Tinder mediated intimacies

How female international students experience sexuality and intimacy

through Tinder.

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ABSTRACT

In a globalized country such as The Netherlands where digital media are a significant part of our daily lives, dating apps like Tinder have become a tool through which people experience intimacy and sexuality. Considering that The Netherlands is a destination chosen by thousands of expats every year to pursue an academic degree, Tinder becomes an important tool used by female international students to experience intimacy and sexuality in the country. Bearing in mind that the design of the app, as well as its affordances, promotes a patriarchal societal structure, the present study investigates how female international students experience intimacy and sexuality through Tinder in The Netherlands. In-depth interview data, which were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, revealed that female international students had a great agency on the app. They decided how to represent themselves, what partner to choose, and how to defend themselves from harassers. Despite the agency and the active role that female international students had on the app, the Dutch globalized environment seemed to have had a huge impact on the schemes of values regarding sexuality and intimacy the participants have adopted in The Netherlands. The main changes that occurred among the population after having moved to The Netherlands and meeting people on Tinder are three: First, they learned how to communicate openly with a partner. Second, they explored their sexual identities freely. Third, they experienced and accepted new ways of dating. These changes have occurred thanks to the fact that Tinder permitted female international students to meet and get in contact with people that, having a different sexual culture, influenced the scheme of values of the female international students. However, the interactions with men on Tinder did not only bring positive and enriching experiences. Episodes of harassment that include unwanted sexual messages, the lack of consent, the objectification of women, and verbal harassment emerged during the interviews. In conclusion, this study recognizes that even though female international students are not totally passive to Tinder, the dating app has a huge role in framing the experience of intimacy and sexuality in The Netherlands.

KEYWORDS: *Tinder, Sexuality, Identity-building, Online-misogyny, Migration*

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1. Introduction

When international students move to a new country, they may go through a process of negotiation of values and ideas connected to sexuality and relationships. Hall (1990) claims that cultural identities change over the influence of cultures and experiences, making some important reflections regarding the concept of cultural identity. Hall (1990) claimed that some scholars conceive it as a condition that unites "people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (pp.223). Hence, people who share the same historical experience are homogenized since the cultural identity ignores the singular experiences by generalizing them. This approach to cultural identities considers identities static, hence, it facilitates the process of otherness. Within this vision, cultural identities are identified as a trait shared by communities in the same manner. This research will apply the critique that Hall (1990) made to the concept of cultural identities since he retains that cultural identities keep changing and they are "subjected to the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (pp.225). Within this conception, even though cultural identities are linked to the past, other stimuli and environments continue to change them.

According to Cserni (2020), in a globalized world, the concept of identity becomes complicated since individuals are subjected to different flows of culture, values, and ideas. Moreover, Cserni (2020) argues that sexuality and intimacy are two components of identities that are strongly influenced by global flows and technology. Digital media play a key role in identity-building processes (Polson, 2015). Indeed, the advent of digital media that combine the online and offline sphere has had a crucial role in the process of reterritorialization in a host country by creating a "sense of place" (Polson, 2015, p. 630). Polson (2015) argues that "through living and traveling in spaces that are dis-embedded from historically situated geographical and social territories, we experience a sense of deterritorialization" s, p. 631). Feelings of belonging and attachment to a new place can occur through practices of socialization and communication. Within the migrant communities, digital media play an important role in the reterritorialization process by connecting virtual realities with off-line ones and by permitting access to social places. Therefore, media practices have an active role in shaping the experiences of expats in the host society and in revaluating among other values,

the ones related to sexuality and intimacy. Hoang and Yeoh (2015) claim that sexuality acquires different meanings over time and place. However, individuals are not passive to cultural schemes, but they challenge them and construct their sexualities autonomously. Hence, sexuality is fluid and inclined to transform. Hoang and Yeoh (2015) argue that previous studies show that the host country presented an opportunity for female migrants to experience a free sexual life due to the anonymity that characterizes them in the new environment. In line with this, in a globalized context, where immigrants re-evaluate schemes of values previously interiorized in the homeland, it is important to study the role that digital media have in the process of adaptation and negotiation of sexuality in the host country (Ahmadi, 2003). One of these digital platforms is Tinder, a location-based dating app that allows people to chat online first and to meet off-line later. Location-based apps such as Tinder differ from regular online dating websites because they allow people to match and interact only with users that are located close by. Creating an account on Tinder is easy since users need to provide only a few photos and a short biography. Once the profile is created, the profiles of other people are displayed on the app and the Tinder user can swipe right if he/she likes the profile or left if he/she does not like the profile that is visualizing. In order to interact with a potential partner, a match is needed. A match is made when both the users swipe right.

Considering that Tinder is the most downloaded dating app in the Netherlands by locals under 30 (Statista, n.d.), we still do not know much about how internationals use it. Indeed, international students compose a heterogeneous group that permits to explore experiences of people from all over the world. In addition, it is a representative group of international students as migrants in the Netherlands. Indeed, in the 2018-2019 academic year, the number of international students enrolled at Dutch Universities reached 85.955 (Nuffic, n.d). It is relevant to understand the impact that a dating app such as Tinder has on the identity-building process that immigrants go through when moving to a new country. In particular, since Tinder focuses on intimate and sexual interactions, it is important to research how the app frames sexual and intimate experiences in the host country. Moreover, previous literature on Tinder does not consider differences between female and male approaches to the app (Abramova et. al., 2016) as well as gendered approaches to engagements with the app are understudied. For this

reason, it is important to do further research focusing on how female experiences differ from male ones. Therefore, the aim of this research is to study migrant women's experience of sexuality on Tinder in The Netherlands. To first understand the use that female international students do of Tinder it is important to look at the motivations that lead the women to download the app. Tanner and Huggins (2018) claim that women, among other reasons, use the app to socialize, to experience hook-ups, or to find a partner. Because the representation of the self on Tinder is mostly performative, Tinder users communicate their intentions by the way how they present themselves (Cabañes & Collantes, 2020). In line with it, Cabañes and Collantes (2020) argue that female migrants choose to give a cosmopolitan representation of the self through the photos on the dating app profile to better fit in the globalized environment and to be liked by locals. Hence, it is relevant to pay attention to the self-representation that women decide to give of themselves. Self-representation is one important aspect of dating apps such as Tinder for two main reasons: First because, as Ellison et al. (2006) claim, when people seek dating partners they try to communicate an ideal self by exposing the person they desire to be and highlighting positive attributes. Second, self-representation within online dating triggers specific dynamics that are not present in the off-line world. Indeed, in online interactions users can decide what is relevant to show and what is not. On one side, they can manipulate their images and apply self-censorship whereas, on the other hand, Ellison et al. (2006) claim that "if participants aspire to an intimate relationship, their desire to feel understood by their interaction partners will motivate self-disclosures" (p. 417). It means that the sense of anonymity and the disclosure to their off-line network allow dating app users to feel free to show a side of themselves that they do not share in the off-line world.

However, users' profiles consist of a series of photos and a short biography which are insufficient to represent the entirety of an individual's personality. Considering it, and observing the affordances of Tinder, it is easy to see how the app follows the logic that constitutes the hookup culture, a cultural phenomenon that refers to a lifestyle based on sexual encounters that do not necessarily involve forms of emotional intimacy with the partner (Lee, 2019). Indeed, the infinite possibility of swiping right transformed the interactions that take place on the platform superficial to the point of transforming Tinder into a real sexual market, where

buyers and sellers rationally evaluate the exchanges of goods. Thompson (2018) argues that if we consider that Tinder follows the logic of the market, we soon realize that female Tinder users represent the product while male ones take on the role of consumers. This shows that hookup culture is not accessible to women in the same way it is to men since it is based on a patriarchal system that objectifies female people (Thompson,2018). In fact, in the hookup culture, men's pleasure is prioritized over women's pleasure. By doing so, Tinder reproduces a hierarchy at the top of which men are positioned who, performing masculinity that is defined as toxic, exercise power over people of the female gender (Hess & Flores, 2018). The term toxic masculinity refers to a set of attitudes adopted by people of the male gender that involve aggressive and dominant behaviors towards women who are considered inferior and submissive (Hess & Flores, 2018). Therefore, the hookup culture on Tinder leads to the pressing issue that it is necessary to address when studying women on Tinder: Online misogyny. Since misogyny is embedded in Tinder logics, the first step to defeating it and having a socio-cultural change is by studying the dynamics that are hidden behind it. Therefore, this project provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of misogyny online. To first understand the phenomenon of misogyny taking into account female international students as population on Tinder, we need to consider that, because of the different nationalities they are from, they belong to minorities within the Dutch context. According to Vaahensalo (2021), the intersection between power structures determined by gender, race, and ethnicity leads to processes of othering not only offline but also online. Hence, the positionality of female international students might lead to technology-facilitated violence not only because of the fact of being women but also because of their nationality and/or ethnicity. The forms that technology-facilitated violence takes in online spaces such as Tinder manifests through gender-based violence. Thus, by practicing non-consensual sexting, gender-based hate speech, and online sexual harassment (Thompson, 2018).

In conclusion, the reflections made above lead to the research question: *How do female international students experience sexuality and intimacy through Tinder in The Netherlands?*

2. Theoretical framework

Launikari and Puukari (2005) argue that identities are the result of the combination of the inner self and the influences of society. According to this idea, migrant identities are shaped by the experience of living in different societies and by the processes of socialization to which they are subjected. By doing so, they acknowledge that there are plenty of ways to interpret reality (Launikari & Puukari, 2005). For instance, they realize that what was considered normal in a societal context, is not in another one. These experiences allow migrants to dispense a repertoire of realities that allow them to interpret the world through different lenses. It means that migrants have the ability to make sense of different realities by applying a set of values that match the particular context. Therefore, Launikari and Puukari (2005) argue that migrants can choose among a set of identities the ones that best fit them. "When nobody knows who the individual really is, the individual gets the opportunity and the possibility to define her/himself in a way s/he desires" (Launikari & Puukari, 2005, p. 105). Within this context, sexuality constitutes an important component of individuals' identities, which can also be shaped by the migratory process since practices of intimacy are culturally defined (Ahmadi, 2003).

Furthermore, in the process of identity building, new media have an important role since they allow migrants to be both producers and consumers (Georgiou, 2012). It means that if on one side they use new media to be in contact with the new society, on the other hand, they use them to give a representation of themselves as they desire, hence having agency. However, it is important to consider that the performance of identities on SNS is shaped by specific affordances of the digital media. If on one hand, the affordances of the digital platforms permit certain ways of self-expression, they can limit others (Szulc, 2019). For instance, the self-representation on Tinder is mostly visual and little space is given to share personal information (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). However, Georgiou (2012) points out that marginalized communities such as female migrants are the ones that get the best out of new media. Indeed, women, through new media, have the opportunity to express and voice themselves challenging the hegemonic representation embedded not only in the native country but also in the host society. Therefore, "new media, cultural connections, transnational networks and affiliations with multiple spheres and sphericules present elements of a complex system of communication

that can advance participation and recognition" (Georgiou, 2012, p. 5). Since Tinder reproduces the sexual culture of the place where it is used (Chan, 2016), it enables migrants to familiarize themselves with the practices of intimacy and sexuality of the host country. Hence, by using Tinder, migrants can experience new sexual cultures which contribute to the formation of their sexual identities. In addition to it, Chan (2018) claims that dating apps are a space where women can liberate themselves from social boundaries and where they can express agency by having access to a sexual world that has always been reserved to men (Chan, 2018).

