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Gert Vermeulen, Nina Peršak
& Stéphanie De Coensel *(Eds.)*

Researching the boundaries of **sexual integrity, gender violence and image-based abuse**

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International Review of Penal Law
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Международное обозрение уголовного права
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Revista Internacional de Direito Penal
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Edited by

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TINDER TALES: EXPLORING THE NORMALISATION OF ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MODERN DATING

Laura Byn[*]

Abstract

Tinder has rapidly become the most popular app in heterosexual dating interactions. While Tinder is known for its hook-up facilitating qualities, the platform might also facilitate sexual harassment. Literature confirms a prevalence of sexual harassment on dating apps up to 88.8%. Even more concerning is the careless shrug culture among senders and receivers. This research explores the experiences and perceptions of Tinder users upon facing online sexual harassment using vignettes of both textual and image-based harassment and the normalisation thereof using a qualitative survey. Results confirm that Tinder users receive twice as much textual sexual harassment than non-users. Women also receive significantly more harassing messages than men. Tinder users seem to have a higher tolerance for these messages as they perceive them less negatively than the control group and labelled the behaviour most often as not harassing. Partial responsibility and agency was frequently shifted to the recipient. Non-consensual explicit images were however agreed to be harassing and rather an occurrence from the past. Preventative measures are suggested to tackle a culture that condones sexual harassment.

1 Introduction

Dating applications are booming. The ongoing digitalisation combined with a global pandemic have considerably increased the popularity of dating apps. This resulted in a tremendous shift in dating culture. Tinder is still one of the most popular dating apps in the Western world when it comes to heterosexual interactions.[1] Many (young) adults turn to the app in hopes of meeting their potential lover, either for the long run or just for the night. While Tinder is created with the intention to match up individuals romantically and/or sexually, the platform might also provide additional possibilities for committing sexual harassment.

A recent scoping review by Gewirtz-Meydan and colleagues sheds light on both qualitative and quantitative research on sexual harassment on dating apps. Results show that prevalence figures for sexual harassment on dating apps range from 57% up to 88.8%. The most common forms of online sexual harassment were textual messages and image-based harassment. Women (especially under the age of 30) and sexual minorities had a

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[1] Mansoor Iqbal, 'Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics' (*Business of Apps*, 30 October 2020) <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tinder-statistics/> accessed on 23 January 2024.

higher risk of being harassed.[2] A Brazilian study also highlighted significant gender differences in the Tinder experience. While most men always felt respected on the app, one third of women encountered offensive behaviour. A prime example is the introduction of new terminology such as a 'Tinderslut' (defined as 'a slut who uses the app to sleep with men').[3] This was experienced by female users as the most negative aspect of Tinder.[4] Dating apps seem to be a facilitating factor in sexual violence by providing perpetrators with more opportunities and enhancing negative gender dynamics.[5]

An obstacle to eradicate this culture of harassment on Tinder, is what Gillet labels as the normalisation of online sexual harassment.[6] While to date no empirical research on the phenomenon of normalisation on dating apps has been conducted, qualitative research into the experiences of dating app users suggests that normalisation of this behaviour is impeding the fight against sexual harassment.[7] Furthermore, research highlights the urgent need for qualitative research on the experiences and labelling of victims upon facing sexual harassment on dating apps and the cultural structure that might facilitate it.[8] This paper aims to fill this gap as the experiences and perceptions of Tinder users and a suspected culture of normalisation is studied. Understanding the nature and extent of the normalisation among active dating app users helps to bring researchers and policy makers one step closer to tackling this prevailing culture.

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[2] Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and others, 'Dating Apps: A New Emerging Platform for Sexual Harassment? A Scoping Review' (2024) 25 Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 752.

[3] Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085; Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212; Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69; Urszula Pruchniewska, ''I like that it's my choice a couple different times': Gender, affordances, and user experience on Bumble dating' (2020) 14 International Journal of Communication 2423; MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432.

[4] Milena Lopes and Carl Vogel, 'Gender Differences in Online Dating Experiences' in Amir Hetsroni and Meriç Tuncez (eds), *It Happened on Tinder: Reflections and Studies on Internet Infused Dating* (The Institute of Network Cultures 2019).

[5] Kenneth R Hanson, 'Collective Exclusion: How white heterosexual dating app norms reproduce status quo hookup culture' (2021) 92 Sociological Inquiry 894.

[6] Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212.

[7] Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and others, 'Dating Apps: A New Emerging Platform for Sexual Harassment? A Scoping Review' (2024) 25 Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 752; Laurie Penny, *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2013); Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (Springer 2017); Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212; Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69.

[8] Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and others, 'Dating Apps: A New Emerging Platform for Sexual Harassment? A Scoping Review' (2024) 25 Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 752.

