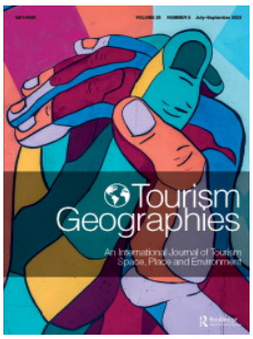

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Spatial dynamics, dating app tourists, and location-porting in the tourist encounter

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ABSTRACT

Based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Berlin in 2019 and 2020, partly during the COVID-19 lockdown, this article seeks to address the spatial dynamics experienced by young dating app users, aged between 20 and 33, in the context of digital media reconfiguring the tourist encounter. The article highlights how geolocational dating apps seek to create a feeling of proximate romantic possibilities, and hide the global information networks they operate through, a factor brought into relief by the proliferation of dating app tourists on Tinder during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Berlin. Drawing on ethnographic data incorporating 36 semi-structured interviews and 45 chat interviews across three popular dating apps, Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, the study finds that dating apps are operated by users as unwieldy technologies with unreliable distance parameter settings, in the pursuit of primarily local connections.

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Introduction

Emerging media, encompassing digital, mobile, geolocational, and augmented reality technologies, are enmeshed within the fabric of everyday life, infiltrating, and facilitating encounters, experiences, practices, and spaces (Bareither, 2019, 2020; Bausinger, 1984; De Souza e Silva, 2006; Ito et al., 2005; Pink et al., 2022). Within tourism geographies, emerging media, particularly mobile digital devices, have impacted the tourist experience (Dickinson et al., 2014; 2016; Wang et al., 2016), eroding preconceived distinctions between the categories of home, or 'pre-trip', and 'on-site' (Tussyadiah, 2016). Indeed, rather than entrenching binaries into this field of study, it is increasingly becoming folly to cast the tourist encounter in terms of a host or guest endeavour, and instead vital to be aware of the mobile realities shaping tourism, as Crouch (2006) notes, 'moments of being a tourist are not contained, but rather they flow over, amongst, in and out of other parts of individuals' lives' (p. 54).

Considering the role of emerging media within tourism geographies, this article focuses on how dating apps, as geolocational media, can redefine spatial encounters

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and destabilise spatial logic in social interactions. While there has been some research into the role dating apps play in tourism and leisure when they are utilised to facilitate encounters during travels (Leurs & Hardy, 2019), this article focusses solely on dating app users resident in Berlin and their experiences with what I term 'dating app tourists', users who have ported location to a different city and do not seek to match with profiles in proximity. The research engages with this phenomenon during the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Berlin in spring, 2020, throughout which international travel and in-person social interaction were severely restricted and takes this as a foundation upon which to probe the ways in which geolocational dating apps seek to create a feeling of proximate romantic possibility, even in moments where none exists.

Locative, or geolocational apps, have been reshaping the way space and spatial dynamics are experienced in social interactions and placemaking. In relation specifically to Berlin and other metropoles, it is important to emphasise the fluidity of the modern urbanscape in terms of its position in the digital era. Stalder (2006) refers to Castells (2010) musings on the city, alluding to the 'new, nonlinear character of (urban) geography and the fragmented character of contemporary societies held together less by physical contiguity than by informational networks' (p. 7). Indeed, the information networks that span the world act to both signal areas of concentrated activity—the modern metropoles cast as global cities—as well as knitting these hubs together. This at first seemingly paradoxical parallel of separation and connection is summarised by Stalder (2006) as the 'functional integration of distant places through the space of flows, and the fragmentation of physical places into disconnected locales', which he sees to be complementary (p. 154). Castells' 'space of flows' marks a new relationship between geographical space and the power of social interaction. Time and space are seen as inseparable, and for two social actors to be able to connect or communicate in real *time,* simultaneously without delays, they must be in the same *space*. However, the 'space of flows' describes how the emergence of global information networks reconstitutes traditional social notions of space, for it is no longer necessary for an interaction to be based on residing in the same physical location, when technologies enable simultaneous networked communication at a distance.

Following on from Castells (2010) theory, Berry (2008) sees locative media as 'ambient and emplaced', operating 'through the space of flows' (p. 103). Subsequently, it is through the emergence of locative media that public spaces in the city are changing and the urbanscape has become a 'mise en scene encompassing surfaces, objects, places, and spaces' (Berry, 2008, p. 101). Locative media, geolocational services and applications, have become an integral part of everyday life 'entangling movements' across city space (Hjorth et al., 2016, p. 251). Furthermore, locational information, enmeshed within digital media and the space of flows, does not simply alter the perception of spaces within which one is situated, but also has the ability to bridge perceived distances, for 'travel is more easily managed as distant places seem less strange and less dangerous and as contacts with those "back home" (or anywhere) can be maintained wherever we roam' (Meyrowitz, 2005, pp. 27–28). For example, Özkul (2015) notes in her study of smartphone users in London that locational data is shared among friends and family to create intimacy across vast distances and

convey a feeling of presence and connection *via* the geolocational capacities of devices.

Within leisure and tourism specifically, Kah et al. (2011) argue that 'place based information technology' allows travellers the possibility of virtually touring a place prior to a physical visit and further blurs the distinction between the moment of departure and arrival, the transitional properties of the space between 'home' and 'destination'. As such, the encounter—with sights, people, places etc.—tourism's 'most cherished, commodified, essential element' (Gibson, 2012, p. 55), has been reconfigured *via* the immediacy of interactions provided by digital technologies. Social interaction is often cast as the key motivator and desire in such encounters (Gibson, 2012; Ryan, 2002), and it is social interaction which stands at the focus of this article, and the heart of the type of encounter dating apps, as locative media, enable.

