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‘Friends, dates and everything in between’: Tinder as a mediating technology

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Abstract

This paper represents an exploratory reflection about dating apps using the technological mediation approach, choosing Tinder as a specific example. In the first part of the paper, I present the technological mediation frame, touching on concept definitions, the specific employed vocabulary, as well as on the ethical part of mediation, as elaborated by Peter-Paul Verbeek. The second part of the paper is represented by an analysis of Tinder, in which I discuss how the app mediates the users’ experiences and actions, as well as design and ethical concerns.

Keywords

Tinder, online dating, dating apps, data cultures

Introduction

With the extensive technological developments happening in the world, smartphones are getting increasingly popular. According to Statista.com (2018), 36% of the world’s population owns a smartphone in 2018, in comparison to only approximately 10% of the population in 2011, with a noticed increase not only in numbers, but also in smartphone penetration rates. While the percent of world users itself isn’t very large, the rate of expansion in the last few years delineates a clear ascending trend in smartphone usage. At the same time, the stigma around online dating is decreasing, with more people considering it to be socially acceptable, and dating apps were some of the highest-grossing ones in the Apple Store worldwide in 2017 (Statista.com, 2018).

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Preceded by online dating sites, dating apps are a relatively new way of meeting people, be it for finding a relationship, a friendship, a casual sexual experience or other things. The novelty of this type of app has led to a growing body of research focusing on multiple aspects of dating apps, such as user characteristics, motivations and experiences, as well as more technical aspects like security issues. Although most of the studies present aspects which illustrate the ways in which the technology of dating apps mediates the users' experiences and relations with the world, there aren't many published studies which specifically approach the topic using the mediation frame.

Therefore, this paper represents a reflection about dating apps, using the technological mediation approach. I will choose the dating app Tinder, one of the most well-known of the genre, as a case-study subject. The reasoning behind my choice lies, firstly, in the app's popularity: in 2018, on Google Play, it is the number one top grossing app for the Lifestyle category, it has 2 million user reviews and 100 million downloads. Secondly, from its popularity can stem an influential power over the developers of other apps, albeit in a subtle way. The app market is, as the name says, a market, meaning that developers are often competitors. In trying to compete with a well-established app such as Tinder, a developer has to create something better or entirely different in comparison to the other apps in the same genre to keep the ball rolling. This is why I think Tinder can be perceived as very relevant.

Technological mediation

According to Verbeek (2008), the postphenomenological approach of the philosophy of technology analyzes the relations between humans and technologies, as well as the roles of technologies in the world and in human experiences, thus framing technology as an essential part of the social world. Through his analysis of the role of ultrasound obstetrics, Verbeek (2008, p.12) underlines that technologies "...help to shape practices and interpretations of reality which form the basis of moral decisions", thus interlinking the mediation approach with ethics. As I will develop later, Verbeek often stresses the innate ethical facet of technologies. However, the first part of the quote is also very instructive in understanding mediation as a process stemming from the interplay between humans and reality.

In his reshaping of phenomenology to develop postphenomenology, Don Ihde (apud Verbeek, 2008) maintained the idea that the relations between humans and world need to be understood through intentionality, meaning the way in which people direct their existence toward the world, but underlined how the intentionality is technologically mediated. Verbeek (2008, p.13) completed Ihde's definition of postphenomenology, asserting that it "consists in the philosophical analysis of human-world relations – including its technologically mediated character – and the constitution of subjectivity and objectivity within these relations", thus highlighting the mutually constitutive character of the human-world relation.

For Verbeek (2009), the concept of mediation is not merely used to describe a specific phenomenon in an exact manner, it being rather formulated to serve as a lens

that can be used to observe and interpret reality in a new and different way. However, the specific set of concepts and the vocabulary subsumed into the mediation approach make it applicable to concrete situations.

Conclusively, Verbeek (2006, p.363) defines technological mediation as being concerned with “the role of technology in human action (conceived as the ways in which human beings are present in their world) and human experience (conceived as the ways in which their world is present to them)”. In this definition, Verbeek (2006) discerns between two dimensions of mediation: perception, focusing on how technology mediates the human interpretation of reality, and praxis, focusing on how technology mediates the actions of humans and their ways of living. In elaborating the two perspectives of mediation, Verbeek develops a characteristic vocabulary of technological mediation. I will briefly present the concepts included in this vocabulary next, as they will serve as guidelines for my reflection.

