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Negotiating Gender and Sexual Norms:

Queer Women and Non-Binary Individuals' Experiences and Semiotic Interpretations on Heteronormative Dating Applications

Word count : 21.935

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to everyone who supported me (and all my complaints) throughout the journey of writing and submitting my master's thesis.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Hjalmar Carlsen, for his guidance, patience, and expertise. I am also truly grateful to the professors, administrators, and staff who have contributed to my education and provided a supportive community inside of the academic environment. I would like to extend my appreciation to my classmates that provided me with regular valuable feedback, as well as giving me a very needed mental support. Their help, knowledge and their enjoyable company have made this experience both rewarding and pleasurable.

I want to also express my gratitude to all the participants in my thesis who took the time to contribute to my research. Your willingness to share your experiences and insights were essential and crucial to the completion of this study.

Lastly, I am deeply appreciative to my family for their unconditional love, strong support, and endless encouragement, even from a distance. Merci surtout à mes deux gougnafiers préférés. And thank you Jordan for not letting me give up.

A special mention also goes to my friends, whose understanding, and encouragement lifted me up during moments of self-doubt and kept me motivated to reach the finish line. Thank you Badou for giving me needed feedback and always believing in me. And thank you to all my Malmöites friends, Mustafa, Samia, Sheila, Aisha, Mohammed, for always being down for drinks when I needed a break, helping me through my existential crisiS, and coming on hours-long study dates with me or having a look at my thesis when I self-doubted. I cannot wait to celebrate this achievement with you all.

To everyone who played a part, no matter how big or small, thank you for being a part of this remarkable journey. Your support made all the difference, and I am truly grateful for each and every one of you (see you again for my PhD thesis, maybe?).

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Title: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Norms: Queer Women and Non-Binary Individuals' Experiences and Semiotic Interpretations on Heteronormative Dating Applications

Master's thesis Lund University

Supervisor: Hjalmar Carlsen

Department of Sociology, Spring Semester 2023

Abstract :

This thesis explores how queer women and non-binary individuals navigate gender norms and heteronormativity on dating apps. It also gives insights about how queer women and gender non-conforming users semiotically perceive and interpret gender and sexuality through online profiles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, about their experiences on the mobile dating applications Tinder and Bumble.

This study reveals the existence of resistance to gender norms and heteronormativity within online dating spaces, as well as the reliance on assumptions to interpret profiles. Users adapt their self-presentation to specific platforms, asserting their agency in expressing their gender and sexual identity. Participants develop strategies to negotiate and reshape gender norms, leveraging platform settings and features. Queer and non-binary individuals face several challenges due to binary structures and heteronormativity on dating apps. Despite this, these platforms facilitate recognition and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

Findings show that participants rely on assumptions based on visual elements to interpret the gender identity and sexuality of another user and that cultural and gender norms influence this interpretation. However, the interpretation of cues and symbols can reinforce harmful biases and assumptions. The study highlights the need for inclusive online environments that challenge stereotypes and biases.

Key words : *Dating Applications; Queerness; Heteronormativity; Gender Norms; Semiotic Interpretation*

Popular science summary :

This research looks at how individuals who do not fit into what society says men and women should be, and who like people of the same gender, use dating applications on their phones. The study is based on questions asked to 15 people about their experiences using the dating applications Tinder and Bumble.

The study finds that some of these people do not want to follow the usual rules for men and women. They want to be themselves and portray their true selves on their online profiles. However, in order to choose with whom to interact on Tinder and Bumble, they have to look for cues to guess the gender and the sexual orientation of other users. Yet, some of these guesses are not based on true facts and can be hurtful to some individuals, potentially making them feel disrespected and unwelcome.

Users also have to find ways to deal with the problems that come with the usual ideas about gender and liking only the opposite gender, in the context of online dating. The study finds that, despite all the challenges, these applications help these people find others who understand and accept them. They can be recognized and feel like they belong within a group of people who have similar experiences.

Table of contents :

1. **Introduction :**

1.1. Aims and research questions

Digital media plays a crucial role in providing resources for members of the LGBTQ+ community to connect with others, learn, support each other, and explore diverse genders and sexual identities (Robards, Byron, & D'Souza, 2021). Among the different types of digital media we can find online dating platforms, defined by McDonald and De Koning (2019) as "*a system where people can look for others and present themselves – over the Internet – to develop a personal, romantic, or sexual relationship*" (n.p.). Initially, these platforms were created as websites, but in the last decade, online dating applications have emerged that are accessible on smartphones or tablets, thus allowing the users to date online with a lot more mobility. This thesis analyzes dating mobile applications, and not dating websites, as I believe that the first ones are more widely used nowadays and more convenient. Mobile applications are also more engaging for their users, because of the "game-like" interface when swiping and matching. Swiping is understood as the action that users take, by physically dragging a profile on the left or the right of their phone screen, to accept or reject a potential interaction on a dating application. Users can either "swipe left" on a profile that does not interest them or "swipe right" on a profile that they like. If two users swipe right on each other it creates a "match" and they can now message each other privately.

This thesis uses both a sociologist and a gender studies perspective to explore the experiences, norms, presentation and perceptions of the self and others, in relation to mobile dating applications. From my readings of previous studies (Miller and Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Baudinette, 2019; Comunello, Parisi & Ieracitano, 2020; Casañ-Pitarch, 2020; Rovino, Jibrael, and Goswami (2020); Miller, Sbieraj, Humphreys, 2021), I noticed that the majority of the sociological analyses about dating applications have predominantly focussed on either heterosexual users or homosexual males users. Therefore, it is interesting to explore this topic in relation to other gender identities and sexual orientations. Consequently, I will look into the representations of queer women[1], and non-binary[2] people through their experiences using mainstream online dating applications. The intent is here to explore the heteronormativity of

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[1] Individuals that identify as women, even if that is not the sex that was attributed to them at birth, but that do not identify as heterosexual. However, in the sample of this study, all queer women participants are cisgender, which means they identify to the sex that was attributed to them at birth.

[2] Individuals that do not identify with a gender identity exclusively masculine or feminine. It is an umbrella term and it includes a wide range of gender identities that differ from the traditional binary perspective of gender.

dating applications, leading to the choice to not limit my research to applications specifically targeting the queer community.

In 2012, the mobile dating application Tinder was launched. It quickly became the most used dating application in the world. In 2020 there were 75 million active users on this app (*Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics*, 2021). In 2016, SurveyMonkey Intelligence revealed that 57% of them were men. A recent study done by Apptopia in February 2023 that was posted on the website *Business of Apps,* reveals that Tinder was the most downloaded dating application in 2022, followed by Bumble. This study helped me in my decision to choose these two mainstream dating applications. Bumble is a mobile dating application considered by its creator as a "feminist dating app" (VanityFair, 2015) and does not allow people who identify as men to send the first message to people who identify as women. It was released in 2014. In 2021 there were 40 million people using it monthly (Bumble, 2021): According to SurveyMonkey Intelligence (2016) 54% were men. This thesis draws on the premise that Tinder and Bumble, due to their affordances, interface, algorithm and settings, are dating applications predominantly designed for cisgender heterosexual users (Bivens and Hoque 2018; MacLeod and McArthur, 2018). However, these platforms are extensively used by members of the LGBTQ+ community.

I aim at analyzing and collecting data about the use, experiences and the interpretation of queer women and non binary people on Tinder and Bumble. I conducted a theory driven, qualitative and interpretive research. The target group of this study is queer women and non-binary people, using Tinder and/or Bumble and living in Skåne. My thesis is assessing the intersection of gender identity, sexual orientation and age. Analyzing this project through the lens of intersectionality helped me to critically reflect on my own assumptions as well as the suitability of the methods I chose (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

While Grindr is a very popular application among gay users, I believe there is no equivalent for the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. Some queer dating applications do exist, for instance Her, but they do not enjoy the same attention as Tinder and Bumble. Following the postulate, made by MacLeod and McArthur (2018), that the platforms Bumble and Tinder were built with a very binary perspective of gender and a heteronormative view of sexual identities, I argue that queer users, often perceived as the "others", have to create strategies and play with settings and queer references while creating their profile, to be able to use these dating applications in an enjoyable, meaningful and safe way. I intend to analyze how the unintelligibility of gender and sexual identities beyond cisgender and heterosexual can impact the experiences of queer women and non-binary individuals on dating applications. This

study also explores the ways in which these individuals can potentially resist these gender and sexual norms.

During the process of swiping queer users also have to look for implicit or explicit gender elements in other profiles (MacLeod & McArthur, 2018), as well as any indication of "queerness" among other users. This thesis intends to explore the understanding, perception and interpretation of displayed elements regarding gender and sexuality on online profiles, with a particular focus on the experiences of gender non-conforming and queer individuals. By examining the semiotic cues and symbols present in online profiles, this study seeks to uncover the diverse ways in which queer and non-binary users assume and comprehend gender and sexual identities. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender and sexuality within digital dating landscapes and underscores the need for inclusive and respectful online environments. My preliminary reflections on the topic, as well as my reading of the previous studies led me to the following research questions:

How do queer women and non-binary people experience gender norms and heteronormativity on Tinder and Bumble ?
How do queer women and non-binary users of mainstream heteronormative dating applications semiotically perceive and interpret gender and sexuality through online profiles ?

1.2. : Outline

I first present an overview of the existing literature on the topic of users' experiences on online dating platforms, their potential strategies to resist or reshape gender norms, and the use of semiotic approach to analyze identity presentations. Then, I present the methodological considerations and application. I explain the geographical context, the qualitative data collection and coding processes, as well as I introduce a reflection on my own positionality as a social researcher but also as a queer woman. This part is followed by ethical considerations about each of my qualitative methods, as well as the use of mock[3] accounts on online dating platforms. Next, I formulate a theoretical framework that is conceptualized around the combination of feminist theory, sociology and queer theory. Finally, I present the analysis of the findings. I first explored the affordances of Tinder and Bumble, through the walkthrough

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[3] A "mock account" or a "dummy account" are terms used here interchangeably to refer to a fictitious or pseudonymous account created by researchers for the purpose of studying online behavior or conducting online experiments.

method. Then I analyze the experience of queer women and non-binary individuals on heteronormative dating applications through their motivations, expectations, challenges and potential feelings of unsafety. Finally, I present a semiotic analysis of the perception and interpretation of gender and sexuality by my participants. This explores self-presentation, the importance of visual elements, the assumptions, the elements that are given meaning to, potential stereotypes, and the phenomenon of "queer vibes".

2. **Literature Review :**

2.1. Heterocentrism in previous research

Individuals' experiences on online dating applications are shaped by gender and sexuality norms, this is even more true for queer women and non-binary individuals. Writing about queer subjectivities in the context of online dating is important in order to challenge the heterocentrism that prevails in previous social science research. Existing research, such as the work of Lee (2019) about hookup culture on Tinder, often acknowledges the heteronormativity of dating platforms, but falls short in providing an in-depth analysis of gender or sexual identities beyond cisgender and heterosexual perspectives. Other studies like those conducted by Communello, Parisi, and Ieracitano (2020), Ricardo Casañ-Pitarch (2020), Rovino, Jibrael, and Goswami (2020), and Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) touch upon aspects of gender representation, stereotypes, emoji usage, social practices and gender performance on dating apps. However, they either focus primarily on heterosexual experiences or fail to consider diverse gender identities and sexualities that may influence how users present themselves on these platforms.

MacLeod and McArthur (2018) argued that the interfaces and settings of Tinder and Bumble force users to enter a heteronormative and cisnormative system. Their article ends with suggestions for future research, such as extending the analysis to look into the swiping process of the applications. By looking more specifically into how queer women and non-binary individuals utilize the affordances of such platforms in order to resist and reshape gender norms, this thesis attempts to bring a more intersectional perspective to the existing literature by bringing nuances of online dating experiences across diverse gender and sexual identities.

2.2. Exploring strategies to resist and reshape gender norms

This thesis aims to draw upon existing research and apply it specifically to the context of gender non-conforming and queer experiences on dating applications, with a focus on strategies for resistance and reshaping of gender norms. Bivens and Hoque (2018) argued that Bumble, despite being created as an feminist alternative of Tinder and as a tool to fight against sexism and misogyny in the online dating world, is excluding other female gender identity than cisgender women, while being built on the belief that masculinity associated with male body is an aggressive threat. However, it is important to note that their analysis is not based on users' personal experiences but rather on an examination of the application's structural aspects. Additionally, while Casañ-Pitarch (2020) explored the role of text descriptions and emoji usage in attracting users, the study did not encompass the entirety of users' experiences on dating apps, as it excluded the analysis of profile pictures. This thesis aims at promoting inclusivity, empowering marginalized communities and at challenging heteronormativity, by giving a voice to queer and non-binary subjectivities in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamic between gender, sexuality and mainstream online dating application.

While MacLeod and McArthur (2018) did not exhaustively describe how users resist heteronormativity that they are compelled to conform to on Tinder and Bumble, their observations of users finding ways to challenge these limitations still provide an important foundation for further exploration. On the other hand, Pond and Farvid (2017) claimed that women resist, challenge and reshape gender norms on Tinder by using the application as a versatile tool for fun, entertainment, to ease boredom and to explore their sexuality. This utilization stands in contrast to the common assumption of dating platforms as a place to look predominantly for casual sexual encounters and can be perceived as a form of resistance to traditional gender norms. This thesis seeks to engage with previous literature to explore the strategies employed by gender non-conforming and queer individuals to resist and reshape gender norms within the context of dating apps.

2.3. Queer self-presentation and interpretation of gender and sexuality, through a semiotic approach

Existing literature using in-depth interviews (Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2021; Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano, 2020; Pond and Farvid, 2017; Ferris and Duguay, 2020; Wolowic et al., 2016) underscores the significance of employing this method within the context of this thesis. The aim being to provide insights into experiences of queer subjectivities in their encounters with heteronormativity on dating applications. This thesis also intends to explore how queer and gender non-comforming users perceive and interpret gender and sexual identities on Tinder and Bumble. In light of these research objectives, and through the reading of previous research, the decision to adopt a semiotic approach became pertinent.

Pond and Farvid (2017) conducted an intersectional and inductive study focusing on young bisexual women's experiences using Tinder. Pond and Farvid (2017) claimed that queer women came up with strategies to be able to tell if another woman was heterosexual or not. However, these assumptions are based on stereotypes of what a queer woman is supposed to look like, and the authors argued that there is no obvious visually identifying code for bisexual women, which is marginalizing them even more from the queer dating life. Their findings shed light on implicit gender norms, heteronormativity, gendered power relations and biphobia on Tinder, and I believe that a semiotic approach would provide additional insights into the meaning of the data and could come to complete the thematic analysis they used. Through the reading of previous research I notice that semiotic approach could be used to explore the way in which participants understand symbols, signs and images present in the data, which prompt me to use this perspective in order explore how women and non-binary users of mainstream heteronormative dating applications could perceive and interpret gender and sexuality through online profiles.

McDonald and De Koning (2019) employed the walkthrough method, to observe the process of using Bumble and Tinder. If their research prompted a reflection around ethical considerations when using online dating platforms as data, it did not investigate the subjective user's practice of dating applications. In contrast, Latinsky (2012) focused on a content analysis of gay and lesbian online daters, examining self-described identities and desires for potential dates. These studies, alongside Smith's (2022) analysis of queer women's experiences on dating applications (through their motivations, habits, potential risks, and safety strategies) highlight the need for a semiotic approach to gain insights into the representation, reinforcement, and negotiation of gendered norms in online dating.

