

Tinder's reliance on Facebook for user information renders Facebook's technical affordances relevant to a discussion of Tinder identity construction, too. Certainly, since Tinder profiles are constructed according to information mediated via Facebook, Tinder identities are almost an offspring of a larger pool of identity cues present in Facebook accounts. To recall de Ridder's notion of the *Technology* mediatory process here, Facebook (and Tinder's) affordances and guidelines inform the nature of identity cues a user can employ to perform his or her online identity; such that the user's stipulated gender on Facebook (a choice out of only Male and Female), his or her first name on Facebook, and his or her age on Facebook are automatically loaded onto a new Tinder user's account to become primary identity cues.

Tinder's reliance on Facebook for such information is also highly significant because Facebook ostensibly strives to create a strong link between its users' online profiles with their corporeal selves – a process Facebook cofounder and current CEO, Mark Zuckerberg suggests is an attempt to “enforce real identity” and a “more real world” (quoted in Kitpatrick, 2010, p. 18). Facebook imposes this “singular identity” (Kitpatrick 2010, p. 19) through restricting the number of times a user can change his or her age (three) and through prohibiting profiles that are considered disingenuous or falsely identifying as another person (Facebook, 2014). These policies and the concept of the ‘authentic world’ as propounded by Mark Zuckerberg are symptomatic of a trend away from the once idolised concept of the anonymous virtual world, towards what might now be considered a ‘nonymous’ iteration of the web 2.0, whereby traditional boundaries of the offline and online self are conflated (Bakardjivea, 2005).

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pictures, longer personal blurbs and more overall customization than that afforded to Tinder users.

Consequently, the *Technology* mediation process at the heart of Tinder's profile interface relates to the nature in which Facebook's own mediation processes restrict or guide user profile construction.

### 2.3.2 *Subjectivity as a Mediatory Process in Tinder Usage*

Considering de Ridder's four mediation processes are almost inextricably entwined, the discussion surrounding the *Subjectivity* process (i.e. the design choices made by engineers and developers in conceiving the resultant technology) shares parallels with my previous section's analysis of the *Technology* process. However, in Tinder's case, the idea that Facebook attempts to inform what Lanier (2010) calls a "nonymised version" of identity, is even more germane. Indeed, de Ridder's notion of *Subjectivity* addresses (or at least reinforces) Lanier's concern that "no more than a tiny group of engineers" are now capable of manipulating and enforcing cultural and social norms. For example, Tinder and Facebook users must fit into neatly engineered niches – particularly to do with sexual orientation and gender.

For example, Facebook only allows users to select from a male-female binary. According to Gleit, this requirement is a consequence of Facebook engineers' desire for a more seamless newsfeed (2008), so that gender specific pronouns like could be used in news feed updates like "X was tagged in *his* own photo" instead of what was the previous, grammatically incorrect and clunky, "X was tagged in *their* own photo." Irrespective of Facebook's purported motivation to 'de-clunk' an interface component though, the move to demand users to select from a male-female binary upon signing up perfectly highlights the how the *Subjectivity* process may play out in Facebook and Tinder – and how such a process may alienate users for whom such categories are not as neat a fit as software engineers might have considered, like the estimated three million transgender Facebook users (McNicol, 2013).

Similarly, two features present in Tinder's interface also highlight the application's *Subjective* mediation processes. Such components do not relate explicitly to profile construction, but they carry cultural and political connotations that could easily challenge (or reinforce) a user's understanding of



social norms, bringing with them the possibility the user alters his or her notion of the self to fit such norms.

Firstly, Tinder employs the “love heart” as a symbol users can select to denote interest in a profile. With medieval French origins, the heart has come to denote romance and is ubiquitously used in Western Cultures. However, other cultures employ different equivalent symbols. For example, the Japanese use the maple leaf to represent romance, while in China, apples denote such sentiments. It is therefore significant, that Tinder – which is available in Japan and will soon be available in China – imposes a Western symbol on an audience of users with historically different equivalent symbols.

Secondly, Tinder enforces what is known as a “lock-in” design such that a user’s rejection or approval of another’s profile is permanent (unless if a “match” occurs and a user subsequently chooses to “un-match”). As Lanier suggests when speaking about the ostensible finality of selecting a relationship status on Facebook, “lock-in” design is misplaced in arenas like relationship construction and cultivation because they do not adequately reflect the fluidity of human sentiment (2010, p. 27). Indeed, while the “lock-in” feature of Tinder is a distinctive component of the application, it nonetheless underscores the *Subjective* influence the technology confers over its use.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored affordance as a salient factor in the nature of user engagement with a platform like Tinder and by extension, the nature of identity capable of performance on the application. This chapter first addressed the need for an awareness of software as pregnant with affordance and limitation. The chapter then progressed to de Ridder’s *Mediation Model*, where four processes (*Technology, Subjectivity, Participation* and *Representation*) are held to shape engagement such as identity construction through networked media. Finally, De Ridder’s *Mediation Model* then informed a discussion of Tinder’s affordances and interface, paying particular attention to Tinder’s reliance on the “nonymous” identity environment of Facebook accounts.

Moreover, the formalist approach of this Chapter largely counterbalances the following Chapter’s approach, where situated and ethnographic observation

determines identity performance from a user perspective, and explores concepts more related to *Participation* and *Representation* of the *Mediation Model*.

### **Chapter 3: Negotiating Affordance and Social Norms to Perform Identity on Tinder**

In Chapters 1 and 2, I explore notions of identity performance amongst young people and dating media users, as well as the role of technical affordance upon the process of mediating user identity. Read together, such discussions lead to a preliminary conclusion: identity performance amongst Tinder users can be exploratory and experimental in so far as 1) this exploration and experimentation does not contravene implied social expectations that the user's profile is not an unacceptable (i.e. misleading) portrayal of his or her offline identity; and 2) that any identity performed on Tinder is a mediated result of a number of restrictive factors inherent to the algorithm and interface. This chapter then, seeks to determine how identity performance is actually manifested on Tinder (and answer Sub Question 3: *How do Tinder users actually negotiate such technical and interface affordances to perform identity within the platform?*). The chapter's first section is devoted to exploring how identity is likely to be performed amongst Tinder users. In this section, I lay out a justification for categorising identity performance amongst Tinder users into five thematic groups: adherence, subversion, discrepancy, obfuscation, and equivocation. Then, Section 3.2. provides an explanation of the method used in conducting the ethnographic research and subsequent thematic analysis of Tinder profiles.

#### **3.1. Outlining Five Identity Practices Relevant to Tinder**

As a culmination of the ideas and answers (to Sub Questions 1 and 2) this thesis has so far covered, I devote this section to proposing five practices meritorious of observation and analysis of actual Tinder users. Indeed, these five practices (adherence, subversion, discrepancy, obfuscation, and equivocation) serve as the framework against which I conduct a close thematic content analysis of Tinder profiles in Section 3.2 of this this Chapter. The following Sub Sections though (3.1.1 – 3.1.5) relate such practices to the thematic revelations outlined

throughout my thesis. For example, the five noted Tinder practices address concepts such as de Ridder's notions of *Participation* and *Representation* (2013), Ellison et al's argument that dating media identity is characterised by the *Profile as Promise* theory (2011), and David Buckingham's suggestion that youth identity performance is inherently explorative and often multifaceted (2008).

### **3.1.1 Tinder Identity Performance Practice 1 – Adherence**

In Chapter 1, identity performance is held to be a performative process limited by social norms like Goffman's concept of a "gentlemanly agreement" (1956) and Ellison et al.'s *Profile as Promise* (2011). However, how can social norms reveal themselves in profile construction in Tinder? The observable answer lies in the manner in which certain Tinder profiles adhere to a somewhat standard form of profile construction, often including consistent pieces of information not necessarily demanded of them by the interface. Indeed, considering Tinder's blurb is an ostensibly blank slate, a consistency amongst the type of information conveyed in such a space suggests that social norms and standard expectations of identity performance are evident.

Similarly, a practice of adherence relates to concepts associated with the socially shaping nature of Technology (Chapter 2). Perhaps, certain forms of adherence to a standard form of profile also highlight how users have been exposed to previous iterations of dating media, which has subsequently moulded their impression of what is required of them when it comes to their processes of *Participation* and *Representation* on Tinder. Thus, an adherence to a standardised form of profile, is the first identity performance practice I will analyse in the latter half of this chapter.

