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Affordances, diversity, and inclusion on dating apps: A dialogue between sociologists and media studies researchers about ‘Hinge’

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Abstract

This roundtable paper is part of the project ‘Digitized Love and Intimacy on Hinge.’ It aims to investigate how digital dating apps reconfigure cultural attitudes to love and intimacy and, conversely, how said attitudes influence digital dating practices. The conversation is informed by (n)ethnographic usage of the app. As algorithms and affordances of dating applications can implicitly or explicitly privilege certain groups of users and exclude others, this conversation mainly aims to make sense of how Hinge’s interface – or ‘affordances’ – facilitates the dating process and how inclusive and diverse the application’s affordances are. We discuss that there is a contradiction between what Hinge portrays itself to be and what it practically ends up being, partly because of its affordances. This roundtable highlights the need to study affordances as relational technologies and to take the perceptions, ideas, and interpretations of users seriously alongside the actual features and designs offered by applications.

Keywords

Affordances, Dating app, Diversity, Hinge, Inclusion, Netnography

Introduction

This roundtable paper is part of the project ‘Digitized Love and Intimacy on Hinge.’ The project was granted to the first three participants of this roundtable, Ladan Rahbari, Misha Kavka, and Erinne Paisley, by the Global Digital Cultures seed grant at the University of Amsterdam (2022). The last three participants, Louis Zimmann, Faye Mercier, and Balázs Boross joined the project as research assistants. The project ‘Digitized Love and Intimacy on Hinge’ aims to investigate how digital dating apps reconfigure cultural attitudes to love and intimacy and, conversely, how cultural attitudes influence digital dating practices. Researching with Hinge users, the project aims to investigate the entangled relationships between the perceptions of love and intimacy, and the digital materialization of dating practices within the Hinge application. Hinge markets itself as an application focused on helping users find a committed relationship. Its slogan, ‘designed to be deleted,’ promises users a sustained love-based dating experience rather than a hook-up.

Dating apps designed specifically for smartphone interfaces burst into the mainstream in 2014 when major news magazines ran features on an app start-up that was growing its base by half a million users per month: Tinder. The key to Tinder’s success, according to David and Cambre (2016), is that it has managed to gamify the search for partners using location, images, and messages, with a particular focus on profile images that look like cards in a deck to be swiped right or left in a split-second ‘yes’ or ‘no’ reaction. If two users mutually swipe right, then the app declares them to be a match, and they can exchange messages, but in the early days of Tinder, confirmed matches were ‘followed by the prompt to either send a message or ‘keep playing’ (Stampler, 2014). According to a 2014 Time Magazine profile of the co-founders, this ‘Keep playing! Keep playing!’ mantra has led to an epidemic of 500 million swipes (and 5 million matches) a day (Stampler, 2014), leading scholars to argue that Tinder was designed ‘to take the stress out of dating’ by being a ‘game’ that requires less time and emotional investment to play’ (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017, p. 272).

The usage of the word ‘gaming’ in a dating app when referring to the selection of dating partners, and the reminder to the app users to keep gaming implies the normalization of hook-up culture in which one is assumed to, and in this case even encouraged, to continue looking for new partners. This is supposed to turn dating into a fun and less frustrating experience. Anecdotal as well as scholarly research shows, however, that Tinder and the crowded field of mobile dating apps that have sprouted around it do not take the stress out of dating. Indeed, the anxiety, frustration, and disappointment now regularly associated with dating apps (Cao & Smith, 2023; Coduto, Lee-Won, & Baek, 2020; Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Jozsa et al., 2021) suggest that being designed as a game does not mean that one’s actions occur inside a hermetically sealed ‘black box’ with no consequences for user or suitor. On the contrary, academic literature on dating apps indicates that users are strongly affected by their experiences (Duguay, 2017; Holtzhausen et al., 2020) not simply in the online space but also in the transition, successful or failed, from online to offline.

The dating app interface and its functions within the gamified logic are digital tools to facilitate how one plays the game. The swipe function, for instance, is easy to use, allowing one hand to go through a whole album of profile pictures in a matter of minutes. Instead, on Hinge, one is expected to press an ‘X’ sign, which adds a more conscious element to the act of ‘rejecting.’ Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid love’ (Bauman, 2013) as the liquification of once secure romantic partnerships due to socio-technological changes, Hobbs et al. (2017) argue that both temporary and permanent romantic connections are now prone to processes of ‘networked intimacy,’ resulting in practices of a ‘confluent love’ that is contingent and strategic. Against this, dating apps that seek to differentiate themselves from gamified hook-up culture work with different confluence. For instance, Hinge explicitly distances itself from Tinder by recruiting employees ‘who want to make dating effective, not addictive.’ It also focuses its market appeal on the transitional space between the online and the offline, or the in-app world and the socio-cultural location in which it is mobilized.

