Why Swipe Right?
An ethnographic exploration of how college students use Tinder

A Sociology and Anthropology Thesis by Stephanie Braziel
Advised by Professor Maya Nadkarni
May 11, 2015
Swarthmore College
to michel, my docile companion to the end
Table of Contents

1 Chapter 1: Introduction
4 Chapter 2: Contextualizing the Field
18 Chapter 3: Reviewing the Literature
27 Chapter 4: The Tinder Tourist
55 Chapter 5: Tinder, Site of the Disciplining Gaze
72 Chapter 6: Conclusion
75 Works Cited
Chapter 1: Introduction

It is difficult to believe that the smartphone dating app Tinder first appeared in the Apple app store - an online marketplace for downloading programs to one’s smartphone – in 2012. Despite its novelty, after only three years the app is firmly entrenched within the cultural landscape for many young adults. At Swarthmore College, the field site for this study, its impact is particularly widespread. Walking through the single college dining hall on this campus of fifteen hundred students recently, I overheard a group of students discussing whether or not to swipe right for another individual. Because “swiping” – a verb that previously connoted credit cards, subway tickets, and the catch phrase of the fox villain on the popular childhood television show Dora the Explorer – has become so closely associated with the process through which Tinder users like another user on the app, I immediately knew what topic they were discussing as I caught this brief snippet while wriggling between tables. If my experiences noticing others using the app throughout the day in a variety of public spaces, or in continuing to meet new couples paired through the app had not made me realize it before, I knew it then: Tinder had arrived.

Studying why and how college students use Tinder carries both anthropological and personal import. As online spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tinder, continue to gain popularity worldwide, they become increasingly relevant spaces through which to examine questions that have long plagued the discipline regarding space, embodiment, and subjectivity. These questions are particularly salient for qualitative researchers to address on apps such as Tinder because closely observing the online and offline social practices of individuals using an app such as Tinder can allow researchers to enrich understandings of how individuals create meaning on new spaces. In addition, the qualitative work of
anthropologists can also illuminate how existing social hierarchies and power dynamics undergird the ways in which individuals exist betwixt and between virtual and offline life.

The endeavor also carries personal interest to me because of my own curiosity at the judgment I have heard others levy individuals seeking connection online. As someone who had never used online dating in large part because of a perhaps old school fear of reaching out to strangers on the internet, the project also stemmed from a desire to understand how and why college students decide to connect with others through the app. As I began using Tinder while beginning my research in order to contextualize the experiences my informants narrated to me during interviews, this experience further helped me to understand not only how individuals construct meaningful relationships both on and with the app, but also how the app functions to alter the subjectivity of its users.

In this paper, I argue that Tinder changes this subjectivity of these college users through the way in which the app begins to condition users to see both others, and then themselves, as objects of desire. To do so, I will first claim that Tinder users initially speak about using the app in order to enact a consumerist fantasy that they can instrumentalize their social relationships. This process of instrumentalization refers to the manner through which individuals describe the app as a space in which they can pick and choose between desirable individuals in the same way they can speak about going to the supermarket to pick and choose a particular brand of soup.

Their conceptualization of the app as a stigmatized fantasy space initially spurs them to view others on the app in a distancing and objectifying framework; it is in this way that their app use finds a powerful metaphor in tourism.

It is in these first stages where informants can most cleanly distance their own actions from the exacting (and instrumentalizing) gaze they place upon others as they judge the presentations of other users on the app. In other words, through acting on the app as a
tourist is encouraged to do while on holiday, Tinder users treat others as one treats objects; they treat others according to the logic of consumptive capitalism.

However, through listening to individuals’ accounts of how they move through a variety of app uses, this narration complicates the metaphor of the “Tinder tourist.” Although in the first stages of using Tinder, the tourism metaphor is apt to describe how users practice techniques of self-distancing, their experiences of the app then become more complicated as they continue swiping for others. By the mere fact of using Tinder - no matter how these students use it - they cannot preserve their distance from others on the app. They have to become a local on the app - and thus they begin to produce that same exacting, objectifying gaze upon themselves.
Chapter 2: Contextualizing the field

2.1 An introduction to Tinder

Loud pop music enveloped me as searched for the last seat near Kerry in the bright orange light of Paces, the student run cafe, at Swarthmore College. Since it was Kerry’s birthday dinner, I did not find the constant stream of friends and acquaintances to the table surprising, and found myself gazing at the new mural on the wall - a new, cartoon-ish addition to the comically bright space - until conversation turned to recent sexual encounters. I strained to hear what she and Kerry were saying, and heard a string of words I could not piece together; she had found an attractive man that she had just matched with while using Tinder, and began reaching for her phone.

“Tinder, what’s Tinder?” I tried to speak loudly enough across the din.

In between bouts of laughter, Kerry responded: “It’s like Grindr for straight people.”

I had learned about Grindr, a smartphone dating app used by gay men primarily for casual sexual encounters, through Kerry earlier in the year. I knew that he and other gay friends had used the app many times to find casual sex while occasionally making a more lasting friend, and I was enamored by both the app and his trust of strangers. He had described many times in which arrived at the homes of strangers he had begun chatting with through Grindr only an hour prior.

Yet as I sat in the pulsating music and alongside old friends and new acquaintances, I looked more closely at this newcomer. Knowing this sexualized reputation of Grindr though my college-aged gay male friends, I had difficulty hiding my surprise and judgment that she, too, could use such a similar app. I thought about my own upbringing and the distrust instilled within me for meeting strangers over the internet; I thought of my feminist leanings and wondered how she could allow others to objectify her as they only saw her brief photos and text before deciding to “like” or “pass” on her profile, terms I will define in greater depth in the next
subsection. But most of all, I thought of how anxious I became considering how to present myself online. Although I knew others did not face the same pressure, I wondered how they navigated presenting themselves to others – and judging the presentations of others - as they used this app.

I begin with this anecdote because to speak of why and how Swarthmore College students use Tinder requires addressing the constellation of factors that affect their use of the app - beginning with my own positionality as a student-researcher becoming introduced to the app in similar ways as my informants.

In this chapter, I will illustrate a variety of factors which contextualize students’ impressions of the app. To do so, I begin with a description of what an app is and how Tinder functions through recounting how I entered the field site and introduce Swarthmore College, the site of my study. Next, I describe my methodology, and my interactions with informants before describing who my informants are greater depth

Next, I will highlight the rise of online dating and corporate history of Tinder, which together play a background role in how the app developed as it did.

At this point, I will highlight Tinder’s presence in both public settings - such as pop culture - and briefly mention its importance in private conversations.

Finally, given the constellation of factors affecting the information informants’ communicate -and I interpret - within the space of the study, I will address this study’s limitations and strengths.

### 2.2 Architecture of the app, or how an ethnographer enters the field

After my introduction to the app in Paces cafe many months before the beginning of my thesis research, I started to notice the app mentioned in dining hall conversations and online articles alike. I thought about it over the summer while in India, as the group of college-aged volunteer tourists I was conducting research with created a “fake” profile late one night unattached to any of their names, photos, or Facebook pages, curious to see if anyone in the near
vicinity used the app. I thought about it again after reading that one of its founders came forward saying that another co-founder had been sexually harassing her. Finally, I downloaded the app in conjunction with beginning this research project as I hoped my experiences using the app could assist in better understanding my informants’ experiences.

Since Tinder is a mobile application (or app), which means that it is a small program designed to run on a smartphone or tablet in the same way you would access a program such as a word editor on a computer, I had to first go the “app” store to download it. Once it installed on my phone and I clicked on the “app” icon, a screen appeared suggest that I can “Anonymously ‘Like’ or ‘Pass’ people Tinder suggests.”. Below that text appears the outline of an iphone and the photo of a blonde woman with a dog being liked. The large blue button at the bottom of the screen asked me to “Log in with Facebook,” another social media website in which users use their given names to connect with friends. At the bottom of the screen lies a small black exclamation point stating “We don’t post anything to Facebook”. There is no way to log onto Tinder without also logging into a Facebook account, and so I click on the blue button to link the two accounts.

I knew from using the app with friends that the profile - or the central page displaying the photos, first name, age, and text based description of a user - formed the centerpiece of the app, and I wanted to go to that page first to customize what I displayed. The app automatically links photos from Facebook to display on the Tinder profile, so I pick one of me smiling from the waist up, hair slightly messy in front of the blurred background of a park in Madrid; I choose not to include any more, in large part because I do not know what other pictures to choose. Similarly, I choose to leave the five hundred characters of text on the profile blank. I notice that I have the option to select my gender as either male or female, but the app has already selected the gender as “female” in accordance with what Facebook lists.

Before clicking on the “flame” icon at the top of the page which will allow me to view the profiles of others, I decide that I want to view the preferences that Tinder uses to match me with
other users based on its algorithm, so I click to the “Discovery Preferences” page under the settings gear. The first button I see is called “Discovery,” which allows me to be “discovered” so that other individuals who use Tinder can view my profile; I keep that checked on.

Next, you slide the “Distance” indicator to ten miles from the fifty that originally appears. This means that the profiles that you will be looking at will appear from individuals whose phone or tablet signal indicates that they are within 10 miles of you. I then slide the upper and lower limit for age to set somewhere between 21 and 25, although the app allows you to select ages anywhere between 18 and 55+. Finally, you click on the “show” button to select whether you would like to view the profiles of only men, only women, or both men and women.

At last, I am anxious to start using Tinder, so I navigate to the page with the “flame” at the top. As I wait for the app to take me to load profiles one by one on the screen, my profile image appears on the screen with a red pulsating circle that extends outwards, making me feel as though there is a honing device locating others in the vicinity.

And finally, the first profile loads. I look closely at Matthew, 22, who appears in a button shirt and leather jacket, sitting on the edge of a long couch in a dimly lit room with a glass tumbler in hand. When I click on his photo, I am able to see his whole profile, gaining the ability to swipe through all of the photos he has listed, see the text description he used to describe himself, and any specific mutual Facebook friends or interests in common.

I notice he does not have any text to describe himself, and swipe through the photos. Almost all of them are photos he took of himself driving or in the bathroom mirror and what is colloquially termed “selfies.” We have no interest or friends in common. I can’t quite place it, but there’s something about him that turns you off. Perhaps it is just nervousness about making such a split-second decision about whether or not I want to connect with him based on such a cursory glimpse.

So I click the button labeled “Done” in the corner and navigate back to the page with the first image. I have four options. The two larger circles in the bottom of the page – the Red X on
the left and the green heart on the right – allow me to decide whether or not I would like to match with or pass on this individual. I decide to click on the X, or swipe left, to pass on this individual. If I had a change of heart and did want to match with this individual after all, I could click on the yellow circular arrow which functions as an “undo” button you can - provided that I forked over the $10 per month for this “Tinder Plus” feature. If you I did so, I could also gain the ability to use the final fourth button – the blue location marker – which would allow me to swipe in another city in a different continent altogether. Since I do not want to spend the money, I am unable to “undo” my left swipe, and it seems as though this individual is gone to the ether forever. I stop worrying quickly though – a line-up of new individuals awaits.

First name, age, photo, distance away, Instagram account, mutual Facebook friends or interest in common: the structure of Tinder is the same on every profile, and they continue cascading past.

I arrive on the next profiles. As I spend more time on the app, I notice my pace quickening as I swipe. Left, right, left, left, left. I felt myself developing a rhythm to the queue of profiles passing swiftly by.

Soon, the screen pops up with a new message: “Congratulations! You have a new match.” Another user has also swiped right, or liked my profile. The screen on the app asks if I want to “chat now” or “keep playing.” I click “chat now,” and felt nervous and excited navigating to the messages screen to see who responded. He’s cute, and he messages almost immediately: “I’m in Philly, you?”

I was not, and I do not respond, but I cannot say why. For whatever reason, it still seems strange that I am aware another stranger in the vicinity who has my first name, age, and photo has swiped right on my profile, let alone to message them.

I do remember my family telling me as a small child not to talk to strangers, though. It is some time, then, before I begin my first Tinder conversation but I see how quickly they tend to
last before moving on. Sometimes I begin conversations, but most of the time others do. More frequently, though, I do not end up messaging your matches at all.

Occasionally when chatting with other users I notice the button to “unmatch” or “report” another user. Although I do not think much of the feature at first, I suddenly understand its use when one of my matches becomes angry that I did not text him back after he gave me his number. “Is that too large of a task for your tiny brain? You stupid cunt.” Clicking on the “report” button before “unmatching” myself with him – meaning that we cannot contact each other again – gives me a small sense of relief, although he reappears under a new photo many months later. It is some time before I use the app comfortably again.

For now, though, it is my first time on the app, and I continue swiping for a while longer. I do not respond to any of the messages that pop up on my phone for some time, but it is a while longer before I go back to reading my book.

2.3 Swarthmore College

A description of Swarthmore College presented on the US News and World Reports College site provides an apt, if idealistic, impression of the campus:

Think intellectual exploration with no limits, whether it’s sharing perspectives with a classmate from another continent or listening to a Rhodes Scholar. Experience nights that stretch into mornings critiquing educational policy, or integrating music and art into a new performance piece, or building, with classmates, a robot that can navigate rough terrain. At Swarthmore, the pushing of boundaries and pursuit of knowledge and truth isn’t just something we do. It’s who we are (Swarthmore College n.d.).

Although “intellectual exploration” this description suggests may strike as a tad optimistic, as a transfer student from another elite liberal arts college, in my experience this description does speak to the heart of the strong focus on academics at the school. Although the college also emphasizes a progressive, social justice framework in comparison to other colleges which takes the form of frequent conversation about privilege and identity for many students at the college, the Swarthmore academic culture is central. Students often spend time studying, even at the expense of the social relationships with others.
Because of both the intense the time commitment of intellectual life at Swarthmore in addition to the expense to taking a $12 twenty-five minute train ride to get into Philadelphia, students often stay on this residential campus throughout the week; students colloquially term this the “Swarthmore Bubble” because of how insular the campus can feel. Students tend to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities during their leisure time.

Although such a large number of Swarthmore alumni become married after college that the college is colloquially deemed the “Quaker Matchbox,” the college does not foster an active dating scene. If students do choose to find intimate connections while on campus, they tend to either participate in the hook up scene or they become in exclusive, monogamous long term relationships, colloquially deemed being “Swat married” because of the amount of time these couples spend with one another.

2.4 Methodology

a. Recruitment

I recruited participants for this study who were college students older than eighteen in order to avoid contacting participants considered “at risk” given that they are legally minors. I focused most of my recruiting efforts on students from Swarthmore College. To recruit participants to my research project, I circulated my recruitment text through a variety of forums, including the all campus announcement page and through an email directed to sixty friends and acquaintances from Swarthmore who had expressed interest in my research.