Locative media incorporates wayfinding apps, games, augmented reality, transport apps, and so forth, yet dating apps offer a slightly different set of affordances to their users in contrast to these other media and open a slightly different field of experience. They are intimate technologies, tied—through their utilisation as platforms enabling sexual and romantic encounters—to their user's most private and personal experiences (Newett et al., 2018). As such, their geolocational functionality takes on added significance, as a point of evaluation in the search for a potential partner. As Veel and Thylstrup (2018) conclude in their study of warranting techniques—ways in which trustworthiness is determined—on dating apps, in terms of the location a user is presented with on a profile, these 'data points we see are less consciously performative as self-representations' (p. 45). There is an understanding that space is not staged on a dating app; there is a truth in location. This truth in location, this understanding of users being tied to a point on a map, situated in proximity rather than within the abstract, opaque reaches of the internet, was destabilised during the COVID-19 lockdown in Berlin, *via* the proliferation of dating app tourists, not anchored to a point in the city, but floating through it. Indeed, during the global pandemic, dating app companies started to reimagine their platforms as tools for 'virtual dating' (Duguay et al., 2022), a framing met with tension, as this article will go on to highlight.

It was over the course of the 13 months of fieldwork that Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid emerged as the focal point of study, rather than being designated as such at the outset. Settling in Berlin, I first sought to conduct some informal, preliminary interviews with dating app users both through my own social circles in Berlin and through the dating apps identified as being statistically popular in Germany, primarily Tinder (Iqbal, 2021). These interactions were used to determine the current dating app landscape in Berlin. The eventual focus emerged organically as Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid were most prominently utilized among research participants. The three apps vary slightly in their design, yet they all hold distinct similarities and function *via* a 'card stack' mechanism showing profiles in proximity. The apps feature a virtual, seemingly infinite card stack of other users' profiles, one on top of the next. Users interact with the card stack by swiping either left to discard a profile or right to like it. When two users like one another they 'match' and can chat, while users are never notified when they have been rejected. It is important to note that the features of dating apps are constantly evolving and can differ based on territory (Junck, 2021). At the time of the fieldwork, on Tinder a mobile phone number was required to

create an account and it was possible to link the resulting profile to various social media, and other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Spotify. A Tinder user creates their profile, made up of a series of images—still or moving—and a short biographical text, as well as any links they wish to add—for example, as previously touched upon, a user's Instagram feed can be displayed on a profile. Users can also add their occupation, university, and origin, as well as certain prompts—answers to questions about themselves, and witty comments. The user specifies their age and gender, as well as whether they are interested in meeting men or women, or both. While it is possible to self-classify outside of the gender binary, a user must select whether they wish to be shown to users searching for men or women. The user must also set various search filters, such as the distance parameter within which they would like to see profiles—the app is geolocational and has access to the current location of the device upon which it is installed—and the age bracket of profiles they wish to encounter.

The app is set out in four key interface points: one section where users can customise their profile and choose how other users see them; one section where users can change the settings of the app and choose who they want to see; one section where users can chat to other users they have matched with; and the central and most important tab, the card stack, known as 'Discovery', where users can browse the profiles of other users.

Bumble is, in many ways, almost identical to Tinder. At the time of the fieldwork, Bumble users could create a profile—using either their phone number, Apple ID or Facebook account—filter who they wanted to see by attributes such as distance, age and gender, swipe through a card stack of profiles, and chat with matches. The options of profile customisation were a little more detailed than on Tinder. There are specific options to disclose details such as height, fitness level, religion, and so forth, as well as prompts to answer—'My personal hell is…'—alongside the short biographical text users can write. The most obvious difference in design between Tinder and Bumble is that whereas on Tinder after a match either user can send a message, on Bumble, when the match is between a man and a woman, the woman has to send the first message to the man. Unlike Bumble and Tinder, OkCupid was originally a dating website, catering to a different demographic, with dating websites part of a very different, and far more stigmatised 'online dating' environment (Cardoso-González, 2019). Indeed, online dating itself has become normalised and destigmatised, as the primary platform association of this practice has shifted from dating websites to dating apps (Degim et al., 2015). As such, all research participants utilised OkCupid only in its app format and did not consider it as a dating website, seeing it as a completely different technology to the form it had evolved from.

While OkCupid, Bumble, and Tinder all have slight differences in their interfaces, all three function similarly as swipe-based, geolocational apps, facilitating matches between users based on proximity and anonymous mutual interest. While all three platforms may be accessed *via* browsers on non-mobile devices, such as desktops, nearly all research participants utilised dating apps solely on their smartphones in app format, and it is from this context that this article approaches them. Dating apps are seen to both enable users to move outside of their existing social networks, while facilitating connections with users deemed to be similar by the apps' algorithms (Parisi

& Comunello, 2020). Dating apps are successfully harnessed by their users through a variety of social avenues of connection, whether the goal is romance, a brief sexual encounter, or simply entertainment (Timmermans & De Caluwe, 2017). Indeed, as Portolan and McAlister (2022) write, app use is 'cyclical, as people fall in and out of relationships with each other and the apps themselves' (p. 370).