2.1 Understanding intimacies

The section of the theoretical framework that follows discusses how societal contexts such as individualism, collectivism, and globalization influence sexual cultures as well as practices of intimacy. In line with it, it is argued that social environments also shape migrants' sexual and intimate experiences.

2.1.1 Collectivism vs Individualism

As it is already stated in the introduction, since identities are fluid and change according to experiences and time (Hall, 1990), immigrants re-evaluate, among others schemes of values previously interiorized in the homeland, as well as the ones related to sexuality (Ahmadi, 2003). Therefore, one of the aims of this research is to investigate how the Dutch globalized environment influences female migrants' sexual identities. Even though Dutch society is a heterogeneous society that includes diverse groups of people who do not share the same cultural background, it is relevant to consider that the main cities in the Netherlands have undergone a process of globalization which is a cultural phenomenon that encourages a Western idea of individualism (Jamieson, 2011). Furthermore, considering that in globalized contexts the Western idea of intimacy is the predominant one, the practices of intimacy are mostly individualistic since the self is placed at the center of the interaction (Jamieson, 2011). Accordingly, Jamieson (2011) argues that it can be a consequence of the image of relationships

focused on the individual given by Western mass media. On the other hand, collectivist societies experience intimacy as a collective action rather than an individual one. For instance, in countries with a collectivist cultural orientation, such as China, "'intimacy is manifested primarily in the harmonious function of a couple in their shared familial and social responsibilities, rather than in private emotional attachment between husband and wife' (Du, 2008, p. 101)". However, claiming that the way people experience intimacy depends merely on belonging to a collectivistic or individualistic society may undermine the diverse and fragmented nature of modern societies characterized by different practices of intimacy within the same society to coexist.

2.1.2 Globalized intimacies

Besides, Bauman (2003) argues that individualism is one of the main factors that has made relationships and love liquid in modern society. Indeed, individualism and consumerism have destroyed the traditional idea of love and relationship. Bauman (2003) claims that computer dating is a result of this view on intimacy as it allows people to find new partners easily and having casual intimate encounters. Hence, some individuals who use computer dating give up on the idea of commitment to one single person since they are aware of the unlimited possibilities. While in the past relationships were characterized by the presence of strong bonds, in the modern age, technology helps us to create shallow transient forms of intimacy. According to this idea, Moore (2012) argues that sexualities in globalized areas are a product of several global discourses such as capitalism, neoliberalism, and consumerism.

Moreover, Cserni (2020) argues that sexuality and intimacy are influenced not only by technology but also by global flows. Therefore, sexual identities are shaped by globalization, hence by the relationship between local and global. To better understand how the relationship between these two-dimension impact sexuality and intimacy, it is necessary to consider that two theories have analyzed the phenomenon of globalization: Homogenization and heterogenization. Assadi (2014) argues that the homogenization perspective identifies globalization with the spread of Western culture, lifestyle, and values worldwide. Within this

perspective, Western culture has colonized the world by disrupting local cultures and imposing an homogeneous culture that conforms to the Western one (Scholte, 2008). According to Cserni (2020) technologies have had a significant role in this process since the Internet has favored the spread of Western culture due to its accessibility. For this reason, the fact that The USA, as well as Europe, have always had greater access than other countries across the world to the Internet has given them the opportunity to have a strong cultural influence all over the globe.

On the other hand, the heterogenization perspective conceptualizes the relation between global and local in a different way. The global culture does not overcome the local one as it is conjectured in the homogenization theory, but the two dimensions coexist together. Therefore, the global flows transform the local culture which is reinvented under the influence of global flows (Matei, 2006). By doing so, globalization is understood as a continuous process of negotiation between local and global which gives rise to transnational identities. Cserni (2020) claims that the expression of sexual identities through dating apps can be analyzed according to these two globalization theories. Indeed, dating apps, among new technologies, "can amplify both homogenization and heterogenization" (Cserni, 2020, pp.2). It means that dating apps can reproduce and reinforce Western sexual culture, but they can also allow dating app users to express their unique way of experiencing sexuality (homogenization perspective).

2.1.3 Intimacy and sexuality in migration studies

The role of sexuality and love in migration studies has been unresearched. However, Mai and King (2009) claim that it is a relevant topic since sexuality is a characteristic of the self that defines the person not only at an individual level but also at a social one. Indeed, the way how people experience intimacy and sexuality legitimizes social and cultural hierarchies. To better understand the existence of this hierarchy, it is relevant to say that the Western idea of romantic love is based on the relationship between two equals who celebrate "the expression of individual autonomy, gender equality and emotional fulfilment as key and fixed criteria of Northern-centric 'civility'" (Mai and King, 2009, p. 300). Accordingly, all people who do not identify with the model of romantic love, are perceived as others while Western people are the

holders of civilization. This view leads to the construction of a hierarchy of civilization that ignores the fact that how people experience and perform love depends on the culture and social class.

In line with this, Ahmadi (2003) claims that "sexuality is constituted differently within different socio-cultural contexts" (pp.685). It means that sexuality is a social construct and that culture affects the way how it is experienced. Hence, individuals' sexual identities are shaped by the external environment. For instance, Ahmadi (2003) studied how the perception that migrants have on sexuality changes after the migratory process, and she concluded that migrants who belonged to a patriarchal society have changed views about topics that concern sexuality after having moved to a secularized country. Some of the changes that Ahmadi (2003) has noted regard topics such as virginity, partner choices, and forms of relationship. In particular, Ahmadi (2003) claims that female migrants have a major change in views on sexuality and intimacy than male ones. Indeed, female migrants identify the host land as a place where they embrace sexual emancipation and can escape from patriarchal structures. Likewise, a study on the evolution of narratives about virginity made by Maroccan female immigrants in The Netherlands has shown that the change of views on virginity does not imply a sharp rejection of schemes of values interiorized during the primary process of socialization (Buitelaar, 2002). In contrast, the participants expressed their ability to shift from the meanings of Maroccan values to the Dutch ones and to combine them. Therefore, this study does not frame female immigrants as passive individuals, but "as actors with a multiple cultural competence" (Buitelaar, 2002, p.482).

Therefore, studies show that the process of socialization is continuous and that migrants "have always evaluated and revaluated their cultural beliefs (in this case, on sexuality) in order to manage new social conditions" (Ahmadi, 2003, p. 703). Furthermore, Farahani (2018) claims that migrants can experience an internal conflict caused by the feeling of being in between their homeland, with its cultural assents, and the host country. Indeed, female migrants can perceive their cultural background to be a characteristic they can benefit from or something that constitutes an obstacle in the new country. For instance, female migrants have to deal with heterosexual beauty and fashion standards of the new country which can be different from

what they were used to in the native one. This leads them to a continuous negotiation and exploration of the personality.

2.2 Activities on Tinder

The following part moves on to describe in greater detail the components of Tinder interactions starting from the motivations to use Tinder and touching upon the performative nature of self-representation given through photos included in the profiles. Further, the logic behind the matches is taken into consideration. Since race is one of the criteria involved in the match-making process, an intersectional lens is adopted to understand what choices the matches are based on. Therefore, the critic that Butler (1997) applies to academia is used as a starting point to study race, gender, sexuality in an intersectional way.

2.2.1 Motivations to use Tinder

To first understand how women use Tinder it is necessary to analyze the motivations that lead them to download the app. Even though Tinder was designed to help people finding a partner for a relationship, not all users utilize it for that purpose. Besides the research of a partner, other reasons such as training social skills and flirting lead people to download the app (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Other women admit that they use Tinder because of peer pressure (LeFebvre, 2018). Indeed, the popularity of Tinder among the young generation has led women to download the app to feel part of the group. Furthermore, Tinder is used also to socialize, especially for people that feel more comfortable in online interactions rather than in face-to-face ones (Sumter et al, 2017). Other users say they use the app just for fun or for curiosity (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), for getting over an ex (Ward, 2017), to distract from everyday life (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), and to meet people when they travel (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017),. Tanner and Huggings (2018) argue that one motivation that has been found in women and not in men is correlated to self-esteem. Indeed, many female users have explained that Tinder gives an ego-boost sensation that comes from male approval

concretized in the matches. Nevertheless, Tanner and Huggings (2018) argue that the motivations to use Tinder can change over time and can be multiple at the same time. For instance, some women download Tinder because they are both looking for friends and trying to get over an ex.

2.2.2 Self-representation on Tinder

However, the two main reasons that lead women to download the app individuated by Ranzini and Lutz (2017) are friendship and self-validation. Moreover, women that feel lonely and are highly educated scored higher in self-validation than others. According to Ranzini and Lutz (2017) women who use Tinder for self-validation purposes tend to manipulate the self-representation on their profiles through the photos and the bio. Indeed, it is important to consider that since Tinder does not allow face-to-face interaction from the first moment, the representation of the self is mostly performative (Goffman, 1973). According to Goffman's theory (1973), a performance is "all the activities of an individual which occurs during a period marked by their continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on the observers" (p. 32).

The author uses the metaphor of the theater to explain how individuals act in front of others. Therefore, Goffman (1973) defines the front as the space where the performance takes place and where the individual brings his/her own characteristics such as his/her gender. In the case of Tinder, the front is the Tinder account itself, the virtual place where users can expose themselves and where they interact with others. According to Goffman (1973), in a performance, the setting cannot be changed and the actors need to adapt to it. In the case of Tinder, it means that the users behave following Tinder affordances. It means that the image that users give of themselves is influenced by the design of the app. Therefore, on Tinder, the props are the images and the bios that compose the profile.

Goffman (1973) has studied self-portrayal in times where the digital did not exist and communication between humans was mostly face-to-face. With the advent of the Internet, self-portrayal has offered new possibilities to present the self to the world. Indeed, social media

including Tinder's main activities is posting photos of themselves. Vries and Peter (2003) argue that one of the main differences that distinguish offline self-portrayal from online one is the fact that while in the first one the individual decides who to share his/her image with, in the online space the audience is not well defined. In addition to it, online platforms permit us to constantly performing ourselves since we leave traces of our identities on the internet which are then transformed into digital data (Szulc, 2019). Because the audience online is partly unknown, people tend to propose a self-image that can be appreciated by a large and diverse audience. According to the socialization theory, because women learn during socialization that physical appearance is the parameter that society and especially men use to judge them, they are more likely than men to represent themselves by emphasizing physical characteristics (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Thus, considering that on Tinder the physical aspect is one of the most significant criteria matches are based on and that both male and female users prefer to match highly attractive people (Neyt et al.,2020), women tend to focus on their physical representation on the dating app. This leads women to manipulate their image in order to be liked by men (Abramova et. al., 2016). As a consequence of it, women, more than men, curate their image on Tinder because they expect to be evaluated on the basis of it.