Up until a few years ago, Hinge was one of the few dating apps which were not owned by the online-dating giant Match Group (which owns Tinder, Match.com, OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, and many others). However, Match Group acquired 51 percent stake in the seven-year-old app in June 2018. Hinge's website highlights the app's 'core values' of authenticity, courage, and empathy – which are, as claimed, applicable to both romantic encounters and collegial relationships in Hinge's corporate work culture – as well as its 'Nobel-prize-winning algorithm' and commitment to ongoing research in behavioral science. This is the Gale-Shapley algorithm that pairs people 'who are likely to mutually like one another.' It measures this mutual interest based on a user's engagement and whoever engages with them, and proceeds to match the user to people with similar preferences (Scanlon, 2020). One existing concern about different types of algorithmic filtering for match-making is that there is always a potential for gender and racial bias to creep into the algorithms (Sharabi, 2022). Algorithmic bias can exclude certain groups of users by privileging the behaviors of the majority.

Besides the algorithm, the range of profile choices and match selections provided to the user by the application can also play a major role in different forms of bias, including but not limited to racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, and lookist bias. Set on this bedrock, the following conversation is based on the participants' experience with setting up a Hinge profile and starting to use the application. The conversation is, therefore, informed by netnographic and auto-netnographic usage of the app. The conversation mainly aims to make sense of how Hinge's interface – or 'affordances,' that we will introduce in the discussion section – facilitates the dating process, and how inclusive and diverse the application's affordances actually are based on our (n)ethnographic pilot research.

Discussion

Ladan Rahbari: Let us begin by establishing that the rise of dating applications is correlated with the prominence of digitality in our lives as more aspects of human relations are digitized. The mechanisms through which these apps are both shaping and being shaped by users' behavior, perceptions, and expectations are still largely undiscovered. I think it would be appropriate to start this conversation with a small introduction to the notion of 'affordances' that we will employ in this conversation. We will discuss the notion of 'affordance' in the sense of dynamics and conditions enabled by platforms and the sociotechnical environment of which they are a part (Boyd, 2010; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Schrock, 2015). Affordances are how objects – including digital platforms – impact or shape the actions of socially situated subjects by enabling and constraining their activities (Rahbari, 2022). We have rallied around the notion of 'affordances' because it offers a way to consider how technologies are constructed and situated on the one hand and how they determine user behavior on the other (Hutchby, 2001). Schrock (2015, p. 1233) emphasizes that affordances are more than just 'buttons, screens and operating systems.' He and others argue that digital environments do not merely offer them tools they can work with but that users' perceptions and behaviors also play a generative role in producing this very environment (Bucher & Helmond 2016). Looking at the affordances of the Hinge dating app in this way, our team has aimed to document their own perceptions and experiences of interacting with the affordances and their approach to diversity.

Misha Kavka: Yes, precisely! In addition to what Ladan mentioned, when studying affordances, much attention has been given to specific ones, such as the swiping affordance, which is used on apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, among others. Swiping affordance is understood to generate higher match numbers, thereby creating a 'swipe logic' that encourages temporary connections and amplifies offline 'hook-up culture' (David & Cambre, 2016; Frank & Klinecicz, 2018). There has been little scholarly attention to the few applications, such as Hinge, that emphasize love and long-term connections. It is precisely that Hinge claims to go beyond the hook-up culture and swipe logic that makes it

such an interesting case. So, we all set up researcher profiles on Hinge to explore whether the app managed to go beyond this logic, and I believe our findings have substantially complicated the picture, especially regarding the application's claims of offering an 'alternative' space that caters to those interested in relationships rather than casual dating.

Balázs Boross: I have to say I stopped thinking about Hinge as this 'alternative' space as soon as I started my netnography by clicking on the official website of Hinge. The full-frontal cover page that appeared in front of me featured a middle-class, tanned, able- and average-bodied (if not thin) Caucasian straight couple. So, as far as thinking about diversity, it seems to me that the app is not shy of presenting itself primarily with the average heterosexual 'attractive' couple. Scrolling down further, one could learn about the Hinge principles, which are, as claimed, applicable to both romantic encounters and collegial relationships in Hinge's corporate work culture: authenticity, courage, and empathy. The first impressions about how Hinge branded and marketed itself gave me an idea of a highly commercial and culturally mainstream app building on classic clichés of intimacy, romance, dating, and relationships, as apparent in their feature image. I started downloading the app with all these impressions in mind.