### **3.1.2 Tinder Identity Performance Practice 2 – Subversion**

Subversion is the next practice I identify as worthy of analysis. Indeed, as explained in Chapter 1 with reference to the likes of Erikson (1968), and Buckingham (2008), youth is a period characterised by identity exploration – a process that is facilitated by the innumerable identity exploration avenues available to the young people of the networked media. One such method for

exploration presents itself through young users subverting the ostensible<sup>18</sup> intended use of Tinder's platform. Similarly, with respect to de Ridder's notion of *Representation* (2013), users who practise a form of interface subversion highlight the negotiation of mediation processes, and are emblematic of a user's struggle against the affordances resulting from the *Subjectivity* and *Technology* processes.

### **3.1.3 Tinder Identity Performance Practice 3 – Discrepancy**

In Sections 1.2 and 1.3 of Chapter 1, I explore the notion of diffused identity and the commonly held belief that networked platforms like Tinder enable (and to an extent, demand) users convey varying and multifaceted identities online. Therefore, it is worth observing the manner in which Tinder users represent themselves in a varied and at times, conflicting manners – giving rise to my third identity performance practice: Discrepancy. However, evidence of users experimenting with multiples selves is difficult to find when investigating only one platform (i.e. users are likely to vary their identities between platforms). My analysis therefore is restricted, and is characterised more by “intra” variation of identity such that discrepancy between a user's photographs and blurbs on the single platform is observable.

### **3.1.4 Tinder Identity Performance Practice 4 – Obfuscation**

Obfuscation is the fourth identity practice I analyse. Obfuscation is the practice a presenting oneself in such a manner that identity cues inferable by an audience are obscured, and the indexicality of such identity cues are reduced. As will be dealt with further in my analysis, obfuscation practice in Tinder can manifest itself in the use of uploading photographs with filters, which reduce the indexical quality of an image with such after-effects. This practice is significant and warrants analysis because it highlights a manner in which Tinder users negotiate the tight-rope observed in users of other dating platforms:

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<sup>18</sup> I use the phrase “ostensible intended use” here because without access to the designers and policy makers at Tinder, it is impossible to determine the ‘actual’ intended use of interface and platform. Nevertheless, some components of the application's intended use appear reasonably apparent and scrutinisable.

representing oneself both appealingly and “achievably.” As such, this practice relates to my discussion of the Profile as Promise in Section 1.3, and refers to ideas presented by the likes of Ellison et al. (2011), Davis (2011 and Whitty (2008).

Furthermore, the practice of obfuscation through the use of technology like Photoshop reiterates and colours a discussion of the *Mediation Process* within identity performance in platforms such as Tinder. Indeed, *Representation* and *Participation* – the two user-shaped processes of the Mediation Model - are contingent not only upon the technical affordance of the platform, but also on the technical affordances of the software and technology used to create and edit the content they ultimately use to construct their profiles (for example, the photo-editing tools the a Tinder user applied to his photograph before uploading to his profile).

### **3.1.5 Tinder Identity Performance Practice 5 - Equivocation**

Echoing the notion that dating profile construction is a balance between the appealing and the achievable, the practice of equivocation is the fifth and final component of my analysis of Tinder profiles. Indeed, similar to the practice of obfuscation, equivocation (the practice of only presenting limited identity cues despite the chance to convey more) addresses a desire typical of dating media users to adhere to the *Profile as Promise* theory as laid out in Section 1.3 of this thesis.

What though, can be made of users deliberately not using the complete interface affordances available to them? For example, if a user only chooses to upload one photograph despite the opportunity to upload 6, does this practice go towards undermining software-studies and technological determinist arguments that suggest identity performance is strongly curtailed by the affordances of platforms such as Tinder? Indeed, an analysis of this practice can reveal, once again, the negotiation of mediatory practices at the heart of identity performance results. It questions whether technical and affordance limitations impact user processes of *Representation* and *Participation* as much as perhaps feared.

### 3.2 Conducting Tinder Profile Observation and Analysis

In seeking to address the five aforementioned practices, I conducted an ethnographic observation of Tinder profiles, from Munich and Melbourne locations.<sup>19</sup> To undertake such observation though, I was required to create a Tinder profile for research purposes. As a consequence, I also had to create a Facebook account, for which I left blank except for Gender (Male), Age (24), and Name (“Researcher Researcher”). Once I linked this Facebook account to a new Tinder account, my details were automatically loaded. I did not upload any further content to the profile, apart from the personal blurb section in which I explained the profile was being used for Master’s Thesis research.<sup>20</sup>

Once my profile had been established, I then refined the search terms to include both Males and Females within 30 km of my current location. I also only searched for “young people” (pursuant to this Thesis’ focus on youth identity) and employed Katie Davis’ definition of “digital youths” as people aged 25 years and younger (2011, p. 635). Once these search terms were refined, I began observing profiles as they (seemingly randomly) were displayed on the application. I observed each profile’s primary profile picture – the photograph displayed when the profile appears – and the personal blurbs and secondary photographs of each profile. I took notes and screenshots of profiles that particularly suited the five identity performance practices laid out in the previous section of this thesis. At the conclusion of such observation, I “swiped right” to denote non-interest in the profile and thereby preclude further contact with the users.

As laid out in the Methodology section of this thesis, the situated, ethnographic approach to researching identity performance on Tinder enables a nuanced understanding of the manner in which Tinder users actually

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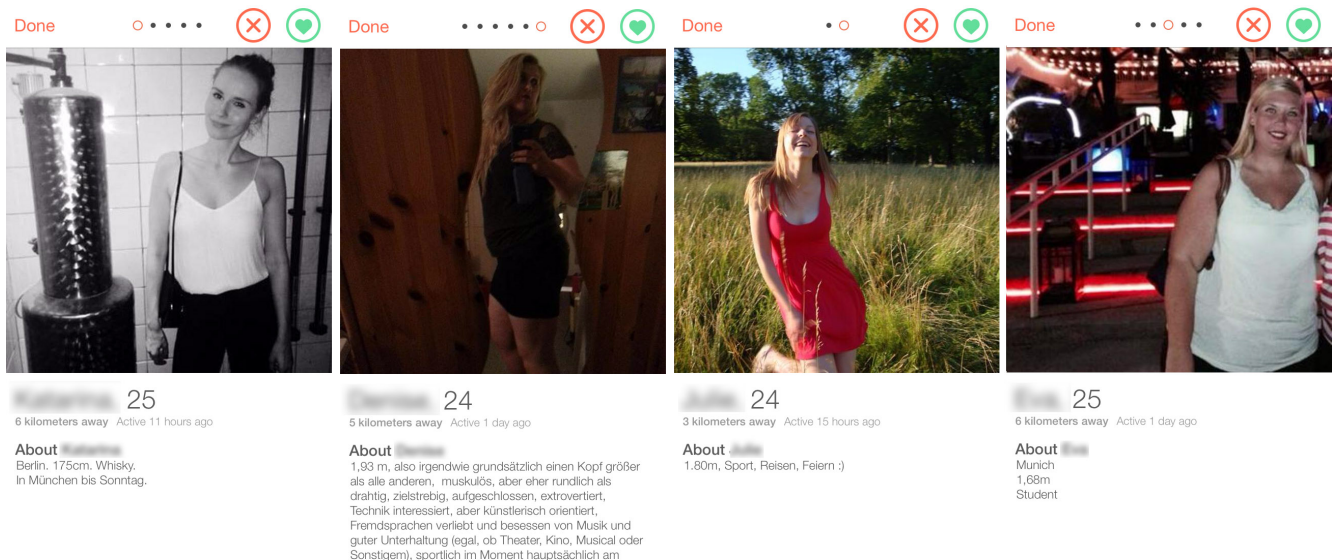
<sup>19</sup> I conducted my research in these cities because I lived in both over the period in which I was researching and writing this thesis. As a bonus, conducting research in multiple “global cities” provides researchers with a well-rounded understanding of a particular phenomenon across certain cultural divides (Ito, Okabe and Anderson, 2009, p. 68).

<sup>20</sup> This admission highlights my role as a researcher distinct from other “serious users” per Aarseth (2003). Indeed, it is likely users, upon being presented with my profile, swiped “Not Interested,” thereby precluding my observation of their profiles. However, upon periods of observation, I did not once appear to exhaust the available profiles in the area.

demonstrate the practices theorised by the identity and software scholars I have drawn upon in Chapters 1 and 2.