2.2.3 Matches on Tinder

The self-representation given on Tinder is aimed to entice the user to swipe right. Consequently, since the criteria used by women and men to choose who to match on Tinder are different, the self-representation given by the two genders is constructed according to the preferences of the other gender. Therefore, as shown by the study conducted by Schmitz et. al (2009), women prefer to interact with men who are older than they are and with a high educational level. This can be elucidated by the fact that women consider socio-economic status an important criterion (Abramova et. al., 2016). Hence, older men are likely to be more financially mature than younger ones. This also explains why, when it comes to manipulating the representation on Tinder, men do not lie on their physical appearance as women do. In

contrast, they increase their age and pretend to be richer than they are (Ward, 2017). On the other hand, since men focus on the physical appearance of women, female users tend to curate their physical appearance on the Tinder profile more than men.

Furthermore, the purposes of Tinder users condition the interactions on Tinder. Ellison et. al. (2006) argue that people who are seeking long-term commitment and the ones that have short-term goals act differently in online dating. Indeed, while the first ones tend to open up and share personal and private information, the second type of users is more cautious and impersonal. Therefore, people who are looking for long-term adventures engage in self-disclosure, hence the action of sharing messages that regard the self to another person (Ellson et.al, 2006). When self-disclosure in an online environment comes from both directions, such as in the case of Tinder when two users open up to each other on private chats, an intimacy between the people is created.

However, Ellison et al. (2006) noticed that self-disclosure can be an opportunity to express freely themselves as well as a chance to be dishonest. Indeed, the online environment allows people to reveal sides of people's personalities that do not come up in face-to-face interactions with family and friends for multiple reasons. Yet, the sense of anonymity can lead online daters to manipulate not only their physical image but also their personality.

Furthermore, since this research focuses on international students who have several cultural and racial backgrounds, the critic that Butler (1997) makes to academia for having studied for a long-time gender, sexuality, and race as separate topics is considered and embraced. Butler (1997) argues that the academic environment needs to study these concepts through an intersectional lens. Ahmed (2017) comes close to Butler's thinking since she retains that feminism has been exclusive for white people. Ahmed (2017) claims that in order to be feminist and to study feminism it is necessary to apply an intersectional approach. Racial oppression and sexual oppression are the results of the same system of power. Hence, to understand the limits and challenges that Tinder presents to women, we need to consider both racial and gender issues.

Having said that, Chiswick and Houseworth (2011) research brought to light the idea that nationality and ethnicity are important factors in the decision-making process that involve

matches on Tinder. It can be explained by the fact that sharing the same cultural capital with the partner enables to transmit cultural goods to the offsprings in an easier way (Chiswick & Houseworth, 2011). Thus, shared cultural references trigger in-group dynamics which create a sense of community with people who share the same cultural background (Bogardus, 1947). In this context, Potârcă and Mills (2015) conducted research on racial preferences in online dating across 9 different European countries and found out that racial hierarchy is portrayed on dating apps. Indeed, the result of the research shows that European people as well as non-European who are categorized as minorities prefer to date people with a European background. Further, "data confirm that after Europeans and their own group, Hispanics and Asians hold intermediate rankings and that finally, Arabs and Africans are the least preferred." (pp.332).

Moreover, Potârcă and Mills (2015) consider that two factors within society determine the openness to date people that belong to different racial and ethnic groups: The presence of minority groups within the dominant group (Bratter & Zuberi, 2001) and the opinions toward immigration (Jacobson & Heaton, 2008). Bratter and Zuberi (2001) argue that the melting pot environments such as the main cities of the Netherlands make people not only more tolerant but also more curious towards the out-group cultures. Therefore, populations that include a significant size of minority groups tend to be more open towards diversity and in having intimate and romantic experiences. The second variable that the authors take into consideration refers to the presence of immigration policies in favor of immigration and integration which favor a tolerant and constructive relationship between the in-group and minorities. It means that if the overall opinion of a population towards immigration is positive, the probability of wanting to date people from different countries is high.

2.2.4 The role of algorithms

Thus, considering that matches on Tinder are a result of the influence of algorithms that filter the Tinder profiles (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018), the likeability assigned to people that belong to a certain race is fundamental in the match-making process. Indeed, the app decides who can be visible to who, and it is based on predictions that the algorithms make on possible

matches. These assumptions are made possible by the fact that "each user has an individual attractiveness score, which is opaquely computed based on popularity and user behavior indices" (Courtois & Timmermans, 2018, p.6). The goal of Tinder is to offer visibility to users that are likely to make a match. However, the marketing strategy of Tinder aims to alternate profiles with users' that are likely to be matched and with others that are not interesting for the targeted user. Courtois and Timmermans (2018) argue that, by doing so, the media company makes sure that its clients are enough satisfied to keep swiping but that, concomitantly, are disposed to subscribe and pay for a better service.

Furthermore, it is relevant to understand the perception that dating site users have on algorithms since they have an important role in the match-making process. Part of the participants of the research that Jones (2019) conducted on the perception of algorithms claimed that they see algorithms as an authority since they are perceived as scientific and objective. In the case of dating apps, some users developed a sense of trust towards algorithms. Indeed, they think that since algorithms are based on their personal data, they know exactly what kind of people they like. Therefore, algorithms, by having access to data of every profile on the dating apps platforms, can determine better than humans whether profiles are fake. However, not all dating app users have a positive attitude towards algorithms. Some of them perceive algorithms as unreliable or even as an adversary.

According to this last view, part of the participants claimed that algorithms are seen as an enemy that needs to be fought. Jones (2019) claims that digital app users have devised several ways to hack algorithms. For instance, by posting on social media only at certain times of the day and using particular words and hashtags, or by generating unusual researchers on Google (Jones, 2019). The purpose of these actions is to confuse the algorithms. Furthermore, another strategy that dating apps users implement to get the best out of matches, is to use at least three or four dating apps at the same time because they are governed by different algorithms. As a consequence of that, it is possible to have different matches (Jones, 2019).

2.3 Gender on Tinder

Considering that gendered violence can emerge from interactions on Tinder, this last section of the theoretical framework analyses how the platform can reproduce a patriarchal structure and how this leads to episodes of online harassment. In conclusion, it is considered the strategies that women implement to fight misogyny on Tinder.

2.3.1 Technology and patriarchy

Since this research focuses on the use of Tinder from a female perspective, it is important to explore the advantages and limitations of women within the dating app culture. To first understand the relationship between women and technology it is interesting to notice that back in the '90s when the Internet was an emergent novelty, a feminist current called technofeminism identified the online environment as an opportunity for women to empower (Wajcman, 2006). Indeed, the Internet was imagined as a space where the vertical hierarchy between genders could be suspended and substituted by a horizontal network system. Therefore, if in the past technology was associated with white heterosexual men, the advent of the Internet, conceived as a democratic space, was seen as a possibility to transform the patriarchal society by liberating women. Wajcman (2006) claims that the technofeminists envisaged the online space as a safe and revolutionary environment where women could express uninhibitedly the virtual self and where gender roles could be rewritten.

However, as the years went on, the technofeminist dream fell apart and it became clear that the online space cannot be understood as an isolated reality, but as strongly influenced by the values that structure the society. As a consequence of this, digital technologies portray the values of society on online platforms (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Therefore, if the society is patriarchal, gender inequalities are reflected on social media as well. Moreover, Dragiewicz et. al (2018) claims that in some cases the affordances of digital media can even ease the spread of misogynistic behavior online. In line with this, dating apps such as Tinder need to be studied intersectionally. Hence, not only by considering the relation of power between genders which is

a consequence of the patriarchal system, but also considering forms of racial oppression (Butler, 1997). In order to do so, as mentioned in the introduction, it is necessary to consider the position and the limitations of women within the hookup culture which is intrinsic to and enabled by Tinder.

2.3.2 Tinder as a marketplace

Thus, under the assumption that Tinder works as a marketplace, the way how users brand themselves follows the same logic of the market. "They acknowledged the need to engage in self-branding activities to market themselves as desirable commodities in a crowded relationship marketplace" (Hobbs et. al, 2017, pp.280). This means that in the hookup culture people are reduced to market transactions and that visibility is the main economic value exchanged (Lee, 2019). The photos constitute the most important element of Tinder profiles and they are used to self-brand themselves so as to make the Tinder profile attractive to other users (Hobbs et. al, 2017). Within the hook-up culture, what Lee (2019) defines as "Cool girl" (p. 3), which can be considered the name of a self-brand strategy that some young women implement on Tinder, is a popular way to represent themselves. The Cool girl is the result of the image given by the consumer culture of the modern and revolutionary woman that at the same time adheres to the gender expectations. Therefore, the Cool girl is an adventurous young woman that is looking for sexual adventures characterized by the consumption of instant pleasure and emotional detachment. Furthermore, the Cool girl is a girly woman who respects the attractiveness standards of heterosexual men as well as indulges male behaviors.

When women do not respect the repertoire of the Cool girl and step "into male territory" (Lee, 2019, p. 3) men respond with violence in order to restore what is considered to be the natural power relation between men and women. Banet-Weiser (2018) calls this phenomenon popular misogyny and she argues that it is created to contrast popular feminism. Since the goal of popular feminism is to reach gender equality and enhance women's power and agency, popular misogynists interpret gender equality as the will of women to take power from men. As a response to this, men aim to destroy women's identities to preserve the

hierarchy of power among genders. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that popular misogyny spreads on social media, where hegemonic masculinities aim to disempower women. In the case of Tinder, when women express their agency such as by rejecting a man, ignoring his messages, or simply by not accepting the use of inappropriate pick-up lines and sexist jocks, men feel their power attacked and reply by harassing women using hate speech, and missing discourse of consent. This shows us that the hookup culture of Tinder is not accessible in the same way by both women and men.

2.3.3 Gendered violence on Tinder

In this sub-section, the different forms of how gendered violence takes place on Tinder are considered. Thus, Hess and Flores (2018) categorized two ways in which men approach inappropriately women within the hookup culture: "Hypersexual declarations" (p. 1092) and "Objectification through consumption" (p. 1093). The first category includes all those pick-up lines that contain explicit sexual references to female bodies. As Thompson (2018) argues, sometimes these chats escalate into missing discourses of consent. "At the core of these toxic messages lies an inherent assumption that men can be successful in courting women through direct sexualization of their bodies" (Hess & Flores, 2018, p. 1092). In addition, the idea that Tinder is a hookup dating app leads men to take for granted that sex is a given within the Tinder environment and that consensus is imperative. The second category that Hess and Flores (2018) found in their research regards the use of consumption metaphors which are referred to women. The objectification of women, therefore, does not only refer to the woman as a sexual object but also to consumer goods such as food with pick-up lines such as "Do you like ramen noodles? Cause I'm gonna be ramen my noodle in ya," (Hess & Flores, 2018, p.1093). This metaphoric language supports the view of women as sexual objects.

Moreover, Thompson's (2018) research discovered that when men feel rejected by women, one of the reactions they have is verbally harassing women. Hence, female Tinder users receive insults that refer to physical characteristics such as weight. Thompson (2018) argues that if we consider that the economy of visibility is the engine that drives the Tinder

game, attacking women for their appearance is "an effort to position her as stigmatized, undesirable and unattractive, and take back or refute his sexual interest which she has not reciprocated" (p. 77). Therefore, considering that bodies are the capital exchanged in the marketplace, men, in the attempt to make feel women undesirable, aim to take control of the rules of the market. Hence, by reducing women as mere sexual objects used for male pleasure and by telling them they are unattractive, their value on the market is low.