Furthermore, understanding how cues are interpreted by other users could help to identify potential risks and obstacles that queer women and non-binary people face when using dating applications. This thesis thus explores the interface, settings and affordances of Tinder and Bumble, while also analyzing the insight of the way queer and non-binary individuals actually perceive and understand cues, signs and symbols on other profiles.

Finally, Wolowic et al. (2016) used a semiotic approach to analyze the symbol of the rainbow flag and the meaning attributed to it by LGBTQ+ youth. However, this study is limited to the rainbow symbol and does not offer an in-depth understanding of the variety of cultural codes, cues, signs and symbols associated to queer identities. Using a similar approach, Shum (2014) conducted a netnography and an authoethnography, focusing solely on self-presentation and impressions formed through photographs, on a platform of online dating targeting Scandinavian gay men. The study specifically emphasizes the significance of visual cues while excluding analysis of other profile elements. This thesis draws upon these previous studies while extending the semiotic analysis to additional queer cultural codes, including the widgets and bio section of online dating profiles. Moreover, it examines the lived experiences of queer women and gender non-conforming individuals, providing a comprehensive exploration of their subjectivities.

3. **Methodology :**

3.1. Geographical delimitation and context

I decided to focus my study on the geographic area of Skåne. I found this area particularly relevant as, especially the cities of Malmö and Lund, are the place or residency of a lot of international students and workers, as well as a geographical site where the queer community is organizing regular events and creating space to discuss and debate. The Swedish context is also characterized by a high level of digitalization and the use of online dating is socially accepted and even normalized in recent years. In addition, Sweden has an international reputation of being an egalitarian country in terms of gender roles and opportunity, as well as a LGBTQ+ friendly country. However, because I want to adopt an intersectional approach, I did not limit my research to Swedish citizens only, nor did I have an age limit for my interviewees. This research does not intend to generalize the experiences of Skånian queer women and non-binary people on Tinder and Bumble. I am aware of the time limitation that

has to face this research. However, I believe that I have reached a point of saturation during the collection of my qualitative data. Which was facilitated by my decision to focus on the two most downloaded applications this last year. By saturation I understand reaching a point where I do not learn anything new from the interviews. While I acknowledge the potential for further exploration on this subject, the time constraints of this academic project have necessitated a focused data collection specifically centered around experiences, norms, self-presentation, and perceptions of gender and sexuality through social cues. My thesis does not encompass an analysis of the experiences, representations and norms specifically related to heterosexual individuals and homosexual men on online dating applications. In addition, as I do not speak Swedish, my interviews were conducted in English.

3.2. Data collection and sampling strategy

During the month of January 2023, I started to do a literature review on the topic of queer identities and online dating applications in order to familiarize myself with the concepts I found the most relevant for my analysis, as well as with the settings and affordances of Bumble and Tinder. I decided that I wanted to explore the heteronormativity of dating applications and that is why I did not choose online dating platforms that would be made exclusively for the queer community. I firstly did an interface analysis of the settings of Tinder and Bumble, in order to look at the options available to self presentation and identity expression during the creation of a profile, and the filters that can be used to sort out the profiles visible during the dating process. While I do not intend to directly compare Tinder and Bumble throughout my thesis, I will still consider their own specificities and how these can influence user's experiences and challenges.

In February 2023, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews about the uses of dating applications, with queer women and non binary people. I decided to choose interviews as one of my methods, because, as described by Mason (2017), it allowed me to focus on my participant's interpretations, perceptions and experiences. The semi-structured format enabled me to have face-face to face (and online) conversations that appeared less formal than a strict list of questions (Mason, 2017). This approach, in my opinion, created a more comfortable environment for participants to openly share their personal online dating experiences. I created an interview guide[4], in the format of a question list, in order to help my interviewees

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[4] See appendix 1 : Interview guide

to talk about the topic of my study. However, I stayed an active listener and open-minded throughout the whole interview process, while I tried to keep the discussion as open as possible and to distance myself from a structured format of interview. My sampling strategy was the snowball one (Mason, 2017). Indeed, I found respondents by using my own personal network, but also by publishing posts on Facebook groups of students in Lund and Malmö, of English speakers in Skåne and of queer women in Malmö.

At the end of 14 of these interviews (excluding the one that happened online for technical reasons), I asked the participants if they felt comfortable to use my dummy accounts to look at profiles shown to them. In the case where the participants were using both Bumble and Tinder we used the platform that they were using the most, otherwise it was by default Tinder. I replicated the setting filters that they use when they are looking from their own account, except that I excluded men's profiles from the research. I then asked them to freely verbalize any thoughts that came to their head while deciding if they will swipe right or left on a profile. I chose this method because it allowed me to have an insight of the way my participants actually perceive other profiles, how they identify if someone is queer and if what they told me during the interview is actually consistent with their behavior. I transcripted the screen videos recordings of the use of my mock accounts by the interviewees. I am aware that the transcripts might feel out of context without the visual of the profiles commented on, but I intend to do my best to contextualize them while protecting the privacy and anonymity of the users on the platforms. On average I asked my participant to comment on the first six profiles that were shown to them on my dummy accounts. It took them between four and ten minutes for them to talk about these profiles, with an average time of six minutes.

Concerning my sampling group, I interviewed nine cisgender women and six non-binary individuals, aged from 19 to 33 years old. Four people identify as lesbian, six as bisexual, three as queer and two as pansexual. My interviewees' nationalities are very diverse, with the majority coming from an European country. Three of them are from Sweden, two from Italy, and the rest of the participants were from Spain, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Finland, Canada, Ukraine, United States, India and Columbia. I had an equal proportion in the professional occupation as seven of my interviewees are students in Lund or Malmö and seven are working in Skåne. Only one participant is both working and studying. The interviews took place : in the city of Lund (2), inside Lund University (5), in the city of Malmö (5), at my own apartment in Malmö (2), and online through Zoom (1). All the participants of this study use or have used Tinder. Ten use of have used Bumble

(majoritarily among cisgender women), six use or have used queer dating applications (Her being the most popular one) and seven use of have used other dating applications (such as Okcupid, Hinge, etc.).

During March 2023, I coded my interviews, as well as my screen videos recordings of my participants' thoughts and perception of other profiles. I used the software Nvivo in order to create my codebook[5]. In addition, I used the walkthrough method, developed by Light, Burges and Duguay (2016) to analyze the application interface of Tinder and Bumble[6]. This method allows me to look into the "*technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences*" (n.p.). Light, Burges and Duguay (2016) recommended to engage actively with the interface of an application by observing and document thoroughly its every aspect, features, texts, images, affordances, cultural discourses, etc, in order to critically analyze it. To do so, I inspected each page and interface while taking screenshots and notes to collect data. I looked into the features, settings, images, texts, symbols, social-cultural representations, and icons. Using my mock accounts, I logged into each dating application and paid attention to any details in order to deepen my understanding of the way each platform was operating, the affordances and the experiences that could potentially emanate from their use. However, because my focus is about the personal experiences of queer users on dating applications, I did not look into the operating model, the economic interests, eventual fundings, the terms of service, the copyright license or any other related element. I also am aware that some functions are not accessible to me as I did not pay to unlock premium features.

After the collection of my data and the coding process, I started in April 2023 to write the findings part of this thesis. To analyze my qualitative data I used a literal, an interpretive and a reflexive reading, as described by Mason (2017). I first adopted a literal reading to focus on the words and the language used by my interviewees while talking about their experience as a queer people using dating applications. The interpretive reading then helped me to look at the respondents' interpretations and understandings, as well as mine. I looked at norms and types of discourse that emanate from the transcripts of the interviews as well as the comments made about other profiles. Finally, I conducted a reflexive reading in order to reflect on my interaction with participants and explore my role in the process of generation and interpretation of data. By conducting a reflexive reading, I was able to reflect on my own

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[5] See appendix 2 : Codebook of the interviews
[6] See appendices 4, 5 and 6.

biases and assumptions, as well as my positionality as a researcher, but also as a European white queer woman.

3.3. Positionality

I want to make sure that throughout this project I challenged my beliefs and what I think I already knew, before and during my research and writing process. Esteban (2001) argued that acknowledging our own positionality and experience can allow us to get a deeper understanding of the subjectivities and experiences of the individuals we are studying. As a queer woman using Tinder and Bumble myself for dating purposes, I knew I was going to be familiar with the elements of discourse of my interviewees as well as with some of the challenges they are facing. This could lead to bias of preconception that could unintentionally influence the interpretation of my data. Indeed, I am aware that I am not living outside of the gender norms that I am analyzing in my thesis, and thus my understanding and interpretation is also shaped by external social factors. However, I intend to counter this issue by reflecting on my initial assumptions, keeping an open-mind, using several methods and turning to peer review to seek different perspectives.

Haraway (1988) claimed that knowledge is always situated in a particular context and that personal experiences can lead to different understandings of the world. If traditional scientific approaches value objectivity and neutrality, Haraway (1988) argued that it may result in a limited and incomplete understanding of complex issues. Harding (1992) used the concept of "strong objectivity" to argue that objectivity in research is not possible to reach and that taking into account diverse perspectives is necessary to produce a more accurate and complete scientific knowledge. I am using a feminist approach in this thesis and believe in the importance of recognizing and representing different subjectivities and experiences, especially the one from marginalized and oppressed groups that are often excluded from traditional scientific research.

According to Bivens and Hoque (2018), aggressive, hypersexualized messages and unsolicited, explicit pictures are a common experience on online dating applications, however these experiences are not distributed equally among the population. These are touching particularly female presenting, gender non-comforming, racialized and younger individuals. Bivens and Hoque (2018) added that the way the platforms were programmed and designed was reinforcing these inequalities. However, identities are not one-dimensioned and need to

be analyzed together, as defined by Crenshaw (1989) through the concept of intersectionality. Indeed, each individual is situated at the intersection of sociological, economical, geographical and political factors that shape their experiences, beliefs, and identities. Crenshaw (2016) added that many of our social justice problems are often overlapping and creating multiple levels of social injustice. In our case, without adopting an intersectional approach, it is impossible to see how heteronormativity affects all the different queer women and non-binary individuals and can lead to the invisibilization and exclusion of a subcategory or this social group. Therefore, I intend to conduct an intersectional analysis as well as to reflect in the conclusion on the limitation of my research in terms of lack of representation of certain subjectivities and the potential impact this could have on my study.

4. <u>Ethical considerations :</u>

This project generated a lot of personal reflections around ethical consideration and more precisely the use of online public profiles for my research. The emergence of the Web in these last decades raised a new number of ethical challenges, and if guidelines exist, there is little consensus, especially about using data found in public online spaces (Sugiura, Wiles and Pope, 2017). I drew upon the reflection of McDonald and De Koning (2019) about the use of mock accounts in scientific research as an inspiration to consider ethical methods when studying online dating platforms. Indeed, when creating mock accounts on Tinder and Bumble I wrote clearly in the description of my profile that I was a last year Master student in Gender Studies looking for interviewees, accompanied by a short description of the aim of my thesis. However, I am aware that this does not represent an informed consent from the owners of the profiles I took into account in my study, and that being shown an account by the platform does not mean that the other user reciprocally saw mine. I first intended to find some of my participants through the use of my dummy accounts. This strategy did not work and I did not find any of my interviewees directly from Tinder or Bumble. I would argue that this could be explained by two factors. The first one was that there is a need to "match" with a person in order to be able to interact with them through a private message box. However, I was not swiping right on any profile, which made it impossible for other users to start an online conversation with me. The second factor was that my presence on the platforms as a social sciences researcher was not expected and could potentially be intimidating and disturb

other users. According to McDonald and De Koning (2019) it is sensitive to use a mock account on dating applications as regular users are here to meet genuine individuals to eventually start a romantic relationship with. Furthermore, Sugiura, Wiles and Pope (2017) reflected on how researchers were sometimes obfuscating the demarcation between what is private and what is public. They used the example of a public forum where, by indicating their presence to online members, it caused the users to feel like the researchers were invading a private space.

In the case of online dating applications, if the users are aware that their profile is going to be viewed by strangers, they probably do not expect them to be social scientists, nor to be used as data in a study. Sugiura, Wiles and Pope (2017) argued that ensuring complete anonymity may be hard to achieve, but it is important to not use any private data that could lead to make the individuals identifiable. Therefore, when looking at the profiles of queer women and non binary people on Tinder and Bumble, I did not swipe right on them, nor did I use private or sensitive information such as the one found in their other social media accounts that could be linked to their profile (for instance Facebook, Instagram or Spotify), their name, their profession, IP addresses, etc. This way I based my research only on representations flowing out from general elements present on online profiles.

The data of the interviews, as well as the screen recording are kept confidential. The data will safely be stored in an encrypted folder until 2 months after the thesis has been published when it will be deleted. I also removed identifying information from all my interviewees. Indeed, all the names have been replaced with ones chosen by the participants. I believe that a name is a crucial part of someone's identity and this decision allowed my participant to play a role in their own representation in my thesis. I asked for written consent from people participating in my interviews. According to Israel (2015), consent should not be given only at the beginning of the study but should be dynamic and continuous. Thus, I made sure that the respondents are aware that they can withdraw their consent within a month. In addition, I also made sure that they all had a way to contact me in case they had questions, reservations or additional elements to share.

Concerning the online profiles that we comment upon during the use of my mock accounts with my interviewees, I firstly made sure to limit my interaction with the users of Tinder and Bumble and to not use any of the sensitive information present on their profile in my thesis. I reflected on the dilemma of providing enough information on the profiles viewed in order for the readers to be given enough context to understand the quotes or examples, while still ensuring the anonymity of the profile's owner. I decided to emphasize the way the

picture was taken (angle, spatial position) as well as the cues, symbols, and signs present on them. That way the semiotic analysis approach of this study could still be relevant and explained, while the anonymity and privacy of Tinder and Bumble's user could be preserved.

5. **Theoretical frame :**

5.1. Heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity

To answer the research questions, this thesis will adopt a feminist and queer theory framework. The concept of heterosexual matrix, introduced by Judith Butler in 1990, will help to understand how the social and cultural norms shape the individuals' experiences on online dating applications. The heterosexual matrix is described by Butler (1990) as an invisible norm that is perceived as natural and that presumes that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation. This also comes to reinforce binary gender roles and gender norms that people are expected to respect depending on their gender. For Butler (1990), gender is the consequence of gender norms and differs according to the cultural framework and the historical context.

Butler (1990) argued that gender is socially constructed and performative. It is created by the repetition of our bodily practices as well as discursive practices. Performativity is a concept that can be used to explore gender identities and their representation through online dating. For instance, Rovino, Jibrael and Goswami (2020) explored how Tinder users are performing their gender through their profile pictures and what they chose to portray. However, it is rarely explored in relation to other genders outside of the binary man/woman. Finlay (2017) drew on the work of Butler to apply the concept of performativity to individuals situated outside of the gender binary. Finlay (2017) used the concept of tolerance to explain that queer individuals are qualified as intelligible only if their gender is fitting the discursive norms of the heterosexual matrix. If they do not then they will be punished through violence. The performativity of queer and trans identities offer opportunities for contestations and possible subvertisement of power relations and gives the queer community agency to challenge the heteronormative intelligibility (Finlay, 2017). Finlay (2017) argued that agency and subjectivity are not entirely determined by discourse, contrary to the way Butler described it. Finlay (2017) advocated that queer theory should not continue to adhere to a vision of gender represented through the heterosexual matrix and that queer individuals

should use self determination when it comes to their gender identities in order to subvert the notion of gender identity. This concept will then be used to explore the heteronormative bias in the settings and algorithms that can hinder the safeness and pleasurability of the experience of queer women and non-binary individuals on Tinder and Bumble.