When circulating my recruitment text through these forums, I gave participants the option of either emailing me if interested or filling in their contact information on a confidential Google Documents form. Although both methods provided potential research participants with the same type of information to contact me with, I distributed the link to a Google Documents form in addition to my email because I believed that students would be more likely to fill out an online form if they are interested in the project than email me, although this did not prove accurate.
I found my best success with recruiting participants through the email directed to friends and acquaintances about my project. Although I avoided interviewing close friends on the topic because I wanted to focus on the experiences of others with whom I had not discussed my project, these contacts often passed along my info to other students they knew to participate in my research.

b. Data Collection

From these recruitment efforts, I recruited thirteen students total in order to conduct one sixty to ninety minute semi-structured interview about their experiences on the app. I used these interviews to determine students’ backgrounds, reasons for joining Tinder, and experiences on the app. Following from this information, I asked how students understood their own virtual representations on the site and how they navigated the virtual representations of others. During this portion of the study I collected handwritten notes of what participants talked about and - if participants consented – recorded an audio recording so that I could later make a transcript of the interview.

I supplemented these interviews with a participant observation component of my research. For participants who were willing, I sat down with them for twenty to thirty minutes as they swiped through individuals while using the app Tinder to observe and ask them questions about their use of Tinder; this time spent swiping through individuals took place immediately following my interview with them.

This observational period was divided into two parts. For the first half of the time, silently observed how research participants used the app as they would ordinarily use it with others around, gaining a sense of the rate at which individuals swiped through profiles on Tinder, any other patterns I noticed, etc. For the second half of this time, I had individuals narrate their use of Tinder to me, explaining what thoughts they have as they swiped through individuals. During this time sitting directly with informants using the app, my data took the form of field notes of their spoken words, physical comportment, and their phone screen.
I felt that this observational component was important to giving me greater insight into how my subjects interact with the app and some of the conscious thoughts individuals choose to share when specifically swiping through others’ profiles. Because I was able to also observe both bodily comportment of the individual swiping, the narrated thoughts of the individual swiping, and the app itself as an individual is using it, I was able to gain a better sense of how study participants used the app in a way that I could not observe during an interview.

My own autoethnographic reflections upon my own use of Tinder proved helpful in highlighting what areas I hoped to investigate in greater detail in the study. These personal experiences were especially helpful in refining my engagement with research participants during the observational component of my research, as my experience using the app alerted me to the various factors which may affect app usage.

c. Interviewees

Because the primary way interviewees indicated hearing about my project was through word of mouth and the Swarthmore campus is so small, I was acquaintances with all but one of my informants before the study. This point is important to note, since as I later discuss when talking about the stigma present when using the app, my prior relationship and status as a fellow Swarthmore community influenced the interview dynamic.

The youngest person I interviewed in my study was Daniel, a gay underclassman from the Southwest. He had experience using the app while as a high school student and again when entering college. Although at the time of interview he was in a monogamous relationship with someone that he had not met from Tinder, he enjoyed using the app and would get on it again, although not for dating.

Ricardo and Thomas are both juniors with strong foreign ties because of their parents’ respective international careers; because of this professional mobility, they both have lived on multiple continents while growing up and spoke languages other than English while at home, Thomas has spent most of his recent life before college on the East Coast while Ricardo did not
live in the US until college. Although Thomas was dating someone that he had met through the
app, both expressed mixed feelings about if they would use Tinder again.

Elena and Michael are both seniors; Michael is from the East Coast, while Elena is from
the south, although her family still has strong ties to family living in Latin America. Michael has
always lived in the same rural hometown near his family, with the exception of attending
Swarthmore and when he earned a scholarship to attend a boarding school for high school, and
he identities strongly with these locales. Elena describes herself from a place that is the
“complete opposite from Swarthmore, like culturally conservative” and her parents are first
generation Americans now working professional careers in her hometown. At the time of the
interview, Elena is dating someone she met through the app. Although Michael would like to
date someone from Tinder, he has not had luck and feels conflicted about his app use.

2.5 Rise of online dating

These college students have come of age at a time when important changes in the dating
landscape are occurring: the rise of social networking websites, a term defined as “web-based
services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded
system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and
traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Ellison and boyd
2006). Beginning with the launch of sixdegrees.com in 1997, other social network websites
dedicated to “enabling users to articulate and make visible their social networks” also developed,
such as Ryze, Myspace, Facebook, and other sites with niche audiences, such as the Portuguese
language community (Ellison and boyd 2006). However, many of these sites organized around
individuals rather than particular interests, with “individuals at the center of their own
community” (Ellison and boyd 2006).

Although individuals found sexual and romantic entanglements in a variety of ways
through these social networking (Gideon 2012), some websites specifically intended for the
purpose of non-platonically meeting others began to appear. Websites such as match.com began to appear, which used algorithms to match users, or Craigslist’s missed connections feature - which took the personal ads sections of newspapers online – served to facilitate these encounters among strangers who may not have been part of an individuals’ offline network.

These websites did not form the first space that strangers could connect “virtually” for non-platonic purposes – newspaper personal ads or even marriage catalogues from yesteryears also served that purpose – although perhaps they did serve to popularize the practice. However, smartphone apps dedicated to dating or casual sexual relationships only appear on the market in 2009 – two years after the first Apple iPhone was released. Some notable apps include Skout, which began in 2007 as a social network but was rebranded as a dating app in 2009, and Grindr, which was designed as an app for gay men which measured – in feet - how far away other users of the app were. Unlike previous ways for strangers to connect, then, these dating apps included a new element, by being able to utilize GPS technology to indicate exactly how close users are to one another.

Websites and apps based on these technologies also included another new element: their place within the corporate landscape. Beginning with international marriage brokerage services (more commonly known as mail order brides) and continuing with social networking websites and apps, these tools to connect carry a real price. The matchmaking industry is a multibillion dollar per year industry, and the creation of a new website or app facilitating non-platonic connections may serve to connect individuals, but it also must function to meet a bottom-line.

2.6 Corporate History

Although the politics of Swarthmore student may tend to lean left, liberal, and foster an environment of political correctness, the company behind this popular does not carry these same commitments.

Tinder was released as a service in late May 2012 but its creation began long before that time. The narrative around Tinder focuses on two main co-founders, Rad and Mateen, who were
acquaintances in the Los Angeles area private schools before both attending USC together. At USC, the two supposedly became friends and preliminary business partners, creating the idea for the app long before they created the app while working in another technology business (Summers 2013), and the two drew upon their connections from their time participating in fraternities at USC to popularize their app at “elite party schools” (Summers 2014) The way that the two present this narrative of Tinder’s start as one in which they operated essentially as a startup being “wined and dined” by venture capitalists, yet primarily owned by IAC, the same corporation that also owns the online dating sites match.com and OKCupid (Summers 2014). Although Tinder did not initially make money from its site, it now offers a “premium” version of the app and native ad content in the form of the occasional sponsored profile.

Tinder makes money through the sale of native add tonent

These narrative ruptures in unpacking the relationship between Tinder as an independently operated startup or as the arm of a multimillion dollar corporation are also important in light of a former Tinder employee and co-founder who filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against one of the other Tinder co-founders, Joel Matteen. Whitney Woolfe, the former employee, created the marketing plan to promote Tinder at sororities, “having members of sorority chapters download the app before she’d go to the corresponding brother fraternity—they’d open the app and see all these cute girls they knew” (Summers 2014). Tinder had fewer than 5,000 users before Wolfe made her trip, Munoz says; when she returned, there were some 15,000(Summers 2014). In her lawsuit, she also says that she suggested the name “Tinder” (Summers 2014). The lawsuit also states that Wolfe was forced out of the company and denied the status of being recognized as one of the “founders” because of her gender and a soured relationship with Matteen that led to him sexually harassing her while others in the leadership at Tinder passively watched on (Summers 2014).

2.7 Media and Tinder
If anything, the lawsuit only served to heighten the fervor around the app. Even with a settlement in the sexual harassment case in November, Tinder still serves as a cultural touchstone within American and international pop culture. There is the regular slew of articles written on pop culture website Buzzfeed ranging from the mundane - what would happen if Harry Potter characters had Tinder accounts – to the serious, such as how Tinder solidifies racial and class-based differences (How I Rebuilt Tinder And Discovered The Shameful Secret Of Attraction 2014; Dunleavy 2015). New York Times opinions articles have both defended and vilified the ways in which the app connects individuals (Finkel 2015), and business articles reflect upon the company’s business decisions (Summers 2014). In online spaces, individuals have created websites devoted to how to use Tinder, and blogs dedicated to posting sensational profiles or messages (Tinder Subreddit n.d.; Humanatarians of Tinder n.d.). The terminology of swiping and even more colloquial parlance such as “Tinderella” have become a part of the cultural lexicon (Tinderella: A Modern Fairy Tale 2014).

2.8 Challenges and Considerations in the Field

From the interview transcripts and observational field notes that I collected, I coded this data to look for patterns or trends in the way college students used Tinder. However, conducting my research project in this manner does create some disadvantages. For instance, my project does not utilize a participant-observation research method which would allow me to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individuals’ Tinder use and their everyday activities. Thus, I am limited in analyzing what these study participants narrate about their use of the app rather than being able to contextualize what they say with what they do, as informants may not be aware of this discrepancy.

In addition, although my informants used the app in a variety of different ways, I am limited by both the number of transcripts I was able to analyze in addition to relative homogeneity of identities they carried, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class.
Finally, the auto-ethnographic approach that I take in informing my interest in my research, and how I frame my research questions creates challenges when ensuring that I do not privilege my own understandings and categorizations of Tinder usage over the experiences of my informants.

However, my participation in the research phenomena which I am studying can also be seen as a positive attribute of my research. Especially because of the short-term nature of my study, my auto-ethnographic reflection allows me to align my bodily practices with those of my informants, enabling me to “become involved in making places that are similar to [my informants] and thus feel that [I] am similarly emplaced” (Pink 2009:40). In other terms, my experience going through the same motions as other users on the app enables me to gain a sense of how others’ understand their own experiences through contextualizing my own usage.

In particular, my research method was fruitful because it allowed me to understand how college students narrate their lives for me through asking examining their processes of rationalization. Although my findings are limited by both the number and identities/experiences of informants in the study, my choice of research methods and ways of engaging in the field still allow me to examine what sorts of choices these college students make when presenting themselves on Tinder.
Chapter 3: Reviewing the Literature

3.1 Setting the Scene

The black lettering of the clock had just shifted to two in the early hours of a Sunday morning when I entered my room, alone. Earlier in the evening, I had spent the night dancing and mingling with friends. For the first time since early April, when I last attended a Swarthmore party, I felt like putting in effort to get ready for the evening. I enjoyed spending over an hour squatting in front of a full length mirror wedged between the end of my unmade bed and the overflowing laundry hamper in the closet, listening to a new age pop band introduced to me my first year, straightening my wavy hair into a smooth sheen, before applying a thick line of eyeliner, mascara, and a red lipstick. I chose a somewhat sheer blue shirt with white stripes with a pair of cuffed white shorts. I felt that I looked a bit more stereotypically feminine than I like, but I also felt so comfortable and sure of my body. I felt attractive, and I enjoyed embodying that power.

When I returned to my room later that evening, I felt somewhat less satisfied. I had hoped to be able to have the flirtatious interactions with never materialized. Still wanting that validation, though, I opened up the Tinder app on my tablet. After checking my “Discovery Preferences” to make sure that my preferred genders gender and distances were set properly, I clicked on the flame logo.

Due to the design of the app, appearances are important. Because I had only downloaded the app within the past week, I had not been able to either take or upload a profile picture that I felt attractive in, and seeing my current profile picture made me self-conscious; it was over a year old, and featured me smiling in front of a tourist site, messy hair, glasses, and all. Thus, even though I spent a few minutes swiping for others and had even made a few matches, I decided to take a new main photo late that evening. I spent over an hour in the process of taking the perfect photo with camera of my tablet, uploading the photo to my computer to Photoshop
to edit out a distracting string of Christmas lights in the background, uploading the photo to Facebook in order to finally upload the photo to the app. It was almost 5am when I finished, and I was exhausted. Placing the tablet on the pillow by my side, I reached above my head to switch off the lamp.

3. 2 Contextualizing the Landscape

Setting the scene in such an experiential manner as I did draws upon a larger discussion about how anthropologists represent their first exposure to a place. So often have anthropologists employed this evocative, personalized account of the field that – even since the earliest days of anthropology – it has become a trope (Kondo 1990:7; Malinowski 1922). Arrival stories attempt to “play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork...Always they are responsible for setting up the initial positions of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader” (Pratt 1986:45).

However, in allowing the author to present the field to others as it was initially presented to him/her, this narrative tool can also present problems. At the risk of attempting to provide structure and recover meaning where phenomena are more complicated than they first appear, using the trope of a setting can present introduction into (and subsequent knowledge of) a social world as objective, hegemonic, and unchanging rather than as emplaced, situated, and emerging (Kondo 1986; Crapazano 1977; Kondo 1990:8).

Yet setting the scene in this way can also serve to make an argument for why a particular place should exist as a field site. For instance, Boellstorff, relies on an evocative first-person account of his arrival in Second Life (2008). However, in using the same language as the beginning of Malinowski’s Return of the Argonauts to describe his arrival, the narrative strategy carries a different aim. Here, Boellstorff begins couching his claim for why anthropologists can study culture(s) within virtual spaces precisely through using “the setting trope” in Malinowski’s iconic work. In arguing that anthropologists have always already been studying the virtual, as
“to ‘imagine yourself’ in a new place” is “to be virtually there,” Boellstorff makes the case that Second Life, too, presents a social world for anthropological consideration (2008:6).

Between the work of Boellstorff and others, online and virtual spaces have emerged within the discipline as important sites for sociocultural work (Boellstorff 2008; Kendall 2002; Miller 2011; Gershon 2010; Humphrey 2009; Coleman Forthcoming). Work such as these seem to follow from a new understanding of field-sites, predicated upon “an anthropology whose objects are no longer conceived as automatically and naturally anchored in space” – physical space, that is – and to instead “use a focus on the way space is imagined (but not imaginary!) as a way to explore the processes through which such conceptual processes of place making meet the changing global economic and political conditions of lived spaces” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18, 11).

Although anthropologists studying virtual worlds may find the discipline more welcoming to these field sites due to new understandings of space and virtuality, technology changes challenge the discipline to further re-conceptualize cultural practices in virtual worlds. For instance, location-based apps such as Tinder may further problematize these categories.

Particularly important to my research is the manner in which my informants discuss Tinder as a virtual space which blurs the boundary between online and offline presentations of the body, particularly when talking about attraction. Thus, the remainder of this chapter will focus on literature relevant to this endeavor.