### 3.2.1 Addressing Identity Performance Practice 1 - Adherence

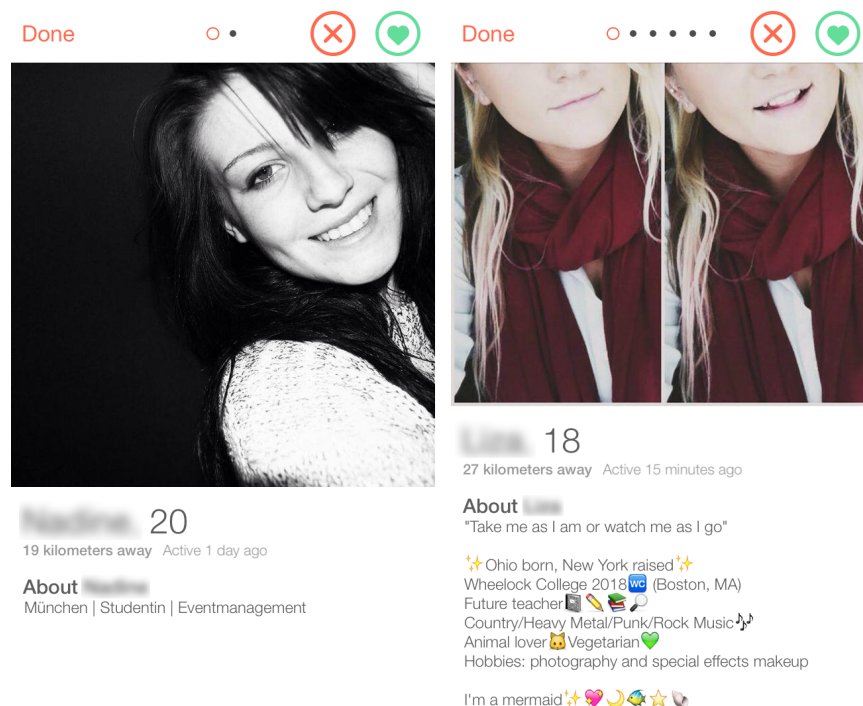
While Tinder represents a novel approach to dating media, many of its young users perform identity according to standard approaches commonly associated with traditional iterations of dating platforms. To recall my discussion of dating media profiles from Section 1.3 in this thesis, traditional dating platforms are “static self-presentational portfolios consisting of textual descriptions and photographs” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 46). This normally manifests itself in profiles consisting of a portrait photograph as the user’s profile picture, and a series of categories that users are encouraged to complete – relating for example, to the user’s interests, height, weight, occupation and nationality (Davis 2011, p. 638; Ellison et al. 2011, p. 47). Meanwhile, the user’s answers to questions relating to their opinion on issues such as their willingness to date smokers to their thoughts on dogs are ostensibly designed to further colour their online dating identities.



**Figure 1: Tinder users, who might provide few other details in their blurb, demonstrate adherence to standard dating media platforms by including height information.**

It is therefore interesting to observe a number of Tinder users constructing profiles with an adherence to such standards despite Tinder’s blurb not requiring a user complete a profile inclusive of such information. For

example, many Tinder users appropriate the blurb to disclose their height – a direct index to their offline self that is otherwise difficult to determine by simply perusing the user’s photographs. For some users (see Figure 1), height is one of the very few identifiers worth including in the blurb. Meanwhile, others fill their Tinder blurb with a number of other components typical of traditional dating platforms. These blurbs describe the user’s occupation, personal interests, and nationality or reason for habituating the particular city in which they are using Tinder (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Tinder users appropriate the blurb to reveal personal information with consistency and an apparent adherence to traditional dating media platforms.**

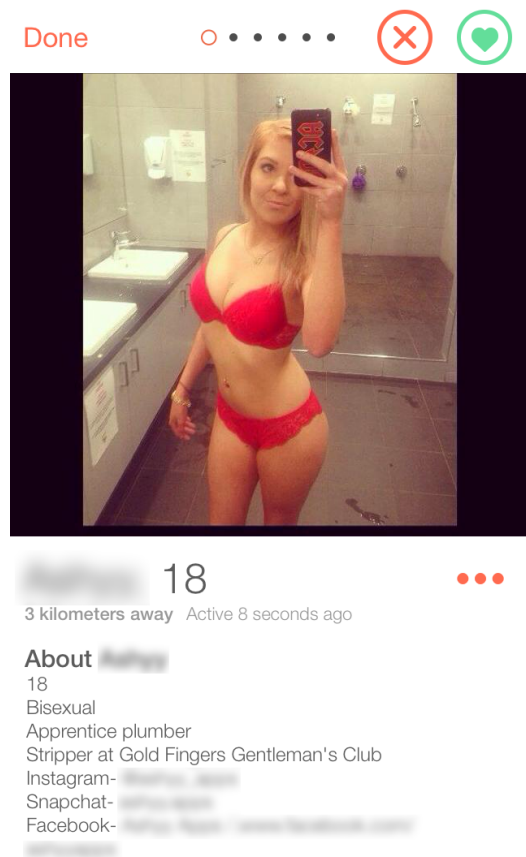
Interestingly, some users (see Figure 3) even include personal details that are automatically displayed in their Tinder profiles like first name, age, and sexuality (although sexuality is not displayed, the user can select which gender(s) can view their profile, thus implying sexuality to the viewer).

Along with physical features like height, users reveal personal details about themselves through their Tinder profiles. They may do so explicitly (i.e. in their blurb) or impliedly (i.e. through particular photographs). Either way, such revelations are an adherence to traditional formats of dating media profile construction (Davis 2011, p. 640) and are a significant point of discussion for understanding identity performance amongst young Tinder users. Indeed, a



predilection for revealing personal information such as height despite the Tinder interface not requiring such detail, can suggest two things: that Tinder users construct profiles with similarities to traditional dating media profiles in order to appeal to preconceived norms as established by the designers and software engineers of preceding and popular dating platforms (see my discussion of Subjectivity in Section 2.3.2); or, that such consistencies are simply a manifestation of widely-held belief that height is essential in determining the suitability of a future romantic partnership. These two reasons certainly not need be mutually exclusive, and as outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.3 of this thesis, technology like Tinder shapes and is shaped by socio-cultural norms. Therefore, the likes of the right user in Figure 2, who reveals her extensive personal details may do so on Tinder because her exposure to other dating media has led her to believe sharing such information is standard or that she believes sharing such information is simply necessary in the context of dating media – or that she believes both to be true.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, from an intimate performative identity perspective, undertaking a process of self-disclosure on networked media can lead to an increased sense of connectedness amongst users (see section 1.2). For example, Gibbs et al claim users engaged in a reciprocal practice of self-disclosure are more likely find an intimate connection with those to whom they have revealed personal information (2011, p. 152). Similarly, Taylor & Altman argue self-disclosure can develop a sense of intimacy even between people who have not



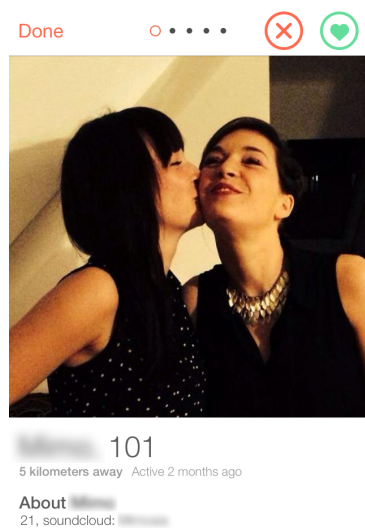
**Figure 3: Some users include blurb details already displayed as automatic identifiers like age.**

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Gibbs et al found that self-disclosure like that in figure 3 predicts “online dating success” and the honesty and amount of information disclosed is positively correlated to such success (2011, p. 152).

met before (1987, p. 261). On the other hand, self-disclosure can lead to a identity performance as a manipulative practices; for example users including a measurement of their height on their Tinder profile may in actual face be shorter than the height stipulated. However, this practice is confined to a degree of speculation and was not testable by my ethnographic observation approach. Nevertheless, as I have discussed previously, dating media profiles are normally constructed according to an implied understanding that face-to-face contact will not bode well for users whose online profiles do not “achievably” reflect the profile owner’s offline person.