The concept of heteronormativity, first introduced by Warner (1999), is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual if their sexual orientation is unknown. It can be seen as a consequence of the heterosexual matrix as it is the consequence of the normalization and naturalization of gender norms and of heterosexuality being seen as the only intelligible sexual orientation. However heteronormativity leads to perceiving other sexualities as a deviance but also to invisibilize marginalized communities. Other identities are erased or ignored if they fail to conform to the norms. MacLeod and McArthur (2018) use Butler's work on the concept of heteronormativity (1990) to argue that the interfaces and settings of Tinder and Bumble force the user to enter a very rigid binary and heteronormative system. MacLeod and McArthur (2018) denounce the fact that there is not any technological or informatic justification to explain the cisnormativity and the heteronormativity of dating platforms. These are indeed choices made by the designers and programmers to comply with hegemonic and normalized beliefs about gender and sexuality. This thesis intends to understand how queer women and non-binary individuals experience this heteronormativity in their úse of online dating applications reinforcing the heterosexual matrix.

5.2. (Online) Othering

Lumsden and Harmer (2019) have developed the concept "Online Othering", to encompass all the abusive behaviors and discourses that occur in online spaces, including various forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. Lumsden and Harmer (2019) showed that the way social media and online spaces are used generates the emergence of new identities, while also allowing the "othered" group to use their agency to attempt to resist this practice and thus empower themselves. Online othering is a concept closely related to power dynamics, agency and resistance, which together shape the rules and the norms of which individuals or groups are considered legitimate participants in virtual spaces and which ones are not (Lumsden and Harmer, 2019).

According to Lumsden and Harmer (2019), the online space is not completely separate from the offline life as it is reproducing the same inequalities that individuals are experiencíng in the offline world. This study will use the concept of online othering to

analyze the experiences of queer women and non-binary individuals on heteronormative dating application, related to homophobia, sexism, sexual harassment, sexualization and exclusion. Certain gender and sexual identities can suffer from oppression in the offline world, and that is also the case in online spaces, especially when they represent the minority of users or when the space is not made for them in the first place. In the case of Bumble and Tinder, I would argue that these platforms are made mostly for cisgender heterosexual users, and thus can lead queer and non gender conforming users to feel excluded, uncomfortable, or even to have to face threat and violences. Lumsden and Harmer (2019) use the work of Schwalbe et al. (2000) to claim that the concept of othering creates a separation between different groups of individuals where one of them is going to be the dominant group and will perceive the other group as "inferior". According to Lumsden and Harmer (2019), by doing so, the dominant group is silencing the "others". Queer women or queer non-binary individuals sufferer from a double discrimination as they are perceived as "other" in relation to their gender, because not seen as cisgender man, which is the reference, the universal (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), but also because not considered as heterosexual, which will be seen as the norms, the preferred sexual orientation.

Butler (2004) depicted how some humans are recognized as less than human or not human at all. I believe that, following their argument, social groups that are being "othered" can also be lacking human recognition. According to Butler (2004), some lives are seen as "livable" and others as "grievable". Butler (2004) used the concept of recognition, defined as the desire to be "*constituted as a socially viable subject in accordance with the established norms of intelligibility*" (Finlay, 2017, p.3), to explain how the norms of recognition impact our individuality and make a life viable as human beings. Following Butler's (2004) view, gender is not imposed on us by regulatory institutions but is itself a regulatory mechanism. If an individual goes against the norms of gender binarity they are taking the risk to not be culturally intelligible and thus to be punished with violence by other individuals or institutions. This thesis aims to explore the relation between a gender non-comforming individual or a queer woman and the gender norms bais on heteronormative dating platforms, for instance in the lack of gender options available. I argue that because Tinder and Bumble are designed and programmed for a cisgender and heterosexual public, the LGBTQ+ community could be "othered" and thus feel excluded, fetishized or even threatened.

5.3. Gender norms and stereotypes

Gender norms can be defined as the societal expectations about how an individual should behave, look, and what they should be interested in, based on their gender identity. Butler (1990) argues that gender norms are a way of maintaining social control, but that they hinder individual's agency, as some attitudes are prescribed and some are restricted. Moreover, gender norms are a social construct and vary across cultures and time.

Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano (2020) showed that gender roles and stereotypes are often reproduced in online dating. For example, they stated that gender norms usually assign men to initiate conversation, with a high interest in a potential sexual relationship, while women are assigned to a reactive role and value emotions over sexuality. This argument is similar to the one of Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021). They used the social role theory to analyze gender-normative behavior in relation to the use of dating applications. They argued that women are seen in heteronormative scripts as submissive while men are seen as assertive and active. However, these analyses are based on data collected through interviews with heterosexual users only, and I would argue that the view of Pond and Farvid (2017), and their work with bisexual women, is bringing more nuances, as well as a queer perspective on the gender norms and stereotypes. Indeed, Pond and Farvid (2017) conducted interviews with bisexuals women in New Zealand. They noticed the presence of heteronormativity, biphobia and gendered power relations on Tinder and described how it was shaping the experience of bisexual women on Tinder. They argued that, even if gender norms were visible and were regulating the use and interaction of online dating, women's experiences on Tinder were more complex than just being considered as passive and responsive users. Pond and Farvid (2017) claimed that women resist, challenge and reshape gender norms on Tinder by using the platform for amusement, to fight off boredom and to explore their sexuality and sexual interests.

I am interested in how queer women, and also non-binary individuals, attempt to resist gender norms, and eventually try to reshape them. It is worth noting that gender norms can be based on, or perpetuate stereotypes. Lumsden and Harmer (2019) defined stereotypes as "*cultural processes, practices and understandings which create meaning*" (p.18). For this thesis stereotypes are understood as rooted in ideological beliefs, bias and values and as ordering the social world by imposing (mostly pejorative) characteristics upon people, based on certain specific social characteristics or identity markers. Lumsden and Harmer (2019) explained how stereotypes were reinforcing the concept of othering. Indeed, stereotypes are

also used as a way to categorize different individuals or social groups. Stereotypes can lead to discrimination and exclusion from the dating pool, but also create bias in the way a dating application is designed or in its algorithm. Thus, it can impact the experiences of queer women and non-binary individuals on heteronormative platforms.

5.4. Cultural codes

According to Ferris and Duguay (2020), lesbian women develop strategies to semiotically analyze a profile to determine the gender identity and the sexual orientation of the person. The absence of stable queer references (for instance masculine clothing, pronouns or rainbow emoji) bring one's sexuality to be questioned (Ferris and Duguay, 2020). But as Pond and Farvid (2017) mentioned, it is even harder, or even impossible, for individuals to be intelligible if their sexual or gender identity does not have a steady visual code, as it can be the case for instance for bisexual women. These visual codes can be referred to as cultural codes. For this thesis I understand cultural codes as a shared meaning and values that exist within a group, culture or (imagined) community. These codes are shaping the way that signs, cues and symbols are perceived, interpreted, and used by a particular community in a given context (Cobley and Schulz, 2019). These codes can be for instance shared assumptions, expectations, beliefs or stereotypes.

Through my reading of Heiskala (2021) and Shum (2014), I came across the work of the semiotician Saussure (1966) and its concepts of "signifier" and "signified" that are closely linked to the concept of sign. The signifier is the sign itself, as one can see or hear it. While the signified is the meaning one gives to the physical form of the sign, the concept that the sign represents. These concepts will be useful in understanding how queer women and non-binary individuals semiotically perceive and interpret gender and sexuality through the viewing of online dating profiles. The signifier refers to visual cues such as the clothing, hair, and facial expression that could be used to represent gender and sexuality. While the signified refers to meaning that will be attributed to these visual cues by my participants, as well as possible assumptions and stereotypes linked to gender and sexuality. Shum (2014) and Rovino, Jibrael and Goswami (2020) used a semiotic approach to look into self-presentation and performativity in online dating. However, I will use their approach and apply it to a wider range of gender and sexual identities. The concept of cultural codes and the semiotic approach will be a tool in this thesis to understand how queer women and non-binary

individuals perceive and interpret gender identity and sexual orientation through the visualization of signs and symbols.

5.5. Digital Imaginaries and imagined community

Ferris and Duguay (2020) use the concept of "digital imaginaries" to speak about the interaction between cultural elements or symbols and technological infrastructures. This interaction creates regular practices that will resonate with an imagined community, in this case online. They used Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined community" that they defined as "*individuals who may never meet in person but who are thought to possess a shared commonality*" (p.5). Ferris and Duguay (2020) used the concept of digital imaginaries as a tool to analyze the online dating practices of women seeking women on Tinder. They identified what they called the "Tinder's lesbian digital imaginary" and showed that this space was easily permeated, for instance by heterosexual women, male presenting individuals, and straight couples looking for a third person for sexual activities.

Digital media can provide online platforms for people to connect with other individuals sharing similar interests, beliefs, values, identities, and experiences. The physical distance is not a limit anymore to interact and communicate on a regular and instantaneous basis. This can facilitate the formation of new identities, support between peers and sharing of knowledge. I believe that the presence of the LGBTQ+ community on heteronormative spaces can be invisibilized, but is always a social reality. Queer subjectivities always have to navigate in heteronormative spaces and comply with the pressure of gender and sexual norms. This is why this thesis is particularly relevant as it aims to recognize and give visibility to other gender identities and sexual orientation than the traditional normatives ones. By focusing on their experiences, perceptions and interpretations.

5.6. Affordances

MacLeod and McArthur (2018) defined affordances as signs and indications given by an object and suggesting its function as well as the way it operates. In the perspectives of this thesis, the affordances of Tinder and Bumble will be considered as their settings, functions, constraints, design, and the way users interact, use and create strategies in relation to these elements. Through the concept of affordances, Mac Leod and McArthur (2018) found that these dating applications construct gender not as an identity but rather as a rigid category that

is built to help the matching process with other users. The affordances are modeling the identity of their users, as well as how users will interact with and on online dating platforms. Users are constrained to present themselves by complying to the technological and social limits prescribed by the settings and widgets of the applications. This will have a bigger impact on gender-non conforming individuals as well as non-heterosexual individuals. It also hinders their agency to present themselves in a way that would accurately reflect their identities. The concept of affordances can therefore be a useful tool to analyze how gender and sexuality are constructed on Tinder and Bumble, and how their norms are negotiated by their users in these online dating spaces.

6. <u>Analysis and interpretations of the results :</u>

This analysis is structured in three sections, providing an in-depth exploration of how queer women and non-binary people experience gender norms and heteronormativity on Tinder and Bumble and how they perceive and interpret gender and sexuality through online profiles. The first section of this thesis examines the affordances of Tinder and Bumble through the use of the walkthrough method, to see how the specific features can shape user's experiences. Then, the second section focuses on the lived experiences of queer women and gender non-comforming individuals, in relation to their gender and sexual identity. Key areas of exploration include the reasons to use dating applications, the underlying assumptions associated with this practice, as well as the challenges and vulnerable experiences that these users encounter in the context of online dating. Lastly, the third section adopts a semiotic approach to look into self presentation and self perception within the creation of online profiles, with a specific focus on the visual dominance on Tinder and Bumble. This analysis also explores the understanding and interpretation of cues, signs and symbols associated with queer identity and the meaning given by the LGBTQ+ community to the terms "queerness" and "vibes" and their significance in shaping user experiences and identity.

6.1. Exploring affordances and features of Tinder and Bumble: A walkthrough

6.1.1. Affordances of Tinder and Bumble

Tinder and Bumble share a lot of common affordances, as both are dating applications developed in the 2010s for a majoritarily cisgender and heterosexual audience. I identified

seven main affordances[7] that I believe would help me to reach a better understanding of queer women's and non-binary individuals' experiences, as well as being a useful tool to guide my analysis :

- *Display of information* : Users can post on their profile a maximum of 9 pictures on Tinder and 6 on Bumble. They can choose to write a description or use emojis in a textual section, commonly called "bio", that will be displayed under the pictures on Tinder (with a maximum of 500 characters), and between pictures (vertically) on Bumble (with a limit of 300 characters). A constraint could be the visual dominance and the focus on appearance of such applications.

- *Swiping and Matching* (as defined in the introduction)

- *Users Upgrades* : Both Tinder and Bumble have in-app purchases that the users are encouraged to pay for in order to unlock more features.

- *Safety* : To create an account on Bumble or Tinder one's need to use either their own Facebook account or a personal mobile number. Users can unmatch, or even report or block other users if they feel that their behavior is inappropriate or that they feel in danger. On Tinder, users have the possibility to automatically have the users from their phone contact list to be blocked. Which is useful for instance if one does not want some sensitive information (such as gender and sexual orientation) displayed on their profile to be shown to friends or family, but to do so they have to allow the application to have access to their contact list.

- *Geolocation* : One's geolocation needs to be activated on their mobile phone in order to use both Tinder and Bumble. One can then decide the distance range in which they want the profile shown to them to be. This enhances a proximity between the users. The maximum distance is 161 km on both platforms.

- *Communication* : Both platforms allow users that match to interact through an online private chat box. There is also indirect communication in the way one chooses to self-present through their profile, and some users even try to write in their description some conversation starters to invite other users to send the first message.

- *Visibility* : Each profile is visible for any other user when shown to them or shared by someone else (with a share button on Tinder, or simply with screenshots), unless they pay to unlock the feature allowing them to be "incognito" on the platform. They can also purchase options to gain more visibility and thus more potential matches. If

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[7] See appendix 6 : Affordances

Tinder allows a user to create a profile without showing their face and thus stay relatively anonymous, Bumble on the other hand requires the face to be clearly visible. This can be a challenge for users in the way they self-present and perceive other's gender or sexual identities.

- *Authenticity* : The multiplatform and multimediality allow users to share more aspects of their life and personality and thus to appear more authentic. Indeed, if a user does not take the time to put any information on their profile they are often perceived as lazy, unserious or unauthentic by other users.

If Tinder and Bumble, as well as the rest of the online dating applications available on the market, share a lot of affordances and features, they still have some specificities that could impact the experience of their users.

6.1.2. Walkthrough of Tinder and Bumble

Tinder was created in 2012 by the American entrepreneur Sean Rad. Bumble was created in 2014 by the American entrepreneur Whitney Wolfe Herd, who was previously part of the team of developers for Tinder. She left the company nine months before the creation of Bumble and filled a lawsuit against Tinder for sexual harassment (Vanity Fair, 2015). She then decided to create a new dating application that would be female-focussed and would fight against heteronormativity, sexism, and gender norms in the online dating world (Vanity Fair, 2015). This application has three different modes and can be used to find romantic or sexual partners with "Bumble Date", friends with "Bumble BFF" and even career opportunities with "Bumble Bizz". Each profile on the three of these modes is independent from the others. However, for the purpose of my thesis I focussed on "Bumble Date" only. By using the walkthrough method, I conducted an examination of the general features and settings of Tinder and Bumble, and I have outlined in more detail in the appendices n.4 and n.5.

On Tinder, users can pick their gender identity by selecting one option from three predefined categories : "man", "woman", or "more". When clicking on "more", users can freely input their preferred self-description in a dedicated search bar. They can also decide if they want their gender to be shown on their profile or not. Tinder's users can select their gender orientation between the following options: "straight", "gay", "lesbian", "bisexual", "asexual", "demisexual", "pansexual", "Queer" or "Questioning". They can select up to 3 of them and decide if they want their sexual orientation to be displayed on their profile. Users

can decide at any moment to modify their gender identity or their sexual orientation in the settings without any direct technical consequences. However, the appearance of other gender identities on Tinder is quite recent as it was developed between 2016 and 2020 depending on the country of use (Tinder, 2016). During the dating process on Tinder, one can decide the gender of the profile that will be shown to them. They have the choice between "men", "women" or "everyone". However, I would argue that these options reproduce gender binary dynamics and lead to the exclusion of some gender non-comforming users that have to be part of the "men" or "women" category if they want to benefit from the same visibility as a cisgender user. This leads some individuals to be "othered" by the algorithm and some users of the platform, as I will explain it more in depth throughout our analysis. One can also decide if they want to see people of the same sexual orientation first, which I argue could contribute to the risk of exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community.