As locative media, one of the key search parameters of Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, aside from age and gender, is distance. The eligibility of a potential match is immediately categorised, as one of a series of factors, through their location, making spatial dynamics a central aspect to the interactions carried out *via* these platforms. As Kitchin and Dodge (2011) write on the interplay between digital devices and spaces, 'software matters because it alters the conditions through which society, space, and time, and thus spatiality, are produced' (p. 13). Within this context, Miles (2017) offers relevant insights into the understanding of city space for the dating app user, arguing that dating apps compress space and time to allow the user to survey vast local distances around them in a brief instance. One informant interviewed by Miles goes so far as to express that 'proximity motivates action' (p. 9), in other words, a nearby potential partner becomes more desirable, which certainly points to the idea that the dating app's main purpose is to open a physical meeting. In this instance, one can also clearly see the affordances of the app precisely due to the user occupying the digital space of the city—without this the app would not be of any use. This awareness of space and location for the dating app user means potential suitors are always co-situated in shared space both digitally within the app and physically within the city (Blackwell et al., 2015). As I will go on to explore, this co-situatedness intersects with the particular spatial configuration of tourism and the tourist encounter, operating as a phenomenon associated with the crossing of borders and space.

As addressed previously, the location of a user on a dating app profile is seen as one of the few areas which are inherently truthful, since there is faith in the user's smartphone accurately tracking their movements (Veel & Thylstrup, 2018). Furthermore, since a user will carry their smartphone with them throughout the day and can theoretically access their dating apps wherever they are, the regularly updated location fosters a sense of intimacy between users, contrasting to the affordances previously offered by dating websites, immobile and independent of geo-tracking (Chan, 2017).

As such geolocational dating apps exist in a context of alignment with the ideas put forward by Certeau (2011) in his interpretation of space in the 1980s, namely the paradox between being present in the city streets and looking down upon them—the equivalent of looking at a city map. Veel (2003) summarises this notion simply as 'the man on the pavement is part of creating or "writing" the city' and counter to this 'the distanced spectator "reads" the city as an image' (p. 160). Dating apps as locative media place the user in a position between these two poles. As Hjorth (2013) notes in relation to mobile devices, these have the power to emphasise positionality and place, but also to elide these altogether; in the adjunction between technology and space a 'relational presence is achieved, which is both emotional and social' (pp. 7–8). Veel and Thylstrup (2018) draw on Certeau (2011) and Simmel (1950), writing that 'dating apps offer the perspectives of both the voyeur-God and the blind lovers. The

user is both a distanced spectator, reading the city and its teeming erotic life as an image, and a pedestrian moving on the pavement, creating and writing the city' (p. 48).

This blurring of spaces and positionality stands in line with the previously discussed broader impact of emerging media within tourism, where places, and in particular cities with their expansive digital infrastructures, have started to leak into one another. By allowing users to interact beyond their immediate physical vicinity even as their position remains anchored to a point on a map, dating apps feed into the further blurring of the boundary between home and tourist destination (Kah et al., 2011). This was particularly true in regard to the location porting enabled by dating apps through features such as Tinder's *Passport*, which marketed and facilitated a type of virtual tourism by encouraging users to explore 'new destinations'. Even aside from porting location to different places, the encounter with the foreign at the heart of much tourism is one enacted on a smaller, local scale by dating app users within their own cities (Gibson, 2012). During the early COVID-19 lockdown in Berlin, with people confined to, and isolated within, their own homes, the distinction between those outside the city's bounds and those within it was further eroded, as locals had almost as little access to their own city as the tourists virtually touring it from afar (Kah et al., 2011). Both were enacting encounters on the same digital playing field. This article probes how Berlin-based dating app users experienced these spatial relations in an urbanscape infiltrated by those outside of its imagined bounds.

Methodology

This article is based on data stemming from a 13-month ethnographic study investigating the practices of dating app users in Berlin, their relation to the spaces of the digital city and the affordances of the applications they utilize. For the purposes of clarity, when I use the term affordances I do so to refer to how 'technological artifacts or platforms privilege, open up, or constrain particular actions and social practices' (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2). Data collection began 7 months prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 in Germany, and as such the study provides a perspective of dating app use across the altered state of the field-site. Berlin was selected as the field-site since it is a city with the ideal environment for dating culture to flourish, with over half the population classified as single (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2018). Consequently, it is also one of the most popular dating app cities in the world, according to Tinder (Gilligan, 2021). The city provided a fertile ground for research engaging with dating practices and dating apps, alongside my fluency in German, which allowed dynamic interactions with research participants. I lived in *Mitte*—Berlin's most central neighbourhood—during my fieldwork and travelled throughout the city to meet research participants. Since research participants utilised dating apps to meet other users all over the city, the research was not limited to one area or neighbourhood.

