

Racialised Digital Dating Experiences of Mobile Dating Application Users

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Abstract: With the emergence of mobile dating applications like Tinder, people have changed how they pursue romantic relationships. However, real-world issues pertaining to race and ethnicity that often emerge as people interact are still being experienced in the virtual world. Given the increased popularity of mobile dating applications, there is a pressing need to explore how racialised digital dating are manifested online. The study therefore explored the racialised digital dating experiences of users of the mobile dating application Tinder as well as the influence of Tinder's affordances on these experiences. Through a qualitative study based on 25 semi-structured interviews, the study identified three categories of racialised digital dating experiences: Matching Experiences, Communication & Interaction as well as Fetishism & Stereotypes. The study also revealed how Tinder affordances of Locatability, Multimediality, and Visual Dominance could be actualised by users to achieve their preferred racialised digital dating experiences.

Keywords: Ethnicities, Race, Mobile Dating, Tinder, Racialised Mobile Dating, Affordances

1. Introduction

The turn of the 21st century has witnessed society's transition towards technologically mediated forms of social engagement (Corriero & Tong, 2016). Interactions that used to occur purely within the physical world, are now supported by interconnected digital platforms (Chan, 2017). One such interaction is the quest for romantic partners which may now be pursued through digital means on applications like Tinder (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016).

While such digital tools have revolutionised how people seek potential partners and form relationships, the social experiences that are being created and perpetuated within these digital spaces (Mason, 2016) should not be over-looked. Indeed, literature shows that dating on mobile dating platforms is racialised (McGrath et al., 2016; Spell, 2017). This implies that, on mobile dating platforms, ethnic groups are perceived differently, which might further influence their overall engagement experiences. In the context of this study, the term 'racialised digital dating' refers to dating amongst mobile dating application users within an ethnically diverse context.

Hwang (2013) states that real-world issues are often manifested in digital communities. Hence, experiences inherent to race and ethnicity that prevail in the real-world could also occur during mobile dating and should be explored. Moreover, it is important to understand how affordances of mobile dating applications might influence these racialised digital dating experiences (Mason, 2016; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). Affordances are defined as "the potential for behaviors associated with achieving an immediate concrete outcome and arising from the relation between an object (e.g., an Information Technology (IT) artifact) and a goal-oriented actor or actors" (Volkoff & Strong, 2013, p. 823). Therefore, this study aims to explore the racialised digital dating experiences of users of a mobile dating application as they actualise the affordances of mobile dating applications. The research question is formulated as follows: *What are the racialised digital dating experiences of mobile dating application users and how are these influenced by affordances of the apps?*

The study focused on Tinder, a location-based mobile dating application (Mason, 2016). Tinder allows users to setup a dating profile that may contain an album of photographs, a short biography, and the current employer/educational institution (David & Cambre, 2016). The research question was answered Through an interpretive and exploratory case study of Tinder. 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data was analysed using thematic analysis.

The paper proceeds as follows: In the next section, an overview of literature on racialised digital dating, the concept of affordances and Tinder's affordances is provided. The research design for the study is then presented, followed by a description and discussion of the findings. In the conclusion, the theoretical and practical

implications as well as limitations of the study are outlined. Recommendations for future research are also proposed.

2. Racialised digital dating

Racial preferences that exist in the real-world are perpetuated in the online dating world. For instance, users who were likely to date people of their own race are more likely to have the same preference in the digital space (Hwang, 2013). Racialised digital dating is also manifested when some races are preferred to others. For instance, mixed-raced users often enjoy an elevated status in the online dating scene in the United States (Curington et al., 2015). This racial hierarchy amongst online dating users also categorises Asian male users as the least desired aggregate user (Sautter et al., 2010) while Black women are often not favoured by users of other races (McGrath et al., 2016). The realisation that digital dating is indeed racialised heightens the need to further investigate the phenomenon. It is important to explore the experiences of the users as they engage in an ethnically diverse digital context via mobile dating applications (McGrath et al., 2016).