On Bumble one can pick their gender identity between "woman", "man" or "non binary". When choosing the option "woman" or "man", one can click on "add more about your gender" and add one of the following options: "intersex woman/man", "trans woman/man", "transfeminine/masculine", "woman/man and nonbinary", "cis woman/man". One can also click on the following link : "tell us if we're missing something and be able to write a gender that is not included to suggest to them to add it". When selecting "non-binary" one can add more precision to it by picking an option among the following list : "agender", "bigender", "genderqueer", "gender nonconforming", "gender questioning", "gender variant", "intersex", "neutrois", "non binary man", "non binary woman", "pangender", "polygender", "transgender", "two-spirit", or to request Bumble to add another term. However, there is no option to choose a sexual orientation label to identify and self-present as on Bumble. When looking for other profiles, one can tick "I'm open to dating everyone", or choose between "men", "women" and/or "nonbinary people". A user can only change their gender identity once on Bumble, but when they do they will lose all their matches. One can also decide if they want their gender identity to be visible on their profile and also if they want to be shown to people looking for men or for women, which forces non binary individuals to adhere to one of the two binary categories of gender and thus seem to contradict the purpose of letting users identify as "non binary".

Bumble's main specificity is that in the case of a match between a man and a woman, only the woman can initiate the conversation. In any situation, the first message needs to be sent in a time limit of 24 hours, and then answered in another time limit of 24 hours otherwise the match will be canceled. However, in the case of a same gender match, or of a

match with at least one non-binary individual, anyone can send the first message. It has changed as in one of the previous versions of the application, non-binary users were not able to message women first when matching with them (Iovine, 2022). It shows how queer people, and especially non-binary individuals are "othered" from the concept of this dating application, as they still have to follow a heteronormative system and do not benefit from the same features as cisgender straight users.

To conclude this section, Tinder and Bumble's common affordances have an impact on the practices and experiences of queer women and non-binary individuals using such platforms. By forcing non-binary users to comply with a strict binary system, or by making the experience significantly different for women depending on their sexuality, both platforms are reinforcing the belief of cisgender and heterosexuality as being the only right identities. This thesis will analyze how queer women and non-binary individuals actually experience such dynamics and how it can shape their expectations, dating process and their safety.

6.2. Queer and non-binary experiences on mobile dating applications

6.2.1. Initial reasons of the use of dating applications

All the participants in this research use Tinder, and ten of them have used Bumble in the past or are still actively using it. Julia (26) justified her choice of not using an LGBTQ+ dating application by saying :

> "*I think it's better to be going to where most people are and that these apps, Tinder and Bumble, can be made for the LGBT community in the way that we can still search for the same sex. I'm going to go where the majority of people are*".

This can illustrate the fact that queer women and non-binary individuals sometimes feel as if they have no choice but to comply with the heteronormative matrix and heteronormative spaces. Throughout this analysis, I will show how, despite their gender and sexual identities differing from traditional norms, participants navigate the settings and the swiping affordance of these applications in order to make the best use of them. Additionally, six of my participants also regularly use LGBTQ+ specific dating applications such as Her, which they perceive as providing a safer and more inclusive space given that users there identify with a variety of genders and sexualities. Another reason given by Charlie (26), one of the participants, is that HER "*it's not as much as a hookup app*". Thus, LGBTQ+ dating platforms are perceived as allowing their users to be more open about their gender and sexual

orientation, with deemphasizing the focus on casual sex encounters and sexualization, which could be the case on Tinder and Bumble.

When asking why they decided to download and use a mobile dating application, my interviewees explained their wish to expand their social circle and meet people that will share their interests. Some of my interviewees also describe themselves as shy or introverted and argue that using Tinder or Bumble helped them to meet people, by allowing them to have the first contact through text messages, which seem less intimidating. Three of the participants describe using dating applications as a "fun" experience, and two explain that it is useful to meet people when traveling or moving to a new city or country. Curiosity also played a role for ten of my interviewees that told me not to be looking for anything specific. The majority of my participants engage with dating platforms for dating or casual encounters, while three of them also hope to develop friendships. Most participants experienced fluctuations in their applications usage, sometimes using them daily and then taking breaks or deleting the applications altogether. These patterns often coincided with major life changes or the beginning or end of a relationship. Overall, my participants described their use as "ups and downs" or "going back and forth".

6.2.2 Expected and actual impact of dating application on social and dating life

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of my participants on Tinder and Bumble I believed it was important to examine their initial assumptions and expectations about these platforms, as well as the impact that mobile online dating had on their social and dating life. Overall, the expectations about using Tinder and Bumble were diverse, subjectives and sometimes even contradictory. For instance, one participant expected people to take the dating process and the profile creation more seriously, while another one assumed that users would have taken less time and effort in the written description of their profile. Gender preconceptions also emerged, with for instance, Blue (22) sharing during our interview that :

> "*I feel like hetero men, they basically use [dating applications] to have either a one night stand or just have sex with someone. I guess that's basically… And their approach is always pretty shitty I would say. I'm only talking about the basic white hetero guy. But there are also some other of course exceptions. While girls, they're expected to look… To come out either super hot or be the funny girl [...]*".

I believe that this feeling, shared by other participants of this study, is rooted in gender stereotypes that emerged from gender norms. Several bisexual and pansexual participants reported their reticence to present themselves as too sexy by fear of being sexualized by men, and of risking to receive unsolicited, violent or inappropriate messages from them. This seems to follow the concept of gender norms scripts as explained by Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano (2020) where men tend to initiate conversation on online dating looking for an eventual sexual relationship, while women are seen as more passive and valuing emotions over sexuality. However, throughout this analysis, the study explores how queer women attempt to challenge these gender norms to emancipate themselves from the heterosexual matrix.

During my interviews, I asked the participants what would change in their social and dating life if all the dating websites and mobile applications were to disappear forever. The answers I got were either about relief or anxiety. The most common reactions were that it would incite people to go out of their comfort zone in the offline world and be more open to interact with people outside of their social circle. However, several of my participants found this perspective slightly scary. Most of my interviewees deplored the lack of queer spaces in the offline world and denounced the regular closure of queer bars or meeting places, which makes it harder to meet people among the LGBTQ+ community without using dating applications. This is especially harder for queer people of color, older queer individuals, queer individuals living outside of big cities or their peripheries, etc. This is why online dating can be an important space for the LGBTQ+ community, as it offers the possibility to connect with individuals that share the same issues, gender identities or sexualities. It creates an imagined online community, as these individuals never met in person (at the time of the online interaction), but still share some common features and experiences. From this imagined online community will emanate online regular practices linked to, in our case, the affordances of dating applications. Ferris and Duguay (2020) identified what they call the "Tinder's lesbian digital imaginary". I would argue that this can also apply to other mainstream heteronormative dating applications such as Bumble and can also be generalized more broadly as "queer dating app digital imaginary". This can be perceived as a safe place for members of the LGBTQ+ community on dating applications, free for heteronormativity, transphobia, homophobia, and misogynie. However, this study also acknowledges that this space is easily permeated by outsiders with unclear intentions.

In addition, the majority of my participants noted how it would make it harder for the queer community in particular to date, if dating applications disappeared, as it would be

harder to identify the sexual orientation of someone without the cues and information given on dating profiles. Julia (26) told me about this issue during our interview :

> *"I guess it would change my ability to meet queer people. Because when you're out in the world, you kind of still have this feeling everyone is straight until you learn otherwise. That's how it works. And it's super weird to walk up to someone and ask, "are you gay?" "Are you queer?" "Are you bi?" "Do you like girls?""*.

Her description of the difficulty to identify people from the LGBTQ+ community in the offline world can be explained by Butler's (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix. Indeed, in our society, it is common to assume that a person whose sexuality or gender is unknown is heterosexual and cisgender. However, from this research as well as my own experience, I found that members of the LGBTQ+ community often try to distance themselves from this social norm by for instance using gender neutral pronouns such as "they/them" to talk about individuals whose sexual identity is not intelligible or publicly known. To illustrate this argument I can use Blue's (22) explanations :

> *"I also hate assuming stuff about other people. Right? So basically I start with the plain plate. I don't know, I assume everyone is like non binary or I refer to everyone as they/them. And then when I know the pronouns, I will use them. Or like I assume everyone is like bisexual [laugh]"*.

Ferris and Duguay (2020) found that lesbian women developed strategies in the dating context to determine the gender identity and sexuality of other women through the analysis of certain cues. However, I argue that certain queer individuals developed strategies to not have to assume other individuals' gender or sexuality. This can be seen as resistance toward the heterosexual matrix, as well as an attempt to reshape norms and normalize the unintelligibility of certain gender identities and sexualities.

6.2.3. Hindered queer and non-binary experiences on Tinder and Bumble

If the main specificity of Bumble, which is men not being able to send the first message to women, does not apply to queer women or non-binary individuals seeking women, there still is a time limit of 24 hours for all users, to send and reply to the first message. However, the othering and exclusion of non-binary and queer women from the feature that obliges women to send the first message to men, came out as a major flaw of this platform during the interviews :

"Well, of course [if you are non-binary] they [Bumble] don't consider you as a woman. I think it's only cis women who can send the first message. I was like, I'm so confused about what it is for, what's the goal of this?" (Léo, 19).

I argue that this can be qualified as "online othering", as described by Lumsden and Harmer (2019). They used the work of other scholars such as Fraser (1990), to state that the virtual sphere is not a neutral environment and that it mirrors the social inequalities that are experienced by individuals in the physical world, in this case the exclusion and marginalization of the sexual and gender minorities. According to Bivens and Hoque (2018), one of the issues with Bumble is its heteronormativity. Bumble and Tinder's features, default settings and affordances are based on a cisnormative and heteronormative system, where the platforms will automatically assume that one's gender is the same as it is on another platform linked (for instance on Facebook, where it could be harder to be out due to the proximity with family and coworkers), that gender and sexuality are fixed and stable, and that a user will be attracted by users of the opposite gender only.

Bivens and Hoque (2018) criticized the lack of distinctions between different sexualities and ways of performing among one gender. For instance there is no differentiation between femme[8], masc[9], or dyke[10] lesbians. Bivens and Hoque (2018) suggested an alternative approach to Bumble where the platform would *"force femme lesbians to initiate conversations just as straight women are forced to with the "ladies talk first" feature"* (p.451-452). However, I believe that if this approach could potentially address the issue of the exclusion of certain gender and sexual minority groups, it may not be an effective way to resist gender norms. Forcing femme lesbian to act like straight women on the platform, because of "feminine" traits and attributes, will perpetuate and reinforce gender norms and homophobia, where more masculine lesbian are perceived as the "man" in lesbian relationships. My suggestion to include non-binary individuals and queer women to Bumble's online dating specificity would be to randomize it. For instance, after a match between non-binary or queer individuals, one user is assigned randomly the role of being the initiator of the conversation. However, I am aware that the algorithms used by such platforms can have heteronormative, racist, sexist, and other biases, but I believe these could be mitigated by adding more gender, racial, sexual and age diversity among their programmers.

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[8] A "femme" lesbian typically refers to a lesbian who presents in a more traditionally feminine or stereotypically feminine way.

[9] A "masc" lesbian refers to a lesbian who presents in a more traditionally masculine or stereotypically masculine way.

[10] "Dyke" is a slang term, initially coming from an homophobic slur, but that was reappropriated by women to express their identity as lesbian who present masculine or androgynous.

Tinder is described by my participants as an easy-to-use platform with a lot of different options, which facilitate the dating and swiping process. However, because all my participants are using this platform, they also had a lot to say about its downsides and the challenges they encountered while using it. Tinder's algorithm regularly shows profiles of cisgender men to users only seeking women. If some participants, for instance Julia (26), described it as a "*lag*" from the platform, other users see it as a deliberate attempt from cisgender heterosexual men to permeate the "queer dating app digital imaginary" and sexualize queer or gender non-conforming individuals. Most of the interviewees also denounced the fact that when looking for "everyone" on Tinder, most of the profiles shown are profiles of men, even if the person looking for is mostly attracted to women and thus more often swiping right on them. Léo (19) felt that "*it's true that when you look for both or, like, all genders, it shows, like, 95% of men. That's true. And very much not queer men*".

Another issue with heteronormative dating application's algorithms is that some of the women shown to non-men users seeking women appeared to be heterosexual. Elliot (23) summarized this problem :

> "*It is very disappointing because on the actual app, when you put like women, they're not actually queer women. I don't know how to explain it. All of them just look like they put "looking for everyone" just for fun or if it's a woman that wants to make friends or something and not actually… I don't want to say it and sound mean but yeah, they look straight. All of them look straight*".

Having to determine the sexual orientation of other users can be exhausting and emotionally sensitive for queer individuals. It can also make them feel fetishized or used, which is what Sara (28) complained about : "*some [women] will actually write, like, "just here looking for friends" or, like, "looking somebody to explore with", and then it's like, "yeah, no, I don't think so". I'm not an experiment.*" However, it is also important to keep in mind that some users may still be unsure about their own sexuality, or not openly out, and therefore requiring them to disclose this information can be problematic.

The permutation of the "queer dating apps digital imaginary" by cisgender heterosexual men or by straight women could potentially be an error from the code and algorithm of these platforms. However, this argument cannot explain the regular appearance of profiles of straight couples, using the profile of the woman, to look for a queer woman for new sexual experiences. This practice is called "unicorn hunting" and can be considered in a lot of cases as an unethical polygamy practice. Indeed, often the woman they are looking for is sexualized and the purpose and expectation detailed of their profile can be unclear. During

my research, I found out that certain profiles do not even mention that there is a couple behind it, while some only reveal it after the first interaction from the woman of the couple with the other woman they are "hunting". Maria (21) already experienced this situation :

> *"I actually did a threesome through Tinder, but at first I didn't know they were together. So I started talking to her and then she was like, "oh yeah, I'm coming with a friend, blah, blah, blah". And then she opened up and she was like, "okay, he's my boyfriend". I was open to it. But like, imagine it's somebody else, or I didn't want to have a threesome".*

However, Maria was not the only one to encounter this issue, Astrid (23) also talked about it during our interview :

> *"Another thing I found a bit creepy though, when I talk to women is that they usually come like "hey, I want to meet someone". And then it's only like "hey, I have a boyfriend that also wants to meet you". And I'm sorry, but be transparent about that. I find that that's a big red flag. And also then you also know that they are not taking this as seriously as I do. I mean, if they did, they would show both of them. I don't mind it, but it's just sometimes I get to feel that they just want to try it. They kind of expect they go for the homosexual girls. I've never, ever seen a profile that's like, as a man, especially women searching for a man's context. Which is also like it feels like they expect "of course gay women want the dick too".*

Interviews demonstrated that this practice is particularly prevalent on Tinder and that it hinders the positive experience of queer women on online dating platforms. I believe that one solution to this issue could be to set up "unicorn hunting" as an option, which would make these couple's profiles invisible to individuals that are not looking for sexual experiences with a straight couple.