### 3.2.2 Addressing Identity Performance Practice 2 – Subversion

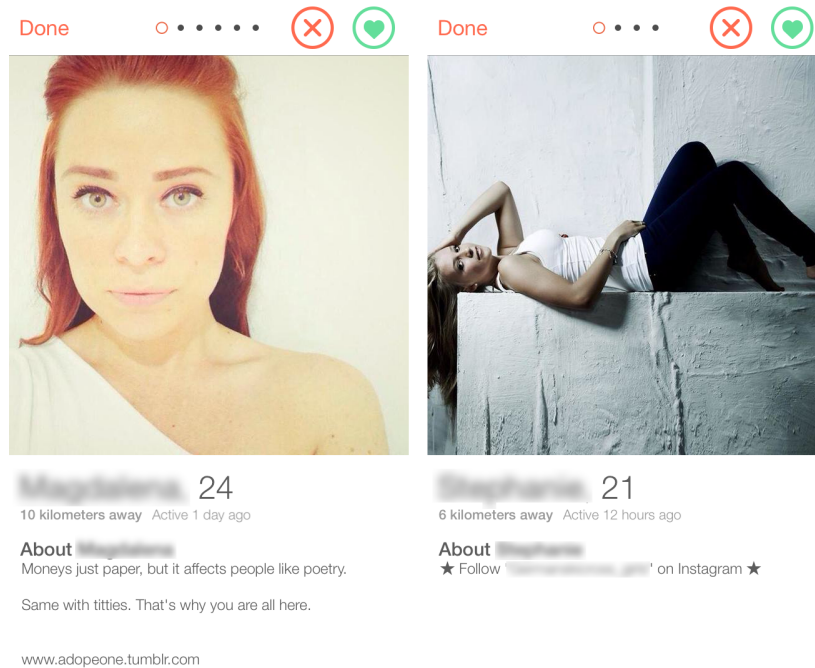
Where the previous section analyses and discusses the significance of a trend amongst some Tinder users to adhere to standardised profile construction templates such that some users even include details that one might expect on other dating media platforms, this chapter explores a somewhat counter-example to such a practice, where user the ostensible intended use of interface is subverted.



**Figure 4: Age as stipulated on this users account is clearly not reflective of the user’s actual age.**

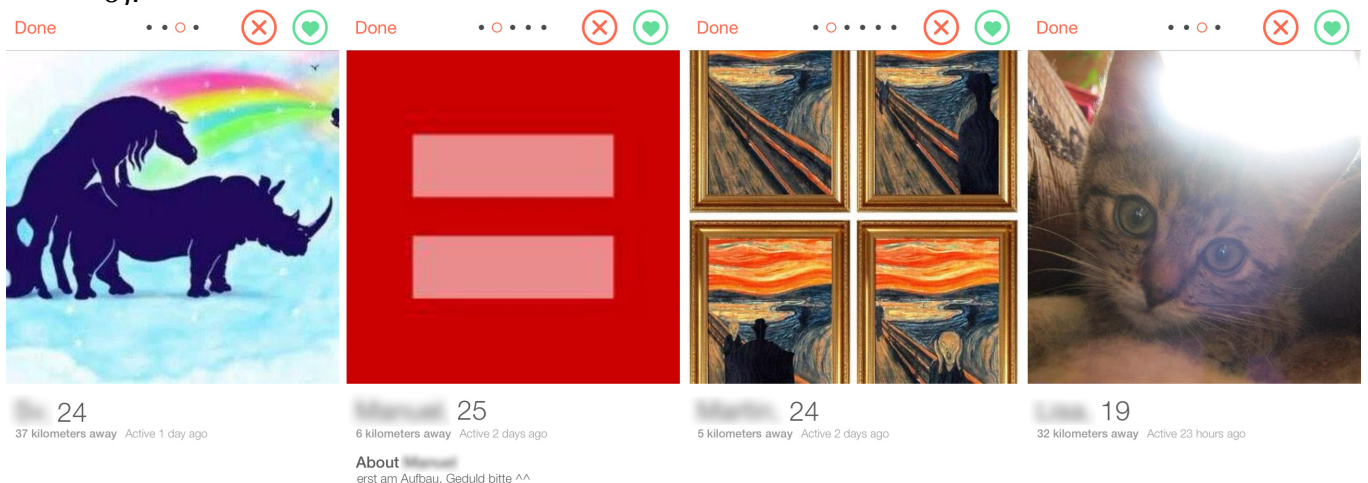
Analysing the intended use of Tinder is somewhat treacherous without explicit knowledge of how the interface was designed to be used. However, analysed within the context of my discussion of Facebook (and by extension, Tinder) as encouraging a “nonymous” identity environment, some Tinder profiles reasonably demonstrate a subversion of such *Subjective* and *Technology*-based affordances. For example, the user in Figure 4 stipulates her age to be 101, yet her profile photographs depict a young woman. It is reasonable to assume then, that this user has subverted the intended use of the age category demanded of Facebook and Tinder users.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting here that Tinder users may also lie about their age in order to appear younger or older only slightly, or to appear old enough to get access to Tinder because users have to be over the age of 17. Without contact with users, my research



**Figure 5: Users appropriate the blurb for links to external avenues for identity exploration. This phenomenon is also evident in Figures 3, 4, and 5.**

However, the practice of subversion is not confined to posting a fake age online. Indeed, many other profiles include links to external platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Soundcloud and Tumblr in the blurb section of their profiles (see Figure 5). Such links can be regarded as subversive because they are advertised in the “Blurb” section – which traditionally means a brief personal self-description (Gibbs et al., 2011, p. 75). This practice could be equated with book sleeves including a link to the books Wikipedia page instead of providing the standard 10-15 lines of summation readers expect on the back cover. Aside from the blurb though, other users include upload photographs of objects, animals, celebrities, paintings, cartoons and quotes in place of profile photographs most users appropriate with photographs of themselves (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Tinder profiles with photographs of subjects clearly not of the users.**

To apply the theoretical perspectives gleaned from Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, subversive practices like those listed above, are significant for two primary reasons. Firstly, such subversive practices underscore the explorative nature of youth identity and the nature of identity constructed in the networked era. Subverting intended use – even if this practice is not done so with the tacit knowledge that a certain online practice is subversive – suggests a particular user explores the affordances of the online platform and experiments with social cues. Playing with age for example, is evidence the user is willing to experiment with an identity far removed from their offline persona, while including a photograph of a cat similarly conveys a different social identifier (i.e. that the user likes cats) than what would be conveyed by simply including a personal portrait in the same space.

Secondly, subversive practices also draw attention to the site of “democratic struggle” (Cartpentier, 2011, p. 193) at the heart of identity performance on technologically mediated platforms. Indeed, where I have discussed *Subjective* and *Technology* processes as mediating identity practices on Tinder, subversive appropriation of the application represents a shift towards user autonomy and highlights concepts of *Participation* and *Representation* can still be achieved relatively independently of the politically imbued restrictions represented in technical affordance. Indeed, aside from exploring identity through using a fake age, the user behind Figure 4 represents a user whose *Participation* process (i.e. the nature in which she uses Tinder) and *Representation* process (i.e. how she ultimately identifies herself through Tinder) are idiosyncratic to her and liberated – to an extent – of the expectations that Tinder (and Facebook users) identify themselves with genuine ages. However, this is not to say that subversive practices completely undo the restrictions inherent to technical affordance. Indeed, while someone may upload a picture of a cat as his profile picture, or a teenage girl may advertise herself to be 101 years old, these practices are still mediated by *Technology* and *Subjective* processes at a design level. The picture of the cat for example, will be cropped to fit the standard photo ratio of the Tinder interface, and the age is simply a selection of a predetermined list (which happens to only go to 101).