Erinne Paisley: I find what Balázs explains quite interesting. I myself did not go on their website first and instead directly downloaded the app. So I was confronted with the app's interface without any previous impressions. When opening an account on Hinge, I was first struck by the open field options to describe one's gender. Beyond the gender identification options of man, woman, and non-binary, clicking on the 'more' option allows you to type your own option of gender description. There appear to be no word count or content limitations within this blank space. I found this quite an inclusive feature. When it comes to sexuality and pronoun use, there are extensive lists and the option to state that your sexuality is not listed. So, it is only the gender field that allows the unfiltered ability to describe one's gender. I wondered why gender was given this open-ended option but not sexuality or pronoun use or ethnic background or religion, for that matter.

Louis Zimmann: I want to second what Erinne said about the openness of the app and perhaps expand it a bit more. Like the openness towards different gender categories, from the moment a user signs up, Hinge pushes users to share more about themselves, to be honest, and to be 'authentic' in service of the app being able to provide better potential matches. When creating the profile, one of the first pop-ups on the app's interface says: 'The more you share, the better your matches will be.' At the same time, the app is trying to give the user a sense of security and privacy. According to the app, sharing more about yourself will allow for a safer dating experience. For example: when the app asks for your last name, and you click on 'Why?' it says: 'Adding your last name helps create a safer, more authentic, and more accountable community.' The idea of: 'The more you share with us, the more we are able to make dating safe and authentic' is prevalent throughout the process of setting up one's account. Safety and the ability to produce great and authentic matches seem to be the main motivators that Hinge effectively utilizes to encourage people to share their data with them.

Faye Mercier: Yes, and if I may take this a bit further, this 'authenticity' approach is also mutual. Not only are you expected to take time to make yourself known, but you are also expected to take time to know the others on the app. For me, the most notable experiential difference between Hinge and other dating apps like Tinder and Bumble is the way in which the app requires you to explore at a very deliberate pace. You can only view your matches one at a time and have a limited number of matches a day if you're not a premium member. Unlike Tinder or Bumble, which operate on the logic of 'swiping,' Hinge instead asks you to slowly scroll through the profile of potential matches. Moreover, while on Tinder and Bumble, you must click into a user's profile to view more of their pictures and their bio, Hinge shows you this information by default, encouraging you to consider every profile you encounter to some degree. Even when scrolling through the prompt options when designing

your own profile, this scroll is much slower than the usual scrolling speed on smartphones, again encouraging you to consider every prompt option given to you and requiring you to put thought into designing your user profile. I believe this has relevance for inclusivity as well because the affordances make it difficult for the user to dismiss a profile based on very little data.

Ladan Rahbari: I would like to draw on the very interesting observations offered by Faye, Louis, and Balázs, and reflect on the affordances as relational technologies. Hookway (2014) encourages researchers to understand the interface not as a pure form of technology but rather as a form of relating to technology. A particular interface comes into being only as distinct entities enter into an active relationship with one another. On Hinge, as Louis and Faye discussed, the interface does not only dictate specific forms of behavior but also encourages a specific form of performance. And Faye's last point about how inclusion can be achieved through manipulating the temporality of actions is also apt. The affordances of the app itself neither determine users' behavior nor are they neutral. When it comes to gender, for instance, as Erinne mentioned, the app offers fixed categories which also include 'non-binary,' hence already making a normative decision, but then there is also the open section that allows the users to self-identify. Another thing that stands out to me is the option to become a 'premium member,' which then adds to the speed and number of potential dating partners. Hence, this also signifies that the slow pace is more of a punishment for a non-paying user than a thought-through function that wants to encourage users to take their time.