I identified two other downsides of heteronormative dating applications that affect principally queer women and non-binary individuals. They are the difficulty of matching and interacting with women and the emphasis on gender binary. Indeed, bisexuals and pansexuals participants claimed that they had more facility matching and interacting with men on the platform. Some of them claimed that it could be because there are more men than women on the platform, or that, as Charlie (26) explained it : "*Tinder is mostly like women go there because they want a hookup, but they don't want to hook up with the same gender or nonbinary. They want hookups with men*". Other participants acknowledged recently their bisexuality or pansexuality and describe their experience with men on the platform as more familiar and closer to their comfort zone, while dating women feels new and makes them unsure on how to act and how to flirt. However, this difficulty for individuals that are not

cisgender men, to interact with women in a dating context, could be explained by gender norms, which many individuals are still conforming to. It is important to note that simply identifying as queer or gender non conforming might not be enough to be emancipating from traditional gender norms. Cléo (28), a cisgender woman who identifies as a dyke or as a lesbian, complained about the "*passivity*" of women on online dating and their lack of initiative. She told me during our interview :

> "*I literally don't understand. I don't get it. And like women are so invested in this idea of themselves as passive that they will miss out on the chance to fall in love and have sex and have fun? Like, what's wrong with you?*".

This illustrates the awareness of some queer individuals about how gender norms can hinder their agency and power in the way they approach dating. They attempt to resist and reshape these gender norms by intentionally performing behaviors that are not typically associated with the gender they are perceived as by others of their society. Robards, Byron and D'Souza (2021) used the work of Wakeford (2000) to claim that "cyberqueer spaces" perform as a place of resistance against the heterosexual matrix. And I believe that it is the case on dating applications. Final (2017), drawing on the research of Butler, suggested that queer and trans people should embrace the complexity of their experiences as it will offer them more creativity and freedom in how they understand and express themselves. Finally (2017) added that because performativity is based on repetition, it provides room for variation and thus gives the possibility to challenge the heterosexual matrix in the long term.

Finally, non-binary users criticized the fact that even if they have the option to identify as "non-binary" on Tinder, they have to select if they want to be included in the research for men or for women and cannot select both of these options. Which means that, even if "non-binary", or any other kind of gender that is not exclusively male or female, is visible on their profile, they still have to comply with gender norms and stereotypes and be judged based on these by the algorithms and the other users during the research and dating process. Blue (22) opened up about this issue that they are facing : "*gay men, for example, that are open to nonbinary or gender fluid people, they will never see me. That's why I tend to try and use it and then I just stop. Because it's not inclusive then*". They added that the binarity on Tinder is hard for gender fluid or non-binary individuals especially if they do not fit the appearance criteria and physical norms of any of the two default genders on these applications. Because identifying as a gender that does not match their physical presentation can lead other users, especially heterosexual, to perceive it as a catfish or as someone presenting misleading information. Blue (22) also said during our interview :

"I feel like it's pretty hard to be non-binary or, like, gender queer or a trans person in general on Tinder. And since you have to be considered as a man or woman, then the people that are going to see your profile will judge you based on that anyway. Even if you write "gender fluid" like THIS BIG, they're always going to think that of you. And so I don't think I've ever been on a date with someone that considered me not a woman. So that's pretty shit, I guess".

Non-binary individuals may choose to perform their gender in ways that defy or conform to traditional gender norms, or a combination or both. However, they will be perceived by others based on the way they choose to perform their gender. This aligns with the concept of performativity explained by Butler (1990) as the way the combination of bodily practices and discursive practices are repeated over time. Non-binary individuals can use the way they dress, their physical appearance, their gestures, as well as using gender-neutral pronouns, to perform their gender online and eventually challenge the cisnormative system. This can be seen as a resistance practice against the cultural expectations and constraints of traditional gender norms. Finlay (2017) discussed how the performativity of LGBTQ+ identities offer agency to challenge dominant norms of gender, as well as the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and will potentially create new possibilities for gender expressions and identities. However, non-binary individuals can suffer from othering from the dominant groups (here cisgender individuals) and this can potentially lead to physical or verbal violence, discrimination, harassment, being misgendered, and being excluded from certain spaces. In our case, non-binary individuals are excluded from a certain dating pool on Tinder, depending on which gender they choose to comply with, as the platform is using a very rigid binary system, even if they recently start to acknowledge a multitude of new gender identities[11].

6.2.4. Unsafeness and vulnerable experiences

Participants of my study expressed a feeling of "unsafeness" while using heteronormative dating mobile application, particularly Tinder. This feeling comes from several elements such as : fail in the algorithm that allow cisgender men and heterosexual woman to be shown to queer individuals looking for other queer individuals, unethical "unicorn hunting", but also "catfishing", fake profiles, sexualization, harassment and other disrespectful behaviors. I define "catfishing" on a dating application as someone using the pictures and information of

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[11] Tinder. *Introducing More Genders on Tinder*. (n.d.). Tinder Newsroom. Accessed April 11, 2023. https://www.tinderpressroom.com/genders/

someone else, or of a fictional individual to persuade other users that they are the person that they are portraying and thus lure them into a potential relationship or casual sexual encounter. While most dating platforms allow the users to use a pseudonym that does not have to be their name, this potential anonymity can lead to a possible manipulation of the information on the profile to, for instance, get closer to institutionalized ideal physical appearance. Some of my interviewees told me to occasionally worry about fake profiles or pictures. And if Tinder, and Bumble, have the option to verify profiles, only a minority of users go through the verification or have "verified profiles" as a dating criteria. Furthermore, if Bumble requires the face to be clearly visible in the user's pictures, Tinder on the other hand allows a user to create a profile without showing their face and thus stay relatively anonymous. This can then lead someone to worry about the potentiality of another profile being fake, which is even more dangerous for people already being the main victims of harassment and violence, in this case women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, etc. Finally, if both platforms allow a user to unmatch or block[12] another user if they feel like they are behaving disrespectfully or that they do not feel comfortable with the interaction, however this action leads to the suppression of the entire conversation history, which deletes any kind evidence of abusive behavior and thus is hard to prove in case of a complaint or a report being filed.

The affordance of visibility forces any user that does not wish to purchase a premium plan, to have their profile shown to other users, even when they are not actively using the application. And as we saw previously, one has limited control over who will see their profile. Thus, some non-binary participants in my study do not disclose their gender identity on their profile as they feel like they are not safe to do so. As Léo (19) explained it : *at some point, I was a bit scared just because if someone that I know sees it that I do not want them to know...*". Indeed, profiles on dating applications are considered as public and can be seen by any individuals creating an account and using filter matching with the age and distance range. This poses a threat for queer and gender non-conforming users as it can lead to non consensual "coming out" experiences in the familial, social, or professional context. Lumsden and Harmer (2019) highlighted how "online othering" can lead to discrimination, prejudice and abuse. They also stated that the consequences of "online othering" are not contained and experienced only in the online world but that they will have real consequences in the offline

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[12] Here we understand the action of blocking someone on a dating application as a way to prevent this person from contacting us again on the platform. After being blocked the user is not allowed to see the profile or to interact through private messages with the person that blocked them.

world. In other terms, violences that can be committed to LGBTQ+ individuals on online dating platforms will affect their relationships with the real social world.

The conducting of the interviews allowed the exploration of the strategies employed by queer women and non binary users to ensure their safety while interacting with other users from the platform. According to the participants, cisgender men are often perceived as the social category that represents the most significant threat to the LGBTQ+ community online. Elliot (23), who is non-binary, express their unwillingness to share some part of their identity to men on Tinder and Bumble:

> "*I think the main thing was if ever I did match with a guy, I'd be reluctant to tell them that I'm queer just because it's kind of like, let me vet you first and see what kind of person you are, and then I'll tell you if I'm queer or not. [...] It's just a cautionary measure*".

The behavior of some cisgender heterosexual male users was described as "*disrespectful*", "*too much*", "*annoying*", "*shitty*", "*creepy*" and "*unreliable*". Four participants reported facing sexualization from some male users, particularly as individuals being queer, identifying as woman, or being openly polyamorous, or asexual. Charlie (26) spoke about this issue during our interview :

> "*I'm kind of fed up with men right now in that sense. Cisgender men. Because they sexualize me in a way that I don't like. Like me being queer, me being poly. They sexualize me a lot because of that. Then me being ace is mostly like : "hey, I can change you, just sleep with me and you are going to love sex with me". And I'm like "yeah no". [...] Because being queer and Poly, "yeah threesome", like having this fantasy*".

According to Ferris and Duguay (2020), some participants feel pressure to conceal some aspect of their identity (for instance polyamory[13], aceness[14], motherhood, etc), in order to ensure their safety or not be judged negatively upon these. This suggests that queer and non-binary users may feel compelled to create strategies, such as purposely not putting in certain information in their Tinder' profiles, for instance their gender identity, sexual orientation, pronouns, etc. However, these strategies created to ensure one's safety can lead to queer and non-binary individuals feeling invisibilized and underrepresented on such platforms, as it can also be difficult to identify other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Despite this risk, some of my participants chose to be really descriptive on their profile and to carefully pick the pictures they posted, in an attempt to avoid sexualization from other users.

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[13] Relationship orientation that involves the ability and willingness to form consensual and ethical romantic or sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously.

[14] Short for "asexuality". Sexual orientation characterized by a lack of sexual attraction or a low or absent interest in sexual activity.

For instance, Charlie (26), a non-binary individual on the asexual spectrum adopted this strategy :

> "*I put on my profile what I think is important for others to know. Like, for example, that people can't expect having sex with me and everything. So I think that is a good thing to just have a good start. Because if people read the profile, they can choose if they like me or not. And if they like me and match with me, they know what to expect or what's not to expect, which makes it quite easier*".

These efforts can be seen as an attempt from Charlie to fight against fetishization and sexualisation of queer and asexual individuals, mostly from cisgender heterosexual men. However, this necessitates other users to carefully read the description of the profile, as well as being respectful of consent during the private written interactions on the online dating platforms.

In conclusion, queer and non-binary experiences on Tinder and Bumble are different from the one they could have on a queer platform, because of the binarity and the heteronormativity of dating platforms made predominantly for cisgender heterosexual users. However, there is still a prevalent LGBTQ+ community on Tinder and Bumble and these applications play an important role in the socialization of queer individuals, facilitating the process of recognition. Despite the issues encountered, these platforms play a valuable role in connecting queer individuals and fostering a sense of belonging. Queer women and non-binary users exploit the settings available to them in order to create strategies to work against the feeling of unsafeness and the risk of fetishisation, catfishing, unicorn hunting, etc.

6.3. Semiotic perception and interpretation of gender identity and sexuality through online profiles

6.3.1. Self-presentation and self-perception on online profile

Gender is a personal aspect of each individual's identity. Among my participants, nine presented themselves as cisgender women, five identified as non-binary and one as genderqueer[15]. Three of them were still questioning their gender identity at the time the interviews happened. Queer theory challenges fixed and essentialist categories and suggests

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[15] "Genderqueer" refers to individuals whose gender identity exists outside of the traditional gender binary and can be a combination of masculine and feminine or being completely separate of these gender categories. Genderqueer individuals reject the traditional gender binary and this term encompasses a wide range of gender identities.

that gender identity, as well as sexual orientation, are fluid and can fluctuate throughout one's life. One's gender identity can be built against traditional gender norms. Participants identifying as cisgender women think that users looking at their profiles can tell that they are women mostly through their physical appearance portrayed through their pictures and by the name they use. Shum (2014) defined self-presentation as the process of an individual adjusting their behavior in order to create a specific impression on others, shape how others will perceive them, or displaying themselves in a specific way to appeal to a particular individual or a certain social group.

Among my participants that identify as non-binary, the presentation of their gender identity is mostly done through indicating it clearly and visibly on their profile, either in the gender widget, or in their biography, while also writing that they were using gender neutral pronouns such as they/them. Four of my participants (one cisgender woman and three non-binary individuals) told me that they did not clearly write their gender identity on their profile. Two of them did not have any particular reason to explain this voluntary omission. One participant claimed feeling still unsure about their gender identity, and another attempted to resist the compulsory binary system of Tinder : "*I didn't write anything about gender because the annoying part about Tinder is that you can't be like genderfluid or nonbinary, you have to put yourself as one of those two genders*" (Blue, 22). MacLeod and McArthur (2018) denounced the fact that there is not any technological or informatic justification to explain the cisnormativity and the heteronormativity of online dating platforms. These are indeed choices made by the designers and programmers to comply with hegemonic and normalized beliefs about gender and sexuality. However, this hinders the experience of users that don't comply with traditional gender identities.

Regarding their sexual orientation, seven of my participants did not state it explicitly on their profiles. Three of them, identifying as bisexuals and queer, still disclosed their sexuality implicitly through emojis, pronouns, interests or memes. One of the other reasons for my interviewees to not share their sexual orientation publically was for two of them the fear of judgment or the potential bad reactions that cisgender men could have in regard to it. However, for one participant identifying as lesbian, explicitly stating her sexual orientation was important to avoid interactions with men.

Additionally, Charlie (26) expressed the belief that it was crucial for other users to know their gender identity and sexual orientation through their online dating profile. They added : "*It makes it easier because it's quite tiring to somehow have to explain it on the first date. And then, like, getting into bad situations, especially being Poly or Ace or something*

that could end in sexual harassment". The choice to disclose or not sexual orientation to another user can thus be motivated by the will to avoid dangerous situations, share information only with trusted users, or signal that unsolicited interactions in a dating context are not welcomed. Finally, one pansexual woman that I interviewed did not write her sexual orientation on her profile and explained to me that it was because of the fluidity of her sexuality : "*because when people ask what I identify as, I say pan, but honestly, I don't like to define myself as anything as it also kind of changes*" (Julia, 26).

Participants were asked about their perception of how strangers would perceive them based on their profiles. While their answers were subjective and influenced by their own understanding of themselves as well as their own self-esteem, they provide insight into the image participants aimed to portray through their profiles. The most common answers were the hope to be perceived as attractive and open minded. In addition, cisgender women assumed they would be perceived as fun, while non-binary users presumed they would be viewed as funny and queer. I demonstrated, through previous literature (Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano, 2020; Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2021) and through data from my interviews, how gender norms lead to different expectations of how one is supposed to behave and act on online dating applications because of their gender. Stereotypes associated to heterosexual male users are for instance them taking more initiative by initiating conversations or inviting on dates, looking for hookups[16], while adopting a visual emphasis on the physical appearance of women during the swiping process. On the other hand the gender stereotypes linked to women on mobile dating applications will be that they are assumed to be more passive, receptive, emotional, social, entertaining and to emphasize through their pictures their physical appearance in a way that will be appealing for male gaze.

The discourse among my participants revealed that these stereotypes, reinforced by the way the information is displayed on online dating platforms, were interiorised and normalized by their users. However, there were instances of resistance to these gender norms and stereotypes. For example, some individuals interviewed expressed their reluctance to conform to societal expectations and actively chose to defy traditional gender norms in their self-presentation. They made deliberate decisions about how they presented themselves on their online dating profiles, consciously avoiding reinforcing stereotypes. Anna (32), a bisexual woman, expressed concern about being perceived as a "*sexual person*" :

> "*I'm not like a girl who posts sexy pictures or a lot of selfies or anything like that. No, no, no. Obviously I'm a sexual person, but I don't want to highlight that in my profile. I*

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[16] See appendix 7 : Hookup culture

don't want to look at myself and think "oh my god that's like a one night stand kind of person" ".