Mediation of perception

The first concept Verbeek (2006) presents is Don Ihde’s transformation of perception, according to which technologies transform the perception of reality in the process of mediation. In use, technologies amplify certain aspects of reality while reducing others, this transformation being called technological intentionality and meaning that technologies are not neutral, but are actively involved in the relations between humans and their world. The intentionalities of technologies are not fixed, but defined in their context of use, within the relations, which means that in different contexts, technologies can be interpreted in different ways, this being translated as multistability.

Mediation of action

Here, Verbeek (2006) presents concepts developed by Bruno Latour. The first of these is the concept of scripts, meaning the ways in which technologies guide or require their users to act in their act of using them. As well as in the case of perception, transformations also happen in the mediation of action. Latour (apud Verbeek, 2006) calls these translations of programs of action. When entities (both human and nonhuman) interact with each other, their original programs of action translate into a new one. In the translation of action, some actions are invited, while some are inhibited by the scripts of the artifacts, in a similar manner as the amplification-reduction structure appears in the mediation of perception.

Technological mediation and ethical issues

As Verbeek (2006) shows through his overview of technological mediation, the fact that technologies play an essential role in constituting in the actions of their users reveals the innate morality of engineering design. While the engineers, Verbeek says, don’t necessarily aim to influence the behaviors of users in specific ways while designing, the mediating role of technologies should be taken into consideration in the design process.

He offers two options of moralizing technologies. The first is trying to determine if the technological product could have mediating capacities which are undesirable and designing to avoid such situations, while the second is explicitly designing forms of desirable mediation and inscribing them to the product. However, Verbeek (2006) admits that the multistability of technologies can lead to unpredictable types of mediation, making ethical design a rather difficult job. Since technologies mediate while being used by different users in different contexts, it is hard to properly assess every possibility of mediation before it takes place.

A striking example of the moral role of technologies is given by Verbeek (2008) in his analysis of obstetric ultrasound. He argues that the ultrasound actively mediates the way in which the unborn baby is shown to the parents, constructing a specific perception of the fetus. Through the fact that the shown size of the fetus is larger on the screen than it is in real life, being similar to that of a newborn baby, the fetus is represented as a person. The representation of the fetus as separated from the mother's body on the screen and the possibility of learning the fetus' gender constitute them as an individual person.

Moreover, by using the ultrasound, the parents can find out if the unborn is at risk of some diseases or suffering from congenital defects, which constitutes the fetus as a patient. The ultrasound also affects the relations between parents, the unborn and the world, through increased bonding, but also through the fact that the parents become decision-makers regarding, for example, having an abortion if the child is suffering from a disease. This is a difficult moral choice which is intrinsically brought to reality by using the ultrasound technology.

Although the technology which Verbeek discusses definitely has clearer moral implications than dating apps, I find his example significant in two ways. Firstly, it reveals how multiple facets of mediation can intersect to have a compound moral effect, which I believe can be the case of other technologies as well. Secondly, I find the ways in which a mediating technology constitutes its 'subjects' relevant for social technologies, since they also constitute their users in specific ways, for themselves and for the other users.

Tinder as a mediating technology

Tinder, as many other dating apps, is a location-based mobile app used for meeting new people. Once the user downloads the app from the Google Play Store or Apple Store and creates a profile, they are shown profiles (called 'cards' in the app) of other Tinder users, based on a predetermined geographical distance and on mutual settings such as age and gender. The user can swipe right on a card if they like the person or swipe left if they do not. For users who swipe right on each other's cards, a separate chat window opens where they can talk.

Design, between efficiency and morality

On the personal profile, the user can upload personal pictures and complete a short 'About' section of less than 500 characters. One can also add a job and company title and

the name of a school, as well as connecting Tinder to their Instagram profile if they wish. Next, the user selects their interests: men, women or both and the age range of the shown users.