The ethnographic research included online and offline participant-observation, as well as 36 audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with dating app users, and 45 chat interviews on OkCupid, Tinder, and Bumble. The 36 audio-recorded interviews

all lasted between 40 and 90 min. The timing of the chat interviews was more dynamic since research participants were not scheduled to a fixed interview time and replied as and when they were available. Chat interviews carried a time commitment of between approximately 10 and 90 min, yet it is difficult to gage the exact time spent communicating due to the fact that apart from the shortest of interactions, conversations were usually drawn out over hours, days, weeks, and occasionally months. The average length of contact with research participants was a week, with a check-in a month later if the research participants felt they had some new insights to report. Chat interviews were employed since 'instant messaging fosters an informal style of communication', which can facilitate a more personal dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, essential when discussing practices of an intimate nature (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020, p. 10). In addition to this, chat interviews also allowed dating app users to utilise the platforms they were discussing during the interview itself, easily making reference to any specific affordances or experiences associated with these, as a prompt to 'elicit the practices originating from the respective device' (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 238). Engaging with dating app users through dating apps, allowed for dynamic observations of profile characteristics and app design. This approach was modelled on Costa (2016), who characterises her ethnography as an online and offline 'hanging out', being immersed in the everyday life of the field-site, living in the city, making field-notes on the role of technology in one's own daily routines and those of the people one encounters, incorporating online platforms and physical city spaces.

There were 81 interview participants in total, aged between 20 and 33; 44 of these identifying as women, and 37 as men. As such, the ethnography takes into account dating apps solely through the lens of emerging and young adults, and the conclusions drawn are applicable primarily within this demographic. Since this segment of emerging and young adults makes up the majority of dating app users (Iqbal, 2021), it lends itself as the focal point of research and provided the easiest point of entry in terms of accessing research participants. While digital literacy is certainly no longer the domain of the young, it was expected that research participants' everyday lives would be firmly enmeshed in practices spanning digital communication platforms, a point essential for the approach of this article (Bareither, 2020). Since I also belonged to the same age group as participants and had some pre-existing connections in the city, I was easily able to access, and embed myself within, the demographic that I was studying.

The research project focused primarily on men searching for women, and women searching for men, on Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, the three most popular apps encountered in the fieldwork. Research participants were primarily university educated, active across a variety of professions, and all were resident in Berlin. For the 36 semi-structured interviews I also collected data on nationality, and noted that the sample of research participants reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the city. Out of 81 interview participants, 62 searched only for members of the opposite gender, 12 searched for both genders, 5 men searched solely for men, and 2 women searched solely for women. All research participants for interviews were sourced *via* snowball sampling through dating apps, Facebook groups, a newsletter, and personal contacts in Berlin. The chat interviews on Tinder, Bumble and OkCupid were sourced *via* designated research profiles set up on each app, which did not feature personal

identifying material about the researcher and clearly stated that matching with this profile had the sole purpose of participating in an interview for a research study associated with King's College London. Chat interview participants occasionally forwarded details of friends they believed to be interested in a semi-structured recorded interview, and as such contributed to the snowball sampling for these additional in-depth interviews. Additionally, calls for semi-structured recorded interviews were placed across Facebook groups—primarily a Humboldt University group—and a local Berlin newsletter—Woloho. While there have certainly been interesting cases of researchers merging dating or flirting and research (Byron & Møller, 2021; MacKee, 2016), I did not feel comfortable with such an approach, and thus, as previously discussed, utilised research profiles to conduct this research, maintaining a clear boundary. This was a decision made as much to protect myself and my research participants, as it was to allow myself to keep a distance between my work and personal life, which I felt to be important for my own mental wellbeing. As such, I also sought to remove the possibilities of hurt feelings or misunderstandings (Evans, 2017) and all research participant data was explicitly granted to me in the context of a researcher and participant relationship.

While during my time operating within dating apps, I encountered many people from outside the bounds of Berlin who had ported into the city, exchanging some messages with these as part of my participant-observation within each app, the recorded and transcribed semi-structured and chat interviews I carried out were all conducted with people resident in Berlin. As such, regarding tourism and the concept of the tourist, the research participants at the heart of this article are not tourists, but rather residents reflecting on the role of tourists within their city. In this sense, the article and methodology take a 'local' perspective towards the phenomenon of virtual holidaying (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012), and engage with questions around the continued erosion between home and tourist destination, not *via* the experience of a person who would term themselves a tourist, but rather a resident faced with a global encounter.

I practiced 'iterative data collection', which, as Handwerker (2001) writes, entails that one 'collect some data, analyze it, and use your new understanding to help you choose what data next needs collecting' (p. 71). It was over the course of the 13 months of research that Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid emerged as the focal point of study, rather than being designated as such at the outset. Most users had accounts on multiple apps, with varying combinations of the three primary apps at the heart of this article. Tinder was utilised by nearly all research participants and was often cast as the original and founding dating app. For example, of the 36 semi-structured audio-recorded interviews, 32 had used Tinder, 22 had used Bumble, and 17 had used OkCupid. Ethical approval was granted by King's College London and pseudonyms have been used to maintain the confidentiality of research participants' experiences. Since Berlin is a cosmopolitan city interviews were conducted in German or English, depending on which language research participants preferred to communicate in. Where relevant, German interviews have been translated into English for the purposes of this article. Research participants were not renumerated.

Over the 13 months of the ethnography, I engaged with hundreds of people online and offline, investigating the role of dating apps as technology integrated in everyday

life (Bareither, 2019a). During the last months of my time living in Berlin, after the initial lockdown restrictions induced by the pandemic eased, I also utilised dating apps in a personal capacity, in order to date. Since I belonged to the same age group as research participants and utilised dating apps as a man searching for women, my personal experiences overlapped with the milieu of dating culture that I was studying. These first-hand experiences of dating in Berlin had the side-effect of embedding myself within the same practices and spaces as my research participants, albeit this was primarily utilised to understand experiences and rituals, and converse with users as someone aware of how apps functioned and dates evolved, while I relied on data from research participants to draw conclusions. I did not interview any dates, nor treat these individuals as research participants. As such, the article is anchored in an understanding of dating apps and the everyday life of dating app users in Berlin, founded on long-term ethnographic immersion.