If this quote seemed to do an amalgam with the association between a woman posting "sexy pictures" and someone that is looking for one night stand, it also showed how cisgender women, such as Anna, while acknowledging their own sexuality, do not want to play along gender stereotypes. They will choose carefully the pictures they post on their profile, in order to have some control on the way other users can perceive them. I believe this can be seen as a safety measure in order for women to attempt to protect themselves from the misogyny and the sexism from men that can be thrown at them in the private conversation section.

It is worth noting that the cisgender women participants in this study, while all being part of the LGBTQ+ community, did not explicitly mention that they would be perceived as queer or at least as non heterosexual through their profile. This could suggest that the perception of queerness is based more on gender identity rather than on sexuality. I believe that gender identity is often expressed through various aspects such as appearance, behavior, and discourse, whereas sexual orientation may not be immediately discernible from an online profile. As evidence, Pond and Farvid (2014) analyzed bisexual women's experiences on Tinder and came to the conclusion that there is no stable and explicit visual identifying code for bisexual women, which can lead these individuals to suffer from double discrimination from both heterosexual men and the queer community (Pond and Farvid, 2014).

Pond and Farvid's findings suggest that gender norms are not always clear and explicit, which aligns with Butler's (1990) argument that gender is socially constructed and performative. According to Butler (2004), norms are often implicit and serve as a guide to social interactions. They often appear as if they have an effect and a power that is not related to the action of the individuals to conform to them. Because they are deeply embedded in social structures, institutions, and cultural codes. However, individuals can use their agency to challenge or resist certain norms through collective effort and social change. The performativity on dating applications can be demonstrated through how one is going to set up their profile, how one portrays themselves through their picture, which discourse they use in their description, and how they choose to adhere or not to social norms during the dating process and the first message exchanges on the platforms. Gender norms lead to exclusion and marginalization of certain groups that are perceived as "other". And thus, portraying a gender identity that does not fit the norms and standard of the gender binary man/woman can be perceived as a user's agency used to resist gender norms and heterosexual matrix. To conclude this section, I will add that, as Finlay (2017) suggested, queer theory must break

away from a traditional vision of gender represented through the heterosexual matrix. Additionally, queer individuals should be allowed to use self determination, and in the case of this thesis self-presentation, when it comes to their gender identities, which is an important step toward challenging and subverting prevailing norms and assumptions about gender identity (Finlay, 2017).

6.3.2. Visual dominance on dating applications

The photos shared on one's profile are often used as a way to present one's personality through different situations and perspectives. It is also a useful tool to share one's gender or sexuality, through, for instance the way one present physically, pictures taken at a queer event (for example at the Pride), memes[17], or other queer cues or references. Several participants indicate that they expect a profile to have several pictures including if possible: one selfie, one picture with friends, one picture with an animal or traveling, one picture with a semi-formal or a sexy outfit, one funny picture and one picture showing the whole body. Seeking advice from peers is common when individuals are unsure about posting a particular picture or if they question the accuracy of their bio description. The interviews I conducted for this research emphasized the visual dominance of Tinder and Bumble. The first element visible when looking at one's profile is a picture of themselves, accompanied by their first name and their age. The display of information on both platforms is organized around the pictures. Especially on Tinder where it is not even mandatory to open the bio section to determine whether to swipe right or left on a user's profile. Shum (2014) described how, in the context of online dating, the impressions of others are based on the perception of photographs and textual elements. He based his research on the previous work on other social scientists, such as Taylor (2010), to detail that pictures present on a profile are going to be the main elements that will influence the swiping process, as the first impression will be based on attractiveness. However, the textual elements will be used to decide if another user has personality traits that makes them likable and, according to me, if there is a perspective of shared interests or shared value.

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[17] "Meme" refers to an image or video that is spread on the internet and has a cultural or social meaning that can be understood by an imagined community. Memes are usually humorous, ironic or satirical.

The ability to present oneself through pictures also offers the possibility for one to use their agency (while complying with the limits imposed by the system, settings and algorithms) to find symbolic or explicit ways to signify part of their identity. Rovino, Jibrael and Goswami (2020) analyzed how Tinder users were performing their gender through the choice of the posted pictures, the angle, the proximity of the subject, the tones and colors, the clothing, the gesture, etc. Their study being limited by a binary vision of gender and a lack of consideration of different sexual orientations, I thus decided to examine how my interviewees were interpreting, understanding and reacting to pictures posted by other users in relation to their gender identity and sexuality.

Although the data collection of this thesis does not allow for generalizations about whom a category of individual will be attracted to based on their gender and sexuality, my participants described that they were mostly attracted to men that were showing some queerness, a feminine aspect, or that really understood the female gaze. Some interviewees expressed to feel more comfortable and interested in men that were embracing their part of femininity but also comfortable in their masculinity. Charlie (26) explained to me how they believe that the pictures of some men, for instance selfies in gym mirrors, where they expose some part of their body, is for them seen as a way to emulate the female gaze, while they are actually adhering to the male gaze and thus complying with a perception of what the "real" masculinity is and need to be portrayed for men. In addition, men have a tendency to post on dating application pictures taken from a lower point, which Rovino, Jibrael and Goswami (2020) analyzed as a way to appear taller and to signify a need of being in control. This entails demonstration of force, virility, apatheticness, strength, tallness, etc. If it seems like pictures portraying "strategic skin showing", as described by Rovino, Jibrael and Goswami (2020), are mostly a deal breakers for my participants when they are posted by men, there seems to be a higher leniency towards women's profiles and their pictures. For instance, Astrid (23) told me during our interview : *"For women when the only thing you see is her boobs or a bikini picture. I usually want... Like it is fine if they have like one of these but I want some more. Something around it"*.

Another interesting element that emerged from the interviews was that some traits, or quality, stereotypically assigned to a gender, are something that can be perceived as negative or as a flaw for the opposite gender. For instance, during the second part of the interview, when I asked my participant to comment on other profiles, one of my participants came across the profile of a bald black woman and said : *"She is really sexy to be honest. But I feel like she could be kinda a dangerous one you know. Maybe it's because she looks so*

empowered. It feels like she would be more dominant". In this context, the absence of long hair, traditionally being a symbol of femininity, is linked to the traits of "dominance" and "power", which are characteristics that are valued and expected in men. However, these same attributes are seen as "dangerous" in a woman. This illustrates how the gendered perception of power and dominance is reinforcing the idea that, according to gender norms, women should be submissive and passive, while men should be in control, dominant, and assertive. Women that display characteristics associated with stereotyped masculine traits will be "othered" and punished for not conforming to gender expectations and not being able to perform their gender in a way that is expected because of their gender.

Furthermore, using an intersectional perspective, studies presented by Lee (2019), showed that black individuals do not benefit from the same visibility and desirability on online dating applications. Social media are promoting normative beauty standards that will be centered around young, well toned, white bodies. According to Lee (2019), on Tinder, users are more likely to decide the likability and the desirability they have for a profile based on visual cards, in other terms pictures, and do not need to read the bios to do so. Users are then going to perceive and interpret other user's identity and personality based almost exclusively on visual cues. They are going to subjectively analyze cues, symbols, and signs to determine one's gender, sexual orientation, race, age, class and attribute them personality traits as well as stereotypes. However, unequal representation of different bodies, as well as the invisibilization of some social groups or communities reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to the normalization of the majority's discourse. This "online othering" (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019) is closely linked with the othering in the offline world, as they both influence and reinforce each other. And if a way to resist could be for one to refuse to comply with norms and stereotypes that are attributed to them, it still does not give them the control over how they are going to be perceived, interpreted and treated by the rest of the society.

6.3.3. Cues, signs, symbols and stereotypes

My conversations with the participants revealed that, when creating a first impression of another profile and interpreting it, individuals primarily rely on creating assumptions based on cues, symbols or signs. In the context of this study, the assumptions emerging during the interviews often related to one's gender identity and sexuality. For instance, when examining the pictures on a dating profile, Blue (22) said : *"She is... [pause] I think she is a "She". You see I am assuming..."*. Then they scrolled down and were able to read that the person

presented themselves, through the widgets, as a queer woman, which came to validate the presupposed assumption made by Blue. Most of my interviewees struggled to give me examples of how they could tell the gender or sexuality of another user. I would argue that it seemed to be built on unconscious bias or automatism, linked to interiorisation of gender norms and stereotypes. Assumptions were mostly made about the style of clothing, the gesture, the make up, the length of hair, the words and emoji used, any elements depicted in pictures and belonging to the queer culture, the way the body is portrayed, and how the pictures are taken. For instance, Emelie (22) told me, when commenting on a dating profile of a cisgender woman that posted several pictures of herself taken in a mirror : "*Here I would make the assumption that she is straight. I think it's just stereotypes of what you think a straight girl should look like. Based on her style and how she takes pictures I guess*". Ferris and Duguay (2020) identified some elements in pictures, such as "duck face" selfies as symbols of heterosexuality and claimed that it often leads a queer user to swipe left on profile presenting such symbols. Furthermore this research underlines that having several pictures taken in a mirror was also identified as a symbol of heterosexuality by my participants.

To identify one's sexual orientation or gender identity, participants often seek cues, signs or symbols in dating profiles. Cues can be defined as a subtle hint. Examples given by my participant were that short hair or "masculine" clothing on a woman are potential indicators of queerness. I noticed that cues are tightly linked with assumptions and stereotypes, as they are just a personal interpretation based on personal experience and cultural context. For instance, during our interview, Astrid, a bisexual 23 years old woman, stated that "*the stereotype of bisexual women is usually that they are either like party bombshells or that they are a bit masculine*". This stereotype confines bisexual women to an uncomfortable intersection between heterosexual and lesbian, where she has to either comply with the accepted feminine or masculine gender norms in terms of clothing. However, the clothing, hair style and way pictures are taken are going to be, according to my interviewees, the main element to identify someone's gender and sexuality, in the absence of more concrete or explicit signs. For instance, during our interview I asked Anna, a 32 year old woman, if she thought that other users could tell she was a woman just by looking at her profile. She answered :

> "*I think so. I think that's the first idea when they look at my pictures… That's the assumption they make I would say. [...] [B]ecause that would be the first thought, the first serious stereotype thought they would have in their head. I have like long hair, I look like a stereotypical woman*".

MacLeod and McArthur (2018) used the work of Suchman (2007) to emphasize the importance of contextual cues to facilitate the intelligibility. Indeed, the meaning of an action is not fixed or predetermined, however, members of a community will share a set of communicative tools and expectations that enable them to work together to achieve a common understanding. In many cultures, long hair is associated with femininity, beauty, good health and fertility. Cultural and gender norms often associate femininity with long hair, makeup and a certain style of clothing, which will influence the way we understand and interpret online dating profiles in terms of cues related to gender and sexuality. For instance, when scrolling at other profiles on Tinder, Charlie (26) came across a picture of a cisgender woman in a swimsuit, taken from the back. Charlie said : "*It has something that makes me interested to check out more*". The second picture of the same user was a whole body picture, taken behind a bottle of beer, Charlie commented : "*That is somehow funny but in the sense it is also basic*". Finally, the third picture on this account was taken in front of a sight view where the woman was standing in front of a sunset in a semi formal dress with a cleavage. When seeing this picture, Charlie declared : "*And that is… No it's not my type. It gives me straight girl… She might be bi, but it's not my type*". The part of their reaction that attracted my attention was "*It gives me straight girl*". Indeed, if the sexual orientation of this woman seemed to be unintelligible or at least left uncertain with the two first pictures, the last one was to Charlie a cue of her potential heterosexuality, due to the way the person dressed, posed, and the way the picture was taken. Cléo (28) also narrated how she interprets cues in order to tell if a woman shown by the algorithms is actually queer or not :

> "*It's, like, the way they look. Like, I can always tell when I accidentally, like, get straight women up on my Tinder because it's just, like, a different way of, like, carrying your body, a different way of dressing, a different way of writing in your profile. Like, straight women write things. Like, they write how tall they are because they want to be little, so men are taller than them or whatever. I'm like, queer women don't write those kinds of things. Yeah, it's just like lots of different little clues, I guess*".

This illustrates that if cues are often visual, they are not only contained in pictures, but can also be observed and interpreted through the textual bios. In the context of our study, bios as well are interpreted upon gender and sexual norms, where queer and non-binary individuals are expected to behave and present themselves on dating applications in a way that obviously differs from the way cisgender heterosexual individuals would.

A sign may appear more explicit than a cue, however I believe that because the information it conveys is often implied or suggested, it is still in many cases an implicit way

to communicate an information given, often visually, by an individual or institution. However, some signs are considered explicit if they directly and unambiguously convey a message or information to the viewer. This is the case for users stating clearly, in the widget section of their profile, their gender identity, their sexual orientation or their preferred pronouns. By doing so, users are providing a sign to others which indicates who they are interested in dating and who could potentially want to connect with them. In the context of the dating application profiles, an example of a sign that could be less explicit, is the use of queer culturals codes references or memes. These can encompass for instance references to queer tv shows or movies, political references, queer jokes, drag cultures references, slang terms, pop culture references, etc. These signs can be displayed through pictures or text in the description section. I argue that, similarly as lesbian women (Ferris and Duguay, 2020), queer women and non-binary individuals develop strategies to semiotically analyze a profile to determine the gender identity and the sexual orientation of another user. Such strategies, using the concepts of Saussure (1996), will be based on seeking signifiers (cues, signs and symbols) to identify a signified. In other terms to give them a meaning that would theoretically be shared by the members of the LGBTQ+ community online and offline. However, some sexualities, such as bisexuality or pansexuality do not have a stable visual code (Ferris and Duguay, 2020) and make it harder for other users to recognize such sexual orientation through an online profile.

As Saussure (1996) suggested, the meaning of a sign is not only based on subjectivity and personal experiences, but is mostly determined by a collective understanding and agreement of a group of people who share a language. In this thesis, this group of people can be the LGBTQ+ community, who, through cultural practices, shared experiences and the influence of gender and sexual norms, will develop a common understanding of the meaning attached to precise signs. This meaning can vary depending on time and cultural context. It is important to notice that LGBTQ+ experiences are very diverse and based on individual intersectionality and thus some meaning may not be universally agreed upon or applicable to all individuals. It is also worth to note that a signifier is not limited to a single object or attribute, but can be a combination of several, and these interpretations can be based on stereotypes. In our study, signs can reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, however they can also challenge and subvert stereotypes by attempting to break with traditional gender norms. If this can be done by individuals through their self presentation on their online profiles, I would argue that dating platforms such as Tinder and Bumble should advertise against gender norms. This could be done by for instance modifying the settings and algorithms to make it

less normative, or by posting, on their main page, images that would depict LGBTQ+ individuals in non-stereotypical roles or relationships.

A symbol is a visual representation of an abstract concept or idea. It can be both implicit or explicit depending on the context and the viewer's interpretation of the symbol. Wolowic et al. (2016) wrote about the sign of the rainbow flag and how it was usually accompanied with a feeling of pride, support and comfort, especially for young members of the LGBTQ+ community. They conducted a semiotic analysis to analyze how shared meanings are created and applied to symbols, such as the rainbow flag (Wolowic et al., 2016). They wrote : "*[LGBTQ] communities, for example, have a long tradition of using innocuous objects such as the placement of ear piercings, the color and placement of handkerchiefs and hair styles to signal identity and community*" (p.2). They started their analysis by identifying visual signs and symbols of the queer subculture, such as placement of jewelry, type of hair style, and color. To them, choice of color and placement can indicate one's sexual preferences. During the interviews and the recording I took of my participants scrolling at profiles, I identified the use of emojis to signify queerness. The three main ones being the rainbow emoji, the rainbow flag emoji and the two girls holding hands emoji. The symbol of the rainbow can be displayed through emojis but also through pictures, for instance some of my participants posted pictures of themselves taken to a Pride event. Another example that can be given to illustrate the presence of this symbol and its connection with the LGBTQ+ community is a situation that happened when I was scrolling through profiles on Tinder with Elliot (23). They showed me a picture, posted by a female user posing in the sunlight in front of a field and wearing a tank top and a skirt, and told me : "*See if you have asked me here I would be like "this person is straight" but then!*". They then scrolled to the next picture where the same woman was portrayed wearing a rainbow necklace and added "*so honestly I would swipe right*". This illustrates how the presence of a symbol that can be identified as a strong queer reference can influence the interest of my participants in a precise profile.