However, it is important to consider that women are not completely passive in the hookup culture since they have decision-making power. Chan (2018) conducted research on women who use dating apps in urban China and found out that dating apps offer the opportunity to women to break what is defined as the male gaze. Indeed, the power that comes from the male gaze, which is the act of looking and judging women's bodies, has shifted. Therefore, considering that the male gaze is the way how men objectify women by seeing them as a set of physical characteristics (Ponterotto, 2016), this phenomenon has become popular also among women who use dating apps. Female users exercise power over men by watching their photos, judging them, and swiping left (Chan, 2018).

Besides, Hess and Flores (2018) argue that women implement strategies to fight the harassments they receive on the dating app. First of all, some of the women who are not interested in hookups write that on their bio to not be contacted by men that are only looking for casual sex (Chan, 2018). In addition to this, women study strategically male profiles in order to understand their purposes. Indeed, photos, bios, and chats reveal the aims of the counterpart. Furthermore, women tackle harassment in several ways. For instance, when female users receive inappropriate messages, they respond with silence. In this case, silences are "significant as they alert men of their poor attempts at courtship, as well as notify them that there is little possibility of being dignified with a response" (Hess & Flors, 2018, p. 1093). Other strategies include answering with the purpose to embarrass the counterpart, blocking the harassers, or reporting them (Chan, 2018).

Dating apps offer also opportunities to women. For instance, apps such as Tinder have been described as an arena where women can experiment with their sexualities and can reflect on what intimacy and relationships mean for them (Chan, 2018). Also, dating apps are

perceived as a social space outside of the personal network. There, women can meet people that do not belong to their social sphere and they can express hidden sides of themselves. By doing so, dating apps result in a source of social capital. However, Chan (2018) argues that the female participants had to deal with the stigmatization that derives from using dating apps. For example, Chan (2018) claims that in China, as well as in the Western world, women who live their sexual lives openly are still slut-shamed "which is the act of attacking a woman's character based upon her perceived or real sexual activity" (Papp et. al, 2015, p. 58)

3. Method

3.1 Population

The aim of this study is to understand how female international students experience sexuality and intimacy through Tinder in a globalized context like The Netherlands. Therefore, several topics such as the usage of Tinder, the change of views on sexuality and relationships, and misogyny on Tinder will be addressed. Female Erasmus international students have been chosen as the population of this research because of three main reasons. First, because of the relevance of international students in the Dutch context. Indeed, according to Nuffic (n.d) in the academic year 2018/2019, the number of international students in Dutch universities rose over 12% from the previous year. Second, because of the diversity of the group since in 2018/2019 students from 170 different countries were enrolled at Dutch universities (Nuffic, n.d). Indeed, the population includes women from distinct parts of the world that, for this reason, experience Tinder in their unique way. Third, due to the accessibility to the population. The researcher is a student at Erasmus University, and this allows her to be positioned on the same power level as the participants with regard to educational level. Besides, it allows the researcher to have a network of contacts that facilitate the recruitment process.

For this study, 12 interviews of approximately one hour were conducted. The purpose of the interviews was to reach a saturation point where new relevant information for the aim of the research was not collected anymore (Johnson, 2011). The sample included international women that were currently studying or had finished a bachelor or Master's program at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the last five years. Moreover, the participants that compose the sample were between 18 and 30 years old and came from various parts of the world. Indeed, it is what Flick (2007) defines as mixed sample since the researcher aimed at creating a sample that is composed of women from as many different countries as possible in order to capture diverse backgrounds, in terms of nations and culture, and in-depth views on the experience of female migrants with Tinder in The Netherlands. "So that the variation and variety in the phenomenon under study can be captured in the empirical material as far as possible" (Flick, 2007, pp. 27). Therefore, the diverse origins of the interviewees, which include

both Western countries such as Italy, Finland, Spain, France, Austria, Luxemburg, and Germany but also no-Western countries such as Turkey, China, Brazil, Japan, Arab Emirates and Vietnam, contribute to give a multilateral vision of the phenomenon.

3.2 Recruitment process

The participants were recruited through two different social media platforms: Instagram and Facebook. One portion of the interviewees was recruited relying on the researcher's network who shared an Instagram story on her profile where she briefly explained the topic of the research and asked her followers whether someone wanted to participate in the study. A smaller part of the participants was recruited through Facebook groups of the Erasmus University such as Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC) and International Students Rotterdam. The researcher posted a brief description of the thesis project on those Facebook pages and invited women to participate in the research. Moreover, some interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling which helped the researcher to contact women who belonged to the participant's networks and who were interested in taking part in the research. Snowball sampling is a recruitment strategy that consists of "going from one case to the next, asking interviewees for other people who might be relevant for the study and the like" (Flick, 2007, p. 5). Initially, snowball sampling was not taken into consideration by the researcher, but it became a fundamental recruitment strategy to recruit valuable interviewees. Indeed, many participants that belonged to the researcher's network, in their turn, have put in contact the researcher with some of their friends that were interested in taking part of the study.

After having recruited the interviewees, the location for the interviews was chosen. Boeije (2010) argues that the setting of the interviews must be a place where interviewees feel at ease. However, because of the current global pandemic situation, the safest way for both the participants and the researcher to conduct the interviews was via Zoom. Despite that, when possible, it was asked the participants whether they preferred to use Zoom or having a face-to-face interaction. Therefore, only one of the interviews was conducted face-to-face while most

of them took place on Zoom. An important remark here is that both face-to-face interviews and online ones have advantages. Opdenakker (2006) argues that face-to-face interviews permit the interviewer to individualize elements of the body language and facial expressions that shape the meaning of the responses. On the other hand, Kazmer and Xier (2008) argue that when the topic of the interview regards online related activities, computer-mediated interviews can result even more suitable than face-to-face ones. Indeed, when the research topic regards online activities, conducting the interviews in an online context confers "contextual naturalness" (Kazmer & Xier, 2008, p. 259) to the participants. In this case, since Tinder is an online platform, interviews on Zoom fit the research topic.

3 3.Data collection: In-depth interviews

The method that best allows collecting data for this research is in-depth interviews. The purpose of in depth-interviews, as it is implied in the name itself, is to gather deep information about a topic. Johnson (2011) claims that it is appropriate to collect data that would not be collected with other methods. Moreover, in-depth interviews are used by researchers when the topics addressed such as values, personal intimate experiences, and decisions are considered taboo and private by society. Indeed, thanks to this method, the feelings, experiences, motivations, and values of the participants were explored. Furthermore, the interviews were active (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). It means that that the interviews result in a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. By doing so, the process of data gathering is a co-production of knowledge. Indeed, the role of the interviewer is fundamental since he/she needs to understand the meaning that participants assign to the information they share with the researcher. Accordingly, Johnson (2011) claims that the relationship between interviewer-participant can be compared to the one that a teacher and a student have. Besides, the interviewer needs to understand the meanings that interviewees create in a specific cultural context. In this research, it was fundamental for the interviewer to acknowledge that international people might have different cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ways to interpret reality. Therefore, the researcher was willing to listen to participants' interpretation of

reality and to set aside her own Western-centric cultural schemes when necessary. Nevertheless, in-depth interviews present also some limitations. The interviewer needs to have well-developed skills in order to get the best out of the interviews. The method requires the researcher to maintain a certain balance between flexibility and control. The goal of the researcher is to guide the interviews in order to answer the research question. In this case, the inexperience of the researcher with the method might have had an impact on the collection of the data.

In-depth interviews started with general questions, that helped to create a relationship with the participant, followed by transitory questions, to further arrive at the key questions. Therefore, the researcher started to ask general questions about school and personal life as well as she shared her personal information too. This was an opportunity for the researcher to get to know the interviewees and to make them feel at ease. Furthermore, the decision of the researcher to briefly explain her research interest and her personal experience with the Tinder app as an international student in The Netherlands, by putting the two actors at the same level, allowed the interaction to detach from power relations that could exist between the interviewer and the interviewee (Garko, 1999).

After that, the questions of the interviews were developed around 7 main topics. Six themes were based on the theoretical framework, while the first topic (journey) was aimed to establish a first connection with the respondents and to permit them to introduce themselves. The seven themes included: 1) Migratory process, touching upon motivations to move to The Netherlands; 2) Relationship with Tinder, investigating the use of Tinder in The Netherlands, and, if applicable, in the home country, and the reasons that lead participants to download Tinder; 3) Self-representation on Tinder, to understand what image of themselves participants want to communicate to other users through photos and the bio that include the Tinder profile; 4) Interactions on Tinder, seeking to explore the criteria Tinder matches are based on; 5) Socialization processes in the home country, especially in the family context; 6) Change in values regarding relationships and sexuality, exploring what ideas regarding sexuality and relationships have changed over the time spent in The Netherlands, and how Tinder contributed to the identity building process; 7) Misogyny on Tinder, touching upon experiences

of gendered violence and harassment by male Tinder users and their reactions. Even though the questions were structured, the researcher needed to be able to follow what Johnson (2011) calls following the flow. It means that answers to some questions generated new questions from the interviewer which contributed to the data collection process.

3.4 Data analysis: Thematic analysis

After having collected the data, the transcript were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used to find patterns and themes present in the data. This kind of analysis was used to report the experiences and meanings of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The purpose of this method is to find themes in the data that contribute to answering the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that there are two main approaches that are used to find themes in the data: inductive and deductive. When the themes emerge from the data and the researcher does not rely on the questions of the interview, the approach is inductive. On the other hand, a deductive approach is implemented when the themes are based on the theoretical interests of the interviewer. An important remark to be considered is that strict rules do not apply to thematic analysis, on the contrary, flexibility is required. Accordingly, the two approaches were combined in the analysis of data, and the researcher relied on the topic list of the interviews but kept her mind open to find new themes she did not consider previously. Besides, the thematic analysis has two layers of interpretations: Semantic and latent. The first level is the most superficial one since the researcher relies solely on what the participant has said, hence the semantic level is purely descriptive. Contrastingly, at the latent level, the researcher finds underlying meanings, ideas, and assumptions that involve an interpretative effort of the researcher who needs to take into account the nuances of the context.The construction of themes is a process that requires several steps. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), in the first step, the data are divided into categories that are coded. Further, in the second phase, the codes previously created are compared and, if possible, merged or erased. The aim of the final step is to find common themes and sub-themes among codes. The first three steps require a continuous comparison of data to find patterns and differences

among themes which can be put together or divided into multiple sub-themes. After having done that, data are summarized and put in order in a way that highlights the main themes and the sub-themes in an organized way. At this point, themes can be named (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Besides, Butler-Kisber (2010) argues that during the analysis, the researcher needs to keep in mind that the lack of reflexivity, hence the awareness of the positionality of the researcher, affects the results. Indeed, if the researcher does not apply reflexivity and is not aware that there could be different interpretations, the analysis might result biased. For these reasons, thematic analysis, as well as other qualitative methods involves limitations. Silverman (2011) argues that it is important to consider issues of validity and reliability. According to Silverman (2011) in order to enhance the reliability of a research, it is necessary to be transparent regarding the processes of the researcher and the theoretical framework used to interpret the data. Only by doing so, it is possible to guarantee reproducibility to the research. Moreover, the validity of the research is established only when the "themes accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Nowell et.al, 2017, p.9)