Ethnography allows the capture of rich experiential data in that it is a highly subjective and selective form of conducting research, giving the researcher a sense of reflexivity and fluidity in creating a focused, qualitative portrait of the field-site and research participants. Interview data, transcripts, fieldnotes, photos, screenshots, and social media posts or articles on dating in Berlin that I came across during my fieldwork were all imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Here I coded the data to specific nodes in terms of emerging thematic points of interest, and carried out analysis, from which I draw the arguments at the foundation of this article.

Crossing boundaries: unveiling the space of flows

During the pandemic induced lockdown, Berlin became an altered field-site, where for many people a physical meeting was no longer possible—if they chose to abide by the restrictions put in place—providing a unique perspective once again on the significance of proximity in romantic interaction on a dating app. Furthermore, physical encounters with tourists were erased altogether, giving the impression that Berlin was now only populated by those permanently residing there. It is important to note that even during the strictest phase of the lockdown, running from late March to early May, two people from different households were still allowed to meet outside as long as they kept their distance. Thus, in its essence dating was still possible, but of course the recommendation was to refrain from unnecessary interaction. During the first months of the lockdown among my demographic of dating app users many people did abstain from physical meetings—although by no means all. By late-May, dating was beginning to return to normal for the users I engaged with in the field, with people meeting outside and sometimes migrating to a user's home. Social distancing seemed to be a matter that was treated liberally, if a date went well, the potential for physical intimacy was not suddenly erased due to fear of breaking governmental guidelines.

However, during the first months of the COVID-19 induced lockdown in Berlin, the experience of city space, and the role of locative media, was significantly altered, especially on Tinder. This was primarily due to Tinder making *Passport,* one of its premium features, available to the public for free in the month of April. This feature

lets users circumvent the usual geolocational ties which restrict them to search within a 100-mile radius of their location, and instead allows them to pick any city in the world to port to, opening the door to a new kind of intimate online tourism. Making *Passport* free was a marketing strategy branded around the idea of bringing the world together in a time of physical self-isolation, based around the principles of further eroding the division between 'home' and 'away' aligned with the idea of virtual holidaying (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Within days of this being implemented across the app I saw an influx of people clearly outside of my search parameters—outside of Berlin. During this period, I matched with Jürgen, 30, on Tinder, a Berlin resident who had also noticed this influx of users outside of Berlin showing up as he swiped. Jürgen was a businessman and lived alone in leafy *Prenzlauer Berg,* a picturesque Berlin neighbourhood made up of parks and cobbled streets. He tried to be sensible and take precautions during the lockdown, but also wasn't prepared to shut off his social life completely—his main in-person contact was his business partner and their family, whom he saw regularly. He still went on dates, for example by getting drinks and sitting in a park, or spontaneously meeting new matches for a fast-food dinner perched on a street corner. Dating apps facilitated these spontaneous, hyper-local encounters—indeed, he organised to meet someone he'd just matched with, who lived around the corner from him, for a kebab, even as I was interviewing him. However, while there were now more people than before showing up from all over the world, Jürgen did not see this as a new phenomenon. In the past, through his occupation as an investment banker and consultant he had worked with Match Group, who own Tinder, and had certain insights into the corporate strategies behind dating apps. He pointed to Lovoo—a successful dating app in Germany, albeit not very popular among my research participants in Berlin—which had been in legal trouble and was ultimately fined for utilising fake profiles to entice primarily men into purchasing premium subscriptions (Stern, 2016). Populating an application with attractive potential matches is an effective way of expanding its userbase.

Tinder certainly isn't flooded with fake profiles, or at least there is no clear evidence of this, but there are ways its interface and algorithm utilise its existing global database of profiles to enhance the user experience—a form of virtual tourism designed to increase consumption on these apps. For a clue as to how this is done, one simply has to navigate to the Tinder troubleshooting pages on its website and the page titled 'The profiles I see are far away' (Tinder, 2022). The first two explanations given for seeing profiles that fall outside of the distance parameter set by the user are that other users are using *Passport* to port to the user's city, or that users are seeing a backlog of profiles from when they visited a different location. Yet, it is the final point of explanation which is most telling, 'we may sometimes surface potential matches that fall slightly outside of your preferences. Although they're a bit farther away, we hope you agree they're worth the exception'. Tinder therefore has a completely legitimate and even—arguably—clearly signposted method of transposing profiles deemed particularly attractive by the algorithm into users' feeds even if they do not correspond to their search parameters. As Jürgen comments on this practice:

> You get profiles that are outside of your search algorithm washed into your feed, so that you see the, I don't know, the super-hot French girl, that gets swiped right by everyone. She then gets shown to you also no matter where you are, simply to show you 'look at

> who we have on this platform'. And the section on the profile that shows you how many kilometres they are away is always on the second page, so you don't even see it at a glance, it's a little bit hidden. So, then the app suggests to you 'wow I'm swiping through a model index'.
> Author's translation from German