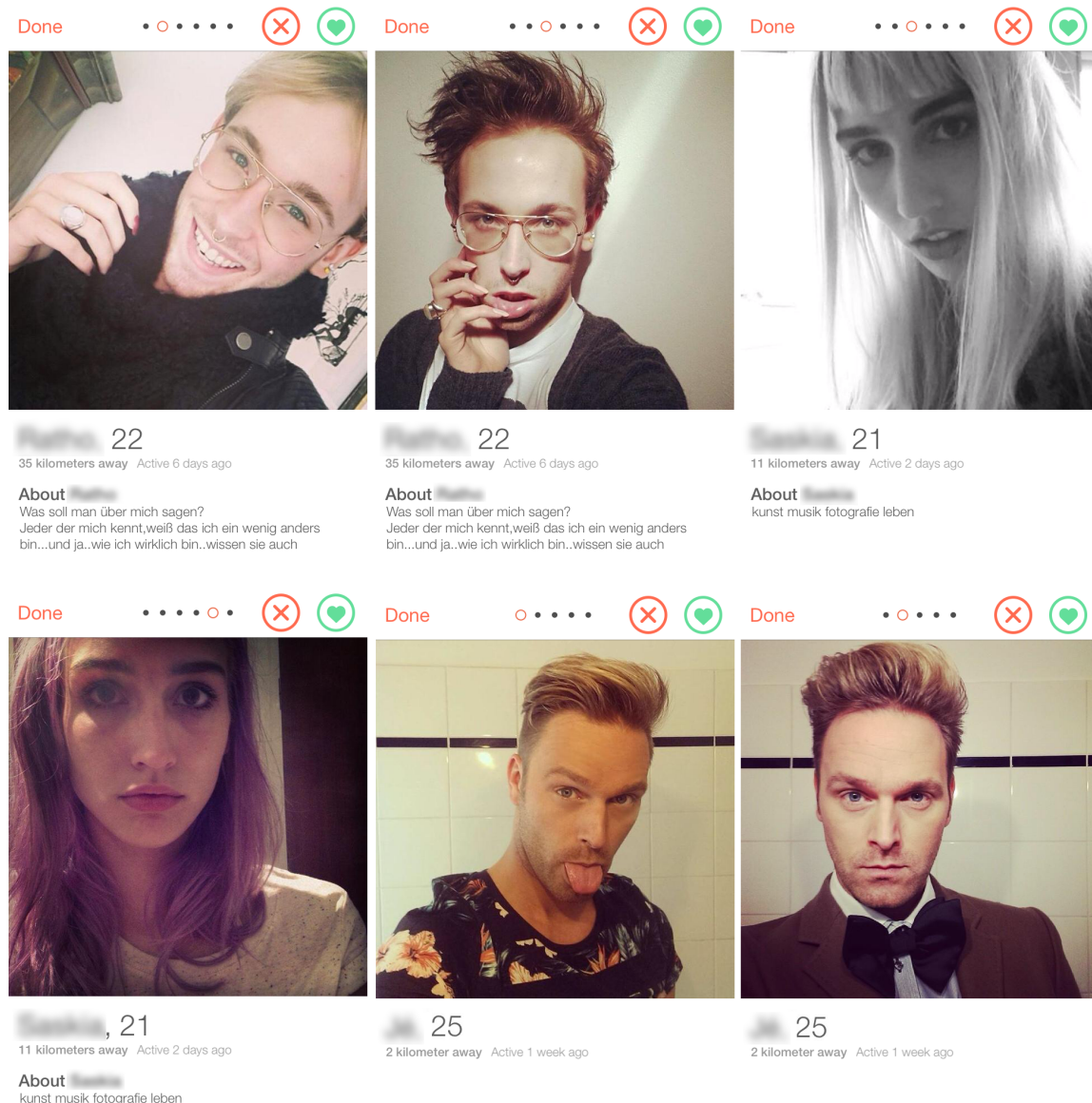
Thus, subversive practices on Tinder raise ideas relevant to both discussions of identity as an explorative process (Chapter 1) and as a mediated process contingent upon each element of de Ridder's *Mediation Model* constituting *Technology, Subjectivity, Participation* and *Representation* (2013).

### 3.2.3 Addressing Identity Performance Practice 3 - Discrepancy

Many Tinder users perform identity with discrepancy. For example, a number of profiles include photographs of the same person with different hairstyles or appearances (see figure 7). As a consequence, the viewer cannot be certain which photograph, if any, is an index to the user's current offline persona. Moreover, to recall ideas of youth identity as an explorative process of multiple selves (Sections 1.1 – 1.2), discrepancy highlights how Tinder users explicitly experiment with a number of identities. Further research could be conducted on this issue to determine whether multifaceted self-representation is a successful online dating tactic because it casts a wider net (i.e. a wider variety of tastes will be appealed to) or whether identity diffusion is unappealing for potential matches.

Nevertheless, the type of profile discrepancy evident in Tinder has been observed in other dating platforms. Ellison et al., for example, suggest discrepancy is a consequence of a user's knowledge that his or her profile will be viewed in the future, which "gives a tacit permission to draw from a library of selves when constructing their profile" (2011, p. 52). Similarly, Walther found that an acceptance of 'asynchronicity' existed between the time a profile is constructed and the time it will be viewed, thereby enabling the user to selectively self-present (1996, p. 38). Furthermore, while we cannot be certain whether audiences of discrepant profiles are attracted or repelled by inconsistency, there is evidence to suggest a level of acceptance towards the practice. Ellison et al. state, "as long as the discrepancy is not too significant and the future self was within the realm of possibility, the misrepresentation is generally acceptable" (2011, p. 52). This idea closely parallels my discussion of the *Profile as a Promise*, which holds that so long as the representation of the self is not so divergent that a viewer will find the divergence unacceptable, a certain

degree of discrepancy is considered not simply acceptable, but expected in dating media (see section 1.4 of this thesis).



**Figure 7: Three Tinder users, who within their profiles, appear with discrepant identities.**

However, observing users experiment with varied identities probably exists to a greater extent than what I have observed in Tinder profiles with photographs depicting the user with varied hairstyles and 'looks.' Indeed, Tinder users' other selves probably most commonly exist outside of my purview as a Tinder-exclusive researcher. For example, a vast majority of Tinder users probably cultivate identity in a different manner in other networked platforms, or even offline – but my exclusive observation of Tinder profiles cannot shed light on such practices.

### 3.2.4 Addressing Identity Performance Practice 4 - Obfuscation

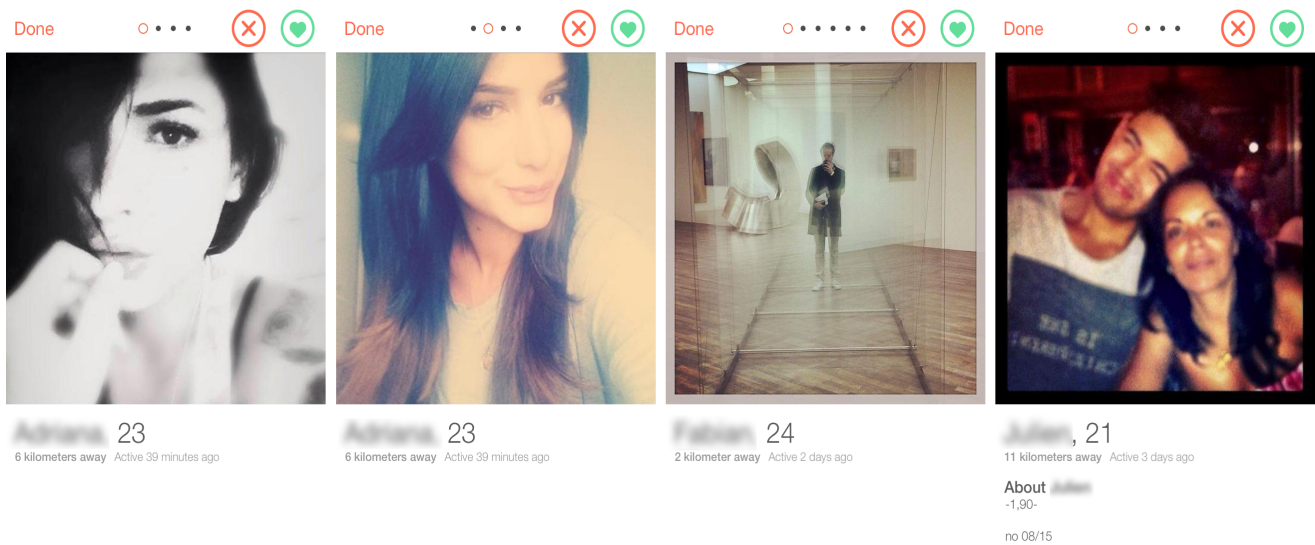


Figure 8: Tinder profile photographs with camera and editing effects that obfuscate the indexical quality of the shots.