3.5 Ethical considerations

In this research, it was used what Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab (2020) define as an intersectional feminist and decolonial approach which invites the researcher to interpret the experience of migrants considering their cultural background. In this way, the experiences of the interviewees will produce "knowledge about their experiences themselves, describing or talking about their own realities in their own terms and their own terminologies" (Nasser-Eddin & Abu-Assab, 2020, p.196). Only by doing so, the results of the interviews can make us reflect on the system of race and gender oppression that affects women, instead of being a mere collection of disconnected women's voices. In addition to it, the participatory model was applied to conduct the research in order to create a non-hierarchal relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. It was applied by sharing personal researcher's experiences with Tinder and by answering all personal and intimate questions that the respondents asked the interviewer. Indeed, Cotterill (1992) argues that sometimes, when necessary, in feminist

studies the researcher needs to be involved in the interaction with the respondent by sharing her personal experience and by answering respondents' questions. As Maier and Monahan (2009) argue, for the researcher balancing intimacy with the researcher's objectivity is not easy. Every researcher might find a strategy that works for her/him. In this study, the researcher maintained critical self-reflection throughout the interview process, interpretation of findings, and analysis of the context. Hence, the researcher "remained mindful of the need to maintain critical distance" (Maier & Monahan, 2009, p. 24). This favours the creation of intimacy between the two involved in the interaction and facilitates the sharing of personal information for the purpose of the research (Cotterill, 1992). However, it is important to consider that even though the position of the researcher as a female researcher helps in creating a bond with the respondents, gender is not the only biographic characteristic that limits the social distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. Other aspects of the biography such as "the age, ethnicity and social status of women being interviewed have been shown to be influential in the power relations between women in the interview setting" (Broom et. al, 2009, p. 53). In this case, the ethnicity and the cultural background might have been a disparity that needs to be considered during the interview process. In order to make at ease the participants, the interviewer was clear and transparent about what concerns the goals of the study as well as its benefits. It was needed to consider that some of the questions that regard sexuality and misogyny might have triggered and embarrassed the participant. The researcher used some strategies to make the respondents talk about these issues more at ease such as sharing a personal experience of harassment online. It was also reminded them that all answers were anonymous and that they were not judged by the researcher for any reason. Moreover, the researcher handed out an informed consent which guarantees confidentiality and anonymity. Because of it, the names reported in the results are pseudonyms. Only with these criteria, it was possible to provide a safe and pleasant experience to the participants. Moreover, the interviewees had the right not to answer any question that makes them feel uncomfortable as well as they were legitimate to decide whether they still want to take part in the study or not throughout the whole interview process.

4. Results

This study began with the aim of discovering how female international students in The Netherlands have experienced intimacy and sexuality through Tinder. The research has paid attention to the Tinder Interactions, to the change in views on sexuality that have occurred among the respondents, and at experiences of gendered violence on the platform. This section presents the findings of the study based on the interviews conducted with 12 international women who study or have studied at Erasmus University. Three main themes have been founded in the analysis of the data: *Interactions on Tinder, Change in sexuality and intimacy views, and Challenges on Tinder*. The first one, *Interactions on Tinder,* refers to how the respondents use Tinder. Hence, the choices that are related to the construction of the profiles and the interactions that take place on the platform are considered. The change in sexuality and intimacy views which is caused not only by having moved to The Netherlands but also by having used Tinder is included in the second theme: *Change in sexuality and intimacy views*. The Tinder experiences of female international students in The Netherlands have also been characterized by episodes of online misogyny which is reported in the third theme, *Challenges on Tinder*. Throughout the different themes, it emerges that Tinder constituted a precious resource for migrants in the identity-building process (Polson, 2015). It allowed them to date people that belong to different cultures and that affected their views on sexuality and intimacy. Therefore, female international students benefit from Tinder even though they acknowledged the fact that Tinder is an arena where shallow and standardized human interactions take place (Moore, 2012).

> I think Tinder makes lose the humanity that characterizes first dates because, in the end, the goal is very clear: to fuck. This preconception that you will eventually go and just fuck the person makes you naturally treat the person you meet in a very superficial way. This means apathy on a sentimental level but if you want something on a physical level it is definitely the best place to be. So before I date I'm not even excited while when I used to date before Tinder I put so much effort into the preparation for the date. (Marta)

The infinite possibility of swiping right and finding a partner on Tinder leads people not to put too much effort into the human interactions that happen first on Tinder, and later offline. This happens because people are aware that they can find so many possible matches (Thompson, 2018). Thus, as Marta reported, there is no excitement or desire to impress because the goal of the date is already set. This is the reason why Lydia, at a certain point in her studies in The Netherlands, decided to delete the app as Tinder took "away the humble feeling of it (love), the magic, almost."

4.1 Interactions on Tinder

The first set of questions aimed to explore how female international students make use of Tinder affordances. In this study, four sub-themes: Motivations to download Tinder, Self-representation on Tinder, and criteria used to match people on Tinder were identified. Each one of these motives will be discussed in this section.

4.1.1 Motivations to download the app

When the female students talked about their Tinder experiences, they highlighted the reasons why they decided to use the app. The motivations that led the participants to download the app are disparate, for a total of 8 different motivations. Only 4 participants claimed they use Tinder with the clear purpose of finding a relationship. Contrary, 8 participants out of 12 explained that they downloaded Tinder to get over an ex-boyfriend (Ward, 2017). Other motivations included: finding friends, out of curiosity (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), dating, boredom, and escaping loneliness. Gabi (Brasil) explained that when she moved from Brasil to Rotterdam, she downloaded Tinder to meet people that knew the city and that could show her cool places where to hang out at. Moreover, a few interviewees expressed that their feeling of loneliness when they first moved to The Netherlands and they used Tinder as an escape to it. Lydia claimed that when she first moved, there were evenings when she

wanted to hang out but did not have friends. Tinder turned out to be a useful tool to socialize with people and go out to explore the city. Therefore, as reported by many participants who have experienced a feeling of deterritorialization, Tinder is often used to create a "sense of place" (Polson, 2015, p. 630) in the new community. Place is defined as a sense of attachment to the city which occurs through processes of socialization that are made possible by combining the online world with the offline one. However, some of the participants reported that the motivations behind the use of Tinder had changed over time and that they could be multiple at the same time (Tanner and Huggings, 2018). For instance, Tulah (Finland) mentioned that the first time she downloaded Tinder was because she was curious about it, but, later on, she used it to find friends (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017).

4.1.2 Self-representation

The step that followed downloading the app consists of the creation of the Tinder profile. Concerning the construction of it, all the participants have demonstrated to have agency in the choices made to present themselves online. It is possible to divide the self-representation on Tinder into two categories: The photos and the bio. Interestingly, most of the participants stated the importance of giving a realistic image of the self. This finding contrast with Abramova et. al's (2016) theory according to which women manipulate their online image in order to be liked by a large audience. In line with it, Lena (Germany) claimed:

> I am trying to always put pictures of myself where I do not look too beautiful like, I mean, I've tried to choose pictures where I look good but I do not like to use a filter or something, because I always feel like a lot of people would tell me that I look better on a picture, but I want men to recognize me when they see me offline

Lena stated it is important to give an image of the self that matches with the real one. She was aware she could upload other photos where she looks better but consciously, she decided to not do so in order to be matched for who she really is. Like Lena, also another

participant argued that she chose photos "like not with a lot of makeup so that….they can really see who I am" (Nuria, Spain). Surprisingly, this finding is the opposite of Ellison et al's (2006) theory which argues that Tinder users portray an ideal self instead of the real one.

The other Tinder affordance that participants used to perform the online self regards the bio. The bio is used to give what the participants consider significant information about the self, such as values and hobbies. Sara (Luxemburg) stated in her bio "…I'm a person that works a lot on self-love, body positivity, psychology art and I'm very curious", while Ata (Turkey) decided to use only symbols "…I only have the emojis that indicate that I like music, food, stuff like that, just some interest". Moreover, some of the participants made conscious choices regarding values, hobbies, and even photos that are aimed to attract particular kinds of matches. For example, Gabi stated in her bio she is a feminist because "…If a guy doesn't want to date a feminist, then I don't wanna go out with him…" while Sara (Luxemburg) stated in her bio "Do not match if all you want is sex". Stating in the bio not to want hookups is a strategy to prevent harassment which Chan (2018) previously found in her study. Another interesting example comes from Tulah (Finland), a girl that used body pictures according to the kind of matches she was up to make.

> I would very often change the pictures on my page according to what type of message I was okay to receive, so if I was okay with more sexual comments I would show my body and when it was too much I would show only my face. So I kind of saw a pattern with it and curated my pictures according to what type of matches I would be okay to receive. Just face pictures wouldn't usually yield a lot of people to message though.

This example shows us that the Tinder self-representation is made of codes and symbols through which users communicate not only their intentions but also their belonging to a specific group. According to it, Nuria (Spain) explained she did not upload "girly photos" because she does not want to be associated with the stereotypical "Neat-posh" girl. Instead, she opted for photos that represent her belonging to the skateboarding subculture by choosing photos that portray her while she is skating or with skating clothes. Similar to Nuria, Mary

(Vietnam) decided not to put body pictures because that is something that "Normies" do. Contrastingly, she used only selfies taken with a Macbook camera because, according to her, that is how "Indie people" perform themselves on the Internet. The symbols as well as other strategic choices included in the Tinder profile are an attempt to self-brand the profile in order to attract the desired target audience (Hobbs et. al, 2017). This is the consequence of the fact that in the hookup culture people are reduced to market transactions and that visibility is the main economic value exchanged (Lee, 2019).

4.1.3 Criteria used to match people

If we now turn to the criteria participants used in the match-making process, we notice that also the meticulous choices made by the participant in the match-making process affirms Thompson's (2018) argumentation which consists of seeing Tinder as a sexual marketplace where users are the goods that are exchanged. There, buyers and sellers (Tinder users) evaluate the exchange of goods based on the information provided by the bio and the photos that users upload on the profile. Most of the participants argued it was important to find people that belong to the same group. Tulah claimed that in order to match a person, he/she needs to "be stylish " while Mary claims that for her it is important her matches having "a couple of indie pictures that could match with me", and Nuria states: "I'm looking for someone that I think I can relate to, with my same aesthetic and vibe". These quotes show us that the different kinds of aesthetics mentioned by the interviewees refer to the belongingness to a group. Therefore, the participants who feel part of a group look for people alike on Tinder. Furthermore, the concept of group is intended also as a social class as suggested by Ata who claimed: "I value if they have a good profession or study.... I would prefer someone who studies or like has studied at a university because then it's like more similar backgrounds." This finding confirms the relevance of the socio-economic status as a characteristic to find in a partner (Abramova et. al., 2016).

Another important criterion that emerged from the interviews was physical appearance which resulted fundamental within the Tinder marketplace where visibility is the main

economic value exchanged (Lee, 2019). Therefore, as mentioned in the theoretical framework (Chan, 2018), the male power expressed through the male gaze has shifted since also women do judge men for their physical appearance. While some of the participants had specific criteria, such as Marta who stated that she prefers tall boys with blonde hair and blue eyes, other participants reported that even though physical appearance is the first thing that catches the attention, the decision of whether to swipe right or not comes after having checked other characteristics. One interviewee argued that "there's something about the profile that has to interest me in a non-physical way as well" (Lydia). Thus, the participants, on the whole, demonstrated that having common interests and values is more important than physical appearance. Sara said: "I read the bio. And if it's interesting, then I swipe right or if I see people that play music like creative persons I think okay cool, this is what I want". Many other participants looked at the hobbies and at the values that other Tinder users showed on their bios and/or photos. Thus, sharing similar interests and views is fundamental in the match-making process. In some cases, the description reported in the bio serves also as a filter. Lydia reported that "if someone's having certain values in their description I don't agree with that's a deal-breaker". It means that the bio is not only analyzed to seek similar interests but also to avoid matches with people with who they have nothing in common.