Individuals tend to prefer romantic partners who are similar to themselves in real life, indicating some degree of homophily (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008). This preference is also manifested in the digital dating world whereby users often prefer other users who are similar to themselves (Hitsch et al., 2006). Indeed, the effects of homophily are more pronounced in the digital dating scene compared to the real-world (Gibbs et al., 2011). Fiore and Donath's (2005) work echo this sentiment and found that between pairs that had already matched on online dating services, they were statistically likely to share certain characteristics. Race was found to be the most significant indicator of homophily and could be the most important variable in determining whether a user is attracted to a potential match (Toma & Hancock, 2010). It must be noted that individual preferences in relation to mate selection is hard to measure, due to the fluid nature of attraction and the subjective factors that influence it (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008). The current emotional state of an individual also impacts their affinity towards a potential partner (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008).

3. Understanding affordances

According to Chan (2017, p. 247), affordances are "the subjective perceptions of artefacts that are based on their objective qualities". Affordances are possibilities for action and relate to the "multifaceted relational structures" between the artefact and the user. These relational structures further enable or constrain possible behavioural outcomes (Evans et al., p. 36). To unpack a tool's affordances, both functional features as well as social processes should be examined. This approach overcomes the limitations of both socio-psychological theories and technologically deterministic theories (Harindranath et al., 2015).

According to Pozzi, Pigni and Vitari (2014), affordances emerge through a cognitive process that includes four stages: 'affordance existence', 'affordance perceptions', 'affordance actualisation' and 'affordance effect'. 'Affordance existence' infers that an affordance exists irrespective of whether an actor cares about it or even perceives its existence. 'Affordance perception' infers that actors need to perceive or recognise an affordance in order to exploit its potential. This recognition process is influenced by the features of the tool, the capabilities and goals of the actor as well as external information. 'Affordance actualisation' relates to the actions undertaken by actors as they utilise and take advantage of the perceived affordances of tools to achieve specific outcomes. Lastly, as affordances are actualized, the process may result in an 'Affordance effect', which could relate to enabling conditions to generate additional affordances, development of additional features and/or enabling change (Pozzi, et al., 2014).

Past studies have mostly focused on the first three stages of existence, perception and actualization, and have not fully explored 'affordance effects' of technologies (Hafezieh & Eshraghian, 2017). Hafezieh and Eshraghian (2017) further claimed that while studying social media technologies, it is particularly important to explore outcomes of actualization. This study will follow this recommendation while seeking to explore the influence of Tinder's affordances on racialized digital experiences of users.

4. Tinder's affordances

There exist various affordances of Tinder. Authenticity relates to Tinder's reliance on a third-party (e.g. Facebook) to verify the users' authenticity (Tanner & Tabo, 2018). Synchronicity is to the ease with which real-time messages are exchanged on Tinder (Marcus, 2016). Portability is the accessibility of Tinder at various locations through the use of smartphones. Immediacy relates to the availability push notifications when users

receive messages and matches, even when the application is closed or inactive. (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). Locatability relates to Tinder's reliance on users' geographic location to identify potential matches (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Multimediality relates to users' ability to link their Tinder profile to other social media profiles (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Lastly, Visual Dominance relates to the users' ability to use both text and images to design their profiles (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018).

5. Research method

The study was interpretive and exploratory. Interpretivism was ideal for this study, as the understanding of socially constructed issues, such as race, requires analysis of the intrinsic experiences and thought patterns felt by participants (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). An exploratory study is a useful way of seeking new insight or assessing a phenomena in new light, especially to further clarify understanding of a problem and pinpointing the nature of the problem (Saunders et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was exploratory as it attempted to outline how the affordances of Tinder lent a hand in influencing racialized dating.

For this study, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage respondents to expand on their responses and share important contextual information about their lived experiences. Interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour and were conducted through video conferencing (i.e. Skype). The interviews were recorded after having obtained permission from the participants. Upon reaching saturation, each recording was transcribed and shared with the respondent to ensure accuracy.

The first part of the interview captured the respondents' demographic profile. Next, users racialised digital dating experiences were explored. Lastly, to understand the influence of the affordances on these experiences, questions around Tinder's functional features as well as the participants' social processes were formulated.