I will first engage with how previous work on location-based apps addresses the body, yet lacks sufficient attention to the interstices between online and offline bodies. Next, I will overview some canonical theories of the body in order to establish how my work on Tinder enhances these scholarly conversations.

### 3.3 Locating the body in location-based apps

Within recent years, advances in technology have allowed for the emergence of technology forms termed location-based apps, location-aware mobile media, locative media, etc.
Although the recent emergence of these new forms of technology and methodological considerations – such as the amount of time it takes for anthropologists to conduct and write up research – have perhaps contributed to the dearth of anthropological literature on the topic, other social scientists have begun to write on the topic of these apps.

Designed to run on software that can run on devices such as tablets or smartphones, these apps utilize the GPS location of the phone in order to provide some feature of their service. For instance, an app such as Tinder uses locative technology in order to only allow other users within a certain geographical area to appear when swiping through images to find “matches.” Other apps, such as Dodgeball or Foursquare, allow users to virtually indicate when they have arrived to a real world location, enabling individuals who are connected to the user to see their location and perhaps go out of their way to meet at that location in real life.

Current literature on the location-based media apps primarily engages with the connection between space and sociality while overlooking reflection on the body in these virtual spaces. For instance, researchers in communication and linguistics have discussed how these apps allow an individual to “see” or spatialize others on both cognitive and physical maps, which can enable new systems of surveillance (Sutko and Silva 2010; Silva and Firth 2010). Works have examined the parochialization and privatization or public space due to the way that individuals employ mobile social networks on these apps (Humphreys 2010). Due to these concerns, researchers have called for further focus on the management of online and offline social relationships, termed “hybrid ecologies,” which emphasizes the dynamic way that space and sociality are intertwined (Licoppe 2013).

This omission of the body when considering the relationship between space and sociality extends beyond just location-based media apps on today’s smartphones, but also in their close relative: the mobile phone. Here, too, researchers in the social sciences more broadly remained preoccupied with the permeability between online and offline space and those implications for social networks (Townsend 2000; Ling 2004). Very rarely do these accounts grapple with
questions of subjectivity, as with Nafus and Tracey’s work on the constitution of personhood vis-à-vis mobile phone use an exception; even then, their work does not engage with the body (2002).

However, although anthropologists have not yet contributed extensively to literature on location based apps, there is a rich tradition of anthropologists considering the body as a subject of research, particularly in virtual spaces.

It may seem strange to imagine online spaces as enabling individuals to have a corporeal presence irreducible to the offline world, but this sense of strangeness comes from an understanding of bodies as only a physical presence. Ethnographic work has shown how individuals can and do craft online presences, (Boellstorff 2008; Kendall 2002; Miller 2011; Gershon 2010; Humphrey 2009; Coleman Forthcoming). These virtual presences exist in and of themselves; they are not just replacements online selves, but rather function as “sites of self-making in their own right” (Humphrey 2009; Boellstorff 2008:149). However, uncanny linkages may exist between offline and online presences, underscoring the consequences online life may have for offline embodiments. In work on the “anonymous” chat rooms of Anonymous and within an ethnic community, the interactions between virtual “selves” can have serious consequences in the offline world, ranging from verbal threats to arrest (Coleman 2012; Humphrey 2009). In fact, anthropologists have noted that there can be some confusion at how exactly to conceptualize the differences between these presences. Although at some times the difference between virtual and offline bodies may seem clear – as when presenting oneself as an avatar of an animal – there may also be some confusion as to the boundaries between online and offline embodiments (Boellstorff 2008). Facebook profiles present an interesting example of this, as users may consciously meticulously craft their profile and online presence and yet confuse others’ online presences as authentically referencing who these other individuals are (Gershon 2010). Indeed, this anthropological reflection on virtual presence and online bodies highlights the ways in which literature on locative-based apps could stand to benefit. Though
previous research on space and sociality are important in order to better understand how these apps are reorganizing real world social practices, they need to more thoroughly investigate the linkages between online bodies and offline selves.

Focusing on the body woven into various sociocultural fabrics in online and offline spaces is crucial for my own study on attraction. In order to consider the politics of attraction on a location-based app such as Tinder, we need to interrogate the way individuals understand and inhabit their bodies in both on and offline spaces.

It is in this way that I position my research in similar ways as Nicole Constable does when she writes on internet romance, as she focuses on “the depiction and perception of bodies and the intersections between bodies and bodily experiences in virtual space on the internet and in real life” (Constable 2007:266). Although her research does not occur on mobile apps per se, her understanding of the attractive and desiring body in internet dating carries direct impact on my own work. She writes that:

Distinctions can perhaps be made between three levels of bodily representations and experiences: (1) the photographs and written descriptions of bodies on the internet; (2) the physical or embodied responses to Internet representations; and (3) face-to-face interactions that highlight the potential ruptures and disjunctures between Internet and real-life bodies and experiences (266).

Constable’s focus on the interstices betwixt and between face-to-face and an internet mediated presence presents an important model for how to imagine virtual bodies in locative apps.

Although some academic pieces on online dating sites and Grindr – a location-based gay hookup app – have begun to focus attention on the space between Internet and real-life bodies, currently scholarship does not engage with the relationship between attraction and the presentation of online and offline bodies (Birnholtz et al. n.d.; Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2014; Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford 2014; Quiroz 2013). However, in not explicitly engaging with experiences and representations of the body, these researchers miss an opportunity to investigate new understandings of the relationship between the body and social realities. How
does the body in virtual spaces exist as a medium which both reflects and shapes cultural norms?

### 3.4 Cultivating an Attractive Body

To answer this question, I turn to traditional social theories on the body to explicate how the body as conceived in canonical texts acts as subject and object to cultural norms.

Bodies “are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself” (Reischer and Koo 2004:311). This understanding of the body as both a product and agent of cultural influences provides an important conceptual node for understanding the standards of attraction by which an individual interprets other bodies on Tinder. Because “the bodies we cultivate are ultimately indexes and expressions of the social world they inhabit,” bodies – including the bodies we are attracted to – do not exist as benignly biological entities. Rather, the myriad of ways culture and the body intertwine ensures that the latter acts “an icon of social values and, less benignly, as a mechanism of social power and control” (Reischer and Koo 2004:299).

Reischer and Koo’s review article on body ideals lays out two theoretical orientations literature on the body: the body as either a passive symbol of social norms of attraction; or second, as an active agent in reinforcing or challenging those cultural norms.

Mary Douglas’ work in Natural Symbols provides one emblematic example of what Reischer and Koo describe as a symbolic approach to the body. When Douglas writes on the “strong tendency to replicate the social situation in symbolic form by drawing richly on bodily symbols in every possible dimension,” this analysis recognizes how the body becomes a site upon which individuals represent the social realities they face (Reischer and Koo 2004:299).

Other researchers, too, have built upon this theoretical orientation to reference how bodies considered beautiful signify cultural norms. Indeed, in Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*, a work on the cultural construction of fat as an undesirable trait within women, Bordo notes how women’s bodies become symbols of adherence to social norms; thus as social norms
change, so too do interpretations of appropriate or inappropriate displays of flesh (Bordo 2003). Thus, as a symbolic approach to the body recognizes, “the quality of attractiveness that we find in the bodies around us is not insulated from cultural and cognitive processes; attractiveness is that which is found ideologically appealing within an overarching set of values” (Reischer and Koo 2004:300). From the perspective of the body as a signifier of social norms, the attractive body is understood as attractive precisely because of the social markers which render its physical attributes beautiful.

As Erving Goffman argues, one reason bodies carry this symbolic importance is because the presentation of the body indicates that an individual “possesses certain social characteristics” that imply that he “has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (1959:13). Since the body becomes an avenue through which individuals understand they are judged, they take care to manage the impressions that they give versus the impressions others interpret.

However, one critique of literature expressing the body as “symbol” is that the body takes a passive role in representing certain social norms, but cannot play a role in shaping what these ideals are. Thus Reischer and Koo also note that a separate corpus of literature exists which positions the body as “endowed with the capacity to participate in the creation of social meaning,” and thus able to act as an agent through altering cultural norms (Reischer and Koo 2004:307). Judith Butler’s reflection on drag serves as an emblematic example of understanding the relationship between the body and agency. Through noting how drag decouples anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender presentation, Butler notes that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler 2008:212). Although the body may seem to symbolize certain intrinsic identities, rather the performativity of drag highlights its reality” (Butler 2008:211). Within Butler’s framework, then, the body acts in an agentic rather than symbolic manner because an individual engages in a gendered performance that creates the identities it purports to name.
Yet just because the body enacts cultural norms rather than reflects them does not mean that the body always seeks to transgress dominant power structures. Rather, individuals can become the instruments of their own oppression, whether that takes the form of internalizing and then implementing oppressive social structures under the threat of surveillance, or through cultivating particular tastes that reinforce existing class hierarchies (Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 1995). Understanding the body as an agent rather than only as a symbol is important because it allows for a more dynamic discussion of how individuals understand and cultivate a beautiful body. The attractive body is conceptualized not only as a passive text signifying bodily ideals, but as a medium through which to navigate, create, and reinforce cultural norms; in other terms, the corporeal body and social realities mutually constitute one another, even if that agency is enacted through implementing oppressive social structures – such as difficult to achieve beauty norms.

3.5 Engaging the literature

The purpose of my work on Tinder is twofold. First, I noted how the paucity of current literature on location-based apps lacks the ethnographic richness of anthropological work and struggles to include adequate reflection on the relationship between virtual and offline bodies. I propose that my research will help to fill these voids. Through drawing upon understandings of the symbolic and agentic bodies as discussed in the work of Goffman, Bourdieu, and Foucault, I will discuss how college students’ use of Tinder can be applied within virtual spaces.
Chapter 4: The Tinder Tourist

4.1 Introducing Tinder

As Tinder users describe beginning to use the app, their reflections do not seem to have much in common with the social theory on the I presented in the previous chapter. However, analyzing the discrepancies between how Tinder users fantasize about using the app versus the actual reasons they give for beginning use of the app begin to allude to the instrumentalizing and commodifying manner in which informants narrate beginning their app use.

4.2: Tinder elicits the fantasy of connection

Although informants’ individual uses of Tinder varied, they largely fantasize about the purpose of Tinder as a space separated from the quotidian of everyday life, which enables them to connect with others offline for romantic or sexual encounters.

However, every informant understands the purpose of the app in the same way. For instance, some, such as Ricardo saw the primary purpose of the app as an erotic space: “I guess my first reaction to the idea [of Tinder] was that it was completely sexual. Just like stereotypically like completely about sex and like super superficial.” For Ricardo, Tinder became a space ripe for corporeal pleasure as opposed to romantic encounters.

Others, however, saw the purpose of the app as a one for connecting with others with the hopes of pursuing romantic encounters. Although used the app the troll others asking about religious beliefs, alludes to what he sees as the intended purpose of Tinder as he describes in a tone far more serious than the frequent laughter that punctuated the rest of our interview, how he started dating a woman he met on Tinder after he stopped trolling others on the app:

And so I went to this, this, this date with this, this young woman. And we liked each other a lot. And we had a few more dates. And then we started dating. And this whole semester we’ve been dating. And I deleted the, the tinder account, a few days after meeting her because I was like, you know, it was kind of like an end. It was like oh, I had a date. Even if this works or doesn’t work, it’s kind of like I’ve reached the point where I used the app for its purpose and now, now I’m done. I don’t need it anymore.
Implicit within Thomas’ description of Tinder is his assumption that the purpose of the app is to do exactly what he achieved at the end of his time using the app: meeting with someone offline for a date that he had met online through the app. Even though Thomas did not always use the app for this purpose - in fact, as he explained it, the majority of his time on the app he did not used the app “for laughs” in a way to troll others - he still had a concept in his mind of going on a date as the proper use of the app.

This understanding of the purpose of the app as being distinct from the reasons people use the app is also reiterated in what Elena’s description of Tinder when I asked her what she thought the purpose of Tinder was:

I don’t know. I feel like it’s just like an open space where people are trying to connect people roman-mm, not even - romantically or sexually in some way. Like I said there’s like a diversity of like what people want on it and that’s like very obvious and like a big age range too so I think. That's what it's become. And I know like, it's initially became very, it's like very, initially sounded just like very hookup-based, but like that, not necessarily true.

Her description is important because it relates not only how individuals seek romantic or sexual encounters, but also because individuals are seeking connection. Although Elena was the only informant to use this term, the concept undergirded individuals’ understandings of the “ideal” Tinder experience - or at least the idealized purpose of Tinder. In this understanding, Tinder is a tool and a medium for find ways to connect with people offline, vis a vis hook ups, sexual encounters, romantic love interests.

As seen by these informants, Tinder's purpose - as enabling the fantasy of romantic or sexual connection - fits with some of the underlying reasons they mention for using the app. For instance, when I asked Michael why he thought that others used Tinder, he mentions “The reason why, the reason why we're all on Tinder is cause we're all lonely and confused. But that's a separate issue. Um, yeah.” He implies here that his reasons for using Tinder fulfill a need for intimacy that he has not been able to actualize offline. Elena, too, mentions using Tinder because of her dissatisfaction with the opportunities for dating outside of Swarthmore, as
app made her realize “‘Oh, there’s actually a world outside of Swarthmore’ because I feel like here no one really cares, like my entire time here one dude has asked me on a date here at Swat and it was only because [it was] the blind date [event]- what is it? Screw your roommate.” Similarly, when she finds that a friend recently broke up with a significant other, “I just like reminded her that it’s not the end of the world, like there’s so many dudes out there, a lot of fish in the sea, and how is that materialized? Tinder.” When struggling to find allay loneliness or faced with losing an important and wanting a date, Michael and Elena’s conceptualize Tinder as a space where they can fulfill those needs.

However, even as informants tell me that the app is for finding romantic or sexual partners - and some informants even narrate to me some underlying reasons for why they want to use the app in this way - they universally said they began using the app out of a casual curiosity rather than to fulfill this need for intimacy. For instance, Michael describes how:

Like in the initial wave, or like people would get it and look at it, play around and delete it. I didn’t know anyone in the initial push that used it formally, if that makes sense. And so like I guess going to when did I get it, or start using it, I, well I had gotten it early this semester and like really not done a whole lot with it. Just cause I was like finally curious as to what it was and, and how it operated.

Through relating his reasons for using Tinder as a curiosity stemming from how he heard offline about others using the app, he positions his reasons for wanting to use Tinder as divorced from wanting to interact with the individuals on it, but rather to position himself safely as an outsider fulfilling a curiosity about this technological oddity.