Besides, contrary to the research conducted by Potârcă and Mills (2015) on racial preferences in online dating no one of the interviewees talked about having a specific preference concerning race. However, the majority of participants agreed with avoiding matching people from the same country as Ata argued: "I do not have a preference regarding nationality but I usually don't match with Turkish people. I think it's because I want to explore more in the international area just like different cultures". This finding suggests that a shared cultural capital is not fundamental in the choice of a partner (Chiswick & Houseworth, 2011). On the contrary, many other participants reported, nationality was not an important criterion in the match-making process.

When it comes to for example skin color or hair color or something like that stuff really doesn't matter. Sometimes when I have the feeling like, oh, probably this person has a

really different experience than I have, for example, they're born and raised in the Netherlands here and they are from some little village and never left from there, then I would not swipe on them because I just feel like I can't relate to them and then sometimes with different cultures is the same. When I feel like I cannot relate. But it's not necessarily that I would say there is a certain nationality or race I would definitely swipe right on or definitely swipe left on (Lena)

Lena's statement, along the lines of what many other participants said, indicates that the majority of the respondents have a curiosity for international people and that dating people who are internationally oriented is important. This confirms Bratter and Zuberi's (2001) argument which affirms that people who live in a melting pot environment tend to be more curious about other cultures.

4.2 Change in views on sexuality

Because The Netherlands is perceived as a free country that permits many nationalities to encounter, it constitutes a land where to develop a sexual personality. From the interviews, it seems clear that the host country permits to experiment and discover practices of intimacy that were not accessible in the home country for different reasons (Hoang and Yeoh , 2015). Therefore, in this section I first consider the socio-cultural background of the participants to better understand the connection and the place attachment they use to have with their native culture before moving and how this has affected their engagement with Tinder. Later, I discuss the schemes of values regarding sexuality and intimacy adopted in The Netherlands also thanks to the use of Tinder. Indeed, comparable with Ahmadi's (2003) and Buitelaar's (2002) studies, also the participants in this research have undergone a continuous process of socialization which led them to re-evaluate the scheme of values regarding sexuality and intimacy.

4.2.1 Socio-cultural background

Almost all the respondents reported that before moving to the Netherlands, they felt outsiders in their local communities. From the interviews, it emerged that most of the participants did not agree with the mentality of the people from their country of origin and that this made them want to escape and discover new realities.

One interviewee talked about her town describing it as a place where there is no privacy since all the people know each other and "you need to adhere to social norms in order not to be seen as the strange" (Marta, Italian). Similarly, Nuria (Spain) said:

In Maiorca, at some point, it was like, I don't fit in, you know, there are people that are just doing what the other ones do. So they all look kind of the same way and people don't really want to appear different, because then for sure people are going to talk about what they do because they do something that is not on the norm.

However, a smaller portion of participants argued they felt connected to their motherland for reasons such as the good relationship with family and friends (Sara, Luxemburg) and the "connection with the culture" (Ata, Turkey). A significant aspect of the research is that 8 participants out of 12 reported, refers to how the theme of sexuality was discussed within the family back home, hence as a taboo. It is important to state that while some of the participants acknowledged that their families treated topics related to sexuality as something prohibited others did not realize it immediately. The latter normalized the fact of not talking about sexuality in the family to the point of not recognize it as a taboo topic. Therefore, participants like Jessica (Lithuania) stated clearly "Sexuality was definitely a taboo at home. Sex was nonexistent. That was not a topic to discuss when I was growing up" whereas Marta (Italy) did not recognize it as a taboo even though from the experience she reported, sexuality was a topic embedded of shamefulness. Hence a taboo.

When I had for example my menstruation I did not tell my parents for five months because I did not feel at ease. It was a speech that was not taboo at home but that no one had ever dare to touch. So I did not tell my parents because I didn't know how they would have reacted.

Furthermore, some of the participants talked about having had conservatory ideas on sexuality because of the influence of the society they used to live in. Gabi's (Brazil) scholastic environment was strictly religious as she remembers:

So at a catholic school, it (sexuality) was a bit of a problem of course and I remember like I was dating a boy in the catholic school and we were not allowed to talk to each other during school unless there was like another person there and it was all so secretive and then we had to talk to each other like hiding.

Similar to Gabi, another respondent also recalled that school gave her a feeling of guilt regarding sex. She argued that having sexual encounters, even outside the scholastic environment, "was a reason that you could get caught and get expelled for" (Ava, Japan). In addition, Mary from Vietnam explained how the mentality of her town had influenced her ideas on how sex was allowed to be done only after having followed and respected specific previous steps such as "getting to know each other, becoming friends, then getting into a relationship...." and so on. However, not all the participants have lived in an environment where traditional views on sexuality were promoted. A smaller part of participant's responses revealed that both in the family context as well as in the communitarian one, sexuality was a topic approached with an open-minded mindset, as Nuria (Spain) reported: "Whit my mom, I don't know, I always felt confident talking about everything. So if I had a date, then I would tell her like, you know, I met this guy, and this happened".

It is important to consider that the close-minded mentalities that most of the participants said characterized their native country had influenced their Tinder engagements since, back home, the app was often seen as a stigmatized app. "Some of my friends do (use

Tinder), and some do not. Because, for example, in Luxemburg, it's really stigmatized, like people that use Tinder are considered losers that are not able to, like, connect in real life" (Sara). Similarly, Lyda said that Tinder is something shameful in Austria and that now that she is back in Austria she does not use her real name on Tinder because she does not want people to find out that she uses the app. It means that she has to deal with the stigmatization that derives from using the app (Chan, 2018) and with the fear of being slut-shamed (Papp et. al, 2015). In parallel, Marta confided she had Tinder only to her closest friends because she was ashamed of it. In some contexts, participants reported that Tinder is even used to bully people. Sara said: "I've been seeing some people from Luxembourg screenshotting people's Tinder profiles and then posting the screenshots on their private story on Instagram to make fun of people because they use Tinder". This finding is particularly important because it highlight two important insights. First, sociocultural factors affect some participants' Tinder engagement. Second, the way how people experience intimacy is strictly related to the sexual culture that is present in a specific place (Chan, 2016).

4.2.2 Scheme of values adopted in the Netherlands

After having moved to The Netherlands, the female international students entered in contact with the local culture and with other international people. From the interviews, it emerged that this has had a significant impact on redefining schemes of values related to sexuality and intimacy. In this process Tinder contributed to the changes occurred in values related to intimacy and sexuality since it was the tool that often permitted the access to impactful experiences in The Netherlands. Indeed, contrary to the views on Tinder that people had in the home countries, the participants reported that in The Netherlands the use of Tinder is normalized. "In The Netherlands, like if you're single or something like there's an assumption that obviously, you're using some kind of dating app to date people" (Jessica). Analogous to Jessica, Marta stated that in The Netherlands everyone is on Tinder and it is used as any other mainstream social media such as Facebook. For this reason, most of the participants after having moved to The Netherlands normalized the use of Tinder leaving behind old prejudices.

Therefore, most of the participants experimented and discovered new realities through the use of the dating app. It is also important to say that, as more than a half of the participants reported, Tinder was used because of the sense of anonymity they perceived by using the app. In particular, the sense of anonymity was associate with a feeling of freedom from social judgments (Launikari & Puukari, 2005) as Gabi argued:

I knew a lot of people (back in Brasil) in my circle so it would have been a lot weirder.... to casually have sex with these people because they're kind of all connected and like this person would be friend with that person. So it would be something that I would think about. But because I came here and I really don't know anyone here, it doesn't really matter.

Similar to Gabi, also Lena argued that Tinder has empowered her as a woman because even if her pictures are on the app she feels anonymous as she interacts with people that do not directly know her. This leads Lena to sexually experiment on the app since she does not worry about meeting those people again in her daily life. Nuria argued that she downloaded Tinder after a few weeks she arrived in The Netherlands because she had always wanted to have Tinder but she knew she would have judged for that in her hometown. "So when I arrived in the Netherlands, I thought nobody knows me here is perfect. I'm just gonna download it and try. " (Nuria).

The exposure on Tinder has also had a relevant impact on the perception of gender roles in The Netherlands. Thus, Mary, a Vietnamese participant who used Tinder both in her homeland and in The Netherlands suggested: "I think I see more women expressing themselves in a very alternative way here (in The Netherlands) compared to women in Vietnam where women express themselves in a heteronormative way". As Mary makes evident, The Netherlands is seen as a country where freedom of expression is guaranteed, and heteronormative structures are loose. This can also be noticed by the fact that some participants reported they had to adapt to new gender roles. For instance, Ata, as many other women interviewed argued that in The Netherlands men often wait for the woman to make the

first move on Tinder. This is something she was not used to in her home country, where the men had control of the date and the gender interactions.

Because in Turkey the guy decides what to do, what he wants. Women tend to please men. So they are male-focus...And then here I saw men being female-oriented. I was surprised...I didn't know at first what to say when a men asked me what do you want to do, or how do you like it, I didn't know what to say.

These Tinder interactions have affected participants' sense of place (Polson, 2015). Indeed, through online socialization, the participants entered in contact with cultural practices which differ from the ones they were used to. In line with it, some of the participants reported they were stunned by the directness of Dutch men on Tinder. As Ava stated:

In The Netherlands, there are some people who are like very straight up like 'I'm just looking for hookups' and then, Japanese....I guess they tried to seem nice. They're not very obvious about their intentions. They just make it seem like 'oh I just want to meet people to go on drink'

Besides, another important change that occurred after having met partners on Tinder regards the communication with the partner. Respondents reported that they understood the importance of talking and opening up with the partner about sexual topics. Ava (Japan) said she started to talk about sex after having met her current Dutch husband on Tinder. She explained that seeing his openness about sex made her realize that there is no need to avoid the topic but that communication is at the base of a healthy relationship. Also, Greta said that, by meeting Dutch guys on Tinder, she started to express her needs to the person she is dating, and that it was never a thing she used to do back home. These findings support the theory that dating apps amplify the effects of homogenization which lead the users to adopt Western sexual culture (Cserni, 2020). As we can see from these examples, the participants are aware that the contact with Western (mostly Dutch) partners has affected their approach to relationships and

sexuality in general. In particular, Ava explained that her Dutch classmates made her reflect on the taboo of having when the parents are at home. She said that after having talked with them she changed her idea on the topic.

> I had this discussion in my classroomates....all the Dutch students were....like the parents should allow their kids to have sex in their own comfortable safe home..... And I was like, actually like it makes sense, like, the kids are gonna do whatever. So, if you don't give them a safe environment, they're gonna go to like, I don't know their car or like some dark corner.