Jurgen's description was accurate—when I used the app it was indeed the case that the distance I was away from other users was only visible on the second page of their profile. If one simply swipes left or right based on the first profile page one sees, which is a process the app's design encourages through its swiping card stack structure, one will never see information pertaining to a user's distance. The first page of a user's profile also already shows the first lines of their bio, making it appear a holistic representation of the user. To see the distance to the user, one would have to tap the right-hand side of the user's profile to navigate to their second profile page which shows a second photo and their occupation if they have entered this. As such, if a user simply swipes through profiles without navigating away from the first profile page, a practice common to many of my research participants, that user would not have any awareness of whether profiles were in fact outside of their distance search parameters—and likely assume that they were not. Hence the design of the app subtly seeks to manipulate the perception of the user as to the 'quality' of potential matches, to employ the term one of my research participants, Corinna, 25, used to describe what made dating apps appealing—'quality' men. When using Tinder 'speed is intentionally encouraged by design' (David & Cambre, 2016; 7), as such users are swayed not to see the distance to a profile until they match, therefore retaining a false imagined belief around the idea that all the profiles they briefly encounter are in proximity, or at least within the distance parameter they have specified. As such, the app simultaneously encourages and masks the tourist encounter, offering users the possibility to port across the globe, yet hiding their true origin upon an initial local engagement.

van der Nagel (2018) applies Certeau's (2011) framework of *strategies* and *tactics* to algorithms, noting how platforms employ strategies *via* their algorithms to manipulate users, while users utilise tactics to resist. Though most platform users, across social media and dating apps, do not have specialist knowledge or truly understand the technological workings of algorithms, they still have agency, and can subvert algorithms *via* their practices (Willson, 2017). Throughout my fieldwork, it was not truly a case of dating app users actively employing tactics to subvert apps or algorithms, but rather showing an awareness of apps' strategies in manipulating the 'quality' of profiles they encountered by showing them popular users outside of their search parameters. While users could navigate to the second page of a profile to determine where a potential partner was situated, in practice most were happy to swipe first and identify distance later, upon a match. However, it was clear that users did not blindly follow the design logic of the apps they were utilising, but rather showed a deep awareness of the intricacies of the interface, identifying ways in which the app worked to their disadvantage. Indeed, as I will address in detail further on in this article, research participants utilised dating apps with the assumption that they would not function as desired.

Usually, the profiles falling outside of a user's specified distance parameter are such a minority that they may never be noticed. However, profiles situated outside of Berlin—and usually outside of Germany—certainly became more prominent in my card stack throughout the month of April and early May, coinciding with the free upgrade to *Passport*. During this time, I matched with far more users outside of my search parameters and indeed encountered more complaints from users I matched with in Berlin about the proliferation of non-Berliner 'dating app tourists' in their Tinder feeds. This new type of tourism transformed the app experience even at a time when physical encounters with tourists were at a minimum for residents.

It is a fascinating example of how the app, which is founded on the principle of geolocation and physical proximity of users, manipulates the perception of space amongst its userbase in order to maximise user experience. Essentially, in a practical sense, this is achieved by bending the spatial logic of users, providing an experience whereby highly attractive individuals appear to be tantalisingly within reach. In this process, Castells (2010) space of flows, the synchronous interaction of individuals separated by great distances, is hidden by the promise of proximity and co-presence within city space. It is a minor detail within the overall user interface, shifting the small number—which shows the distance in kilometres that the profile is away—at the bottom of a user's profile from the first page to the second page, but it can have a significant impact on the notion of space a user forms as they swipe, and accordingly the promise of intimacy that proximity facilitates for a potential match. Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) refer to Castells (2002) space of flows when they write of the impact of online technologies in overcoming 'the tyranny of distance, time and space to allow for the establishment of new networks and patterns of interactivity (p. 156); however, as illustrated in the example of far off users appearing to be closer than they are, dating apps, and in this case particularly Tinder, seek to falsely reinstate this 'tyranny', for in its restrictiveness there is a certain comfort in feeling close to others. Dating apps operate through the space of flows, yet they strive to create the impression of an experience anchored in more traditional notions of intimacy where proximity facilitates connection, rather than the far-reaches of Castells (2010) network society. As Newett et al. (2018) expand on Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) claims, dating apps rely on the 'same physical and social locations' to create connections, and create the impression of thus expanding 'face-to-face intimate networks' (p. 348). In the dating app interface, great distances are squeezed together and ordered around more traditional ideas of communities as existing within the same physical location. Whether this is a false lure or simply a slight reconfiguration of the mapping of intimacy is a matter of perspective. What is certain, however, is that the figure of the tourist wedged itself into this seamless process of masking the space of flows, cracking its veneer, and threatening its illusion.

While the design of Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid suggests that proximity is a highly important factor for users in determining a match, one must ask how users themselves relate to the apps' distance parameter functionality? Most of the people I encountered on dating apps and formally interviewed did not spend too much time thinking about their distance parameter search settings. Nearly all research participants were not sure of their exact distance settings, but thought that they covered all of Berlin. The understanding as to the borders of Berlin diverged of course between

people; for some these borders meant inside the *Ringbahn*, an S-Bahn overground train route that encircles the inner city, for others they meant that the person lived somewhere within easy reach *via* public transport. To exceed these physical demarcations of Berlin space was to be a dating app tourist. In this sense, while Paulos and Goodman (2004) note that in tourism geographies the 'very essence of place and community are being refined by personal wireless digital tools that transcend traditional physical constraints of time and space' (p. 230), for research participants, it was in fact the physical markers of location which shaped their understanding of where the intimate space of Berlin was bordered.