Misha Kavka: Indeed, and therefore, Ladan's point about the pace being a punishment for non-paying users confirms Balázs's point about the commercial nature of the app. I would also like to draw our attention to how we can read Hinge's promise of short-term app engagement for the pay-off of long-term romance. This focus on romantic monogamy is another aspect of inclusivity that should be considered. On the one hand, everything about Hinge's alignment with an ethical mission and a basis in science suggests that they take their customers' dating goals seriously – which is to say that they want to be an anti-gaming app. While this serious approach to dating is surely positive for like-minded users of the app, it also brings with it an unspoken set of ideological premises that undergird this like-mindedness: e.g., dating is serious business; dating is goal-oriented; the goal is to whittle romantic options down to 'the one;' we all want 'the one' because human nature is monogamous; monogamy is the joy of being with one person forever, etc. The landing page on the Hinge website – which consists of a large photo, the slogan in white lettering, and discrete tabs at the top related to 'Mission,' 'Careers,' and 'Labs' – taps into these implicitly shared premises through the image itself.

Balázs Boross: I can't agree more with you on this, Misha. In fact, I will take things further by saying that, looking at the profiles and the design of the interface, I do not see how this app is not based on swipe logic. I would suggest that the prompts actually reinforce this logic. With them, you seem to engage in a very particular type of self-performance and self-promotion, which is quirky, snappy, and seemingly 'original.' At the same time, the overall layout and the aesthetics of the profile presentations largely remind of commercial fashion or other advertisement catalogues. For instance, the catchy headers and quotes are nicely arranged between photos. If the so-called 'hook-up' apps are criticized for (self-)objectification, the swipe logic combined with the heavy reliance on the prompts existent on Hinge strongly suggests the promotion of (self-)commodification as well.

Faye Mercier: Let me also come in here with a point that I think is quite relevant: the app requires the user to upload a minimum of six photos, and you have to answer at least three prompts in order to complete your profile. The quantity really matters and can be connected to what you previously considered (self-)commodification, Balázs. The app further assists in active deliberation by asking users to present themselves as accurately as possible. Alongside prompts and photos, the app encourages users to upload videos and voice recordings of

themselves to give a more accurate sense of themselves to other users, with the promise that this will lead to ‘more likes.’ Before meeting in person, the app also facilitates voice and video calling, giving users the opportunity to make sure that the person they’re speaking to matches their expectations before meeting in person. This emphasis on getting to ‘market’ oneself well and to get to evaluate the other users as accurately as possible *before* deciding to meet also works to gear the app toward more serious dating.

Louis Zimmann: I agree with what Faye is saying, but I think there is also an exception here in terms of how the app allows for open marketing of one’s ‘identity’ and preferences. The options afforded for expressing one’s ‘politics’ are quite limited. The user is given the options: liberal, moderate, conservative, not political, other, and prefer not to say. This is particularly interesting because my initial ethnography indicated that many people mention their political beliefs in one way or the other in their prompts. And it seems that politics play an important role in choosing potential dates. One user said, ‘Together, we could seize the means of production,’ and another stated, ‘The key to my heart is free health care for everyone.’ These quotations signal political beliefs that are significant in choosing prospective dates. Since my location was set as New York, I also saw many profiles that in the USA context would be considered to express ‘progressive’ and ‘democratic’ politics, and fewer profiles with ‘conservative’ ones.

Erinne Paisley: I find it curious that you mention New York, Louis. When I specified my seeking preferences, it was notable that the location for dating did not automatically relocate to my current geolocation. Instead, when the question popped up, ‘Where do you live?’ the map initially placed me in Manhattan, New York. The option of clicking a button that would allow you to ‘go to current location’ was possible but not automatic. This means that a new Hinge user must search on the map, zooming out from New York as a starting point, to relocate to their own chosen dating location. This is unlike location selection affordances on other dating applications such as Bumble or Tinder that automatically locate the users to their current location. Considering that Hinge’s headquarters are in New York, the location affordance implies an American-centric bias.

Ladan Rahbari: I think we are slowly outlining how diverse and inclusive the Hinge application actually is. What is more, when it comes to ‘dating preferences,’ Hinge allows users ‘select in’, which also implicitly means that they can select out categories of people that they don’t want to date. This will let them select categories that they want to exclude from their dating pool (such as select age, gender, ethnicity, etc.). Interestingly, although users can select people both in and out based on the categories named above when it comes to other characteristics such as height, politics, or education level, the user must upgrade their membership to premium to be able to implement such selection criteria. The significance of this in/out selection and membership barrier is multifield: the app acknowledges and thereby also perpetuates existing preferences as well as discriminations in the dating scene. All sorts of biases, such as sexual racism (Bedi, 2015) and ageism (Orchard, 2022), that are quite common in the dating scene are simply reproduced. The app also creates a hierarchy among different categories of identity, some of which are considered more foundational and dealbreakers because the user is allowed to select people (in/out) based on them, while others are more exclusive.