2 Theory

2.1 Sexual scripts

Upon studying sexuality and dating practices, sociologists found that sexual behaviour is not an arbitrary occurrence. A compilation of a standardised set of cultural rules is meticulously followed, all the more so in heterosexual interactions. This research is framed within constructivism, a social theory describing reality as interactions intertwining and creating a societal standard that is enforced and of which deviation is disapproved. In line with this conceptual framework, sexual script theory describes sexual behaviour as social interactions that are learned and adapted continuously from a young age.[9] Sexual scripts can be defined as 'mental representations individuals construct and then use to make sense of their experience, including their own and others' behaviour'.[10]

The relevance of this theory for this research lies in the established link between endorsing certain sexual scripts and (normalising) sexual violence. One of the most prevalent scripts is the traditional heterosexual script. It entails very specific and complementary traditional gender roles.[11] Literature has confirmed extensively that having more traditional ideas on sex and dating heightens the risk of condoning, conducting and experiencing sexual and dating violence and rape myth acceptance.[12] In the last 20 years, more

[9] Michael W Wiederman, 'The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts' (2005) 13 The Family Journal 496.

[10] William Simon and John H Gagnon, *Sexual conduct : The social sources of human sexuality* (Aldine Publishing Company, 1973); Michael W Wiederman, 'Sexual script theory: Past, present, and future' in John DeLamater and Rebecca F Plante, *Handbook of the sociology of sexualities* (Springer International Publishing 2015).

[11] Janna L Kim and others, 'From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing the Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television' (2007) 44 Journal of Sex Research 145; Jennifer Stevens Aubrey and others, 'The Heterosexual Script on Tween, Teen, and Young-Adult Television Programs: A Content Analytic Update and Extension' (2019) 57 The Journal of Sex Research 1134.

[12] Jerry Finn, 'The Relationship Between Sex Role Attitudes and Attitudes Supporting Marital Violence' (1986) 14 Sex Roles 235; Elaine Sandra Byers, 'How Well Does the Traditional Sexual Script Explain Sexual Coercion? Review of a Program of Research.' (1996) 8 Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality 7; Dana M Truman, David M Tokar and Ann R Fischer, 'Dimensions of Masculinity: Relations to Date Rape Supportive Attitudes and Sexual Aggression in Dating Situations' (1996) 74 *Journal of Counseling & Development* 555; Marcia K Fitzpatrick and others, 'Associations of Gender and Gender-Role Ideology With Behavioral and Attitudinal Features of Intimate Partner Aggression' (2004) 5 Psychology of Men & Masculinity 91; M Christina Santana and others, 'Masculine Gender Roles Associated with Increased Sexual Risk and Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration among Young Adult Men' (2006) 83 Journal of Urban Health 575; Barbara Krahé, Steffen Bieneck and Renate Scheinberger-Olwig, 'The Role of Sexual Scripts in Sexual Aggression and Victimization' (2007) 36 Arch Sex Behav 687; Katja Gillander Gådin, 'Sexual Harassment of Girls in Elementary School' (2012) 27 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 1762; Amy Rose Grubb and Emily Turner, 'Attribution of Blame in Rape Cases: A Review of the Impact of Rape Myth Acceptance, Gender Role Conformity and Substance Use on Victim Blaming' (2012) 17 Aggression and Violent Behavior 443; April Chiung-Tao Shen, Marcus Yu-Lung Chiu and Jianxiu Gao, 'Predictors of Dating Violence among Chinese Adolescents: The role of Gender-role Beliefs and Justification of Violence' (2012) 27 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 1066; Lylla Cysne Frota D'Abreu and Barbara Krahé, 'Predicting Sexual Aggression in Male College Students in Brazil' (2014) 15 Psychology of Men & Masculinity

modern scripts have come into play. On Tinder, researchers have identified what can be called a 'hybrid script' in which traditional dating practices are combined with casual sex scripts from hook-up culture .[13]

2.2 Fifty shades of sexual harms

The concept of sexual harassment is used to cover a multitude of behaviours. From a legal stance, it entails a completely different array of actions than it does in social, behavioural sciences. Kelly prefers the overarching term sexual violence and conceptualised it in all its different types of occurrence on a continuum in order of incidence, without strict distinguishment between the behaviours as they often fade into one another. [14] The continuum thereby explains the contradiction in which certain sexual violence is widely condemned on the one hand (eg physical rape), yet perpetuated and condoned on the other hand (eg online harassment).