It was also important to conduct the study in a racially diverse context, to have access to respondents from various ethnical background. Hence, the study was conducted in South Africa, a country with complex ethnical categories (Dolby, 2001). A purposive sampling strategy was followed to identify respondents from this ethnically diverse context. Two sampling criteria were identified namely: race and gender.

A race or ethnicity is defined as a major division of the human race, with members sharing distinct physical characteristics (Morning, 2008). Defining objective ethnical categories is a challenge, as no globally recognised categories have been set (Firestone & Scholl, 2015). Since the study was conducted in South Africa, the ethnical terminology employed in this study aligned with that of Statistics South Africa. This was particularly relevant as participants would most likely have been exposed to these specific terms and categories (Dolby, 2001). Statistics South Africa classify the population according to 5 categories: Black African, White, Coloured (i.e. mixed race), Asian, and Other (Statistics South Africa, 2012). To obtain a holistic understanding of the race-related challenges of users, experiences of all genders were considered and participants were asked to self-declare their race.

Participants with an active Tinder account for more than one month were considered. This ensured that participants had previously engaged in social interactions with other users. Participants were identified through word of mouth and social media. The snowballing technique was also used to identify participants. An overview of the participants' demographics is provided in Table 1.

Data collection and data analysis were conducted concurrently. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed and imported into NVIVO. Thematic analysis was then performed, following the step-by-step guide outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Table 1: Respondents Demographics

Respondent Acronym	Racial Category	Sex	Respondent Acronym	Racial Category	Sex
F1	Black	Female	M1	White	Male
F2	Black		M2	Black	
F3	Black		M3	Coloured	
F4	Black		M4	Coloured	
F5	Black		M5	Black	
F6	Black		M6	Coloured	
F7	Asian (Indian)		M7	Black	
F8	Coloured		M8	White	
F9	Black		M9	Asian (Indian)	
F10	Black		M10	White	
F11	Black				
F12	Black				
F13	Black				
F14	Coloured				
F15	Black				

6. Findings & discussion

The analysis of the interviews revealed three categories of racialised digital dating experiences: *Matching Experiences*, *Communication & Interaction* and *Fetishism & Stereotypes*. Each of these categories are now discussed, supported by relevant quotations from respondents.

6.1 Matching experiences

Racialised digital dating was manifested through the matching experiences of the participants. The matching experiences were influenced by the participants willingness to engage with the different ethnic group and as well as Tinder’s feature ‘ability to adjust the search geographic radius’.

Participants who were willing to explore and engage with other ethnicities explained that they were more inclined to do so through the app, as opposed to the real world. However, in spite of their willingness to explore and engage, some participants had limited matches with people from other ethnicities. While they swiped right, they did not necessarily receive a positive response from Tinder users of other ethnic groups. Respondents reported that they sometimes adjusted their preferred age group and geolocation radius to broaden their choices, but that was not always successful: *“I do swipe on people outside of my own racial group, but that has never really resulted in anything” [I-6]*

Respondents reported that some ethnicities are over-represented on Tinder, which further influenced their matching experiences. This might be related to the location of the users, whereby in South Africa, some regions are more populated by people from certain ethnic groups. Depending on the ethnic preference of the participants, this was deemed as both an advantage and a disadvantage: *“I would say that there’s more of the other race than my race. Obviously I don’t know if other people notice that but there’s definitely more” [P-C].*

Tinder provides users who are willing to engage with other ethnic groups with the opportunity to tap into this aspiration, allowing them to partake in a behaviour that they might not have easily had offline. Past literature has stated that homophily is predominant in the digital dating scene (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). But, this study found that through Tinder, some users are also inclined to explore other ethnic backgrounds, and this is further supported by the locatability affordance. Tinder is location-based (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018) and if the user has a search radius that includes people from diverse ethnic background, they are presented with more potential matches.

However, the locatability affordance can also be a downside for those who are willing to explore. The distribution of South Africa’s population grouping tends to be clustered according to suburbs or regions. In other words,

some regions are predominantly populated by people of certain ethnic groups (Statistics South Africa, 2012). This tends to further limit the option of the Tinder users.