Obfuscation is another observable trend amongst Tinder user profiles. I define obfuscation as the practice of including photographs that calculatedly blur or alter (normally through the use of digital filters) the viewer's impression of the user's corporeal or physical self. Many Tinder users for example, employ post-effect filters to alter portraits of themselves before uploading them to their Tinder profiles. Often this results in a series of photographs that are 'softer,' and less sharply focused on the user's physical features (see Figure 8). As a consequence, this inhibits the viewer's immediate understanding of the user's physical features, but at the same time, is pregnant with implication. For example, while one may wonder what Figure 9's " face may look like because his photograph clouded with a heavy red tone and blurred portrait (such that only his hair and eyes can be discerned) carries identity cues about his personality and taste nonetheless. While we may learn little of his nose shape and jaw line, viewers may yet draw conclusions about his taste in photography and music (vinyl records serve as the back drop of the photograph).

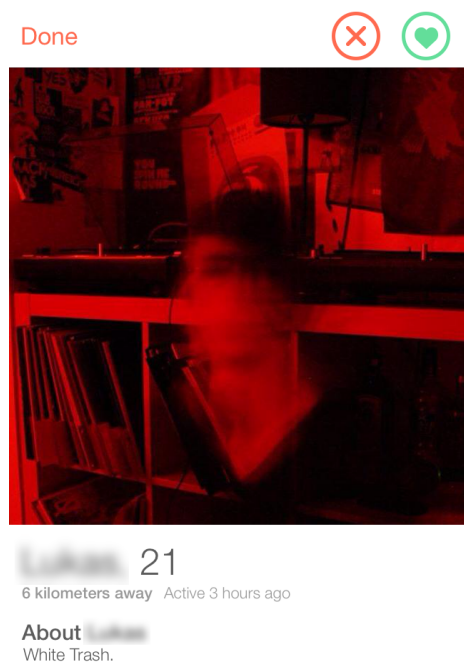
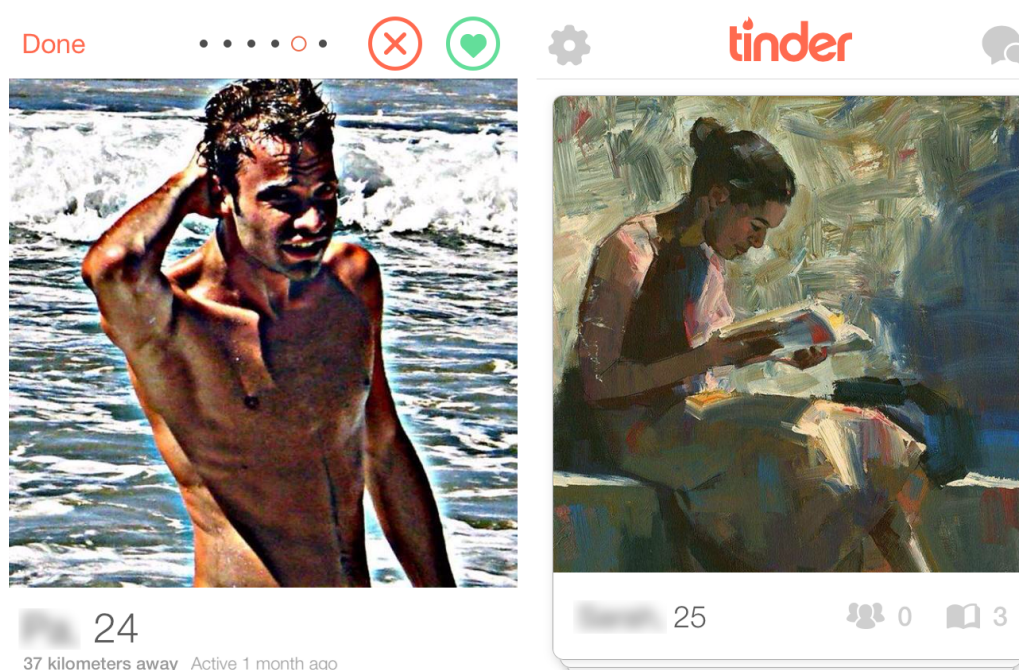


Figure 9

Similarly, both profiles in Figure 10 include effects that considerably dilute the indexical qualities of the original photograph or image. And while the viewer's impression of such users' corporeal and physical selves might be somewhat obfuscated, one may still draw conclusions about the manner in which they pose, where they pose, and which after effects they have used. According to Walther, interpretation – and at times extrapolation – is par of the course to engaging with identity performance on dating platforms (1996, p. 13). Walther claims such platforms are “reduced cue environments,” whereby audiences of potential daters are forced to interpret the few cues available to them to determine a profile's suitability for dating.



**Figure 10: Visual effects that undermine the indexical quality of the photographs/image.**

Moreover, the aforementioned obfuscation attempts may represent the widely observed trend that dating media users engage in a process of “embellishment” (Mazar and Ariely, 2006; Heino et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2011). Embellishment, or adding decorative detail to something to make it more attractive has been regarded as distinct from calculated deception and lying (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). Indeed obfuscation practices may occlude particular details of a photograph to render the overall photograph more attractive (see Pa’s photograph for example) and therefore is a form of embellishment.

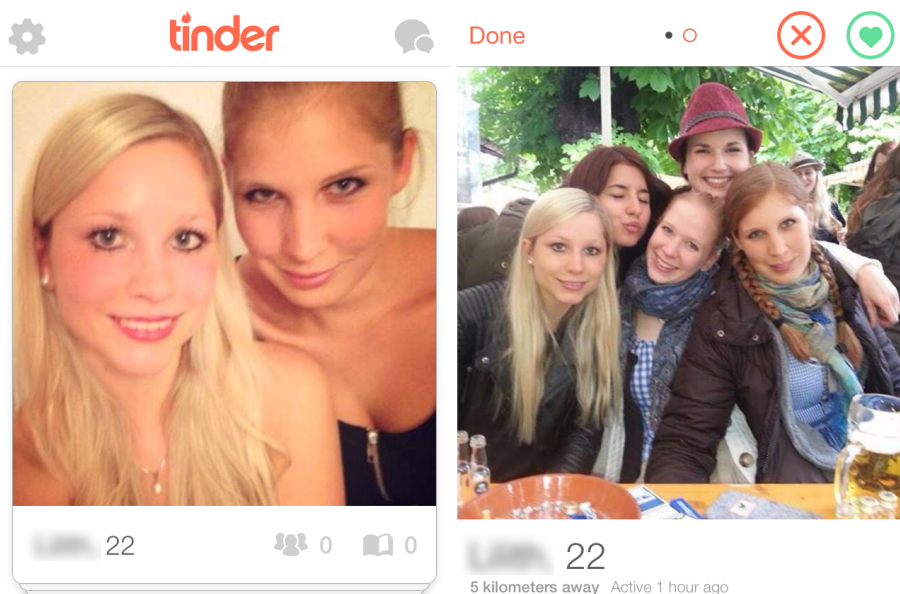


Interestingly, Ellison et al. note “an expectation that dating profiles will include a certain degree of fudging to get over the hump” (2011, p. 56) such that other daters expect photographs and blurbs to include details that are purposely used to make the profile more appealing.

Aside from the negotiation Tinder users must make in order to appear both appealing and “achievable,” after effects such as Photoshop again cast light on identity performance as a technically mediated process. Indeed, assuming Tinder users like those in Figure 10 have used photo-editing software, the technical affordances (and processes of *Subjectivity* and *Technology* per the *Mediation Model*) associated with the photo-editing software have a mediatory role of their Tinder identity, too. This is to say, if the users in Figures 10 could not have used a particular after-effects tool, the audience’s interpretation of their Tinder identity will be intrinsically different.