Especially in relation to Tinder, some users showed an awareness of the app's algorithm covertly impacting their search parameters, and this must be seen as accounting to some extent for the fact research participants were not too concerned with their precise distance parameter settings, since the expectation was that Tinder would show them people outside of this range anyway. Sandro, 26, was interning at an algorithm watchdog and was fascinated by dating apps even before he installed them on his phone, particularly in terms of the mechanisms making them function. He'd moved to Berlin recently from Leipzig, but already felt he'd assimilated to his new home city. He was in an open relationship and used dating apps to facilitate encounters which could be both predominantly sexual or lead to a more substantial encounter outside of his steady partnership. Sandro did not see any point in spending too much time fine tuning his distance parameter search settings, for ultimately the algorithm would still have the final say in who he encountered on Tinder and OkCupid, the two dating apps he used. He told me, 'even if you changed the radius to one kilometre as an experiment, you would still see loads of people, which of course doesn't make any sense' (author's translation from German). Sandro felt the apps would do as they wished, curating a set of profiles for him regardless of his locational preferences in order to make the experience more pleasant for him no matter which settings he changed.

Tanya, 23, a long-term resident of Berlin felt deeply tied to the city and particularly its free-flowing nightlife, which she felt provided her a form of self-expression unlike any other city in the world—she regularly performed as a drag king at various venues. While the lockdown limited the city, she felt its nightlife would re-emerge in different forms, and indeed illegal raves in abandoned factories and the woodland surrounding Berlin soon filled the gap left by shuttered bars and nightclubs. Similarly to Sandro, when I interviewed Tanya and asked her if she felt very aware of the algorithm powering the app, she immediately referred to the distance parameter settings as a sign that something was occurring over which she had little control, 'I noticed a few times that apparently Tinder has an algorithm where if a person swipes right on you the app will show you that person even if they are super far away. I noticed that people who are very, very, very far outside of my radius still get shown to me' (author's translation from German).

Thus, while dating apps, as geolocational media, provided a basis for users to engage with the spaces they occupy and indeed allow certain readings of the city to take place in interactions, the technology itself is almost passively accepted as being flawed and working in ways other than its design suggests to the user. As Bausinger (1984) notes, technology 'penetrates the everyday and it is consumed and

absorbed by the everyday' (p. 346); therefore, it is not surprising that dating app users demonstrate a sort of nonchalant literacy of the apps they use and an acceptance of their processes, even in moments where these are often counterintuitive when taken at face value. Whether this was demonstrated through specifically referring to the apps' algorithms or simply in the ambivalence shown towards the functioning of the distance parameter settings—as long as they encompassed Berlin's imagined borders (Anderson, 2006)—dating app users engaged with the technology by understanding its limitations and the ways in which it actually appeared to work, rather than the way it promised to function. It is a similar mindset to that noted by David and Cambre (2016) in their study of Tinder users, where they observe that users triggered the app to show a new cache of profiles by changing their search preferences from searching for only women or only men to searching for men and women or vice versa—'tricking' the app into refreshing possible matches. This behaviour was based on an understanding that 'Tinder might show users that no matches are nearby, when in fact there are other users in the area but Tinder does not offer them' (p. 5).

Approaching the geolocational functions of dating apps like this produces a recalibration of a principle Duguay (2020) terms 'off-label' application use. Off-label is a term Duguay borrows from pharmacology, meaning the prescription of a drug for a condition other than that for which it has been cleared; it had previously already appeared in relation to Tinder in a 2014 Forbes article (Bercovici, 2014). Duguay refers to the practice through examples of users advertising, networking, or selling *via* Tinder, in other words utilising this *dating* app for purposes other than dating. She refers to Lamb and Kling (2003) notion of users as social actors whose response to the context of a technology has multiple facets, and Eglash's (2004) ethnomathematical work, focusing on how users are agents able to decide how to repurpose or ignore any technology's intended use. Applying this off-label framework specifically to the geolocational affordances of dating apps, where one may be tempted to cast the relationship between user and technology as one in which the technology is not used as it is designed to be, rather I argue that the technology does not work as it promises to and users accept and adapt to this phenomenon. Rather than repurposing the technology, users accept it is unwieldy and unpredictable, and that they are bound to operate within this framework. To continue with the pharmacological analogy, instead of off-label usage, here the prescription itself is not labelled in such a way that is comprehensible and so side-effects are expected and accounted for by the user.

As highlighted in my interview with Jürgen, the free Tinder *Passport* feature during the pandemic induced lockdown inadvertently brought to light the unreliability of the distance parameter settings on the app, and the pre-existing dating app tourists in his card stack. Jan, 27, whom I matched with on OkCupid, told me he had stopped using Tinder altogether during this time, since due to *Passport* there were now 'way too many people that are further away than I am looking for' (author's translation from German). The discrepancy between the user controlling the spatial navigation of the city and the app itself taking on this agency had become too vast for him, with the figure of the tourist emblematic of this discrepancy as an unwelcome intruder into the local environment.