From an affordance theory perspective (Pozzi et al., 2014), Tinder is designed to be location-based (*affordance existence*). Users are aware that they can easily modify the search radius and some are able to utilise this feature to their advantage (*affordance perception*). In particular, they can adjust the search radius to tap into a wider pool of users from diverse ethnic backgrounds as required (*affordance actualisation*). However, there are two main constraints limiting the affordance effect (i.e. whether or not they match with someone from a different ethnic group). First, the location radius by which users could feasibly extend their search might still not offer access to a more diverse ethnic group. Secondly, a match also depends on the other users' willingness to engage with people of a different ethnic group (i.e. homophily).

6.2 Communication & interaction

Racialised digital dating experiences were manifested in the way in which participants of different ethnicities communicated and interacted with each other. Some respondents explained that they changed how they usually communicate while interacting with matches of a different ethnicity. They sometimes behaved in a manner that was not in line with their ethnic identities: *"But on Tinder, if you're going to go with the whiter way of doing things if you're hooking up or chatting in a certain way, doing something you wouldn't ordinarily do as a black or coloured person, that could definitely change the way we interact with the app based on of that"* (P-3)

Some participants adapted their language, choice of words (i.e. avoided certain slang words) and sometimes their accent while engaging with matches from other ethnicities. This is usually dependent on their perceptions of their matches' expectations. For some, this felt like a restrictive experience whereby certain words or slang that they felt more comfortable with could not be utilised freely: *"Whether it's like, a different race or anything well with talking I have to switch up the accent so that like they understand me, because I add a lot of Zulu words, Swati words whenever I speak English"* (P-K)

Topics of conversations were also chosen differently based on the ethnic group of the match. However, in some cases, respondents felt that interactions with other ethnicities were less fluid. They experienced the need to try harder get the other person to like them: *"I've found that while talking to people of other ethnicities depending on whether you want that person to like you are not like it almost seems like you have to make the conversation more interesting"* (P-A)

The findings revealed that the multimediality affordance is useful to Tinder users who engage with people from other ethnic groups and who find the communication to be less fluid in that regard. Tinder allows users to explore the social media profiles of their potential match (*affordance existence*). Users are therefore aware that they can potentially explore the various social media profiles of their matches to better relate and understand them (*affordance perceptions*). More specifically, users browse the social media profiles to understand how the matches usually communicate, identify potential conversation topics and understand their likes and dislikes (*affordance actualization*). They then adapt how they communicate accordingly (*affordance effect*). It is interesting to note that this is a common behaviour that most mobile dating users partake in when they are interested in a match. However, this study found that the multimedia affordance can also be useful in enhancing the quality of communication between users of different ethnic groups.

6.3 Fetishism & stereotypes

Some respondents felt fetishised while interacting with matches from other ethnic groups. In particular, they were of the opinion that some matches only want to experience being with someone of a different ethnic group, without necessarily seeking a more serious relationship. Some attribute the degree of fetishism experienced with the age group of the matches, whereby older matches tend to partake in this sort of behaviour more than others: *"They're just there for a fetish sort of an interest because none of them are serious"* [P-C]

In addition to fetishism, certain stereotypes tend to be attributed to ethnic groups. Respondents tended to associate certain stereotypes to matches of certain ethnic groups and also felt that certain stereotypes were associated to them by others. Examples of stereotypes could relate to people's choice of music, movies, sports, and even their expectations from a relationship: *"If I matched with a white guy, I will automatically assume that they're like, I don't know, really into like gym stuff. Very weird, but I automatically assume that they really into fitness"* [P-F]

The findings found that both the multimediality (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017) and visual dominance (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018) affordances could support the fetishism and stereotyping behaviour. As previously mentioned, Tinder is designed to provide users with access to pictures of potential matches either through their profile (visual dominance) or through other social media sites (multimediality) (*affordance existence*). Those who perceive themselves as victims of fetishism feel more vulnerable because of these affordances (*affordance perception and actualisation*). The study did not identify any insight into how users utilise multimedia and visual dominance to fetishise others. Instead, it unpacked the experiences of those who feel fetishised because of multimediality and visual dominance of the app (*affordance effect*). In other words, while the affordances might be actualised by other users, they nonetheless perceive the effect of these affordances.