Moreover, from the accounts of the respondents, it appears that female international students have had experienced new ways of dating in The Netherlands. Most of these experiences have been possible thanks to Tinder. A participant said she was used to label relationships but after having moved to The Netherlands and having started to meet people on Tinder she realized that it is not necessary to "put it in a box". (Lena, Germany) because there are plenty of ways to experience intimacy and it is not necessary to define it. This is a consequence of the fact that the simplicity with which it is possible to meet potential partners online has made relationships and love liquid (Bauman, 2003). Ata, albeit in a different way from Lena, experienced a different way of meeting people than the one she was used to. Indeed, Tinder permitted her to meet people outside of her personal network and to build social capital (Chan, 2018).

> In Turkey, I only dated ….. people I already kind of have information on. And because in Istanbul, especially depending on where you go to school you kinda know like that person. So it never happened I met with someone that I have no information on. So that was very eye-opening because then you really have to put the effort to get to know someone......I was used to dating people that belonged to my social network. And for the first time, I had to, like, meet people that were total strangers to me.

Furthermore, a third of the participants revealed they normalized hookups after having moved to The Netherlands. Some of these respondents specified that they use to hook up also in the hometown but that if before " there was a sort of social pressure" (Jessica, Lithuania), now they do not "feel bad about it it" (Jessica, Lithuania). Others stated that hookups were not even contemplated when living in the home country but that they had changed their minds in The Netherlands.

Because before coming to The Netherlands I was not judgmental, but I thought I would have never hook up with people. It was because of the culture, it was all like, it's so shameful it's like not okay and like, ideally, you have to be in a relationship and have sex with the guy you're dating, but then being on these online dating apps like now, like yeah like it's liberating like now I have a different view on hookups.

Ria's experience shows us that hook-ups were stigmatized in her own home country and that she adhered to the views embedded in her culture. Therefore, changing the idea on the topic was even empowering as a woman since now she does enjoy to hook up and experience sexual pleasure in an individualistic way. This finding confirms Jamieson's (2011) theory who affirms that in globalized contexts the Western idea of intimacy is the predominant one and that the practices of intimacy, such as hookups, are mostly individualistic since the self is placed at the center of the interaction.

I want to conclude this section by exposing the most interesting and unexpected results that emerged during the interviews. Five of the girls declared of having realized they are bisexual only after having moved to The Netherlands. The perception of The Netherlands as a free and open-minded country is something that encouraged the female participants to discover new sides of their sexual identities. Nuria's (Spain) words are representative of this finding:

I came out as bisexual in the Netherlands not so long ago. I've always had, like, this curiosity. And I always thought that girls were pretty and hot but I never really made

that click before moving to The Netherlands. And then yeah, for me going into the Netherlands....... I bloomed as a person, I grew there. And I became the person that I wanted to be for all those years in Mallorca but that was kind of too afraid to come out.

For Nuria moving to The Netherlands has been an opportunity to escape from social pressures that made her feel uncomfortable in Mallorca and to be free to express who she is without any filter. Similar to Nuria, also Lydia came out as bisexual in The Netherlands because entering in contact with open-minded people permitted her to let a part of her sexual personality come up.

Therefore, the dating app offered to the majority of the respondents the opportunity to understand and investigate their sexuality. A part of the participants who defined themselves as bisexual or pansexual argued that Tinder allowed them to find people who are also looking for same-sex partners. One participant said she used Tinder to find other women to meet because often queer people state explicitly their sexuality. This can be handy since she argued she does not "want to assume people's sexuality in real life" (Mary). Like Mary, also Lena, who has just found out about her interest in women has argued that Tinder is the perfect place where to experiment with sexuality since it results less intrusive than offline approaches. "I would be too shy (to approach a woman in real life), you know, it's easier to just send a message. That's easier than going to a gay bar." Moreover, Lena argued that receiving a rejection in real life is more hurtful than on Tinder. This is the reason why it is easier to hit on people online, because " you don't have to put yourself so much out there" (Lena). An important remark here is that on Tinder the definition of the situation (Goffman, 1972) is set. Hence, people that use Tinder are expected to receive dating requests and to offer them in their turn. This makes it easier to make a pass on someone. Instead, in offline contexts, asking a person out implies a greater personal involvement.

It (Tinder) made it easier to ask each other out on a date because if it's someone you know there's always the risk of what if there's an awkwardness What if this person

rejects me or, you know if it's on an app it's so easy because if someone says no. Okay, next one. (Ava)

4.3 Challenges in Tinder use

However, Tinder in The Netherlands did not only bring positive experiences that contributed to liberating and creating open-minded personalities. For this reason, the research is aimed to show the socio-technical complexities related to engaging with the app. Therefore, if in the previous themes the agency of women was emphasized, in this section the negative side of Tinder is taken into consideration. It means that even though most of the participants perceived The Netherlands as an openminded country, Tinder in The Netherlands still reproduces a patriarchal structure (Hess and Flores, 2018) since most of the participants argued they have experienced gendered violence on the platform in The Netherlands. Thus, the two sub-themes *Gendered violence* and *Responses to challenges on Tinder* are considered. The first one refers to the different episodes of gendered violence that take place on the dating app while the second one focuses on the strategies that the female interviewees have implemented to respond to the harassers.

4.3.1 Gendered violence

The challenges in the use of Tinder reported by a large part of respondents regards the fact that Tinder reproduces a patriarchal system which leads to episodes of gendered violence (Thompson, 2018). Some participants reported that the frequency with which they experienced harassment on Tinder in their home country was more frequent than in The Netherlands. Marta said "In Italy I used to receive a lot of inappropriate messages on Tinder. Here it still happens but way less". On the contrary, a participant argued that she did not experience any kind of

harassment on Tinder when she used the app in Finland but when she moved to The Netherlands she argued:

> I've had like times where I would unmatch somebody, and then they would message me on a different social media or something...... and people found me because my name is kinda unique and people find my Instagram very easily. So they would come onto my Instagram and then insult me there because I would unmatch them..... So after blocking them on Tinder they would come to Instagram and if I blocked them on Instagram, then they would find my Facebook and Twitter...... it's kind of crazy how I was used to it or like I expected it. (Tulah, Finland)

Tulah (Finland), after having talked about her experience of stalking, realized that harassment on Tinder was something she normalized in The Netherlands due to the frequency with which it happened. She was not the only one who elaborated such a thought. Other participants talked about harassment on Tinder as something taken for granted, "I mean I think every woman gets that.....It's so normal to get those." (Ava, Japan). These experiences highlight the fact that on platforms such as Tinder, the manifestation of popular misogyny is frequent (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Indeed, within the hookup culture, when women reject men, the male counterpart responds with violence in order to restore what is considered to be the natural power relation between men and women (Lee, 2019).

Another form of harassment that a significant number of participants experienced on Tinder refers to the reception of unwanted messages with sexual content. As a respondent reported:

> It (the message) was just very simple and straightforward. Yeah, but also the opposite, like also some people would just write......I remember one really distinctive which was a really long message where he described to me all the sexual practices he would have done to me. (Lydia, Austria).

Similarly, Jessica (Lithuania) said that while she was chatting with a man, he sent her a video of himself naked in bed without asking whether she wanted to receive that kind of content. From these examples, it is evident that sexual messages are sent on the platform without first asking the consent of the female users. Like Lydia, Sara (Luxemburg) stated that she received messages such as "Can I explore your chest?" or "Hey sexy" (Lena, Germany). Messages with hypersexual declarations aim to objectify the woman by identifying them as a mere set of physical characteristics (Ponterotto, 2016). Moreover, it is relevant to mention that since Tinder is considered a hookup app, men often take for granted that women are on the platform exclusively to have sex. The consequence of this belief is that, as it emerged from some of the interviews, the consent is a given (Thompson, 2018), and men send inappropriate messages to women such as "Let's hook up" (Ava, Japan). Sometimes, the messages become even more insistent.

> I think a couple of men tried to meet me and have one night stand and I said no but they made me feel really uncomfortable because they were trying to really persuade me and I was like no, this is, this is not cool. (Mary, Vietnam)

An important remark that needs to be addressed in this section regards the processes of othering that, as migrants, a part of the participants have experienced on Tinder (Vaahensalo, 2021). One participant reported that she felt uncomfortable every time someone would point out "Oh, you're Asian" (Mary, Vietnam). Like Mary, Jessica (Lithuania) argued that once a man told her: "You moved here to the Netherlands for money. I know it's so horrible in Lithuania, so you must be really happy now living here..... look at you, you cannot even speak Dutch." Both the participants experienced a situation where negative attributes were assigned to them for the only reason of belonging to a certain nationality such as Asian and Lithuanian. Also, Ava (Japan) received racists comments because of her nationality.

There are always things like ching chong, I guess, and someone called me like Thai fried rice……I feel so bad because my friend isn't getting any of these remarks and I'm being targeted just because of how I look.

In this case, as in Hess and Flores (2018) research, the woman is objectified through the use of a consumption metaphor which refers to food. The particularity of this statement is that the reference to food is linked to the belongingness to the Asian race.

4.3.2 Responses to harassment on Tinder

Despite the disadvantaged position that women have on the Tinder platform, from the interviews it emerged that they did not react passively to the several forms of harassment on Tinder. On the contrary, they implemented strategies to defend themselves or even to attack the counterpart (Chan, 2018). The four strategies that participants used to respond to the harassers include: Removing the match, blocking the harassers, and trying to find a dialogue. Usually, the participants unmatched and/or blocked a man when something the man said made them feel uncomfortable or when they were too persistent and did not accept a no. As one respondent (Mary) said, she unmatched a man after he talked about the size of his genitals because "men do talk a lot about their genitals on Tinder and this makes me really uncomfortable". Like Mary, Ata argued she unmatched a man because after having asked him to stop texting her he kept doing that, and this made her feel uncomfortable. Ava stated:

Most of the time I will just block them because these people really like attention, so when you show them that you're upset or that they affect your mood they feel they have the power. So, yeah, I blocked them. (Ava)

These strategies are aimed to disempower the men they received the insults from. By blocking and unmatching men, women re-appropriate of the decision-making power since after having implemented these strategies men cannot get in contact with them anymore (Hess &

Flors, 2018). This means that, in the end, they do not achieve what they want, hence having sex. A smaller part of participants argued that they tried to dialogue with the harassers to explain to them the reasons why their behavior is inappropriate.

> A lot of times (I explain to them that they are acting wrong)…. and a lot of times, the person reacts quite positive and they're like, 'I'm sorry I didn't mean it that way, I just you know I think you're really nice and I just really want to get to know you' and I explained them yeah sorry but like you push it too far for me and "I'm like I'm just not comfortable anymore. So mostly that's really nice. And then if they still don't understand it, I just unmatch. (Lena)

Like Lena, also Sara tried to find a dialogue before unmatching the person. She once explained to a man who texted her "Can I explore your chest" that it is not ok to normalize this kind of direct and sexual language on Tinder. These attempts on the part of the participants aim to educate and to make harassers reflect on their behaviour.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how female international students experience intimacy and sexuality in The Netherlands through Tinder. The current research found that female international students have a great agency and awareness in the Tinder interactions. This is reflected in the strategic choices made in the constructions of the Tinder profiles as well as in the attention with which they choose potential partners on the dating app. Hence, the photos and the bio uploaded on the dating app are aimed to give an online performance (Goffman,) of the self with the goal of attracting suitable matches. In contrast with the socialization theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), female international students do not emphasize physical characteristics and do not manipulate their image in order to be liked by men (Abramova et. al., 2016). On the contrary, they try to give a realistic image to confer a genuine and truthful representation of the self. Moreover, female international students showed to have a great agency also in the match making-decisions since they analyzed Tinder profiles looking for physical and not characteristics that they found attractive. The meticulous choices made by the participant in the match-making process affirms Thompson's (2018) argumentation which consists of seeing Tinder as a sexual marketplace where users are reduced to goods that are exchanged. Furthermore, it is relevant to consider that, contrary to Potârcă and Mills's study (2015), the race was never a criterion involved in the match-making process. Even though the race was not important, what the participants consider often important was to date, international-oriented people (Bratter & Zuberi, 2001).