Not only do informants frame their use of Tinder as merely out of curiosity spurred by hearing and seeing others use Tinder, but also as a basis for solidifying offline social networks. Even though Elena talked about wanting to date during her senior year, she did not start using Tinder with this in mind:

I had, like, renounced myself to being single all of senior year ‘cause I was just like whatever, I’m going to focus on my school, I’m going to focus on like, you know, what’s going afterwards. There’s no point of getting emotionally attached. Literally before like [the campus library] closed on like a Sunday night I was like "Hey Charlie, do you want to play Tinder with me?” and he’s like "Yeah" so I like
download this app, put up like four pictures, and then we just like start playing Tinder (smiles). Like it was more of a joke and curiosity just to see what it looks like and everything.

Despite being open to a more serious connection, Elena frames downloading the app as a spontaneous, casual decision unrelated to a desire to connect with individuals through the device. Instead, through conceptualizing her reasons for using Tinder both relate to - as she consciously acknowledges - her use of Tinder as a general curiosity and perhaps as a game - as indicated by her language referring to “playing” Tinder. However, it is the fact that she does so with a friend that is interesting here because not only does her downloading the app provide an outlet for a curiosity stirred by off-Tinder conversations about the app, but the offline presence of Charlie and dynamic of downloading and beginning to play Tinder serves as a mechanism of social validation. In other words, her friends’ presence and participating in the beginning of her usage serves to legitimate her being able to use the app out of curiosity in the same way that Michael is assured that he uses the app in a socially acceptable way because of how he frames his use of the app in a greater narrative of how all individuals begin to use the app. Thinking about what others do when they download the app, or downloading the app in the presence of others helps to justify Tinder usage.

In addition, the architecture of the app allows informants to conceive of the app as a casual commitment. For instance, Michael comments how:

Every element about [the app] is so easy that you can get on and in five seconds, say y-, uh, yes I would like to talk to you or no I would like to talk to you to like ten people. And that’s absurd. But it makes it feel like you can use it without really affecting anything else. It, you don’t spend hours making a profile, you don’t really spend much time, you don’t waste anything to say yes or no.

Through providing a low learning curve for using the app, the construction of the app allows Michael to frame his use as a “casual” activity; an activity that does not “really [affect] anything else.”

Although informants may say that the app’s purpose is to facilitate finding romantic or sexual connections, they also state how they begin using the app out of a casual curiosity. Yet
why the discrepancy? As the rest of this chapter will unpack, informants’ Tinder usage is not just about the fantasy of connecting with others through the app, but also the politics behind admitting to - and enacting - this fantasy.

The remainder of this chapter will delve into these politics. First, I will analyze how the discrepancy that exists between why informants say they use the app out of a casual curiosity while they say the app’s purpose is for intimacy results from the stigma of using the app.

I will then posit that Swarthmore College students both use the app to enact fantasies they may not be finding in their offline life, but also distance themselves from this stigma, is through treating their interactions on the app in a distancing and objectifying manner. It is in the objectifying and distancing framework that their use of the app finds a powerful metaphor in tourism.

Finally, this chapter will delve into how the manner through which informants narrate their decisions to “swipe” allows them to distance their actions from the instrumentalizing gaze they use to judge - and desire - the presentations of others.

4.3 The stigma of Tinder

This discrepancy between how Swarthmore Tinder users understand the purpose of the app, their underlying reasons for using the app, and the reasons they give for beginning the app, is caused by the stigma these users feel for turning to an app to meet social needs.

A helpful definition of stigma comes from sociologist Erving Goffman, who defines the concept as occurring when a stranger “possess[es] an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind [... and ] he is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a weak and discounted one” (Goffman 1986:3). In other terms, that stranger somehow possesses a quality that contrasts with those considered “normal” (1986:5). Because what is “normal” depends upon the social context, what is considered a “stigma” varies according to these social contexts as well.
Stigma appeared most visibly in the manner through which informants spoke with me, an interviewer and fellow college student, around more difficult topics. For instance, when I asked Ricardo questions that arose during the course of our conversation such as his “criteria” for choosing others, why he would swipe right for himself, and if he would recommend the app, he embarked on multi-minute diversions and did not always finish answering the questions. He noted “it’s interesting to me to be on this side of the interview;” “what would your [thesis advisor] think of you asking this?”; and because I asked him so many questions, “I get to ask you [the question, it’s] just one thing.” Because the presence of these attempts to divert attention back to me occurred when asking less straightforward or uncomfortable interview questions, his strategy implies how he does not want me to see him as a “weak and discounted person” if his answers place him outside the norm, so he chooses to not answer to question at all.

My interviewees may have felt a particular pressure because of my positionality not only as a researcher, but as a fellow Swarthmore student and acquaintance. For instance, after Thomas mentioned using the swipe because he thought that someone was attractive, I asked him about how he knows, or what criteria he uses in this assessment. He answers, “Man, I don’t know if I could answer this” before taking a long pause. Finally, he says “Yeah, we should move on.” His reticence and inability - or at least discomfort in my presence – answering that particular question was consistent with other interviewees as well. His decision to move on from this question could indicate in part that the question does not resonate with his lived experiences. However, taken in tandem with my experience with other informants, their lack of communication about sensitive topics indicates a possible discomfort about being vulnerable with me. Therefore, they engage in a rhetorical dance to evade, avoid, or prematurely end the question - which they are fully in their right as study participants to do. However, these moments in which participants indicate that they are not comfortable fully sharing an answer—perhaps because as a researcher they fear I will not view them as “normal” - points to a deeper
stigma behind app use that bubbles to the surface in these one on one interactions with me. This stigma in speaking with me, then, stems from the systemic stigmas of using the app.

One of the deeper reasons for this discomfort in the interview setting, then, stems from the stigma of using an online app for social activities that are less authentic than interacting offline. Ricardo uses the analogy of playing tennis to articulate this difference:

Like, I think the fundamental like goal of interacting with people always, will always have to include the desire to interact with them in person. And that means that if you go to a party at Paces [the same space as the student run cafe], you're practicing the actual practice... You're playing tennis to learn how to play tennis better. Rather on Tinder it's like you're hitting balls with the wall, you know you do that in tennis, just like an exercise you do, the ball just sits it back to you, it just bounce[s] (unclear).

Just like in Tinder you're hitting balls with the court, with the wall to then go and play [a] tennis match. But it's not the same thing. Because one thing is to hit the ball when it's right here and there's a wall in front of you, and one thing is to hit the ball right here at the same speed at the same weight in the same situation at a different person there who thinks and like there's a place in the court. It's just a different field.

In Ricardo’s analogy, interacting with individuals offline is more “authentic” than interacting with them online because of the various strengths and limitations on the two mediums. His analogy recognizes and naturalizes the different set of variables that individuals encounter in offline interactions - such as body language, sound, smell, taste - as providing a “more authentic” experience than the medium of Tinder provides. In comparison with interacting with someone “offline,” Ricardo understands online spaces to permit having an almost unnatural amount of control over interactions. Thus, it is unfathomable for him to consider how someone could prefer connecting with another individual over the medium of Tinder as opposed the medium of offline interactions because he has normalized the idea that offline interactions are “authentic” while online interactions are “fake” in some sense due to the increased sense of control online. In this way, the stigma of using Tinder arises from an individual using the app when the option to connect with others offline - the medium that is ideal, valued, and conceived as the norm - is available.
It is not just a difference of which medium an individual uses to interact with others that matters, but also what the difference in medium represents. Turning to an app rather than looking offline for social interaction implies that an individual needs to resort to a space in which they perceive they can control more variables because something makes them undesirable in person.

I Have you ever used any sort of technology when dating before?

M No. No, my mom had met two prior very significant boyfriends um on like match dot com and I think knowing that made me more willing to try Tinder just because I'd always found it kind of o[dd] using dating sites or whatever,

I've always found that kind of odd and I, I couldn't, it wasn't right for ME because I'm in a college setting. I'm surrounded by people my age and who are like interested and passionate. And to, to resort to like a technological medium seemed like you were, there was, that was an extra step somewhere. That like if people wanted to date each other, we're here in the flesh, and we see each other all the time, make somethin' happen!

Surrounded by a “sea of choice” of worthy romantic or sexual partners nearby on campus can make Swarthmore students feel like turning to the app means that there is something wrong with them. Because meeting someone offline is the valorized “norm,” to not be able to “make somethin’ happen” in the flesh with any of the other fifteen hundred students in geographic proximity causes embarrassment; using online dating tools means admitting that they are not desirable.

The stigma of Tinder - whether in speaking with me or in mentioning that app use is casual and not intended to find intimate relationships - forms an crucial framework through which informants experience and narrate their usage of the app to me. As this subsection illustrated, moments of discomfort around me and instances of comparing the app to offline interactions mark moments of vulnerability. This vulnerability stems from a discomfort when speaking about desirability and attraction - and the shameful feeling that one is admitting something is wrong with them if using the app for social connection in a small college community.
4.4 Tinder as touristic fantasy

Although Swarthmore Tinder users may see how the app mobilizes desires for intimacy with others, the discussion on stigma illustrates how the complicated politics behind connection. Social norms which naturalize and privilege offline interactions over other types within this college setting condition these students to see the app - and its ability to connect - in a negative manner.

In light of this stigma, how is it that informants narrate using the app, and what factors are at play? As the rest of this chapter will address, Swarthmore students use the swipe in order to dissect other users on the app as objects of desire. At the same time, this process of objectifying others to fulfill their fantasies allows them to distance themselves from the shame of using the app.

It is through this fantasy - of objectification, and gazing at others while maintaining social distance - that students' use of Tinder finds a powerful metaphor in the tourism.

Tourism, like Tinder, works because it fulfills a similar consumerist fantasy. Tourism functions because of the “difference between one’s normal place of residence/work and the object of the tourist gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011:13); this difference triggers individuals to desire what lies in the displacement between everyday reality and the fantasy of what could transpire. While in tourism, this displacement may emerge when daydreaming about a beach holiday, on Tinder this exists through musing over attractive matches.

In addition, “the logic of consumer society by definition works for the reproduction of touristic activities - that is, activities implying a temporary retreat from the environments of everyday life” (Jansson 2002:44). Tourism, by definition, exists in contrast to and as a respite from the hustle and bustle of the everyday. Tinder, too, acts as that same purpose. Although these Swarthmore informants use it alongside their everyday activities - as Thomas uses Tinder "every day, all day" while at his summer job and Michael uses the app in the afternoon at his thesis carrel and before bed, for instance - these times on the app serve as a chance to unwind.
They serve as welcome disruptions to the ordinary activities organized in a particular place and for a regularized period of time. Tinder usage may occur regularized because of the patterns routines and spaces that individuals at times note that they observe, but that regularity occurs insofar as one’s time on the app is a break from ordinary activities.

Although tourism and Tinder both provide breaks from everyday life, individuals understand these retreats to be temporary diversions. At the end of a trip to Tinder or a vacation locale, there is an "intention to return home" within a relatively short period of time (Urry and Larsen 2011:4). On Tinder, that intention to return manifests in the casual attitude informants approach interactions from the app, such as when Elena notes: “I don’t know if [using the app is] like stigmatized but like I feel like most people try to be very casual about it and like ‘if it [a relationship] comes naturally,’” then that individual would be open to entering one with someone from the app. Through seeing interactions on the app as short lived, it allows informants detach themselves from becoming too invested in the app and implies that they expect to “come home,” or leave, the app in the end.

Central to the fleeting, fantasy-filled experience of the tourist is the experience of the “gaz[ing] upon or view[ing] a set of different set of scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary;” Urry terms this the “tourist gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011:1). For Urry and Larsen, vision provides a cornerstone of the tourist experience. However, travelers must learn “how, when, and where to gaze” (2011:12); thus “gazing at particular sights is conditioned by personal experiences and memories and framed by rules and styles, as well as by circulating images and texts of this and other places” (2011:2). In other words, the way an individual “sees” a touristic locale is learned. Although this understanding of vision as socially constructed extends beyond travel experiences, tourism provides an apt manifestation of this “socially patterned and learnt ‘ways of seeing’” because the gaze allows tourists to distance, objectify, and consume the places they visit (2011:2).
Urry and Larsen’s focus on vision as a centerpiece of the experience of tourism provides a valuable framework for analyzing how Swarthmore Tinder users narrate their use of the app through the swipe. On Tinder, informants narrate how their use of the swipe feeds a fantasy that they can pick and choose just the “right” sort of person to connect with. In particular, the manner through which Swarthmore Tinder users employ the swipe to “gaze” upon others demonstrates how they both treat others as objects of consumption and negotiate the perceived “stigma” of presenting oneself online. In other terms, discussion around the swipe is the central tool through which Swarthmore Tinder users present themselves as consumptive, distant tourists, who visit and indulge but never migrate to the app.

4.5 The symbolism of the swipe

For the tourist, “places are to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially of daydreaming and fantasy” of the sights in store in a new locale (Urry and Larsen 2011:4). For the tourist-like Swarthmore Tinder users conceiving of the app as a separate leisure site, their daydreams take the form of the new individuals they may see when they swipe. This chapter continues the metaphor of “Tinder as tourist sight/site” to investigate the meanings these users give to the swipe. Through engaging in an analysis about the reasons informants explicitly give for why they swipe, I delve into an analysis of the politics behind what the swipe represents in their narrations. In particular, I show how when informants fantasize about swiping for matches, they make decisions about who is “attractive” in accordance with how those potential matches have profiles demonstrating right” kind of social capital; in other terms, they seek new individuals with the same types of dispositions and identities of those already around them.

In order to establish why individuals Tinder - just like tourist sites - with anticipation, I first need to contextualize what a swipe means; for Swarthmore Tinder users, the swipe universally signifies some form of attraction to other users. Often that attraction is physical. When Elena explains the feeling of waking up to “twelve new matches” in the morning, she smiles as she explains that it means “people you’re attracted to are also attracted to you.
Fantastic. Piles of hot guys - yes!” The imagery she evokes through describing her heap of men is one in which they lack distinguishing attributes beyond their physical flesh. They are not individuals, but rather bodies detached from their personality and interests beyond their appearances.

Other users may be desirable for non-physical reasons as well. For instance, when Michael swipes, he states that it means “that this person is good enough to start a conversation with,” which does not have to imply a physical attraction at all. Daniel, too, decides how to swipe based at times based upon physical appearance, but at other times based upon interest: “Say I like coffee and they’re like ‘Oh I love coffee,’ then I’ll swipe right because I like coffee and I don’t even think about it. I don’t even really look at them, I’m just like yes. That’s different than saying know this person I’m actually attracted to this person, or this person’s pictures. Swiping left, never, it’s just, it’s just like me generally uninterested.” Although Daniel and Michael both swipe in accordance with others’ desirability, they define that attractiveness as something that transcends appearances.