Online sexual harassment is a component of the catch-all term 'technology facilitated sexual violence'.[15] This hands-off behaviour can be positioned on one end of the continuum. One of the first and extensive descriptions of online sexual harassment is found in Barak's work as he adds the online dimension to sexual harassment. His definition is adapted and used as a framework. Online sexual harassment will be delineated as online gender harassment and online unwanted sexual attention.[16] It encompasses unwanted or

152; Stacey J T Hust and others, 'Rape Myth Acceptance, Efficacy, and Heterosexual Scripts in Men's Magazines: Factors Associated With Intentions to Sexually Coerce or Intervene' (2016) 34 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 1703; Paulina Tomaszewska and Barbara Krahé, 'Attitudes towards sexual coercion by Polish high school students: links with risky sexual scripts, pornography use, and rézeligiosity' (2016) 22 Journal of Sexual Aggression 1-17; Stacey J T Hust, Kathleen Boyce Rodgers and Benjamin Bayly, 'Scripting Sexual Consent: Internalized Traditional Sexual Scripts and Sexual Consent Expectancies Among College Students' (2017) 66 Family Relations 197; Cindy Hartingsveldt and Jenneke van Ditzhuijzen, 'De Relatie Tussen Seksuele Genderrol-stereotypen en het Aanhangen van Mythes rond Seksueel Grensoverschrijdend Gedrag onder Jongeren: Een Pilootstudie' (2018) 42 Tijdschrift voor seksuologie 3; Paulina Tomaszewska and Barbara Krahé, 'Predictors of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration among Polish university students: A longitudinal study' (2018) 47 Archives of Sexual Behavior 493; Isabell Schuster and Barbara Krahé, 'Predicting sexual victimization among college students in Chile and Turkey: A cross-cultural analysis' (2019) 48 Archives of Sexual Behavior 2565; Isabell Schuster and Barbara Krahé, 'Predictors of sexual aggression perpetration among male and female college students: Cross-cultural evidence from Chile and Turkey' (2019) 31 Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment 318.

[13] Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69; MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Women on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432; Laura Byn, 'Swipe, Hook-up and Harassment: The Complex Scripts of Dating Apps' in Gert Vermeulen, Nina Persak and Stéphanie De Coensel (eds), *Researching the boundaries of sexual integrity, gender violence and image-based abuse* (RIDP 2024.2; Maklu 2024).

[14] Liz Kelly, 'The Continuum of Sexual Violence' in: J Hanmer and M Maynard (eds), *Women, Violence and Social Control. Explorations in Sociology* (Palgrave Macmillan 1987).

[15] Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, 'Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research' (2018) 19 Trauma, Violence & Abuse 195.

[16] Azy Barak, 'Sexual Harassment on the Internet' (2005) 23 Social Science Computer Review 77.

unconsented sexual behaviour on a dating app that communicates sexual desires or intentions using textual or image-based messages.[17] Gender is defined in this paper as the social construct of what is deemed male and female.[18] Sexual gender harassment can be either active or passive, and verbal (ie degrading comments, sexual remarks, …) or graphic (ie pornographic or sexually violent images or videos, and 'cyberflashing'). [19] Unwanted sexual attention is intended to solicit some sort of sexual cooperation and can consist of direct messages asking about a person's body or sex life, or other intimate unwanted questions, requests or imposed sex-related sounds or images.[20]

Tackling and preventing sexual harassment is a multi-step process. One of the biggest obstacles is the reluctance of perpetrators, bystanders and victims to label the experience as such. A culture that reduces sexual harassment to every day behaviour is harmful as it maintains the idea that it is nothing out of the ordinary and that no action should be undertaken, thereby reconfirming the traditional heterosexual script.[21] One of the pitfalls lies in comparing online sexual harassment to eg physical rape. By focussing on and condemning the most severe forms of sexual violence, the types perceived as more common or less intruding could be dismissed or minimised. It is crucial to challenge these condoning attitudes and discourses as a first step in the direction of a safe environment in which one's sexual integrity is respected at all times, both physically and online.[22]

Normalisation is a concept often used in feminist literature. This research frequently assumes that patriarchal institutions, beliefs and normalisation are imposed with the intention of subjecting women to men. While recognising the existence and researching the acceptance and condoning of sexual violence is crucial to develop evidence-based prevention strategies, this paper does not specifically position itself in this research movement.[23] Normalisation will therefore be defined in this paper as the cultural beliefs and

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[17] Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and others, 'Dating Apps: A New Emerging Platform for Sexual Harassment? A Scoping Review' (2024) 25 Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 752.

[18] Diana T Sanchez, Jennifer Crocker and Karlee R Boike, 'Doing Gender in the Bedroom: Investing in Gender Norms and the Sexual Experience' (2005) 31 Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 1445.

[19] Cyberflashing is commonly referred to as the unsolicited sending of 'dick pics' or explicit images of sexualised female body parts.

[20] Azy Barak, 'Sexual Harassment on the Internet' (2005) 23 Social Science Computer Review 77; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (Springer 2017).

[21] Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212.

[22] Melanie McCarry and Nancy Lombard, 'Same Old Story? Children and Young People's Continued Normalisation of Men's Violence against Women' (2016) 112 Feminist Review 128; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (Springer 2017); Nadia Aghtaie and others, 'Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Young People's Relationships in Five European Countries: Online and Offline Normalisation of Heteronormativity' (2018) 2 Journal of Gender-Based Violence 293.