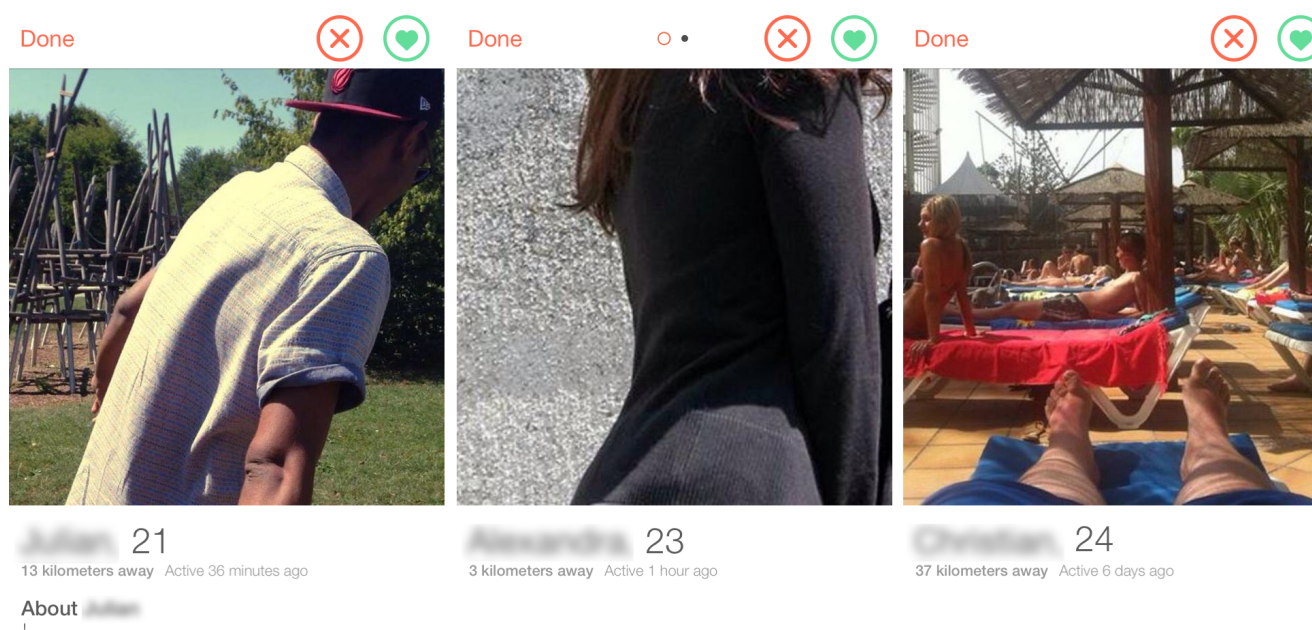
Thus, while the process of obfuscation reveals how Tinder users negotiate profile construction such that they appear appealing (in their own eyes at least) and reasonably indexical to their offline persona, the use of editing software to conduct such practices also highlights the multi-stage process of the *Mediation Model*, whereby the technical affordances of software distinct from Tinder (such as Photoshop) can have a salient impact on the nature of identity performed on the platform regardless.

### 3.2.5 Addressing Identity Performance Practice 5 - Equivocation



**Figure 11: Many users equivocated identity performance by only including group photographs. In this example, it is impossible to determine which of the blonde women from the left image belongs to this profile, because both appear in the only other profile photograph.**

On Tinder, users equivocate with identity performance primarily through the practice of uploading photographs that purposely channel a viewer's interpretation of the user's identity by reducing the number of identity cues. Unlike obfuscation, this practice does not involve a form of embellishment or a purposefully used filters to undermine the indexicality of the photographs. Instead, Tinder users can equivocate through photographs, which although indexical, reveal little about the person's identity or physical persona. I observed this practice to exist in two distinct types of photographs: firstly, many users uploaded photographs of groups or couples, thereby rendering it difficult for a viewer to discern who the profile actually related to (see Figure 11). Secondly, many photographs were simply of close-up body parts, which also limited the viewer's capacity to recognise and interpret the user's overall appearance (see Figure 12).



**Figure 12: These profiles practice of equivocation by including photographs (that are probably of the user) but lack insight into the user's actual offline person. Significantly, the figures on the right and left only included such photographs**

Such forms of equivocation narrow the number of identity cues an audience can use to interpret the user's identity, and once again recall Walther's notion of dating media as a "reduced cue environment" (1996). Reducing such cues limits varied interpretation amongst the audience to the user's performance

(Goffman, 1957), and as discussed in Section 1.2, reducing the potentiality for varied performance interpretation is less explorative than other forms of identity performance such as discrepancy. Consequently, Tinder users who choose to represent themselves narrowly and with equivocal photographs support the idea that although new media platforms enable identity diffusion, many users do not employ such availabilities when engaging with dating platforms or SNS platforms with indexical relation to his or her offline identity (see Section 1.3). Ellison et al. suggest dating media users who purposely reduce identity cues resolve a “tension between honesty and self-presentational pressures” (2011, p. 53). In other words, Tinder users who might feel self-conscious about a particular physical trait can reconcile their need to represent themselves truthfully on Tinder and a desire to represent themselves in what they consider an appealing light by uploading an equivocating photograph that does not include the particular body part they do not like.

Another form of equivocation was also evident in a large proportion of the profiles I analysed: leaving the blurb blank or nearly blank, and not uploading the maximum number of photographs available (see also Figure 12). This form of equivocation suggests that the mediatory process of *Participation* amongst Tinder users often does not extend to limits of Tinder’s affordances. Therefore, the nature of a user’s *Representation* process is actually self-restricted, and not absolutely restricted by *Technology* and *Subjective* processes at play. Consequently, it may be argued by the likes of Carpentier (1996), that this represents a victory for the user in the struggle between user-will and technical limitation. However, as is the case with profiles that employ subversive practices, simply because a user does not exhaust the number of characters available does not mean the characters he or she has used in the blurb were not mediated by technical affordance. Indeed, equivocation in this sense may suggest the user can still nuance his or her *Representative* and *Participatory* processes, but such processes are still contingent upon the platform’s affordances.

### 3.3 Tying the Five Identity Performance Practices Together

Thus, this Chapter has identified five practices of identity performance worthy of observation: adherence, subversion, discrepancy, obfuscation and equivocation. The analysis of such practices has explored their implication with respect to notions of identity performance and the mediatory processes behind Tinder as a software platform. The results of my observation and the ensuing analysis have gone towards answering Sub Question 3: *How do Tinder users actually negotiate such technical and interface affordances to perform identity within the platform?*

Indeed, a practice of adhering (to standard forms of dating profile construction) suggests social norms have infiltrated Tinder identity construction practices, resulting in users highlighting identity cues they deem necessarily relevant to potential future face-to-face dates. Meanwhile adherence may also suggest that the *Technology* and *Subjectivity* processes behind other dating media the user may have been exposed to (such as Match.com which includes an option to include height) has shaped the nature of the user's *Representation* when given the opportunity to fill a personal blurb on Tinder.

Meanwhile, users who subvert the ostensible intended use of the interface highlight the young users of Tinder engage with the application in an exploratory manner, and appropriate certain affordances to convey social cues in unexpected ways. Furthermore, subverting intended use highlights a level of autonomy with respect to the user's *Participation* and *Representation* processes that influence the nature of identity performance in countenance some perceived restrictions of interface affordance. Significantly, some users also make explicit reference to Tinder (see Figure 13). This suggests users are at least cognizant of the technology's role in mediating communication between users.

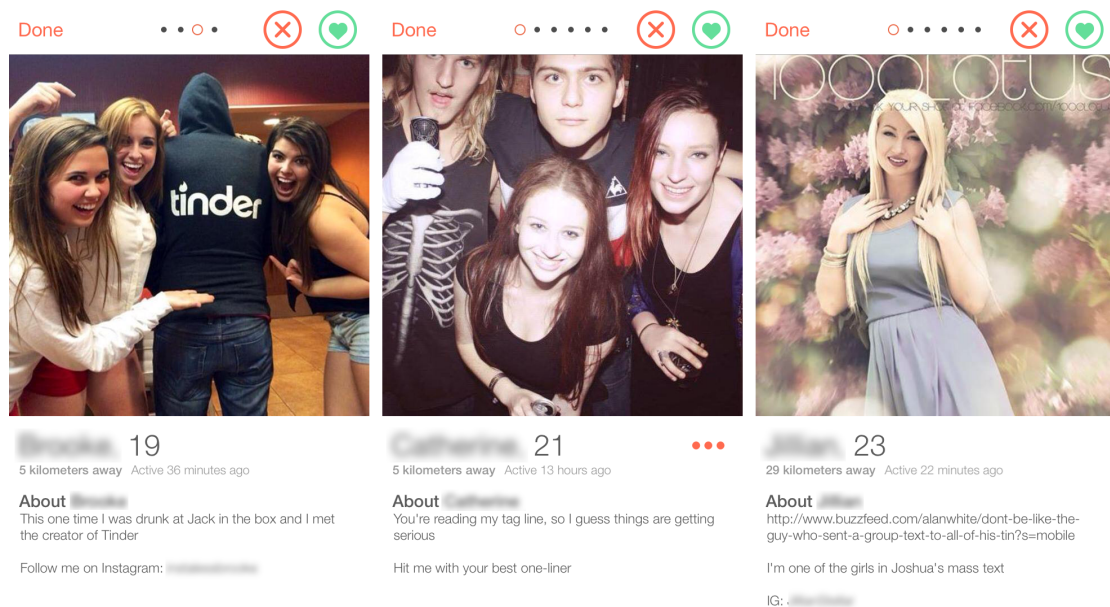


Figure 13: Users making reference to explicit or implicit reference to Tinder.