Despite intentions of judging others based upon what Thomas describes as a “superficial statement on the on [other users’] beauty,” Swarthmore Tinder users can only make judgments about the desirability of others on the app based upon a brief, mediated impression. Michael describes the importance of individuals’ mediated presences on their profiles when describing his reasoning behind a neutral swipe:

[The reason that a] neutral reaction leads to going left instead of right is that you’re given the opportunity to present something, and you failed (b laugh) is sort of like how I see it. That, this is a curated personality, is what a Tinder profile is.

And, it’s a hyper-curated, it’s so small, that all you, all you have are photos and like smallest amount of text. And so, to curate something that leaves me indifferent, much like art, I say I’d rather have something that leads, that has me hating you or loving you. (emphasis added)
Michael does not - and cannot - evaluate another *individual* on Tinder. Rather, he describes making decisions about desirability based upon the way those individuals select photos and text to highlight attractive aspects about themselves.

This understanding of the profile as crafted separate from Tinder users as they exist offline highlights how Michael understands the profile as a moment of impression management. As Erving Goffman writes, “when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation” (Goffman 1959:15); for Michael, this motivation takes the form of enticing other users as to one’s desirability through intentionally crafting an online presence that only references the most attractive offline characteristics. In other terms, he recognizes that the profile is an explicit exercise in impression management, but it is a (mediated) impression that can stand in for the attractiveness of an individual offline as well. The desirability of another individual thus stems from intentionally seeing - and conflating - another Tinder user’s offline characteristics with their choices in what to include and exclude online.

To measure this attractiveness, Swarthmore Tinder users describe evaluating other’s profiles through looking for symbols which become a stand in for whether or not an individual is attractive. Thus, when presented with a few images and text, users rely upon “the shared vocabulary or ‘conventionalized discourse’ that enables us to make widely agreed sense about dress, physical gestures such as nodding, or waving, facial gestures and the like” (Smith 2006:38). Goffman terms this vocabulary the “body idiom,” and describes how this corporeal language means that “an individual cannot stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through the bodily idiom; he must either say the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing” (2006:38). Although Tinder users cannot draw upon an offline, corporeal body idiom to evaluation the presentations of others, they make sense of others’ profiles through engaging in a semiotic analysis of the “body idiom” of the Tinder profile.
Elena’s description of an unattractive profile underscores the importance of evaluating others’ desirability through the body idiom of another’s online presence:

Well there’s [sic] definitely things I didn't want on [the profile]. So like if you had something really like vulgar on your bio or if you were completely indifferent about matching. If you were very clearly trying to indicate that you were very wealthy or very rich, not about that. If you belonged to a fraternity, not about that. It sounds bad, but if you look like your typical privileged white dude who’s wearing Sperry’s and, you know, salmon colored shorts (interviewer laugh), not about that [...]

Too many emojis - not about that. Um getting like smashed, like pictures where you’re just like drinking out of funnels, not about that. Pictures where you’re like obviously not even trying, like you’re asleep, like you’re -, like your hair is in a disarray and you're wearing pajamas and you look disgusting, like you haven't showered in 3 days, not about that. So I guess anything that doesn’t fit that is like alright.

In contrast, one attribute of an attractive profile for Elena includes an acknowledgement of education, as:

Me being able to have an intellectual conversation with you is important so like if I could have that either in your bio or like it being more like explicit in like a picture like is it like you're wearing a white coat, like I could tell obviously that you’re a doctor.

Just as with offline iterations of the body idiom, the body idiom of the profile always communicates something about the “other” individual. Elena’s evaluation of others’ profiles highlights the diversity of factors influencing the attractiveness of another individual based upon a seemingly arbitrary assortment of factors, ranging from another’s hygiene habits to emoji usage, that do not mesh with the representational techniques she finds most desirable, such as educational achievement.

However, her valuation of attractiveness based upon the body idiom of others is not just a casual, neutral assessment. Rather, Swarthmore Tinder users - just like tourists - have a sense of sense of “shared conventions about what should be seen and which actions are appropriate” on the app resulting from “culturally coded patterns of tourist” - or online - “behavior revolving around class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality” (Urry and Larsen 2011:192). As Urry underscores, the very conventions that Elena uses to judge others’ presences online stems from
the development of a particular set of *identity politics* long before she downloaded the app. Tinder users and “tourists never just travel *to* places” such as the app; “their mindsets, habitual practices, and social relationships travel unreflexively along *with* them” (2011:192). In fantasizing about and describing what attributes of Tinder profiles that they find attractive, Swarthmore Tinder users are not making value neutral judgments about the representational strategies of the “other” on the app. Rather, the way Swarthmore Tinder users view others on the app displays their definitions of “attractiveness” reveal their own culturally mediated understandings of desirability that belies the power dynamics lying beneath the swipe.

To speak of “attractiveness,” then, reflects the ways in which Elena’s assessments of desirability cannot be separated from the power dynamics at play behind her ability to classify and assess other’s appearances as “attractive” or not. Bourdieu explains this capacity to distinguish between others results from how an individual internalizes and reproduces social conditions and life experiences as the habitus, a helpful framework for understanding Elena’s judgments. He clarifies that the habitus is a structuring structure which “organizes practices and the perception of practices;” the habitus is a framework through which individuals make sense of particular actions or behaviors (Bourdieu 1984:170). In addition, the habitus is also a structured structure, which allows for the “the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes”(1984:170)The ability of an individual to make sense of particular actions within their social world - such as through classifying and judging the behaviors of others as appropriate or not - is *itself* the product of that individual internalizing present social division.

His theory of the habitus captures how individuals - such as tourists travelling to new, distant locales - cannot perceive and classify new phenomena without relying upon the “mindsets, habitual practices, and social relationships” that are *themselves* internalized products of social divisions (Urry and Larsen 2011:192). In other terms, the very “meaningful practices,” dispositions, and other embodied forms of knowledge that tourists draw upon when
encountering a new site are both caused by the ways in which they have internalized social division in addition to generating new “meaningful practices” (Bourdieu 1984:170). The habitus constitutes the framework upon which tourists attempt to generate “meaning giving perceptions” through further classifying their world in accordance with how they have internalized these power dynamics, “which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs” (1984:170). The very power dynamics which help to produce the social biases and behaviors of an individual become entrenched to such a degree that the individual begins to reproduce those power dynamics in the ways in which they participate in the world.

Revisiting Elena’s description of the signs of a desirable profile with this understanding of habitus in mind illuminates the power dynamics at play behind her evaluation. Her habitus emerges when she speaks of her classificatory system for evaluating others’ through the profile. The body idiom of the unattractive profile - filled with symbols of drinking, vulgarity, and messiness - as opposed to the desirability that the white doctor’s coat inspires with its association to education alludes to the weight she assigns upon her socially internalized values. Just like the tourists who travel while carrying the weight of their own culturally mediated values and histories, Tinder users such as Elena evaluate who is attractive and thus how to swipe on Tinder based upon the ways in which they understand attraction - itself a product of the internalization of social division. Her assessment of the doctor as “attractive” cannot be separated with how power dynamics have shaped and materialized her current world views.

Thus, when she speaks of wanting to find someone who she can hold an intellectual conversation with and seeks out what she sees as physical manifestations of that characteristic – such as a white doctor’s coat – she is making evaluations on the embodied habitus of others. By embodied habitus, I refer to the way in which power dynamics, social hierarchies, identities, and experiences materialize in through the bodily presentations of others. For instance, an individual on Tinder who displays photos of drinking out of funnels may be able to have just the intellectual conversation Elena seeks while she may find the doctor misogynistic and dull in
person. However, she cannot know those things from just the profile. Instead, the socially mediated manner in which she sees the world and has learned to present herself causes her to associate the white coat with a doctor, and the doctor with the years of education and the presumed intellectual prowess necessary to the line of work. In contrast, the man drinking alcohol out of a funnel does not have those associations attached to that image.

Thus, Elena “reads” another’s profile looking for others who speak a bodily idiom she recognizes as socially valuable and meaningful to her. Because of this, how an individual chooses to represent oneself through the profile becomes important. As Elena demonstrates in her evaluation of the criteria she uses when deciding whether or not to swipe right, she uses the profile to evaluate the impression another user gives off that seem to indicate his embodied habitus. In doing so, though, she evaluates his symbolic presentation in accordance with her own habitus to decide whether it resonates with the forms of attractiveness that she finds most appealing. What she does not note is how this attractiveness is culturally mediated. It is not coincidence that Elena seeks out “intellectual” men, which translates into looking for symbols that they have had access to an echelon of academia most in this country cannot or have not had the opportunities to access.

Although part of the appeal of Tinder seems to lie in the fantasy of how the app can connect them with others beyond the “Swarthmore bubble,” this often does not translate to swiping for – or connecting with - others who exist across significant social difference. It seems as though Ricardo notes that this ability to connect is one of the app’s appeals:

> If you do Tinder from Swarthmore, and you’re not doing it with in the TriCo community,¹ you’re jumping into a completely different world. Just a different world. Just completely different people, living completely different lifestyles and completely different institutions with completely different social dynamics and probably even social values. So that's kind of interesting that if you look for someone on Tinder in that sense, you're looking to like, for [a] different world.

¹ The “TriCo” community refers to three liberal arts colleges – Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and Swarthmore – which share courses and events.
Although Ricardo verbally recognizes how one of the app’s strengths lies in its ability to connect students with others with different lifestyles and experiences beyond liberal arts college students, he does not engage in using the app in this manner. Even after making this comment, Ricardo mentions that he would not be interested in meeting someone from Broomall, a low income community near Swarthmore, because he believes he would not have much in common with a match from that locale.

The juxtaposition of both Ricardo’s verbal acknowledgement of the app’s strength in connecting across difference and his lack of desire to do so underscores the complexity of the politics behind the swipe. Here, social difference - indicated through the location of an individual’s home - becomes a proxy for evaluating whether or not that a potential match shares many the experiences and identities which would allow them to share commonalities. His desire to connect with others with common interests and desires again reiterates the importance of embodied habitus to making assessments of desirability about other users on the app. The same power dynamics and social structures which enabled him to live in multiple countries as a child due to his parents’ international careers in addition to attending an elite liberal arts college underlies his implication that individuals from Broomall are too socially distant to connect with him.

This social distance emerges in how he gazes upon and desires other users through evaluating the embodied habitus of the Tinder profile. Through framing his reason for swiping as an attempt to find other compatible users on the app, Ricardo uses the swipe as a tool to locate, reward, and connect with individuals who display that they have the experiences and identities which make them attractive. Attractiveness here, then, takes the form of others who display a similar embodied habitus – or at least a compatible one to his own. Although part of Tinder’s appeal may lie in its supposed ability to democratically connect Swarthmore students with others from “different worlds” outside of the college, Elena and Ricardo’s reflections highlight how finding compatible profiles to swipe right for entails seeking out others who are
just different enough to elicit fantasy, but still demonstrate compatible enough experiences, identities, or social positions to warrant them compelling.

Swarthmore Tinder users do not have to be conscious of the way they evaluate the embodied habitus of others’ profiles in their search for sameness, power, and privilege in order for these social dynamics to affect even the most mundane of selection tools in the app. For instance, altering the distance settings becomes a way to filter the overall desirability of individuals Tinder presents Michael to swipe with. He describes how he uses the distance tool to swipe for users he has the most interest in meeting:

The distance started at like five miles away but then that kind of didn’t go anywhere because of the way that Swarthmore is situated between Philly and between like Haverford and Bryn Mawr. Like that's not quite far enough so once sort of all the five, five miles were exhausted [once he had swiped through all of the individuals with Tinder accounts in this radius], which were very few actually, um I started increasing it to see when, when more people would show up. And it seems like about 9 miles includes the TriCo and Philly in that radius.

Michael uses distance as a proxy for the educated, urban profiles he hopes to connect with on the app. Through setting his mileage settings to include the TriCo and Philadelphia, he can more easily find not only young urban professionals and other students in college, but also similar highly ranked liberal arts colleges (as opposed to community college students, or others from Temple, La Salle, or other universities in the Philadelphia region). He notices how far away other users are from him, then, because these settings become a proxy for their educational or career aspirations. Distance for Michael and Ricardo, like the doctor’s coat Elena prefers, become not only criteria for attractiveness but markers of an embodied language – or bodily idiom – that communicates the social background of others on the profile.

Other factors, too, indicate the manner in which Swarthmore Tinder users seek out similar individuals, such as through age and political preference. For instance, Thomas chose to raise the minimum age his matches could be on the “Discovery Preferences” page, because initially with his young matches: “the maturity level was not, not compatible. And I also, if I did meet someone, I wanted to meet someone my age or older so [...it] didn't really appeal to me to
talk to eighteen or nineteen year-olds anyways.” Furthermore, Michael described using automatically swiping left for women in photos with guns because he does not believe anyone should own one, a value that often corresponds with his political progressivism.

In addition, Swarthmore Tinder users also noted using seemingly innocuous criteria such as the construction of the profile to evaluate the embodied habitus of the “other” on Tinder, as opposed to the information communicated through the medium of the profile as I have discussed thus far. Informants describe noticing the representational techniques of another user such as the structure and wording of the bio, quality of the photos, or the use of emojis on a profile. For instance, Michael swipes left “if a bio has horrific grammar or like egregious spelling errors” while Thomas “really can’t handle” “terrible photos” and “Instagram filters.” Daniel seeks users who know how to work within the bounds of a particular genre of text in the bio; he seeks “a short biography, not a huge one, or if it’s huge it’s like funny. It has to like show some sort of quirkiness or something.” With all three men, not only is the content of a profile important but also the representational techniques of other Tinder users that matters.

Grainy photos and poorly constructed bios matter to these Tinder users because they become markers of social compatibility affected by class. Through their life experiences and upbringing, these informants learned what they deem to be “proper” or “improper” modes of communication. Thus, other users who lack this form of communication savvy also seem to suggest that they lack the communication save to even have the same conversations as these Swarthmore users. The profile, like with the touristic advertising photograph, “causes the viewer to, as it were, dream into it, causing it to become subjectivised to the viewer’s desires, memories and associations,” (Osborne 2000:77). Thus, for the Swarthmore students looking describing the swipe as an opportunity to assert distinctions between - and fantasize about - other users demonstrating that that have similar amounts of power and privilege there is little point to swiping for individuals who fail to demonstrate a proper media literacy through their grammar or photo quality.
Although I have discussed instance in which informants desire others with social similarity, there are times when they welcome and seek out social difference in others. This occurs because just as in tourism, where “commercial photographs are normally composed to make the viewer dream into the picture,” to think “This could be me!”, attractive profiles work to make the viewer imagine that they, too, can become entangled in the fantasy the other Tinder user represents (Urry and Larsen 2011:175–176). Many times this fantasy is represented through finding others who transcend social difference through indicators such as attire, age, or current town which stand in for a constellation of indicators of compatible, attractive life experiences.