Across nearly all research participants there was an aversion to the influx of non-Berlin based dating app users. No matter where a person was originally from, if

they lived in Berlin they were seen to belong to this city. Berlin had a certain brand of intimacy, and a dating culture which encompassed the city's fabled and dizzying nightlife, with people staying out late, having beers outside Spätis (liquor stores, often with tables outside, treated almost as bars) and some clubs staying open non-stop from Friday night until Monday morning. There was a certain snobbery towards tourists, a feeling that they didn't really understand the city. This understanding of the city was only seen to be absorbed *via* a prolonged residency within its borders. Berlin was seen as a stable imagined environment by all my research participants, a city with a certain reputation and global standing—a metropole spun in narratives of freedom, hedonism, and an ugly, exciting, fast-paced rootlessness. Within Berlin, intimacies among young people were seen to be fleeting, with dating a casual, non-committal sphere to participate in. How could an outsider, porting virtually into this sphere, possibly understand? How could they be worthy of engaging with? Among research participants, I detected the notion that when one lives in a city one becomes a part of the particular imaginaries and cultural attributes seen to exist there, one becomes integrated into certain narratives, in Berlin one becomes a Berliner, (King, 2007), and secondly, that, as Simoni (2015) writes, 'while intimacies can signal and mediate certain forms of belonging, people's assumptions and desires of belonging can also, in turn, affect the way intimacies are experienced and perceived' (p. 26). This provided the foundation for a growing irritation towards those diluting the local connections users' desired, particularly when taking into account that dating apps offer their users the illusion of occupying a shared physical space with potential partners, which stands central to their appeal.

Carla, 23, a Dutch-Italian, who had moved to Berlin from London, and worked at a historical institute alongside studying for her MA in history, would often delete and then reinstall dating apps, and was adamant she wasn't actively looking for any connections, but just browsing for fun. However, the apps played into her desire of unveiling, or tapping into, the potential romantic encounters held by the city around her. For example, she had seen a man she felt attracted to in her canteen at work and immediately had two thoughts: one was to give him her phone number and the other was to log on to Bumble and see whether she could find him there. In the end, she felt too shy to give the man her number and instead hoped she would come across him on Bumble in the future. The potential for an encounter remained, both in the physical environment of her work canteen or the romantically charged space of the dating app he may or may not have been a member of. These two spaces overlapped for Carla as potential territories of encounter and were bound together—Bumble to Carla did not mean a global platform, but a point of local connection within Berlin. The influx of dating app tourists and the adverse reaction to these further showcased the desire for proximate intimacies in users' motivations for using these applications.

Conclusion

Taking the perspective of dating app users resident in Berlin, this article has explored the way the proliferation of international profiles—dating app tourists—appearing in users' card stacks during the COVID-19 lockdown in Berlin brought into relief

pre-existing tensions regarding the functionality of dating apps' geolocational affordances. Tinder's *Passport* feature is an example of how smartphones continue to erode distinctions between sites of vacation and the 'home', as well as contribute to the vast digital networks enmeshing the globe. The article concludes that for dating app users in Berlin, the appeal of using dating apps was primarily to form local connections, within the city's imagined bounds. Dating apps catered to these desires as they sought to hide Castells (2010) space of flows, creating the illusion for users that enticing connections were available in proximity and playing into a sense of localised intimacies. The free introduction of Tinder's *Passport* feature during the COVID-19 lockdown and the large number of dating app tourists it brought to Berlin unveiled the app's global network of users, cracking its illusion of proximate intimacies.

For research participants, the uncertainty and overwhelming possibility of mobile communication enacted on a global playing field stood in contrast to a desire, or hope, for a more attainable form of community, one where city streets foster romances within easy reach. Tinder seeks to manipulate the way users experience spaces, while users themselves are literate enough in the fallacies of platform design and algorithms to engage with apps as unwieldy—yet useful—tools. Research participants showed an awareness of the fact that dating apps would on occasion splice their card stacks with profiles from outside of Berlin and accepted this as standard protocol for using these platforms, even while it directly went against their motivations for being present on these apps. As such, research participants often did not know their exact distance search parameters, since it was accepted the app was likely to deviate from these inputs—which was tolerated, as long as the majority of matches users received were from within Berlin. It was only with the introduction of *Passport* on Tinder that some research participants actively became irritated at the phenomenon of profiles outside of Berlin being shown to them. The feeling for research participants of being anchored within the same bounded imagined environment of Berlin as other users was key to the appeal of utilising a dating app and fostered a sense of connection—and trust—with profiles encountered. In terms of Tourism Geographies as a field of research, the article highlights how understandings of tourism and indeed the figure of the tourist are being integrated into conceptions of space which have shifted with the affordances offered by emerging media. The article presents a view of tourism from a local perspective, shaped entirely through a digital lens, and highlights that while digital media continues to erode distinctions between home and away, there remains a desire to demarcate spaces and organise them around the ideas of *here* and *there*, close or distant from one's physical location. Tourism can be traced and observed even in situations where no borders are crossed and an encounter remains entirely implicit, as in the caching of a dating app profile from thousands of miles away.

There is scope for further research on how geolocational dating apps form a key component of emerging media in the changing perception of spaces globally, as well as how these dynamics shift in different cultural contexts. While this study has focussed particularly on Berlin resident dating app users in their encounters with dating app tourists, it would be insightful to carry out further research with those actively utilising dating apps to tour the world. Finally, the continuously evolving affordances of dating apps offer fertile ground for future research within the realms of space and digital media, with features such as Tinder *Passport* suggesting a step back towards the

spatially-detached online form of matchmaking, not reliant on proximity, associated with dating websites (Chan, 2017). Dating apps are simply one of many emerging media woven into global networks of communication, continuing to redefine the boundaries between the local and the global. Investigating notions of intimacy in the tourist encounter suggests that the infinite reach of digital communication is oftentimes tempered by the overwhelming desire to locate proximate, tangible connections.

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