Pond and Farvid (2017) wrote about strategies that queer women came up with to be able to identify other queer individuals through their online profiles. The data collection of this thesis showed that these interpretation are based on assumptions and stereotypes about how a queer woman on a non-binary individual is supposed to present themselves physically (masculine clothes, short or colored hair, piercings, wearing some brands such as Vans, having long or fake nails, wearing "typical" make up, etc); explicit signs or symbols of queerness (emojis, preferred pronouns, clear statement of gender identity and sexuality, etc); cultural codes references (pop cultures, left wing political affiliation, interest in arts or poetry,

etc). Interestingly enough, the majority of my interviewees think that they are able to tell if a user is queer by looking at their profile. The minority of my participants that do not feel confident that they could do so are the ones that recently became aware, within the last few months, that they were not straight or not cisgender. This emphasizes the importance of the cultural context and the personal experiences in the meaning given to a cue or the understanding of signs and symbols.

Shum (2014) emphasized how codes present in a message, in our case shared through cues, signs or symbols, are to be interpreted upon a precise context. However the meaning given to an element will vary from person to person and can also be misunderstood or misinterpreted from the basic intentions of the person sharing the element. For instance, an online dating user could unintentionally incorporate semiotic signs in the pictures or the description of their profile, perhaps because they are unaware of certain cultural codes, and it could lead to a misunderstanding from other users reading the profile. Ferris and Duguay (2020) explained that certain behavior or ways used by an individual to present themselves physically can be seen as associated with a stable sexual identity such as lesbian. For instance, several interviewees discussed how certain lesbian individuals portray their identity by dressing in a more masculine way than what is traditionally expected as a woman. Ferris and Duguay (2020) added that in the absence of such elements of behavior, one's sexual identity can be perceived by others as unintelligible. However, I argue that suggesting that some sexual identities displays are perceived as more stable and as having more elements associated to be able to be intelligible, can be harmful to other sexual identities. In the context of this research, individuals that do not wish to comply to gender or sexual stereotypes or present themselves in a way that facilitate explicitly the understanding of their gender or sexuality will then take the risk to be invisibilized and excluded in the process of identification and interpretation of gender and sexuality on online dating application.

6.3.4. Interpreting queerness and vibes

"Queerness" is a complex term with meanings that can vary depending on the context. It is mostly used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences that are situated outside of the scope of the traditionally established ideas of heterosexual and cisgender norms. It can also be linked to political movements and activism against heteronormativity. Léo (19) applied this definition of queerness to the profiles they looked at at the end of our interview. They commented on the profile of a cisgender woman :

"The vibe I get from her profile it's that it's not someone very queer… Because I think that being queer is different from not just being straight. But I don't get the vibe that I'm looking for, like queer people who are a bit into politics, in activism and a bit different. She didn't say it so I can't know for sure, but it is a feeling I get".

This shows that queer people are often expected to challenge social gender norms and expectations. It is interesting to note the use of the word "vibe" in this quote. Indeed, most of the participants, if not all, used this term when commenting on other users' profiles. This word was used in sentences such as "having a queer vibe", "having a good vibe", "having a straight vibe", etc. In the context of this study "vibe" is understood as a subjective emotion or feeling that emanates from the perception and the intuitive interpretation of a meaning given to symbols or elements, that are influenced by one's own experience as well as by broader cultural or social factors. The data of this thesis shows that a"queer vibe" or a "straight vibe" is going to be perceived differently depending on the subjectivity of the person, but will be the determinant factor to interpret one's gender or sexual orientation. It will also have an impact on the likability, intelligibility, and interest shown to a profile. In the context of this study, "vibe" refers to a personal and subjective feeling that emanates from the interpretation of elements based on intuitiveness, one's own experiences, as well as cultural codes and social norms. The interviews showed that respondents are looking for authenticity and "queer vibes", which means that they expect for a user to go more into detail about their personality and interest, but also to give more indication about them not being cisgender or not heterosexual.

The concept of "queer vibes" is often used by members of the LGBTQ+ community to describe a positive feeling of shared experience between people that do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual. It also can refer to a queer-friendly space or environment, such as in our case the "queer dating apps digital imaginary". By this it is understood that, through the use of Tinder or Bumble, queer individuals can recognize each other and embody traits and qualities that are associated with queerness. However, it is important to remember that "queer vibes" can represent a panel or very diverse attributes and emotions and can be based on stereotypes and assumptions that do not represent the reality of one's experience and identity.

The majority of my participants seem to be able to use the concept of vibe to identify precise identities in the spectrum of gender and sexuality, that are situated outside of the dichotomy straight/non-straight and cisgender/non-cisgender. For instance Cléo (28) explained during our interview :

"I generally dress quite, like, masculine. And then when I do dress feminine, it's quite like femme rather than, like, straight girl feminine, which I think is a difference. Which I don't know if straight people can, like, see the difference, but I think queer people can. Like, I can definitely look at a girl and see whether she's, like, straight or just, like, bisexual and feminine. It's like a different vibe".

In other terms she stated that most of the queer people are able to identify if an individual is part of the LGBTQ+ community simply by looking at the way they dress and present themselves and by comparing it to the traditional gender norms and beauty standards that are expected from each gender. Some of my participants mentioned the "gaydar", while others spoke about it implicitly. For the purpose of this thesis "gaydar" is understood as an informal term to describe the intuition that some people, mostly members of the LGBTQ+ community, claim to have to be able to identify the gender identity or sexual orientation of other people, based on some traits, characteristics or behaviors they present. It is important to note that this is not a valid scientific concept in the academic field and it is based on stereotypes and assumptions about different gender and sexual identities. However, I argue that this can be identified as one of the strategies used by my respondents to attempt to identify someone else's identity through a first based impression on online dating. The myth of the "gaydar" also illustrates the dichotomy between two types of utterances that I heard from interviewees. This contradiction can be illustrated by these sentences : *"This person looks gay"* (Elliot, 23), *"So even if they have this straight vibe, yet they could tell that it's not a straight person"* (Charlie, 26), *"Because some people just look really straight and it's pretty obvious"* (Sara, 28); versus these ones : *"Like, some people tell me that I don't look [gay] like I mean, there's no gay look"* (Maria, 21), *"I don't know. What does a straight person look like ? or what does a bisexual person look like?"* (Anna, 32). It shows the whole complexity about intuitively being able to guess the gender or sexuality of someone, while being aware that this ability is built on stereotypes and assumptions and that gender identities and sexualities are diverse and multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to simplistic categorizations or generalizations.

Nevertheless, six of my participants disclosed that they do not have an identifiable way to confirm their assumption about someone's sexuality. They usually assume that the profile that is shown to them was created by someone that would be attracted by either a cisgender woman or by a non binary individual, or both. For instance, I asked Melissa (28), who identifies as lesbian, during our interview to confirm that she did not have a specific way or thing she was looking at to identify a user's sexual orientation, and she replied *"Yeah I don't. Unless they're like with a man in the picture [laugh]"*. As Melissa, several of my

respondents disclosed to assume that the profile they were looking at, when seeking women of non-binary individuals, was part of the LGBTQ+ community, unless something was stated differently in the description (for instance a cisgender woman stating looking for female friends), or if it seems in the pictures that it was indeed the profile of a straight couple looking of a "unicorn".

Sara (28) and Cléo (28) both told me in the interview that they found it easier to tell someone's gender and sexual orientation through their profile on an online dating platform than on the offline world. Cléo guessed that it is *"because of fashion right everybody just looks queer with the current fashion"*, while Sara insisted that on Tinder it is *"like how a person wants to be seen, right? Like, it's very curated. So I think it's sometimes easier on Tinder to read"*. Ferris and Duguay (2020) drew upon Goffman's (1959) framework of impression management to explain that the performances given by individuals in terms of self-presentation were based on a specific context and were targeting a particular audience. This perspective recognized that people consciously perform their identities on online applications by adapting their self-presentation to the platform they chose, their intent, the type of person they are wanting to connect with, etc. This also explains why there is a higher emphasis on gender and sexual identities, in terms of self presentation, on Tinder and Bumble, than in the offline world. It can be seen as a way for queer and non-binaries subjectivities to assert their identities authentically and navigate the complexities of offline dating norms and biases.

To conclude this section, individual choices in terms of self-presentation are going to impact the way others are going to perceive and interpret our identity, whether it is online or in the offline world. However, the impact is going to be bigger and potentially more harmful for marginalized or already oppressed communities. In order to identify another user's gender or sexuality, one has to interpret, principally through assumptions, cues, symbols and signs, visible explicitly or implicitly on dating profiles. Queer women and non-binary individuals seem to prioritize connecting with users who exhibit some traits or "vibes" associated with queerness, as it is also sometimes easier to identify these on online dating platforms rather than in the offline life.

7. **Conclusion :**

This analysis provides insights into the experiences and perceptions of queer women and non-binary individuals in navigating gender norms and heteronormativity on dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble. Heteronormative applications are approached with various expectations and assumptions, as well as with a wide range of emotion. Overall, the "queer dating apps imaginary" is perceived as providing a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community but is still easily and regularly permeated by outsiders with unclear intentions. Which makes the experience exhausting and potentially dangerous for queer and gender non-comforming individuals. This thesis highlights the existence of resistance to gender norms within cyberqueer spaces. Participants in this study develop strategies to ensure their safety while negotiating or reshaping such norms, by leveraging the settings and features of Tinder and Bumble, asserting their agency in self-presentation, and expressing their gender and sexual identity beyond the traditional societal expectations. Queer and non-binary individuals face multiple challenges on dating applications due to their binarity and heteronormativity. However Tinder and Bumble also facilitate recognition and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

This study shows that dating users either reinforce or defy stereotypes through their behavior, textual descriptions, and visual display. However, gender and racial stereotypes on online dating are still harmful to already marginalized social groups and contribute to "online othering", which comes to reinforce offline discrimination. Stereotypes are closely intertwined with assumptions in how they shape our perceptions and judgments of others. Members of the LGBTQ+ community rely on dating applications to identify, through assumption, other users' gender and sexual orientation. This is because identifying queer individuals offline is difficult due to societal assumptions of heteronormativity.

This thesis provides an analysis of the semiotic perception and interpretation of gender and sexuality through online profiles by queer women and non-binary individuals. Participants rely on assumptions based on elements including for instance clothing, style, make-up, hair length, pictures, etc, to interpret a dating user's gender identity and sexuality. This study, through the interviews conducted and the recording of the swiping process, shows that cultural and gender norms influence how users interpret profiles. Queerness is interpreted in online dating platforms through meaning given to cues, signs, symbols and vibes. However, the meaning given to a semiotic element can vary from an individual to another, even among the same community. Participants report using first impressions and assumptions

based on stereotypes to identify individuals' identities beyond the confines of the heterosexual and cisgender norms, but acknowledged the subjectivity and complexity of such assumptions.

Finally, this research shows that individuals adapt their self-presentation to distinct online platforms and specific audiences. Sexual and gender identities play a bigger role on Tinder and Bumble, allowing marginalized communities to assert their identities and navigate offline biases. Despite the opportunity for self-presentation, within the limits imposed by the platforms, there is still a risk of misinterpretation because of the limited information displayed on dating profiles. Cultural codes are to be interpreted upon a specific context, but their interpretation can also be, intentionally or not, influenced by the way a user is choosing to share an element. In addition, interpretation of cues and symbols can potentially lead to harmful bias and assumptions and reinforce the "othering" and exclusion of individuals who do not fit into preconceived notions in terms of gender and sexuality.

7.1. Further lines of inquiry

Future studies could strive to diversify the sample regarding social characteristics, such as including a wider range of individuals in terms of age, race, class, disability, religion, and sexuality. This would emphasize how "online othering" is an inseparable aspect of intersectionality and the influence of this concept in the way users' experiences are shaped online and offline. Latinsky (2012) suggested that intersectional approaches minorities could potentially defy and break free from gender norms. This could be done by challenging the binary and surveillance system that reinforce the notion that individuals should adhere to either male or female behaviors. Latinsky (2012) drew on Collins' work (2000) to explain that minority groups navigate a variety of life experiences that can act as a protective barrier and potentially allow them to negotiate and reshape stereotypical norms. Moreover, exploring how different social identities intersect and interact within the context of online dating platforms can provide valuable insights into the ways in which power dynamics operate. By including diverse voices and experiences in research, we can shed light on the ways in which individuals from marginalized communities navigate and resist dominant narratives, fostering a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality.

Additionally, this research could be pursued by exploring more in depth participants' intentions behind their self-presentation on dating apps. Indeed, it could be interesting to explore how queer and gender non-comforing user perceive the presentation of their identity

on their own profiles compared to how they believe others perceive it. By examining the alignment or dissonance between self-perception and perceived external perception, valuable insights can be gained regarding the negotiation of identity and the dynamics of self-representation within the context of online dating platforms. This line of inquiry has the potential to shed light on the complexities of self-presentation, authenticity, and the construction of queer identities in digital spaces.

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Appendices :

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Briefing	
Information about the thesis Signed consent form	- I'm working on Queer representations on Tinder and Bumble - The interview will be recorded and will safely be stored until two months after the thesis has been published where it afterwards will be deleted - You have signed the consent contract and as stated in it you have one month from today to withdraw your consent. - As stated in the consent contract you will be anonymised.
Presentation of the informant	- How old are you? - Where are you from? - Which language(s) do you speak ? - What is your education and work background? - What gender identity and sexual orientation do you identify with ? - Are you out in your daily life? - What pronoms do you want people to use when talking to you or about you ? - Is there anything else that you consider as a part of your identity ? - Do you have children ? - Are you currently in a relationship ? Do you consider yourself monogamous ?
	Interview questions
	- Which online dating application do you use? (how did you discover them?) - Since when and how often? - What gender did you choose for yourself in the setting of the applications? - What gender and age category are you interested in? What distance range did you set up ? - Why are you using dating apps ? - Why did you pick Tinder and/or Bumble? Did you ever use or thought about using any queer dating applications? If yes, which one(s) ? And why ? - What is your experience using these applications as a queer woman/non binary individual ? - Differences between Tinder and Bumble ?

	• How would you feel if the dating app(s) you are using suddenly disappeared for good ? • Did you ever encounter any issues or discrimination while being part of the Queer community and using Tinder and Bumble? • Do you make any precautions to ensure your safety while using these apps ? • Do you make sure that people using these applications know that you're a woman or non binary through your profile? If yes, how? If not why ? • Do you make sure that people using these applications know that you're queer through your profile? If yes, how? If not why ? • Are your profiles similar on different dating applications ? • How did you decide what to show on your profile? How is your profile important to you? • What do you think your profile tells about you? • What do you look at first when looking at a new profile? What is the most important for you ? • Do you look into Spotify or Instagram when they are linked ? Does that influence your perception of the profile ? • What makes you swipe right or left on a person? • Is there any criteria visible on their profile that is a deal breaker or a must have ? • How can you tell if someone is a part of the Queer community (symbol)? Is it important for you to be able to tell? • Do you have any assumptions, expectations or stereotypes in mind when thinking about queer women or non-binary people's profile or experience on Tinder and Bumble ?
Debriefing	
Eventual additions or corrections	• Do you have anything else to add or to correct? • Is there anything we have not touched upon but you find relevant and want to share?
Practical	• Do you wish to have the transcription of the interviews sent so you can approve it?