However, not all social differences are undesirable. Thomas, for instance, proves this point in describing how he presents himself as desirable. He describes how he intentionally highlights his European nationality, as he sarcastically noted that he wanted to show that he “was foreign, so exotic, you know, because people love that shit.” He uses his self-presentation to highlight how he is just different enough from the average American using the app near Swarthmore. Notably, he does not include that he is also from a country in the global south. It is through not only underscoring his foreignness but through solely claiming his European, he invites other Tinder users to view him with desire because of the social clout that a European heritage represents. Thus, his experience emphasizing how he contrasts with the typical American Tinder user in Swarthmore demonstrates how attraction may not always stem from similarities with other users, but also because other users present themselves as just different enough (and in the right socially valued ways) to excite new fantasies.

With some categories such as age, nationality, educational background, and political leanings, informants did not struggle with locating and assessing the types of social similarity and difference they found most attractive in others. However, other identities and experiences proved more delicate to discuss, such as assessing the embodied habitus of others when discussing race.
Even though only one of the thirteen informants I interviewed related to me that they considered race when evaluating the attractiveness of other users on the app – a particularly bold claim at Swarthmore given the stigma when breaking the bounds of political correctness – when it did arise, the racialized politics of “attraction” still formed an important factor of app use.

For instance, Thomas - the Tinder user who earlier mentioned his European roots - notes how he notices race when swiping but “it [doesn’t] change my swipe at all.” However, he notes that he realized the importance of his race when using the app when he saw the photo of a “very horizontally challenged black woman” that seemed odd, as:

[The photo] was badly Photoshopped and like a really weird background and it was like this has to be a troll. And so I clicked and it was this white girl. Part, the other photos were of this white chick. Sorry, white girl,[chick is] not an appropriate term. White girl. But she was like a white, whatever (slaps hand on table). You know like partying and drinking out of Solo cups and all, anyways. And I was like, she was clearly trying to like divert attention from people who weren’t serious about looking at the profiles with a photo of someone of another, another race. Which is really strange in my opinion. Which is why I think that you know, like, the first thing [individuals looking at his profile] notice is a white guy.

Thomas’ two comments - first about how he does not notice on the app, but also how his interpretation of the white woman using race as a mask to deflect unwanted attention - serves to highlight the importance of racial politics on the app.

First, this incident is noteworthy because of how he experiences race on the app; better put, until this incident, he does not perceive his race. Because as a white man, he benefits from both gender and racial privileges, he has not had incidents before this moment that have caused him to think about those identity categories before.

Second, his comment on how race does not affect his swipe fits the progressive politics of many students on Swarthmore. However, he contradicts himself when talking about the “white girl” partying using a photo of the black woman. Although he does not say what direction he

---

2 A troll is “a person who submits deliberately inflammatory articles to an internet discussion” (Troll n.d.)
swiped on the profile, his tone implies a sense of judgement; that judgement extends to the drinking paraphernalia present in the photo, it also encompasses the way this profile seems “strange” in part because of its political incorrectness. Although he may say that he does not consciously swipe right because of race, his comments here imply that there is a “proper” way of presenting racial or ethnic markers that this white woman did not demonstrate.

As this subsection demonstrates, whether speaking of race, age, nationality, educational background, displays of professionalism, communication styles - or any of a number of other items Swarthmore students stated aided their decision to swipe\(^3\) - profile presentation forms a crucial aspect of that decision making process. Through evaluating the embodied habitus of others vis a vis the profile, Swarthmore students seek others who they find attractive because these individuals make sense. By this, I mean that others demonstrate through the profile that they can perform identities in the “correct” ways, or demonstrate similar class, educational, and other experiences. In other terms, what these Swarthmore students term as attraction reifies the social hierarchies that underlie and structure offline life.

Although no two individuals in my study listed the same criteria for deciding whether or not to “swipe right” for another user, certain commonalities persisted. In particular, Swarthmore Tinder users cited using a constellation of indicators to determine which surface level symbols or settings best mobilized their desire to seek other attractive users.

I term these criteria – such as age, spatial difference, and race - “axes of difference” since they serve as the frameworks upon which these Swarthmore students differentiate between other users based upon their potential matches’ identities and experiences, as evaluated through assessing the embodied habitus of others.

Through using these “axes of difference” to evaluate the desirability of other users on the app, these Swarthmore users indicate that although the amount of difference they seek through

\(^3\) Because of the constraints of this project, I did not have the space to elaborate upon other equally salient
swiping right for another user may vary, those differences need to be socially valued. As Elena’s anecdote from the beginning of the chapter indicates, it is not the drunkard but the doctor who appeals; it is not the user from Broomall, but Brussels.

As these Swarthmore students demonstrate, the fantasy of using Tinder is to not to engage with the genuine “differences” of others, but to find others who are desirable, but this assessment stems from socially constituted ways of regarding the “other.” Like tourists, Swarthmore Tinder users may use the app out of anticipation of viewing individuals different from the individuals they encounter in their everyday life at the college. However, the methodical and dissecting nature of the “axes of difference” through which they evaluate the desirability of other’s Tinder profiles serves only to connect these students with new individuals of the same types of people they ordinarily encounter in an elite academic environment such as Swarthmore; individuals who are similar to them, but just different enough to trigger these Swarthmore’s students fantasy for connection with others with similar interests, identities, experiences, and power.

4.6 Instrumentalizing the “other”

In the previous subsection on the swipe, I analyzed the manner which Swarthmore Tinder users gaze at the “other” they encounter on the app, articulating how the “axes of difference” they use to assess attractiveness stem from and reify existing social hierarchies. In this section, I will demonstrate the effects of gazing upon others using this framework.

Returning briefly to the tourist metaphor in the beginning of the chapter, I will show how the gaze on Tinder, like tourism, serves to distance the gazer from the gazee while simultaneously transforming the gazee into an object of consumption.

Within the relationship between tourist and the site being toured, Urry and Larsen note that “potential objects of the tourist gaze must be different in some way or other. They must be out of the ordinary” (2011:15). Furthermore, it is this the sense of vision underlying the tourist that “enables people to take possession of objects and environments, often at a distance...[T he
vision sense] facilitates the world of the ‘other’ to be controlled from afar, combining detachment and mastery” (2011:158). The effect of this visual relationship is twofold: first, the discrepancy between what the tourist perceives as intimate and normal, versus the exotic and distant tourist site, implies a detachment and distancing between the subject gazing and the object of that gaze. Second, the tourist gaze is objectifying insofar as it allows for the vision of the gazer to feel control over the gazee. Through controlling the vision sense – and thus determinations of which sights are out of the ordinary – tourists gain a disproportionate control over the agency of sites of touristic interest.

Through their narrations of how they use the swipe, Tinder Swarthmore users embody a similar objectifying and distancing gaze in the manner through which they evaluate other users embodied habitus on the app. In particular, this gaze manifests in the manner through which which these users separate and assess various intersectional immutable markers of identity and experience – such as age, communication style, and race. Through picking apart and separating these various characteristics of individuals through the “axes of difference” by which they evaluated the profile, these Swarthmore students fail to see others on the app as whole individuals. For instance, Elena demonstrates this point when describing Tinder as a space with “piles of hot guys.” When deciding whether or not to swipe with another, that comment underscores the sentiment that one primary purpose of others has nothing to do with who they are, but how they fit her needs and fantasies in that moment. This method of evaluating other users on the app is objectifying because these users showed no interest in the subjectivity of the other user beyond how that individual could mobilize - or inhibit - a particular desire the Swarthmore user cared about. Rather, in their narration of the swipe, Swarthmore users relate fantasizing about picking and choosing various parts of people rather than viewing them as a whole.

It is through this lack of care about the subjectivity of another that individuals begin to treat others as objects in a way that mimics a capitalist system. Simmel describes how, in a
capitalist system, money “reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much? All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent. Only the objective measurable achievement is of interest” (1903:12). On Tinder, “man is reckoned with like a number” through the swipe. Is this person attractive enough to swipe right for, or no? Through presenting every Tinder user with the same question, every time a new individual appears on the screen, what could be an intimate emotional relation seems to become an impersonal calculated response, as Swarthmore Tinder users describe. Is she the right age and have the right educational background? Does he demonstrate a socially appropriate communication style and a set of socially desirable political commitments? The ways in which Swarthmore students discussed evaluating the presentations of other users both allowed them to fantasize about forming connection with others of “social value” through treating others’ embodied habitus as a series of discrete attributes subject to piecemeal dissection.

In addition, consuming others’ presentations on the app allows these Swarthmore students to distance themselves from the stigma of using the app through indulging in this fantasy for connection. Through downloading Tinder out of curiosity rather than need, and instrumentalizing other users on the app through evaluating them in accordance with how others fit their needs, these users serve to separate themselves from others in the space. This social distancing also has the effect of offering protection from implicating themselves in the precision of their objectifying gaze, thus insulating themselves from the stigma of “actually” using Tinder to find intimate connections. Through the way that these users employ the gaze to judge the presentations of others, these students use the visual architecture of the app “to permit an internal, articulated, and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside” the app, (Foucault 1995:172). Imposing control over others through subjecting them to the students’ instrumentalist, consumerist fantasies allows these students to assert themselves as different
from the “other” that they gaze upon when using the app, thus separating students from thinking of themselves taking Tinder seriously – and the stigma that accompanies this title.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how informants conceive of Tinder as a fantasy leisure space existing outside of the bounds of everyday life, yet say that they want to use the app out of curiosity because of the stigma to attached to admitting use of the app.

A helpful framework for understanding how these Tinder users exists within the metaphor of the consumptive tourist. Like tourists who dream of new sites of pleasure, the Tinder user too dreams of indulging in a similar consumerist fantasy. Students’ descriptions of how they use the swipe to evaluate the attractiveness of others highlight the power relations underlying these claims. Through using the swipe to dissect the perceived identities and experiences demonstrated through the embodied habitus of others, these users seek to establish an asymmetrical power relationship with those individuals they see on the app. Although informants perceive a stigma to fully participating on Tinder to seek intimate connections, they overcome this shame through presenting themselves as consumptive, distant tourists. This framing allows them to indulge their fantasy that they can pick and choose just the “right” sort of person to connect with through treating others (and their lifeworlds) as objects of consumption. These objectifying evaluation criteria also enable Swarthmore Tinder users to feel that they are subjecting others to this objectifying gaze and are able to distance themselves from the stigma of taking Tinder seriously.

However, Swarthmore Tinder users cannot stay in this consumeristic framework for the entire duration of their app use. As the next chapter will discuss, the way that individuals consciously narrate how they swipe – and the objectifying, tourist like attitudes the swipe engenders – differs from many of the ways Swarthmore students use the app. Although Swarthmore students use the app for a variety of reasons, they follow a similar use trajectory for why they use the app, moving from the consumptive framework I presented here to other
reasons for swiping. Swarthmore students cannot remain consumptive Tinder tourists for long; yet as their use of the app changes, they begin to exact this consumptive gaze upon themselves.
Chapter 5: Tinder, site of the disciplining gaze

5.1 Complicating the Swipe

In the past section, I analyzed how Swarthmore students using the app talk about their app use as though they are distant, consumptive tourists. Although this metaphor seems to work when discussing how individuals enter Tinder as curious observers, the “Tinder-tourist” does not describe the whole picture when discussing other common users. What about the colloquially termed “power swipers,” typically men who swipe right for everyone in order to maximize their chances of matching with other users? What about the trolls who use Tinder, individuals who use the app in order to make deliberately inflammatory comments to their matches out of entertainment? What about individuals who quickly begin using the app as a dating tool? Initially, my analogy of how Swarthmore students use Tinder like tourists does not seem to fit many of the lived practices of these users. Rather, these students use of the app changes over time, and their transition from seeing the app as a site/sight of leisure to one that they begin to incorporate as a new, uneventful everyday reality.

The key difference between tourism and Tinder, then, is that these students do not stay tourists for long. According to their own accounts in interviews, students’ use of the app causes them to embark on a process of transforming from a voyeuristic tourist to an experienced local of Tinder.

For the first part of this chapter, I will illustrate how students may use the app for different purposes, such as power swiping or trolling, yet they follow a similar arc in the degree of seriousness with which they use the app.

I will then argue that this macro-process of transitioning from tourist to local on the app occurs at the micro-level of the swipe. I revisit the disciplining tourist gaze to discuss how the structure of Tinder shapes the way users begin to see others as subjects. However, the structure
of the app also enables and encourages these users to enact the same exacting and objectifying gaze toward others on themselves.

### 5.2 Changing uses, changing metaphor

Although as I discuss in the previous chapter, informants frame their reason for using the app as one of fulfilling curiosity, if they decide to keep using the app, that usage becomes more significant in the informants' life. To highlight these changes, I will discuss how informants may use the app in different ways, but the manner in which they frame these uses fulfills a deeper desire to use the app to forge new connections or satisfy offline emotions vis a vis the app.

The stigma of using Tinder emerges again when informants discuss their reasons for leaving; yet by this point, they have already begun to humanize other users on the app and see these “others” as not quite so different from themselves.

#### a. Connection:

Swarthmore students’ reasons for using Tinder as it becomes a more present feature in their lives may often have to do with connection, although not necessarily in the ways that seem most obvious given their understanding that the app's purpose is for spurring sexual or romantic relations. Through chatting with others on the app, some users begin to realize that the app can serve as a tool for finding intimate connections – and that they can be confident in admitting that they use the app for that purpose.

Michael’s use of the app provides one such example of how individuals begin to use the app more seriously due to his offline interaction with a friend. He did not always view his app use as taking a significant role in his life. In the beginning of the interview, he spoke his early experiences as a “one-time user” of the app, which he defined as:

> For me, it was download the app, create a profile, then like I-I, every, I used, I'd look at profiles and say yes or no enough - only until the first two or three people started matching. And then once they did like try to have conversations, see what those are like. And then when they died, kind of saying, kind of not continuing to try and match with people.
He used the app only superficially in the beginning, as he speaks about satisfying his curiosity about how the app works before stopping.

However, he, too, follows a trajectory of using the app more seriously for connection when he runs into a friend at a party in Philadelphia going on an offline date with a Tinder match the next day. Once he realized that the app could foster dates, using the app - and trying to find these connections - became a more consistent part of his life. He describes his use of the app now as more serious than it was in the beginning, even though he has not been able to find the types of connections he has been seeking. Using the app every two or three days for “no more than five minutes” falling asleep while listening to a podcast before going to bed or during the afternoon in the library while working on his thesis, the app’s notification sounds often spur him go on Tinder to try having conversations with matches. Even though he describes his interactions with others as “inane, boring, useless drivel” that “[die] out very quickly... I still like will come back to it [the app] every so often and see.” For Michel, his use of Tinder becomes more serious not because of the connections he feels that he is able to materialize vis-a-vis the app, but the fantasy of the connections that could transpire. Through his conversations with a friend going on a date offline, he realizes that he could connect seriously with someone online, and is comfortable admitting to that desire in the interview.