Figure 1. The customization menu of a Tinder profile

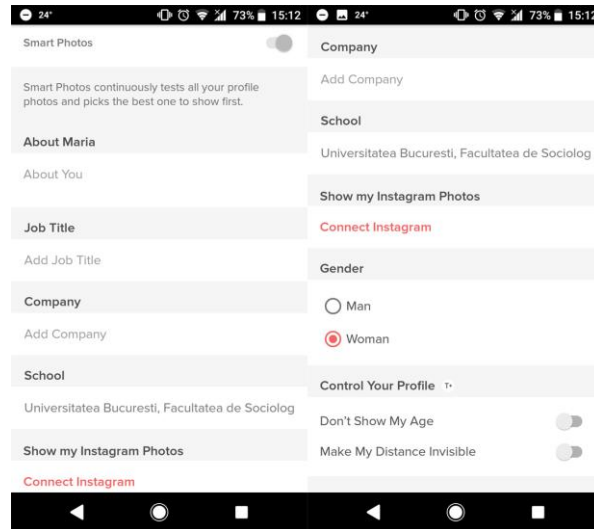


Figure 1 illustrates the profile options. An interesting feature is that of 'Smart Photos', which 'continuously tests all your profile photos and picks the best one to show first'. Although there is no specific explanation about what 'best photo' means in this context, I can assume that it translates as the photo which brings the user most swipe rights. This secondary feature, which the user can turn on and off, can be perceived as an example of the app's intentionality for maximized efficiency, in a sense: the user can delegate the app to maximize their success on the app by managing their photos, if this fits their interests.

The last section in Figure 1 is the one which allows the user to 'control their profile'. This is only available for users who choose to pay for Tinder Plus, the premium version of the app. For better control of their profiles, paying users have the ability to hide their age and their distance from other people. But if control translates in showing less information in comparison to other users, this can have the unwanted implication of creating an environment of mistrust and imbalance between the users who show less information and those who show more. While this is maybe not very likely to happen, it is possible that some users can manipulate and lie by hiding their age or distance, leading to unpleasant situations. I believe this is an example that illustrates what Verbeek meant by unwanted mediations stemming from design, which could be avoided or modified through an exercise of imagination.

The other features only available for Tinder Plus users are options like browsing in other locations, controlling who sees your profile with the option of it only being shown to the people you have liked, being the top profile shown to the users in your area for a limited amount of time and unlimited right swipes, among others. These options

ultimately have the same common theme: maximized efficiency. Either through filtering out the people who don't swipe right or through having unlimited swipe rights, they all lead to better matching abilities in terms of numbers.

From an engineering point of view, these options deliver a highly functional app, if it is perceived as a 'numerical' matching system. However, Tinder is created and presented as a way to begin human relationships which often require time for discovering mutual interests or for developing trust, a fact that can come in direct contrast to this 'number game' in some cases.

Data concerns

Another ethical concern is represented by data production and management. Albury et al. (2017) address this issue through the frame of data cultures. They use the term to illustrate multiple situations, encompassing the ways in which data produced in dating apps through usual requirements such as age or gender, the ways in which data is cultivated and harvested by individual or corporate actors and used according to their needs, as well as the ways in which users encounter, experience and resist the practices regarding data in their experience with the apps.

Albury et al. (2017) mention that a lot of user data is collected while using mobile dating apps, that the collection process can begin at sign up and that, in the case of Tinder, which requires signing in with Facebook for identity verification, the collected data can extend to all of the Facebook information an user shared, enforcing norms from the two platforms on each other in the process. The data is used by developers to learn how to improve the app in order to offer better user experience and find better opportunities for monetization. The geo-location disclosure is also important in collecting localized data, especially in the case of Tinder, since its business model generates most revenue through data sharing (Albury et al., 2017). These practices can raise concerns about the safety of the user data in case of a security breach, as well as the possibility of data misuse.

Albury et al. (2017) give an interesting example of how data cultures are formed through the interplay of user practices, app functionality and business requirements. Tinder has introduced a new feature which limits the number of profiles users can see for free, as a response to the users who used to swipe right automatically to increase their matches. Now, unlimited swiping needs to be purchased as a part of Tinder Plus. As a result, users started changing their sexual preferences on the app to reset the metadata and make more profiles available without paying. I believe this also illustrates how the mediating character of Tinder is dynamic, being formed in use and through the interaction of humans and contextual factors.

Mediating 'friends, dates and everything in between'

The quoted sequence from the subtitle is adopted from Tinder's description on Google Play Store. I find it quite funny and indicative of what the app does. Through its use, Tinder mediates people's experiences of meeting new people for diverse purposes.

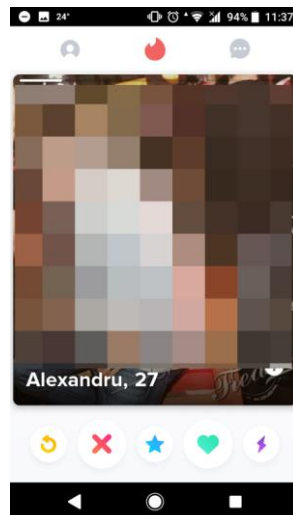
Coming back to the heart of technological mediation, it thus creates a new and specific reality of engaging and communicating with people.