Appendix 2: Codebook of the interviews (with the categories and the number of elements coded for each code)

Dating apps
Bumble (mentions of the use of Bumble) - 11
Downsides of Bumble
Binarity - 2
Time limit of 24h - 2
Lack of users - 2
Why picking Bumble - 11
Specificities of Bumble (settings and affordances) - 21
Tinder (mentions of the use of Tinder) - 16
Downsides of Tinder
Overwhelming - 1
Harder to match and interact with women - 9
Superficiality - 8
Binarity and lack of queer users - 10
Ghosting (users never replying to messages or stopping to reply in the middle of a conversation) - 12
Algorithm - 12
Unicorn hunting (straight couple looking for a bisexual/queer woman to engage in sexual activities) - 15
Unsafeness (sexualization, unsafe interactions with other users, harassment, etc) - 21
First utilization of Tinder specifically - 7
Frequency of the use of Tinder specifically - 6
Why picking Tinder - 20
Specificities of Tinder (settings and affordances) - 16
Other apps use (mentions of the use of other specific apps) - 16
Queer dating apps - 10
Her - 18
Reasons to use dating apps - 18
First utilization - 13
Frequency of use - 14
General experiences and anecdotes (using dating apps)
Polyamory - 3
Dating specificities or differences depending on gender - 3
Negative experiences - 9
Positives experiences - 10

Gender
Self perception (how interviewee identify and describe their gender) - 19
Self presentation (how interviewee present or not their gender on their profiles) - 22

Sexual orientation
Self perception (how interviewee identify and describe their sexual orientation) - 24
Self presentation (how interviewee present or not their sexual orientation on their profiles) - 25

<u>Prefered Settings (when looking at other's profiles)</u>
Distance range - 15
Age ranger - 18
Gender - 20

<u>Profile's creation</u>
Interests, settings and information (given by the interviewees' own profiles) - 9
Peer review and social norms - 10
Similarities and differences (between profiles on different dating apps) - 13
Own profile perception - 19
Biographies (written description on the interviewees' own profiles) - 24
Pictures (of the interviewees, displayed on their own profiles) - 25

<u>Swiping and online dating process</u>
Identifying gender (in other users' profiles)
Assumptions - 3
Importances to know someone's else gender - 5
Identifying sexual orientation (in other users' profiles)
Assumptions - 20
Importances to know someone's else gender - 14
Looking for cues - 19
Linked social media
Spotify (How important is it ? Do the interviewees go to check it and can it impact the perception of another profile ?) - 16
Instagram (How important is it ? Do the interviewees go to check it and can it impact the perception of another profile ?) - 14
Reasons to swipe right or left
On men's profile specifically - 8
On women's profile specifically - 11
Reasons given to swipe right - 33
Reasons given to swipe left - 48
Main focus when looking at another profile (what is the first thing they look at and what is important) - 17
Conversation starters (who initiates the conversation and how ?) - 19

<u>Safety</u>
Example (story times, anecdotes related to safety or unsafety while online dating) - 4
Gender aspect (differences about safety feelings and strategies depending on the gender) - 13
Strategies (developed by the interviewees to ensure their safety while interacting with people online or when planning to meet them in real life) - 19

Impacts and expectations (of dating apps on different social aspects)
Assumptions and expectations (about how it will be to use dating apps right before using them) - 17
Impact on social life - 8
Impact on dating life -14
Meeting other members from the queer community (how dating apps impact this) - 7

Hookup culture
Self judgment and social judgment (around sexuality and hookups) - 5
Cisgender heterosexual men's sexuality on dating apps - 6
Taboo around women's sexuality - 9
Stigma and stereotype about Tinder (perceived as a "straight hookup app") - 12
Sex discourses - 13

Specific geographic areas (experience of online dating in specific countries of cities as a queer woman or a non binary individual)
Copenhagen - 1
Morocco - 1
Spain - 1
Canada - 2
Italy - 2
Ukraine - 2
India - 4
Sweden - 8
Skåne - 4

Appendix 3 : Demographic details of participants

Interview Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sexual Orientation	Country of birth	Occupation	Arrival in Skåne
1	Julia	Cisgender woman	26	Pansexual	USA	Working	2 years ago
2	Maria	Cisgender woman	21	Lesbian	Spain	Working and Studying	Less than a year ago
3	Elliot	Non binary / Gender non conforming	23	Queer	Canada	Studying	Less than a year ago
4	Léo	Non binary / Agender	19	Queer	France	Studying	Less than a year ago
5	Celeste	Non binary	23	Bisexual	Italy	Studying	Less than a year ago
6	Astrid	Cisgender woman	23	Bisexual	Sweden	Working	Local
7	Emma	Cisgender woman	28	Bisexual	India	Working	5 years ago
8	Sara	Cisgender woman	28	Lesbian	Sweden	Working	Local
9	Melissa	Cisgender woman	28	Lesbian	Columbia	Working	4 years ago
10	Freya	Gender fluid / Non binary	33	Pansexual	Ukraine	Working	1 year ago
11	Charlie	Non binary	26	Queer and Asexual	Germany	Studying	5 years ago
12	Emelie	Cisgender woman	27	Bisexual	Sweden	Working	6 years ago
13	Cléo	Cisgender woman	28	Lesbian / Dyke	UK	Studying	6 years ago
14	Anna	Cisgender woman	32	Bisexual	Finland	Studying	3 years ago
15	Blue	Genderqueer	22	Bisexual	Italy	Studying	Less than a year ago

Appendix 4 : Tinder's features (30/03/2023)

Through the use of the walkthrough method I looked into the general features and settings of Tinder. When setting up their account one can select a maximum of five interests from an exhaustive list of different kinds of music, hobbies, social media, places, sports, political beliefs, kinds of movies, etc. One can give more information about themselves by selecting an answer from a list for each of the following information: zodiac sign, level of education, family plans (if they have kids, or want some in the future), covid vaccine status, personality type (16 personalities), preferred way of communicating (by text, by call, by video call, or in person) and kind of love language. One can also add more details about their lifestyle by selecting an answer from a list for each of the following information: if they have, want pets or have any allergy to pets, drinking habits, smoking habits, workout habits, dietary preference, how active they are on social media and sleeping habits. They can also add a job title, the name of their potential company, the name of their school, the name of the city they are currently living in and select a song anthem. One can select the age range of the profiles they want to see. This age range can be as small as only picking one precise age and can be anywhere from 18 years old to 100+ years old. They can also decide to only be able to receive messages from verified users. I looked more into the process of having an account verified. To do so, Tinder's users have to submit a short video selfie following a prompt. It will be verified by "*a combo of trusty humans and facial recognition technology*" (Tinder). About text communication users can decide whether to send read receipts to indicate to the other user that they have read their messages. Finally, in March 2023, Tinder allowed users to display on their profiles which language(s) they can speak, as well as their relationship style (monogamous or not).

Appendix 5 : Bumble's features (30/03/2023)

By using the walkthrough method, I conducted a general examination of Bumble. On Bumble, one can select five interests maximum from a long list of creative activities, sports, going out activities or places, staying in activities, film and tv kinds, reading kinds, music kinds, foods and drinks, traveling means or activities, type of pets, traits (interests and personality traits) and values. They can also pick some "profile prompt" where they can answer some of the pre written questions to "*show a little more of [their] personality*" (Bumble). Bumble's users can, on their profile, indicate their work, the place where they studied or are currently studying as well as their hometown. One can also provide more information about themselves by selecting an answer from a list for each of the following information: dating preferences related to the covid pandemic, height, exercise habits, star sign, education level, drinking habits, smoking habits, what they are looking for ("relationship", "something casual", "don't know yet", "marriage"), kids plans (if they have kids, or want some in the future), religion and political orientation. They can also indicate which languages they can communicate in, as well as which language they want people that will be shown to them to speak. Bumble's users can select the age range of the profiles they want to see. This age range can be as small as 4 years and can be anywhere from 18 years old to 80+ years old. One of the differences with Tinder is that Bumble gives access to articles to inform me about safety and help with my emotions well being. To verify their profile on Bumble, users need to send a selfie that will be verified by "*a combination of automated and human review*" (Bumble) to be sure that the person taking the selfie is the same as on the pictures on their profile.

Appendix 6: Affordances (extensive details)

According to Light, Burges and Duguay (2016), the affordances of an application are going to depend on its mediator characteristics. They regrouped them into four categories. The first one is the organization of the interface visible by the user. Light, Burges and Duguay (2016) wrote that the placement and the size of text or buttons can influence the users' practices and the way they will experience the application. The second one is the functions and features, which includes the multimediality, in order terms the functions to link the dating account to other social media. The third one is the textual content and its tone, as well as the variety of options available in the settings. The last one is the symbolic representation, which can be analyzed through a semiotic perspective in order to identify cultural references, symbols, connotations, etc.

I looked at their mediator characteristics to identifiý seven main affordances that I believe would help me to reach a better understanding of queer women's and non-binary individuals' experiences, as well as be a tool for my analysis :

- *Display of information* : Users can post on their profile a maximum of 9 pictures on Tinder and 6 on Bumble. They can choose to write a description or use emojis in a section, commonly called "bio", that will be displayed under the pictures on Tinder (with a maximum of 500 characters), and between pictures (vertically) on Bumble (with a limit of 300 characters). Users are also encouraged to give information through picking options between a list of different alternatives in the widget section. However, a constraint could be the visual dominance and the focus on appearance of such applications. Indeed it can be perceived by some users as superficial, as I will detail it later.

- *Swiping and Matching* : One user can show their interest in another user's profile by swiping right on their screen. If this other user also swipes right on them, then these two users have a match and they can now message each other privately. If one user is not interested in the profile that is shown to them by the application they have the possibility to swipe left and another profile is automatically shown to them instead.

- *Users Upgrades* : Both Tinder and Bumble have in-app purchases that the users are encouraged to pay for in order to unlock more features.

- *Safety* : To create an account on Bumble or Tinder one's need to use either their own Facebook account or a personal mobile number. These can only be linked to one account only on each of the dating platforms. Users can unmatch, or even report or

block other users if they feel that their behavior is inappropriate or that they feel in danger. In our case, gender and sexuality can also be sensitive information that could potentially be a risk for a non-straight or non-cisgender individual when shared to the wrong person for instance. Especially when an individual using such dating applications did not disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation publiquely. However, on Tinder, users have the possibility to automatically have the users from their phone contact list to be blocked. Which is useful for instance if one does not want some sensitive information displayed on their profile to be shown to friends or family, but to do so they have to allow the application to have access to their contact list.

- *Geolocation* : One's geolocation needs to be activated on their mobile phone in order to use both Tinder and Bumble. One can then decide the distance range in which they want the profile shown to them to be. This enhances a proximity between the users. The maximum distance is 161 km on both platforms.

- *Communication* : Both platforms allow users that match to interact through an online private chat box. This is a communication in real time as users receive instantly messages that have been sent to them. The portability of mobile phones allows users to have access to Tinder and Bumble anywhere as long as they turn on their Wifi or mobile data and their geolocalisation. There is also indirect communication in the way one chooses to self-present through their profile, and some users even try to write in their description some conversation starters to invite other users to send the first message.

- *Visibility* : Each profile is visible for any other user when shown to them or shared by someone else (with a share button on Tinder, or simply with screenshots), unless they pay to unlock the feature allowing them to be "incognito" on the platform. They can also purchase options to gain more visibility and thus more potential matches. As I stated previously, this public visibility can also be a threat for some queer individuals. If Tinder allows a user to create a profile without showing their face and thus stay relatively anonymous, Bumble on the other hand requires the face to be clearly visible. This can be a challenge for users in the way they self-present and perceive other's gender or sexual identities.

- *Authenticity* : If previously users needed a Facebook account to log into both Tinder and Bumble, they now can do so with a mobile phone number instead. They also have the option to link their profiles to their Instagram and their Spotify account. This

multiplatform and multimediality allow users to share more aspects of their life and personality and thus to appear more authentic. Indeed, if a user does not take the time to put any information on their profile they are often perceived as lazy, unserious or unauthentic by other users.

<u>Appendix 7 : Hookup culture</u>

According to Lee (2019) "hookup" is a term that does not have a clear definition, but the author defined it as "*a variety of intimate relationships that are mainly associated with game-like playing for sexual pleasure, with some chance to develop into "romance," yet do not guarantee any commitment beyond*" (p.3). The "game-like" refers here to the swiping affordance. Six of my participants told me how Tinder has the reputation to be a "hookup app", where users, and especially cisgender heterosexual men, are looking for casual sexual relationships only : "*I would say Tinder isn't a queer app. Yes, like Tinder is not for queers. There are some queers in there, but it's mostly a straight hookup app*" (Charlie, 26). Lee (2019) detailed the double standards that exist about women's sexuality. If "hookup culture", that I define as the normalization of casual sexual relationships in our society, is often perceived as a symbol of freedom and resistance against patriarchy, it is mostly, if not only, accessible to men (Lee, 2019). Women's sexuality is taboo and often stigmatized. Lee (2019) used the work of Freitas (2013) and Levy (2010) that suggested that "hookup culture" was rooted in patriarchal beliefs, in alignment with heteronormative pornography content, and was reinforcing the ideas that women are to be submissive and objectified as sexual objects by men. Blue (22) felt a difference in how users were using Tinder, depending on their gender:

> "*I feel like hetero men, they basically use that to have either a one night stand or just have sex with someone. I guess that's basically... And their approach is always pretty shitty I would say. I'm only talking about the basic white hetero guy. But there are also some other of course exceptions*".

The discourse among my participants revealed that gender norms and stereotypes were interiorised and normalized. It can be illustrated for example by a conversation between myself and Melissa (28) during our interview :

> "*- Okay. So what do you look at first when you look at other girls' profiles ? - I would say, well, in the pictures mostly like... It sounds weird, but it gives me good vibes [...] Like not too crazy [...] But I feel like it's also a stereotype, depending on the pictures, but more like with the face you get to know a little bit if she looks like a kind person. - What would be crazy to you ? - She will be more like... Like one night stands. But that is a stereotype. I'm stereotyping them probably*".

Despite the double standard and the taboo linked to women's sexuality (Lee, 2019). Certain of my participants told me through their experience, or the experiences of other women they know, that women are also looking for hookups on dating applications. For instance, Cléo

(28) told me that she was using dating applications not to find a romantic partner but mostly in the hope to eventually find a regular sex partner. In addition, Charlie (26) felt like

> "*Tinder is the exception for women to be accepted in going for hookups. Of course, many men are like shocked that a woman is on Tinder and is looking for a hookup instead of a relationship because women can't have hookups. But I think that is more of a social aspect than an app aspect. And I think on Tinder is mostly like women go there because they want a hookup [...]*".

However, I would argue that if it starts to be more accepted for women to have freedom in their sexuality, inequalities and stereotypes are still very prevalent. I also detailed how the question of safety was crucial on heteronormative dating applications, as it can be a dangerous space for women, the LGBTQ+ community, as well as other members of minority groups. Lee (2019), as well as Lumsden and Harmer (2019) demonstrated how these online violence (such as homophobia, sexism, racism, transphobia, etc…) were not contained to the online world but were actually mirroring and reproducing all kind of violences (for instance physical, psychological, symbolic, sexual, etc) that already exist in the offline world.