Elena, too, transitions from using the app more casually as a joke before finding a long term relationship with another Tinder user. Unlike Michael, her experience interacting with others she met on Tinder spurred her using the app looking for serious connection. When I asked her this shift in app use occurred, she responded:

I think it was because (pause) even before [my boyfriend] just like talking to dudes who were just like really interested in like dating you, and I guess because Tinder is so direct, right, like people are on it for some type of reason relating to having a connection, however strong or loose that might be, right? And so like just talking to dudes who were like very direct, very interested in getting to like know you and talk to you and stuff, I think that might have been like "Oh, there's actually a world outside of Swarthmore" because I feel like here no one really cares [...] like my entire time here one dude has asked me on a date here at Swat.
The combination of both Elena’s dissatisfaction with relationships at Swarthmore coupled with the men she meets on the app spurs her to deepen her use of the app. Even though she only used the app for two weeks before meeting her current boyfriend, her impressions with other men on the app enable her to see Tinder as a more serious site for connection than she initially intended.

In spite of Elena and Michael’s varying success on the app at the time of interview, both began to use the app more seriously after they see its possibility for connection. After chatting with friends or strangers online and off, it is not curiosity that keeps them coming back to the app but the fantasy that they can find this intimacy for themselves.

b. Offline emotions spurring online app use:

Although Michael and Elena admit to using the app more seriously over time to fulfill a desire for social connection, not all informants deepen their commitment to the app in this way. Others will speak of how they transition from using the app casually to seeking it out when they are lonely, want a confidence boost, or are seeking humor. Their use of the app is one that transitions from curiosity to learning that they can turn to the app to address offline emotional needs.

At times, informants acknowledge that these emotional needs are more serious. When I ask Ricardo what prompts him to use the app, his response underscores the stigma of turning to the app as a method of satisfying these emotions.

I think, I don't know. I don't know (his phone dings; he looks down) I guess. (Pauses again) Anything, I don’t really know. My guess is that being bored. I guess like being lonely too.

At this point, I unintentionally make a small sound he interprets as indicating interest, and changes the subject for multiple minutes. When I again ask him later to provide further examples of these emotions emerging, he responds:

Well because if you're bored, interacting with people is fun - or the notion that you'll be interacting with people, right, because [you] might not be interacting with them at the moment. So it's better to distract yourself and other people. (He pauses). And, well loneliness is the same thing. If you're lonely, you're interacting with other people [through the app].
His discomfort with my question, as indicated through him finding a way to change the subject for multiple minutes and then framing his answer in the second person as opposed to providing a personal example, indicates the sensitivity of the topic. His reticence to sharing this information with me belies his need for using others to satisfy his emotional needs. Although when he starts using the app, he frames this usage as a casual way to find women to hook up with, his answer alludes to the ways in which Tinder begins to play a more significant role in his life than just to satisfy carnal urges; it also allows him to connect with others when he feels alone.

The increasing seriousness with which Swarthmore students use the app does not have to stem from serious emotions, however. For instance, Thomas’ experience on the app underscores how he used it in order to find humor and entertainment.

Initially, Thomas states that he and a friend “thought it would be a great idea to get Tinder to just have some laughs because both of us agreed it was a stupid app and why would anyone use it to do anything serious.” Although “the original idea was just to mess with people,” they realized “a lot of people were on there to actually like get to know people. And him and I assumed that everyone else was [on there] to just have laughs.”

In particular, Thomas describes how “having laughs on the app was matching with someone and then having a conversation with them and then [...] basically, trolling them. Being a troll. As in saying things that are meant to provoke to gauge a reaction.” He most often did this through introducing “himself with the sentence ‘do you have five minutes to talk about Jesus?’ Which I did I think about 100 times. Which I thought for me was, was funny to do. Incredibly immature, but funny.” He did this so often that his phone began auto-correcting to this sentence when he typed “do you” in a message.

Initially he and his friend began a match war with each other to get to a certain number of matches with other users, yet even when his friend left the app, he stayed until he reached his
goal of matching 666 matches because “it was a symbolic number” for him, then left the app — but not without finding someone to date in the process.

The consistency with which he used Tinder — indicated through the frequency he used the app, beginning with beginning with his walk to work and ending with when he went to sleep at night — highlights how Tinder became a more important aspect of his life. Although he frames his use of the app as a “joke” from when he first downloads it, it is a joke that he demonstrates gains an increasing amount of resonance through the regularity with which he finds himself clicking onto the app.

For Daniel, using Tinder for entertainment accompanies a desire to use the app for an ego boost. He explains these desires when I ask him to describe his experiences on Tinder:

I used Tinder for a variety of reasons. Like I used it as a game cause like I do get this weird thrill out of swiping left or right. For some reason that’s just fun. And it’s weird to like...

I don’t, I, like it's like sometimes it definitely gives me a confidence boost. Which is kind of ridiculous but it’s like, it's like matching someone you didn’t think you’d match with, you're like oh wow look at me, but not really at the same time.

It's like always half a joke, like Tinder is always half a joke for some reason.

Daniel, like Thomas, describes Tinder as a “joke,” but it is a joke that carries personal resonance. Although he discusses using the app because it allows him to feel positively from it because of the “weird thrill” of swiping, this reaction has the deeper benefit of feeding his self-esteem, which also assists in spurring him to continue using the app in order to meet offline emotional needs.

As Daniel, Thomas, and Ricardo indicate, one way informants deepen their commitment to the app is through learning that its use can satisfy their own emotional state; in this way, this form app usage has little to do with the other person, and serves to enable student users to satisfy themselves.

c. Leaving the app
At a certain point, many of my informants decided to discontinue using the app. For some, they related this decision as occurring as they entered monogamous romantic relationships with others; others became bored with the app. Still others found the app objectifying and were unhappy with using it or decided to get off of it because of that reason. In fact, of the five individuals whose interviews I analyzed in greater depth in this thesis, only one still has the app on his or her phone.

Although the specific reasons for using and leaving Tinder varied greatly among informants, the overarching themes behind why people leave depend upon whether or not they feel that extenuating circumstances have affected their ability to be on Tinder and, therefore, Tinder has fulfilled its purpose.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, although informants initially think that the app’s intended purpose is to spur romantic or sexual connections offline, they begin using the app out of curiosity. Although this stigma weakens as students’ uses of the app becomes more serious, their understanding of Tinder’s intended purpose plays an important role when they explain why they begin to use the app less, or decide to leave it altogether.

For instance, reason informants leave the app is because they enter a monogamous relationship offline. Daniel deletes the app when he:

came to be an exclusive like relationship with someone so it seemed weird to have a tinder app. That was like a personal decision, it wasn’t a request of him [Daniel’s boyfriend]. But it was like, I just felt like...

Maybe it’s like, it seems like maybe it’s a weird thing to have, I don’t know why I felt that way. But I did, and I felt that like, like maybe he would think I was like looking for someone else on Tinder or like, like quote unquote flirting with people on Tinder. So I just thought, I’ll just delete it. Not that I was using Tinder to find a boyfriend or anything.

Given informants’ understandings of the app as a space for developing a variety of intimate relationships, even when individuals such as Daniel are not using it for those purposes, its mere presence on a phone can suggest transgression and thus prompt a user to leave. Because Daniel understands Tinder as a space filled with sexual and romantic undertones, he leaves the app
because he understands this action to be the “right” thing to do given his changed relationship status.

Elena, too, deleted the app after entering a long term monogamous relationship with an individual she met through Tinder. Unlike Daniel, however, her relationship and thus experience leaving Tinder occurred weeks and not months after Tinder. Although she “kept playing Tinder a little bit” after she met her current boyfriend through the app because she “was just like pshhh whatever” after “the fourth, fifth date I was just like I cannot be doing this [using Tinder] anymore.” Tinder had fulfilled its purpose, and as her initial ambivalence about using the app while casually dating her new boyfriend evaporated after the relationship became more serious.

Thomas, too, follows this pattern. Although he had primarily used the app to find humor throughout the day, he found one individual that he wanted to go on a date with and before getting rid of the app;

And I deleted the, the Tinder account, a few days after meeting her [his girlfriend met through Tinder] because I was like, you know, it was kind of like an end. It was like oh, I had a date, even if this works or doesn't work, it's kind of like I've reached the point where I used the app for its purpose and now, now I'm done. I don't need it anymore.

Unlike the two individuals I've presented so far, however, Thomas' decision to leave the app did not have as much to do entering into a monogamous relationship. Rather, Thomas' comment that the outcome of the date does not matter implies that the purpose about the app is to connect with individuals offline, but does not have to necessitate a relationship of some sort.

Unlike the individuals just mentioned, Ricardo and Michael both became disillusioned with the app after some time. Although only one of the two decided to stop using the app at the time of the interview, both experienced similar feelings of disillusionment due to the fact that their use of the app did not allow them to connect with others offline.

Ricardo, for instance, began using the app as a means to find “sensuous” encounters with others, but tired of his inability to find individuals to connect with beyond the app:
That’s why I am, that’s why I have, I was always about getting to know people soon and fuck this [using the app], let’s get a coffee or whatever. Because I think like - because I think like hooking up in a way that you take people as objects, it’s just more negative than positive.

Ricardo’s experience demonstrates some of the ambivalence felt when using the app. Although he wanted to find a hook up through Tinder, he also felt troubled by “hooking up in a way that you take people as objects,” a quality he implies that the app engenders. Through meeting individuals offline, he hopes to feeling like he objectifies others less; it is only when he is unable to materialize such interactions off the app that he decides he does not want to continue using the app.

Michael was the only individual of my five primary informants who still used the app at the time of interview, however, he too had stopped being satisfied with the app, stating emphatically in our interview that “Every time I put the app down, I hate myself” because of the superficiality of interactions on the app as the app “makes me feel like I’m like either shallow or like stuck up or just, or just boring! Or like something, it, it does not make me feel good. Experiences have been very short-lived.” His dissatisfaction indeed seems similar to the reasoning behind when someone such as Ricardo leaves the app. With the app not living up to its implied fantasy of romantic or sexual connection, he begins to lose sight of his purpose of why he uses it.

Because of the stigma that underlies admitting to using the app to actually try meeting someone online, it is easier for informants to frame their initial uses of the app as occurring out of curiosity. However, all informants noted becoming more invested – whether through time or emotional energy – with others. Yet in order to feel satisfied with the app, informants needed to form more significant connections with others than they initially expected, particularly if those connections manifested offline.

Even though the stigma does play some role throughout the process of using the app, students also begin to shift their impressions of Tinder. The metaphor I presented in the last
chapter of Tinder as a touristic space enacting consumptive fantasies begins to shift. Instead, as these Tinder tourists begin to use the app to fulfill more longstanding needs, it becomes a more consistent aspect of their lives; Tinder becomes a normalized everyday space for many of these users. These students become locals on the app.

This transition of the space of Tinder in individuals’ lives simultaneously corresponds with a shift in how they begin to see others on the app as well. Elena, Thomas, and Daniel - who all described at least some amount of satisfaction with Tinder when they left – began to see others on the app as people who demonstrate normal needs and desires rather than only as objects of desire. Daniel notes this point when I ask him if his reasons for using Tinder ever changed:

That's a great question. (whispers) Did they ever change? Yeah, like... Maybe they were times when I, like... They seemed nice, like yeah I could meet their friend or like I took it like as a, as a means to meet cool people whereas initially I didn't intend for that to be the case. I just like would use it as a very disconnected like game. But then I, as I like had more matches, as I like... Interacted with people more, I thought that, I could actually like, I don't know. I could like, like take, take the people I met on there seriously, like as humans.

I feel like at first I didn't see them as human, you know what I mean? It's so easy to not, to see these profiles and pictures on your phone as not human because you're not interacting with them face to face. There such a huge disconnect. But yeah. So I guess there reasons would change, but not drastically. I was never searching for a mate on Tinder. (emphasis added)

The increasing seriousness with which Daniel treats the app stems from the new manner in which he treats his interlocutors. Although he describes looking to the app for entertainment, these interactions allow him to more clearly see the humanity of others on Tinder. Thomas and Elena’s experiences also follow this humanizing trajectory as they begin dating individuals they found through the app. These three individuals begin a process not only of becoming more committed to the app but seeing others in more holistic manner than they described when they narrated their reasons for swiping.

However, not all informants note such positive feelings about others when leaving the app. As I described earlier in this section, Ricardo continued to see his app use as objectifying
toward others. Without opportunity to form more significant relationships offline than he was anticipating, his app use did not lead him to feel satisfied or respectful for the person on the other side of the app.

So why is it, then, that all of my informants macro-usage of the app deepened – transitioning from Tinder tourist to local – but only some felt as though their views of others on the app changed? The changes in how students use the app over time, view others on the app, and feel satisfied with their use on Tinder occur in tandem at the micro level of the swipe.

5.3 Revisiting the gaze

The subjectivities of these student Tinder users evolve as they spend more time on the app and thus learn how to alter the ways in which they gaze upon others – and themselves. This section will delve into theory on the gaze in order to establish how these Tinder users internalize the consumptive, disciplining gaze they initial directed toward others on the app, in the process learning how to implement this objectifying gaze upon themselves.

In the previous chapter, I began my discussion of the gaze as it related to the socially patterned manner in which both tourists and others regard the “other” while engaged in these activities. However, the gaze also refers to more than just the manner in which individuals regard particular sights of interest; the gaze also can act as a mechanism of power and control. As Foucault discusses, the gaze acts as a locus of this power when they become aware that others look at them as objects of surveillance and alter their behaviors accordingly; that “discipline makes possible the operation of a relational power that sustains itself by its own mechanism and by which, for the spectacle of public events, substitutes the uninterrupted play of calculated gazes” (1995:178). The gaze thus becomes an instrument of power when it shapes the manner in which subjects view themselves to the point where it becomes internalized and thus subjects begin to act as though they are under this surveillance, even when they are not. It is in this way that subjects are disciplined as both “objects and as instruments of its discipline” (1995:170).
Tinder presents the ideal environment for the implementation of the disciplinary mechanism of the gaze. Using Tinder requires users to participate in the visual architecture of the app to a degree unheard of on dating apps before its development. Unlike other dating sites, users do not have the option to passively and voyeuristically gaze upon the users on the app without also participating in some form due to construction of the swipe. Because Tinder presents users one by one on the app and its users must physically move through the pile of profiles, this action serves to both incentivize and routinize the manner in which users gaze upon others. In this way, Tinder users have to participate in this primary, defining feature of the app interface.