This shows that female international students in The Netherlands use Tinder to meet open-minded people thanks to who they could experience new realities. For this reason, Tinder represents a tool through which the young migrant made a "sense of place" (Polson, 2015, p. 630). Indeed, by using the app in The Netherlands they socialize with local and international people who permit them to get in contact with a different sexual culture than the one they were used to in their home countries. Thus, the Dutch globalized environment seemed to have had a huge impact on the schemes of values regarding sexuality and intimacy the participants have adopted in The Netherlands (Cserni, 2020). This finding supports the theory that dating

apps amplify the effects of homogenization which leads the users to adopt Western sexual culture (Assadi, 2014; Cserni, 2020) and that international female students readjusted their values according to the globalized environment (Matei, 2006). In addition to it, the possibility of meeting people from different cultures and ethnicities has also influenced the willingness to be opened to have a partner that belongs to a different country and/or nationality. This shows that no racial preference surfaced in the study (Potârcă and Mills, 2015)

Therefore, it emerged that the processes of socialization are continuous and that sexuality, as well as practices of intimacy, is shaped by migratory processes (Ahmadi, 2003; Buitelaar, 2002). Indeed, by coming to The Netherlands and meeting people on Tinder, three main changes regarding sexuality emerged among international female students. First, they learned how to communicate with the partner openly about their feelings and sexuality. Second, they explored sides of their sexual identities they were too scared to expose in their native countries. For instance, some of the participants argued they realized they are bisexual in The Netherlands and that Tinder worked as a resource to meet women easily. Third, they experienced and accepted a new way of dating. It means that traditional relationship structures were abandoned while new ways of meeting partners and label human relations changed.

However, Tinder did not only represent a resource for female international students, but it was also a place where they have experienced gendered violence. This demonstrates that Tinder reproduces a patriarchal system where men try to hold their power over women through harassing them (Thompson, 2018). The form of harassment experienced include the reception of unwanted sexual messages (Hess & Flors, 2018), the lack of consent (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the objectification of women (Hess & Flors, 2018), and the inability of men to accept a rejection which led to verbal harassment (Thompson's, 2018). In some cases, these forms of violence were also transformed into processes of othering. Therefore, part of the migrants has suffered discrimination not only for their gender but also for the fact of belonging to a certain nationality and/or race. Under this perspective, the female international students did not react passively but implemented strategies to confront the harassers such as blocking and unmatching them (Hess & Flors, 2018), or even trying to find a dialogue.

In conclusion, this study shows that Tinder has a crucial role in how female international students experience sexuality and intimacy in The Netherlands. By being consumers and producers of the dating app, they adopt some elements of the sexual culture presents in the Dutch globalized environment. Moreover, Tinder resulted to be a space of liberation for women with different cultural backgrounds, who found it as an arena where to empower themselves by having access to a free and liberal sexual world. However, on the other hand, the experiences of the expats have demonstrated that Tinder promotes a patriarchal sexual culture where female Tinder users are disadvantaged in comparison with male ones.

5.1 Social implications

The findings of this research yield several implications important to be considered. First, it emerged that Tinder in The Netherlands has not only strongly shaped and determined the experience that international female students have had with sexuality and intimacy in the Lowland, but it has also been a useful tool for international students to make a sense of place through socializing with local and international people (Polson, 2015). Second, this research has shown that not only Tinder, as digital technology, has shaped users' lives in The Netherlands. In their turn, female international students have demonstrated to be able to play with the app and use Tinder affordances to their advantage. Indeed, this study has demonstrated that Tinder is a hook-up app that promotes a patriarchal structure of society. For this reason, the experiences of Tinder are framed within a sexist culture. However, the female international students have shown great agency in trying to fight the logic of the app as they have shown by choosing how to represent themselves and how to interact with other users. Third, the normalization and the extensive use of dating apps such as Tinder in The Netherlands suggests that dating apps have gained enormous importance in defining intimate lives not only of locals but especially of expats. According to it, the results that emerged from this study provide an important understanding of the sexual identity development of female expats in The Netherlands. Therefore, in the light of the findings, dating apps have a huge impact on people's lives who approach them with little awareness. For this reason, informational campaigns as well

as educational programs at schools that promote a conscious and responsible behaviour on social media including dating apps are needed. Educational programs centered around relationships and equality with a focus on exploiting the multiple potentialities of the social media as well as dating apps in respect of others.

5.2 Limitations

The current study presents some limitations. First, the sample size did not permit to reach the saturation point of the data. This suggests this research as a first step to study international female students' experiences of sexuality and intimacy through Tinder. Second, the fact that all the interviews except one were conducted online via zoom limited to a certain extent the interaction with the respondents. Indeed, especially when talking about intimate and sensitive subjects, human contact is fundamental. According to it, conducting the interviews through a screen, often with problems of internet connection, made it more difficult to make interviewees at ease. For this reason, I think that some of the interviewees did not feel completely comfortable with sharing private experiences of sexual life with me, in their eyes a stranger, and this could have led to the collection of less rich data. Third, although interviews resulted to be particularly useful in capturing the experiences of the participants, the method does not allow researchers to understand digital and social practices in everyday life. Therefore, a point of improvement could be using ethnographic methods to better capture those everyday life practices by observing the population. Fourth, the fact the all the participants moved to The Netherlands at a youthful age, when sexuality is first approached, means that it is needed to consider that the changes in views on intimacy and sexuality could have not been entirely caused by the migration process, but also by the fact that the participants have matured as individuals.

5.3 Directions for further research

The findings of this study suggest that more research should be focused on international students' experiences of intimacy and sexuality through Tinder. Future research could examine the subject from different angles. It would be interesting to conduct comparative research between the two genders to evaluate to what extent gender is a variable that determines the experience of Tinder in The Netherlands. In particular, since the challenges encountered in this research were strictly linked to gender issues, future research could investigate what kinds of challenges the male counterpart has to deal with on Tinder. Furthermore, another angle that future research might consider regards choosing a single nationality as the population of the study instead of the mix of nationalities that include international students. By doing so, it is possible to investigate the impact that the Dutch globalized environment has had on people that share the same cultural capital. In order to do so, it would be interesting to conduct an ethnographic study that involves Tinder users with other migrant backgrounds, such as non-elite migrants, to further investigate the interconnections between race, ethnicity, and gender in mediated intimacy. This would also help to reflect on what extent the findings of this study are reflective of the experiences of other populations.

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Appendix A: Codebook

Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes
Interactions on Tinder	Motivations to download Tinder.	-"I think I started using the app more when I moved to Rotterdam. So I wanted to meet people that knew about the city and it actually worked out really well because I managed to go on cool restaurants where I still go today"
	Criteria used to match people.	-"I'm looking for someone that I think I can relate to, with my same aesthetic and vibe" -"I value if they have a good profession or study.... I would prefer someone who studies or like has studied at a university because then it's like more similar backgrounds."
	Self-representation	-"I would very often change the pictures on my page according to what type of message I was okay to receive, so if I was okay with more sexual comments I would show my body and when it was too much I would show only my face". - "I am trying to always put pictures of myself where I do not look too beautiful like I mean I've tried to choose pictures where I look good but I do not like filters because I always feel like a lot of people would tell me that I look better on a picture, but I want men to recognize me when they see me offline"
Change in sexuality and intimacy views	Socio-cultural background	-"In Mallorca, at some point, it was like, I don't fit in, you know, there is people that are just doing what the other ones do. So they all look kind of same way and people don't really want to appear different, because then for sure people is going to talk about what you're doing

		because you're doing something that is not on the norm."
		-"Sexuality was definitely a taboo at home. Sex was nonexistent. That was not a topic to discuss when I was growing up"
	Scheme of values adopted in The Netherlands	-"I came out as bisexual in the Netherlands, like, not so long ago. I've always had, like, this curiosity and I always thought that girls were pretty and hot and everything, but I never really, like made that click before moving to The NL."
		-"I think (I normalize) not having to be in a relationship to have sex with someone and communicating, like having clear communications with the partner because, yeah, that was never a thing I did back home."
Challenges on Tinder	Gendered violence	-"Once I was talking to this guy and he asked me 'Can I explore your chest ?' and I was like, Fuck, dude. And then he was like 'oh its just a joke'"
		-"There's always things like ching chong, I guess, and someone called me like Thai fried rice....some people say hi and you respond to them and they just come up with these racist remarks."
	Responses to harassment on Tinder	-"If someone said something that I thought was weird or like not okay, I would just immediately block them and not continue the conversation."
		-"I'd insult them back by laughing, because like it's just so stupid."

Appendix B: List of participants

Name of the participant	Age	Country of origin
Lydia	22	Austria
Greta	25	Arab Emirates
Ata	21	Turkey
Jessica	29	Lithuania
Marta	25	Italy
Ava	28	Japan
Nuria	20	Spain
Mary	20	Vietnam
Lena	25	Germany
Sarah	19	Luxemburg
Tulah	22	Finland
Gabi	27	Brasil

Appendix C: Interview questions

Migratory process:

- Can you tell me something about tour journey to the Netherlands?

  First approach on Tinder:

- What apps did you use when you moved to The Netherlands?

- When and why did you download the app?

- Did you use Tinder also in your home country? If yes, what are the differences in using it in The Netherlands?

- How often do you use Tinder?

  Self-representation on Tinder

- What kind of pictures do you have on Tinder?

- What kind of bio do you have on Tinder?

- Do you think that the way how you present yourself on Tinder wants to communicate something of you?

- Can you show me your profile?

  Interactions on Tinder

- What criteria do you use to match people on Tinder?

- Do you prefer to match people from your home country, or do you prefer to date other internationals? If yes why, if not why.

- What happens after a match?

- Do you open up to your matches or do you prefer to remain vague about yourself?

  Change in sexuality views.

- How was your family idea about sex? Did you talk about it with your parents?

- What kind of relationship did you have with your city and the mentality of the people who live there?

- Do your friends use Tinder? How do they use it? Do you talk about your experience?

- Did Tinder change your way of dating people? How?

- Do you think that the way how you experienced your intimacy (like dating, sexual encounters) was different in your home country?

- Did your attitude towards sex change?

- Did your Tinder experience play a role in how you see intimate relationships now?

- Did you normalize something you used to see as a taboo before coming to The Netherlands (For instance, casual sex)? Do you have an example of it?

Misogyny on Tinder

- Have you ever felt uncomfortable while chatting with someone? Why?

- Have you ever received insults on Tinder by men? Can you tell me something about that?

- Have you ever received unwanted sexual messages?

- Have you ever felt judged by men on Tinder?

- Do you feel free to express your sexual personality on Tinder?

- Do you want to share with me some unpleasant episode you experienced on Tinder?