But before the experience of meeting new people takes place, Tinder, in a similar and yet extremely different fashion to the ultrasound technology discussed by Verbeek, constitutes its users in certain ways. Firstly, it constitutes users in accord with each other's requirements, grouping them by gender, age and location.

Secondly, through the simple, gamified design, the app constitutes its users in a simplified way. The maximum of six photos uploaded on a profile and the 500 characters allowed for the 'About me' section limit the users from constructing an in-depth self-representation, only allowing for a fragmented one. In terms of amplification and reduction, I believe that Tinder amplifies the visual characteristics of users, focusing on personal photographs, while reducing their personal interests and other characteristics that can only be textually expressed by limiting the text dimensions.

Figure 2 illustrates how a card is shown to other users. The largest part of the screen is covered by the users' profile photo, with the personal description not being visible at all. The browsing user can tap on the screen to see the other photographs, but they have to enter a separate window to read the personal description and learn more about the person than their name and age. In this way, Tinder's interface initially constitutes users in an avatar-like fashion, by amplifying the aspects they choose to showcase in photographs, which, by a quick browse and general experience of users I've interviewed in the past, are usually a combination of physical traits they consider to be attractive and representations of different status symbols.

Figure 2. A Tinder user card as it is shown when browsing the app



The ways in which people choose to use Tinder have been the subject of more research papers, but for the purpose of this paper I will discuss the one I found to be most relevant. Hobbs, Owen and Gerber (2016) explored the users' motivations through in-depth interviews, learning that these vary widely: people use Tinder for relationships,

for making friends, for expanding their social networks in new places, for casual sexual encounters obtained fast as well as for validating their ego through their number of matches. Ranzini and Lutz (2016) also noticed gendered patterns of Tinder use, with men using it more for sex, traveling purposes and relationship seeking, and women using it more for friendship-seeking and self-validation.

Through recounting their interviewees' experiences with Tinder, Hobbs, Owen and Gerber (2016) also showcase the app's multistability. For a heterosexual female user, the app was a way of feeling powerful and taking control over her sex life as a single parent, as she was able to find partners in a short period of time and state her intentions and boundaries clearly, telling them from the start that she didn't want a long term commitment. For a heterosexual male user, the app served as a game of vanity, where he enjoyed being liked by other users, even if he noticed the superficial nature of the matching system, entirely solely based on aesthetics. At the same time, more interviewees perceived their own profiles as needing to be marketable for the other users, which can explain the focus on attractive photographs.

Hobbs, Owen and Gerber (2016) conclude their paper by saying that the dating app users perceive them as good options of finding love, sex and intimacy, as they are quick, accessible and adapted to the fast-moving world. The users also feel that by using dating apps, they have increased opportunities compared to the past generations, as well as an increased amount of control over the process of meeting people this way. At the same time, the different motives and methods of using the app by different users lead to a multiplicity of opinions and experiences.

Conclusions

Along with many other similar dating apps, Tinder can be understood as a mediating technology, as it mediates the process of meeting new people for seeking romantic relationships, friendships or other purposes. Through the examples I have chosen to showcase in this paper, I have tried to identify some aspects of the technological mediation frame as they appear in the design, perception and use of Tinder.

The app design is gamified through swiping motions and the use of 'cards', optimized for mobile use and it focuses on the visual sphere more than the textual one in the presentation of users. Taken together, these elements make the app simple to use, entertaining and very efficient, but they can also create an overly superficial environment, especially for the users who are seeking serious intimate connections.

An ongoing concern is that of data collection and sharing through apps such as Tinder. By also involving Facebook as an identification factor, Tinder also collects large amounts of secondary data from its users, and, in accord to its business model, sells it for revenue. These practices raise not only questions of morality, but also of user security in case of a data security breach.

Ultimately, the multiplicity of user experiences generated through Tinder, as the presented research has shown, underline the mediating character of the app in the clearest way. In the end, dating apps are a tool for searching and finding what the user

wants in terms of relationships. Their efficiency and suitability are not set characteristics, as they can be continuously defined and redefined in concrete contexts of use.

As dating apps are becoming more popular, both for the general public use and as a research subject, I believe more research should focus on their mediating character, explicitly incorporating the technological mediation frame into their research agenda. Personally, I think it is especially important to understand how these technologies are mediating some of the most private spheres of life in the culture of public user data collection, and that future research would have better results by approaching this subject through innovative methods.

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