On the other hand though, equivocation practices on Tinder and failing to present a profile with resounding indexical quality to the user’s offline persona, suggests that perhaps user *Representation* is not curtailed the interfaces limited affordances for identity performance. For example, since many Tinder users do not use all six photographs in constructing their online identities, the some ostensibly restrictive affordances on user Representation, may not actually restrict the vast majority of users. Meanwhile though, equivocation practices also highlight some users’ reconciliation of the need to appear attractive and “achievable.” Evidence of this reconciliation was is also present in the practice of obfuscation, where users employed the use of certain photo-editing tools to obfuscate the indexical qualities of profile images, such that the photograph was altered (often to make the user appear more attractive) but not by so much the photograph lost its complete indexical value.

## Conclusion

As networked platforms continue to infiltrate our personal lives and increasingly become a crutch upon which we rely for social and romantic connection, conceptualisations of identity must be re-evaluated to address these progressively significant and novel platforms. Through reference to identity practices on Tinder, this thesis has undertaken an exploration of the practices young people employ to perform identity through their online profiles. Such

practices though, are shaped and mediated by social norms and technical affordance.

This thesis first approached the social norms likely to shape performance identity on a platform like Tinder. In answering Sub Question 1 of this thesis (*How do social norms influence youth performance identity and performance identity in dating media?*) I mapped leading scholastic theories into youth identity practices and identity practices widely observed in other dating media platforms. In doing so, the first chapter of this thesis reveals a number of salient social norms likely to influence the identity performance of young Tinder users. For example, identity is held to be a *performative* process requiring a certain “gentlemanly agreement” between an individual performer and an audience of interpreters, who must take social cues on face value. Moreover, young people – as facilitated by the many identity avenues of the networked era – are believed to experiment with identity and multiple versions of the self. However, certain social expectations exist in dating media platforms, whereby users are expected to represent themselves in an appealing light but without misleading future potential dates as to their “realistically achievable” offline persona. Therefore, the young users of dating applications such as Tinder are likely to construct online identities in an exploratory and appealing yet “realistically achievable” manner.

Aware of the expected social norms informing identity performance, in Chapter 2 I turned to the nature of technical affordance as a mediator in identity practices (and addressed Sub Question 2: *What role does technical and interface affordance play in mediating identity practices on platforms such as Tinder*). The first step in such a discussion though, involved a justification for exploring technical affordance – an often-overlooked component of new media scholarship. Then, I proposed an adapted model of communication scholar Sander de Ridder’s *Mediation Model* (2013)– which provided a sound framework for an investigation of the *Technology* and *Subjective* processes that ultimately mediate identity performance on Tinder. These processes with respect to Tinder, and a textual analysis of Tinder and its relationship with Facebook proved, revelatory. Especially since Tinder relies on Facebook for user identifiers like age, gender and name, and that Facebook attempts to assert a “anonymous”

environment where ‘true’ identity is favored. Consequently the *Subjective* processes of Facebook and Tinder, as well as the *Technology* on which such *Subjective* processes are asserted, reveals Tinder user identity is highly contingent upon the affordances and regulations behind the application.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I identify five practices of identity performance that merit analysis pursuant to the ideas discussed in the previous two chapters. The results of a situated observation of actual Tinder profiles facilitated such an analysis. I used the five identity practices of adherence, subversion, discrepancy, obfuscation, and equivocation to answer Sub Question 3: *How do Tinder users actually negotiate such technical and interface affordances to perform identity within the platform?* As such, I explored how many Tinder users create online profiles and identities through an adherence to revealing standard profile information (like height), while others appeared to consciously subvert the intended template for identity construction by uploading photos that are evidently not of themselves, or by providing links to external platforms with other identity performance avenues (like Instagram or Tumblr accounts). Meanwhile, other users appeared to explore with different appearances and include discrepancies of identity between photos. Then, some others embellished their online profiles by uploading edited photographs to obfuscate the audience’s ability to analyse the original, more indexical photograph. Similarly, others purposely included photographs with reduced identity cues or photographs with dubious indexical reference to an offline persona, such that it appears they equivocate in performing identity that is personally revealing.

So in short, how do social norms and technical affordance shape and mediate youth identity performance on Tinder? With respect to social components, Tinder’s young users experiment with notions of the self (as evidenced in discrepancy and subversion practices), while seemingly remaining cognizant of a duty to represent oneself in an appealing yet “achievable” light (as evidenced by practices of adherence, equivocation, and obfuscation). Meanwhile, interface affordances largely shape the nature of *Representation* and *Participation* processes at the heart of identity performance on Tinder. Particularly, with respect to Facebook’s attempt to assert a ‘nonymous’ version of identity, Tinder users are curtailed from flippant experimentation with

multiple online selves. Similarly, all forms of *Representation* on Tinder are ultimately mediated by interface, and as such, are reliant on technical affordance in the communication of social cues. Nevertheless, the practices of equivocation and subversion of intended interface usage suggest that *Technology* and *Subjective* processes may not completely curtail users from identity performance exploration.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Since new dating media platforms are consistently finding a way onto our phones and into our lives, further research into the nature of identity on such platforms will colour and nuance scholastic understanding of novel identity performance practices. Certainly, a number avenues for research merit closer analysis than what I was able to provide in this thesis.

Particularly with respect to my discussion of subversion, research investigating the actual intended use as disclosed by software designers and policy-makers behind platforms such as Tinder would provide a more specific understanding of what constitutes a subversive practice from a design perspective. Meanwhile, research into subversive practices that goes beyond my ethnographic observation approach, could reveal whether users calculatedly intend to adhere to or subvert the affordances presented to them. Indeed, where my research is confined to observation, studies exploring the motivations behind particular identity practices would be revealing and help nuance understandings gleaned through observation as presented in this thesis. Moreover, studies into the intent and motivations of users could reveal whether users who adhere to certain profile construction standards (i.e. including height in the burb) do so out of a desire to appease a socially-constructed duty to engage in a practice of self-disclosure, or whether such practice is a consequence of their exposure to previous other forms of dating media that require such profile information from users.

Furthermore, my ethnographic approach to testing identity exploration through multiple online selves was severely limited by my focus purely on Tinder profiles. Further research into this field could test technical affordance as a mediating process by exploring the multiple identities present between users'



various online dating platforms (such as a comparison between a user's Tinder profile and Lavoo profile). Indeed an intra-genre analysis (as distinct from Vasalou and Joinson's 2009 study into identity across platforms of different genres) would highlight the immediate effect of both the notion of identity exploration and the technology-oriented Mediatory roles of specific platforms. Further, my ethnographic approach did not include contact with Tinder users – who also cultivate online identity through the chat function of the application. Indeed, a holistic approach to identity practices would include an analysis of identity cues conveyed through chat.

Irrespective of the avenues for further research though, this thesis has explored the multifarious restrictions (both socially-constructed and technically enforced) users must negotiate in constructing their online dating profiles. And while such media continue to facilitate romantic connection and mediate our online personas, it is crucial we understand the nature of identity they enable. As a result, the next time we upload a photograph onto our Tinder profile, or write a brief personal blurb on another platform, we can be cognizant of the technical affordance mediating our actions, and the socially-constructed norms likely to mould the nature of our profiles – and we may at once begin understand why exactly our online identity is the way it is.

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