Misha Kavka: Indeed, in their explanation slides that pop up when one clicks ‘Wondering why we ask this?’ Hinge says it offers search limitations based on ethnicities to ‘help people quickly find each other via cultural experiences without having to scroll and scroll (and scroll).’ The tongue-in-cheek parenthetical addition of the last ‘scroll’ works somewhat like a nervous giggle, allowing Hinge to justify exclusionary practices, which it presumably takes to be consumer demand, while also attaining some distance from this stance. And this exclusionary imagination is offered to the users in direct and indirect ways. Think about Balázs’s reference to the landing page on the Hinge website with the image of the tanned

heterosexual caucasian couple that reeks of monogamy and heteronormativity. Although elsewhere on the website, there are photos of gay/queer couples, as revealed to the visitor patient enough to scroll down and click through, the images on the landing page signal mainstream normativity.

Erinne Paisley: To continue in the same vein, these exclusionary mechanisms evoke a tension with the language of inclusivity that pervades Hinge's submission statements, such as 'We want anyone looking for love to be able to find it,' as mentioned by Hinge, which sits directly above 'Relationships are at the core of everything we do,' mentioned in 'Our values' section. Indeed, a press release by Hinge posted on their website that I accessed, explained that '[i]n October, Hinge introduced an updated algorithm — the system that recommends daters to each other — to help non-binary daters better represent themselves while connecting with others.' Despite the overt attempt to include more genderfluid identifications, this language of inclusivity can sit uncomfortably with both the written and unwritten common values of Hinge as a dating app culture and corporation. The images and slogan, for instance, suggest a heteronormative relationship culture that includes others on their own terms rather than the other way around.

Balázs Boross: Yes, and I would like to add that this normativity is reproduced implicitly also through the neoliberal rationale behind how one promotes themselves. The app is advertised as 'welcome to your last first date,' but I got prompted to upgrade to the paid version, reminding me that 'premium members get twice as many dates.' There are conflicting messages here, with the app trying to sell itself as promoting deep connections yet encouraging you to boost your profile to go on more dates. As long as one does not upload six photos, the possibilities remain rather small. I also find the interface quite claustrophobic in that you only see one profile at a time which you can skip, and then you get a new one. To go back to the swipe logic, this seems to me exactly the same, maybe not literally and not with a swiping motion. But the rationale is the same: you look at a picture, scroll to read a few words, or listen to their voice and decide whether they are worthy or not. And if not, you move on to the next person.

Faye Mercier: Precisely, and if I may continue here, I also found that while the app has claims of helping people find 'serious' relationships and discouraging people from hook-ups and short-term engagements, it still implicitly caters around those types of relationships through its affordances. I found it specifically telling that the app then had a 'Standouts' section, with a daily curated selection of 'popular' profiles. This highlighting of popular users seems to run counter to Hinge's mantra that it is primarily a relationship app, not a dating or hook-up app. The logic of popularity in a dating app is opposite to the logic of exclusivity that the app seems to market. This is also a feature that was only introduced within the last year or so, so it could also be interpreted as a way of maintaining engagement with and interest in the app, especially for users coming from other dating apps. In this case, this can be considered a way in which the app makes itself more inclusive by also catering to users who do not necessarily look for monogamous and long-term relationships.

Louis Zimmann: I cannot agree more with you, Faye. In addition to what you mentioned regarding the contradictory practices by Hinge, I find the 'Standouts' to be a particularly fascinating tool on Hinge. Hinge defines 'Standouts' as 'prompts on profiles that are getting the most attention coupled with our knowledge of who you've liked or commented on in the past.' I could imagine that 'Standouts' for users are both desirable and aspirational. On the one hand, they are supposed to give you what you want most. On the other hand, seeing standout prompts and pictures allows users to deduce what is most desirable on the app and what gets the most attention. This then enables users to adjust their own content correspondingly to be able to attract more 'likes.' And in this case, the 'Standouts' actually do not promote diversity but rather normalize or idealize performances.

Misha Kavka: Louis, what you just explained also supports Balázs's insight that Hinge, while positioning itself as open to diverse identities, especially those related to gender, is nonetheless in the business of disciplining the user. In line with the tension we have discovered between the normative-based values of Hinge culture and its language of inclusivity, there is also a potential contradiction between its built-in emphasis on catering to different dating styles and equality between users and the 'Standouts' section. Indeed, the standout option could also be the result of the app realizing they are losing users who are not merely using the app for relationships but also to showcase examples of 'successful' dating profiles. In terms of diversity, I would be curious to know whether the popularity criteria are presented equally to all users or whether the algorithm selects popular profiles based on individual preferences.