Table 2 summarises the influence of Tinder’s affordances on the racialised digital dating experiences of users.

Table 2: Tinder Affordance Summary

Affordance	Affordance Existence	Affordance Perception	Affordance Actualisation	Affordance Effect	Racialised Digital Dating Experience
Locatability	Location-based design	Users’ awareness of the ability to customise the search radius on Tinder	Adjustment of search radius based on ethnic group interest	Access to wider pool of ethnic groups BUT mitigated by other users willingness to explore & search area demographic	Matching Experience
Visual Dominance	Profile design using Text and Images	Users’ awareness of how to design and customise their profile on Tinder to suit their needs	Profile design using specific images and text to indicate ethnic group preference Other users’ access to the pictures on their profile	Recipients perception of being fetishised	Fetishism & Stereotypes
Multimediality	Link to other social media platforms	User awareness of the ability to view other users social media profiles via Tinder	Access to users’ social media profiles to understand their matches communication style, and preferred topics	Ability to adapt communication to certain ethnic groups’ perceived style and preference	Communication & Interaction
			Other users’ access to their social media profiles	Recipients perception of being fetishised	Fetishism & Stereotypes

7. Conclusions

Mobile dating applications like Tinder have fundamentally changed how people pursue romantic relationships. However, as users engage on these platforms, they interact with people of diverse ethnic groups, which might result in digital dating being racialised. In order to design better systems and avoid perpetuating inequalities within society, it is important to explore how users of mobile dating applications experience racialised digital dating. Therefore, this paper examined how racialised digital dating experiences are manifested on Tinder, as well as the influence of Tinder’s affordances on these experiences. This influence was examined using the Affordance Theory.

The study contributes to the Information Systems (IS) literature by detailing how users experience racialised digital dating on a mobile dating platform like Tinder. In particular, three categories of experiences were identified: *Matching Experiences*, *Communication & Interaction* as well as *Fetichism & Stereotypes*. It is important to note that these categories of experiences highlight the fact that some users are willing to explore and engage with people of different ethnic groups while others prefer not to. Moreover, when users are indeed willing to engage with other ethnic groups, a resulting match is not always guaranteed and the potential interaction and communication is not always fluid. There are circumstances that influence users’ ability to match with people of other ethnic backgrounds. The other users must also be willing to engage in such a manner to

increase the likelihood of a match. Moreover, the external environment in which the users operate also play a role (e.g. where they are located and the demographics of the search area). As users engage with people from other ethnicities, they may perceive the communication to be less fluid and hence feel the need to change how they communicate to appear more attractive and interesting to their matches.

The study also contributed to IS literature by providing new insights into the influence of Tinder's affordances on the four categories of racialised digital dating experiences. The study specifically identified three affordances that play a role in how users experience racialised digital dating: Locatability, Multimediality, and Visual Dominance. The study specifically highlighted how these affordances could be actualised by users to achieve their preferred racialised digital dating experiences. Whether or not a user is willing to engage with users of a different ethnic group, Tinder's affordances can be used to support that preferred mode of interaction. The existence and perception of Tinder's affordances are standard. What matters is how users actualise these affordances to achieve their desired outcome.

The study also has practical implications especially pertaining to how mobile dating applications can be designed. Indeed, some users experience challenges in how they communicate and interact with different ethnic groups. Some of these challenges are related to communication. This reveals an opportunity to improve on the design of the mobile dating applications to include features that support and facilitate communication between ethnic groups. There is also a need to include features to better protect users who feel fetishised and hence vulnerable on the platform.

It is important to note some of the limitations of the study. First the qualitative study was limited to South African users. While the South African context is ethnically diverse and was thus considered particularly relevant for this study, the country also has historical circumstances, which might have influenced the results. Secondly, the researchers sought to acquire a relevant and representative sample, but it was not possible to interview some white female users. Their perspectives would also have been useful for the study.

Further research could be conducted to further evaluate the findings derived from this study using a wider sample of users, preferably from a broader range of countries. It is also recommended that future studies explore mechanisms to enhance Tinder's features in order to improve the ease of communication and better protect vulnerable users.

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