As I discussed in the beginning of Chapter three, users frame the beginning of their use of the app as “casual.” However, as they continue using the swipe, just like other Tinder users do, the difference between “them” and the “other” lessens. The shrinking social distance between these Swarthmore students and others continues to the point where they realize that they, too, are now experienced Tinder users and have deepened their commitment to the app. This deepening commitment to the app occurs because of the new ways in which the swipe disciplines users to see the app in a new manner. Initially, Tinder users narrate using the swipe as an instrument through which to reassure themselves that they are not like this “other” and evade stigma through gazing upon and evaluating others in a consumerist manner.

However, one swipe at a time, Tinder users begin to change these views. Students begin to see others in a new, less objectifying light as they start to interact with users offline and reestablish some amount of respect for the “other” on the app.

At the same time as each swipe serves as a new data point in learning more about app politics and norms through seeing how others present themselves – in the process, seeing others differently - they also begin to extend and internalize this gaze themselves. In other terms, to use Tinder is not just to subject others to a set of instrumentalizing politics and standards of
judgment; it is also to realize that students users becomes objects of this gaze themselves, as they, too are implicated in this web of surveillance.

Informants allude to the internalization of the gaze and their changing subjectivities when they recount not only how their use of the app alters over time to become more serious, but also when they mention the ways in which their relationships with others on the app transform over time.

5.4 Internalizing the gaze through the profile

One of the clearest relationships informants change due to internalizing the gaze of others occurs when they change their self-presentation on the app in accordance with what others on the app indicate they prefer. This section will analyze how informants narrate the process of maintaining a profile, analyzing how their experience seeing and deciding how to swipe on the profiles of others dictates the manner in which they begin to discipline their own behavior.

Michael’s experience learning how to develop and maintain his profile serves as a poignant example of the process by which he learns to exert the disciplining gaze of Tinder upon himself. When he began using the app, he was unfamiliar with the norms governing how individuals should present themselves on the app:

Yeah, well when I first logged in, I had no idea like what do people put on these things. And I can’t remember if I like looked at, ca-, cause I don’t remember if it lets you look at other profiles without putting anything in or not. But I started out I think with just my class. Like my, like Swarthmore College ‘15 was all I put in the bio.

When Michael begins using the app, he does not exactly what to include because he does not know how others see the profile; he is not acquainted with the bodily idioms other on the app use to present themselves, and opts to include less information at first.

However, as he swipes through more profiles, he notices how others present themselves and begins to alter his profile accordingly through a number of iterations. When I ask him what
his profile looks like now, he begins by saying it is “exactly the same” as before, then amends that statement as he recounts a number of small tweaks he has made:

Well the bio’s a little different. I added one photo [...] then I, I got to see more of what people were writing in the bios and so I added this like description of what I do, as, like I’m a singer, I’m a web designer-developer, technology, art, blah blah. And then I let that ride for a bit.

Then I noticed that like an unusually high percentage of people seemed to be talking about how they liked guys with beards so I put in a photo of me with a beard, a beard. Not as the first one but as like the third one or something like that, to see if anything would change. And nothing really did, I didn’t any like, uptick in matches or that the people I was matching with were the ones that said things about beards that to be talking about how they liked guys with beards so I put in a photo of me with they were not. So that, I just kept that on there, I didn’t take that off.

And then I was also curious about what would editing the bio do to it, so all I did was add “what’s up” between my class year and the, like, art, technology, business and I did not notice anything there either. I was like maybe that’ll, it felt very serious before. It felt like, this was deliberate and intentioned before and so by adding what’s up I thought maybe people would be more willing to like talk just without thinking that I’m a serious dude. Like they could, it could be more free I guess, and like yeah. Agile or something. I don’t know.

As his account underscores, Michael has to learn how to present himself to others, and this process occurs as he passes more time scrutinizing the profiles of others. The disciplining gaze Foucault describes plays an important role in this process. Through making decisions to change certain aspects of his profile because he thinks that he will appeal more to other Tinder users, he demonstrates that he understands that he exists in a system of surveillance; he is always being watched and assessed by others. Although he does not see the moment of these evaluations, he is rewarded by its effects when he receives another match. Thus, he preemptively makes changes to his presentation on the app with this present audience in mind. Attuned to the criteria by the ways in which other users seem to see themselves through their profiles, Michael begins to exact similar modes of representation upon himself in order to appeal to this intended audience.

Although he has many choices when deciding how to present himself on the app, the particular types of modifications such as including his occupation, noting a particular aspect of
his physical appearance, and his casual disposition, highlight the importance of him crafting his embodied habitus on the app. In Chapter Three how Swarthmore Tinder users evaluate the presentations of others through dissecting some of the “axes of difference” through which other users represent their embodied habitus. Here, Michael does the same thing to himself. Through analyzing the profiles of others, he learns how to parse through which attributes are most important to include, and thus exacts that same objectifying eye upon himself to see how he can better appeal to these other users.

Although the particular types of changes that Michael makes as he begins exacting this instrumentalizing gaze upon himself may seem innocuous at first, this process of internalizing the gaze can carry a steep cost. For instance, one effect of this process of self-objectification is that it can impose an insidious form of self-policing gender expression, as Elena experiences. When creating her profile, she chooses to include a photo that indicates she is “slightly athletic” and includes a shot of her hiking, but tells me:

It wasn’t anything showy or anything. It was like more of a silly picture so like I guess [I was] trying to come off as like casual, not hooking up, not trying to be attractive or sexy, no cleavage picture, definitely no butt picture, like nothing that like showcased my body in any sort of sense I guess.

Elena’s rationale for including this particular style of photo demonstrates how the politicized nature of this particular forms of bodily representation. She demonstrates awareness of the importance of managing her impression, and she recognizes how appearances matter because “an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is” (Goffman 1959:13). As she understands it, if she presents any significant amount of skin, others looking at her profile will interpret this sexual connotation in her bodily idiom. Particularly on Tinder, Elena understands how others may look at her profile and make a number of assumptions about who she is through the profile, and thus she is hyper-conscious about the images she puts up because she is nervous about how others may interpret her image.
However, Elena’s self-conscious decision to avoid these interpretations though preemptively altering her self-presentation. She is aware that she is already the object of the gaze of others, and thus she attempts to mold the presentation of her embodied habitus in this photo in order to take these (profile) viewers into account. Thus, the gaze – established through the manner in which she shows off her body – serves to entrench and validate only certain bodily expressions, and she has internalized what corporeal presentations on the app allow her to be “casual” and not “sexual.” Her cognizance of how others see her on the app have disciplined her to develop a particular way of herself, her bodily presentation, and what it means to be respectable on Tinder.

Although she does not directly speak with another user in altering her self-presentation, my interview with Michael confirmed how others on the app do use bodily presentation as a criteria for determining the relationship type another user desires. Since he is not looking for a hook up, he says that he thinks:

It’s like a negative for profiles that do seem overtly sexual. And that’s a hard distinction cause like I said before, it, it almost never comes up. But sometimes there’s an occasional profile where it’s like, there’s four photos and they’re all of boobs. Um like, mm. *laugh* no. (mhm) Saying no to that.”

Elena and Michael’s comments together underscore the circular nature of the gaze. These socially patterned ways of seeing which deem certain gender presentations as less sexually charged than others affect the ways in which they view one another. As Foucault would describe, though, a compelling aspect of this is the way in which this power relationship self-perpetuates. Yet through this process of surveilling and performing gender, they both participate in this system of discipline, as both seek to engender the “right” type of gender expression or politics.

5.5 Conclusion

Although these Tinder users universally cite beginning their use of the app out of curiosity, the increasing seriousness with which these students begin to engage with Tinder indicates an important change. The process by which users go from using the app with tourist-
like curiosity to the insider experience of a local occurs as every swipe on the app disciplines them to become less casual users.

In particular, these individuals’ subjectivities change through gazing at others-humanizing them in the process - and yet learning how dehumanize themselves in the process. This occurs most poignantly when users week to change their profile in response to how they learn – through the swipe – how they think that others view them.

Elena, Michael, and their fellow Swarthmore students exist in a difficult position when using the app. The circularity and self-perpetuity of the power relationship of the gaze seems engendered within the very architecture of the app, as exemplified through the necessity to swipe in order to use the app. The negative effects of this self-regulating, disciplinary gaze can be seen in the objectifying norms enforcing a particular identity politics, such as that of policing gender expression.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

I began this project with one simple question in mind: how and why do college students use Tinder? In drawing upon the ways in which college students narrative their use of the app as it changes over time, I argued that they initially they use Tinder in an objectifying and distancing manner in order to both separate themselves from the perceived stigma of using the app. In addition, the processes of objectification present through the way they use the swipe allows them to fantasize about connecting with other attractive individuals through the app. In short, they describe using the app and the swipe to attempt connecting with new individuals of the same type of people they ordinarily connect with in their everyday life.

As Tinder users continue using the app for some time, they transition from using the app in a manner analogous to the way tourists gaze upon others while traveling to becoming “locals” on the app. Through interacting with others that they meet through the swipe, they learn how to begin seeing their matches as human subjects, rather than as sole objects of desire.

However, through swiping through other individuals on the app, they have begun to discipline themselves to see their embodied habitus online as the others’ object of desire. Thus, through internalizing the gaze of others, informants begin to exert that objectifying gaze toward themselves. In other terms, Tinder users began to subject themselves to their own processes of objectification. It is in this way that Tinder users shape their subjectivities through their use on the app; although the app is structured in such a way that encourages this power-producing gaze to occur, these college students become the ultimate implementers of their self-surveillance. Saba Mahmood reminds us that it is “it is in the repeated performance of practices (and/or norms in Butler’s sense) that the subject’s will, desire, intellect, and body comes to acquire a particular form;” these repeated performances serve to shape the individual’s experience of subjectivity, particularly through as they begin to act as though they are always already an object of the objectifying gaze of others (2001:216).
However, as Mahmood also articulates, “if there is one thing that the feminist tradition has made clear, it is that questions of politics must be pursued at the level of the architecture of the self, the processes (social and technical) through which its constituent elements (instincts, desires, emotions, memory) are identified and given coherence” (2001:224). As I embarked upon my own use of Tinder alongside my informants this past September, I also noticed the various elements of my own architecture of the “self.” I see how, through my interviews, I experienced many of the same changes in subjectivity which shaped how I understood my understanding of self and desires – and what those mean to my everyday life.

Given the data from these interviews, it is easy to criticize the ways in which these college students – and I - begin to see others on Tinder as a negative and emblematic example of the extending reach of consumptive capitalism. However, my own experiences on the app reveal not only the ways in which engaging with these consumerist social structures can discipline users in a positive manner as well.

Although the discourse analysis I conducted in interviews with my informants established some of the broad theoretical frameworks in which these individuals structure their lives, future research must engage with not only the discourse informants use to narrate their experiences, but also observe how this discourse evolves alongside longtime changes in practice.

I propose this not just as a rote academic exercise, but because it is precisely within this rich, grounded, and contextualized analysis that we can understand the positive and negative ways Tinder shapes informants’ experiences of subjectivity, because “in order for us to be able to judge, in a morally and politically informed way, even those practices we consider objectionable, it is important to take into consideration the desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations of the people to whom these practices are important” (Mahmood 2001:225). Although the instrumentalizing frameworks through which Tinder users begin to view others and themselves may seem to institutionalize a worrisome – and even objectionable – manner of regarding others consistent with consumptive capitalism, they do not tell the whole story. These
frameworks may serve to ingrain older power dynamics in new ways, yet they also provide spaces for enacting discipline with a positive purpose as well – a purpose that did not have the space to surface within a single interview.

Although my time on Tinder disciplined me to perhaps regard myself and my presentation in a self-objectifying manner that still gives me pause, I also see the manner in which employing the framework of Tinder has enabled me to consciously engage within these consumerist structures in a manner I found empowering. Through slowly pushing myself outside of my own comfort zone, including facing my own culturally ingrained fear of seeking connection with strangers through virtual space, I have seen how I have begun more wholeheartedly embracing the alterity of others through the process of using Tinder – and I urge that further research, too, should continue to consider all of these positive and negative effects of app usage.
Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun

Beltrone, Gabriel

Bialska, Paula
2012 Becoming Intimately Mobile. Peter Lang, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Bilandzic, Mark, and Marcus Foth

Birnholtz, Jeremy, Colin Fitzpatrick, Mark Handel, and Jed R. Brubaker

Blackwell, Courtney, Jeremy Birnholtz, and Charles Abbott

Boellstorff, Tom

Bordo, Suzanne

Bourdieu, Pierre

boyd, danah

Brubaker, Jed R., Mike Ananny, and Kate Crawford

Butler, Judith
Castranova, Edward  

Coleman, Gabriella  


Collins, Samuel Gerald  

Constable, Nicole  

Couldry, N., and A. McCarthy, eds.  
2004 Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age. London: Routledge.

Crapazano, Vincent  

Csordas, Thomas  
1990 Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. Ethos.

Dunleavy, Jamie  
2015 If “Harry Potter” Characters Had Tinder, January 27.  

Ellison, Nicole, and danah boyd  

Featherstone, Mike  

Finkel, Eli  

Foster, Robert  
Foucault, Michel

Gershon, Ilana

Gideon, Melanie

Goffman, Erving

Grusin, Richard

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson

How Your Race Affects The Messages You Get

Humanitarians of Tinder

Humphrey, Caroline

Humphreys, Lee

Ingold, T.

Jansson, Andre

Katz, James E., and Mark Aakhus
2002  Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance.
Cambridge University Press.

Kendall, Lori

Kondo, Dorinne K.


Licoppe, Christine

Ling, Rich

Mahmood, Saba

Malinowski, Bronislaw

Mazzarella, William

Miller, Daniel

Moore, Robert J., Cabell Hankinson Gathman, and Nicolas Ducheneaut

Nafus, Dawn, and Karina Tracey

Osborne, Peter

Peter, Anne Helen
Pratt, M.L.  

Quiroz, Pamela Anne  

Reischer, Erica, and Kathryn S. Koo  

Rodaway, P.  

Schilling, Chris  
1993  The Body and Social Theory. London: SAGE.

Silva, Adriana de Souza e, and Jordan Firth  

Simmel, Georg  
1903  The Metropolis and Mental Life. Individuality and Social Forms.

Smith, Greg  

Summers, Nick  


Sutko, Daniel M., and Adriana de Souza e Silva  

Swarthmore College  

Tinder Subreddit  
Tinderella: A Modern Fairy Tale

Townsend, Anthony M.

Troll

Turner, Terrence

Urry, John, and Jonas Larsen
2011 The Tourist Gaze 3.0. London: SAGE.

Van Wolputte, Steven