Ladan Rahbari: Interesting point, Misha. That is something we can explore using our profiles. We have discussed that the app has widened the range of potential options when it comes to gender, sexuality, ethnic background, and religion. But we also noticed that some categories have been more inclusive than others (e.g., gender has a fill-in option, and political inclination is given very few options). We have argued that user profiles on the app are not merely representative but are also performative in that they produce a specific ideal type of dating profile. These ideal types are promoted by the app's affordances, such as the 'Standouts' section, which was just mentioned by Faye, Louis, and Misha and can serve as normative and disciplining tools. We also found a contradiction in the app's marketing narratives and how affordances perpetuate a swipe logic. I think we can conclude that we have, in general, discovered a contradiction between what Hinge portrays itself to be and what it practically ends up being, partly because of its affordances.

Concluding remarks

In this roundtable, we examined Hinge as the self-proclaimed 'dating app designed to be deleted' using (n)etnography to explore the diversity and inclusivity of the app. Our observations confirm the findings by other existing studies that digital platforms, such as dating apps, are extensions of the material realities they are embedded in (Van Doorn, 2011). Digital dating apps are only one manifestation of how our lives are now more than ever before dominated by almost untraceable cloud environments, automated smart environments, algorithmic biases, racism, and predictive policing, sellable Big Data, even more, complex codes, and other types of bits and bytes (De Vuyst, Geerts, & Rahbari, 2022).

This roundtable discussion mostly focused on user-experienced affordances and less on the algorithmic potential for bias. The authoritative nature of algorithmic matching has already been discussed in match-making TV programs in which the predetermined matches cannot be questioned by the participant in what is expected to be perceived as 'scientific dating' (See, for example, Kavka, 2021). The algorithm on dating apps, and especially on Hinge, has a similar authoritative grip and 'scientific' claim. Eventually, the user is limited to whoever the algorithm sees fit for them. However, platforms that rely on user information for their functionality – from social media to dating apps – have started taking diversity and inclusion more seriously.

Hinge is one of the platforms that positions itself firmly as a more inclusive and more "serious" dating app. Beyond algorithmic determinism, we observed that the app has made efforts to present an inclusive space to its users. The inclusivity does not stay at the level of identity categories. This means that not only the range of potential options when it comes to gender, sexuality, ethnic background, and religion are quite diverse (although some are more expansive in range than others), there are also different ways users can introduce and 'market' themselves. This is made possible by adding textual, visual, and audio options to the app. On Hinge, users can get creative in how they construct and promote their digital self.

Despite these more “inclusive” features and functions, we discussed how exclusionary and discriminatory dynamics are perpetuated or amplified as users interact on and with the Hinge interface. Furthermore, the dating app promotes a narrow romantic ideal, in which dating is construed as a serious business with romantic monogamy as goal. In general, there appears to be a tension between the language of inclusivity marketized by Hinge, and the dynamics and practices perpetuated on the interface.

Our observations also challenge the idea put forward by Hinge, that the platform counteracts the gamified logic prevalent on other dating apps. The app encourages users to share personal information of all types on its platform. This feature and the ‘Standouts’ feature highlight that the app is eventually based on a quantitative logic. It cultivates a general environment that encourages the individual user to share more, to gain a more ‘authentic’ experience. There are some features, such as “slow scrolling” or the lack of a swipe function, with which Hinge tries to position itself against the gamified hook-up culture often assigned to dating apps such as Tinder. However, in our ethnographic observations, we find that the app maintains a gamified logic and, as a capitalist enterprise, it monetizes users’ desire to become more visible, to increase and specify their dating pool and, most importantly, to keep on playing.

This roundtable highlights the need to study affordances as relational technologies and to take seriously the perceptions, ideas, and interpretations of users alongside the actual features and designs offered by applications (Hookway 2014). While self-descriptive options for gender and extensive lists of sexualities and pronouns are a welcome addition to profile settings, such features and functions will not single-handedly determine the inclusivity and diversity of the dating experience. We need research that investigates the biases and problems on the design-side of these features but also research that takes a more relational approach to how users interact with and perceive the tools they are provided with.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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