[23] Helene Berman and others, 'Sexual Harassment: Everyday Violence in the Lives of Girls and Women' (2000) 22 Adv Nurs Sci 32; Amanda Keddie, ''Some of those girls can be real drama queens': issues of gender, sexual harassment and schooling' (2009) 9 Sex Education 1; Heather R Hlavka, 'Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse' (2014) 28 Gender & Society 337; Melanie

values that sustain or justify the perpetration of sexual violence– in this case, online sexual harassment on Tinder.[24]

3 State of the Art

Research on sexual harms often suffers from discrepancies in scope, leaving the research landscape with incongruences. While this paper focuses on sexual harassment, the terminology in the state of the art is diverse as the aim is to explore the landscape of literature broadly.

3.1 Normalising physical sexual violence

Normalisation of physical sexual violence is not a new phenomenon. It entails a general tolerance of sexual violence which entails not adequately naming or labelling experiences as such. Rousseau researched the various ways in which victims of rape process what happened to them. Victims experienced difficulties with labelling and normalisation was detectable in the reduction of severity and even shrugging off what had happened as everyday behaviour. Perpetrators were held unaccountable and respondents rejected using the term sexual violence as they did not want to recognise or label themselves as victims.[25]

Hlavka poignantly illustrates how framing sexual violence starts at a very young age. Interviews with female victims of rape aged 9 to 17 revealed patterns of heteronormative scripts appropriated to make sense of the sexual harassment they experience on an almost daily basis. Young girls seem to have learned how to deal with and manoeuvre around this behaviour. She even found a culture of reprimand among the girls as they scold each other if they fail to shake off aggressive behaviour from their male peers. This shows how deeply the internalisation of this cultural script runs. Overwhelmingly described as 'normal stuff that guys do' or shrugging it off as it 'just happens'. Sex was understood as something done to them. The girls were also very aware of the double

McCarry and Nancy Lombard, 'Same Old Story? Children and Young People's Continued Normalisation of Men's Violence against Women' (2016) 112 Feminist Review 128; Giussy Barbara and others, 'Sexual Violence Against Adolescent Girls: Labeling It to Avoid Normalization' (2017) 26 Journal of Women's Health 1146; Katja Gillander Gådin and N Stein, 'Do schools normalise sexual harassment? An analysis of a legal case regarding sexual harassment in a Swedish high school' (2017) 31 Gender and Education 920; Caroline Mellgren, Mika Andersson and Anna-Karin Ivert, ''t Happens All the Time': Women's Experiences and Normalization of Sexual Harassment in Public Space' (2017) 28 Women & Criminal Justice 262.

[24] Melanie McCarry and Nancy Lombard, 'Same Old Story? Children and Young People's Continued Normalisation of Men's Violence against Women' (2016) 112 Feminist Review 128; Nadia Aghtaie and others, 'Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Young People's Relationships in Five European Countries: Online and Offline Normalisation of Heteronormativity' (2018) 2 Journal of Gender-Based Violence 293; Maddalena Rodelli and others, 'Conceptual Development and Content Validation of a Multicultural Instrument to Assess the Normalization of Gender-Based Violence against Women' (2022) 26 Sexuality & Culture 26.

[25] Catherine Rousseau, Manon Bergeron and Sandrine Ricci, 'A metasynthesis of qualitative studies on girls' and women's labeling of sexual violence' (2020) 52 Aggression and Violent Behavior 101395.

standard that comes with this script. They claimed that 'guys get away with everything' and that 'they can do anything and not get in trouble'. This culture forced the girls into a traditional script in which their only agency is gatekeeping.[26]

In Sweden, adolescent girls frequently experienced sexual harassment and a normalising culture ruled at their school. They had an unwilling and hesitant attitude to talk about their experiences, thereby concealing the harassment. A romantic discourse was also revealed in which transgressive behaviour was confused with being in love or in a relationship. In addition, a praised, symbolic construction of heterosexual masculinity was omnipresent.[27]

The phenomenon has also been researched on college campuses. Sinko and colleagues noticed a certain tolerance present in both the social upbringing and the university culture of the students. Concerning their social upbringing, pressure and coercion of young men against women was labelled as natural and the excusing 'boys will be boys'-phrase was frequently thrown around. Normalisation in university culture was particularly reflected in the handling of cases of sexual conduct as universities did not follow up with the necessary measures. Furthermore, the culture was noticeable in the language peers used and their experiences with hooking up and dating. This cultural script influenced gender expectations, personal and peer beliefs, reactions and behaviour related to sexual violence.[28] This study was confirmed a year later by Metz and colleagues who also studied normalisation in university students. Women have normalised sexual harms as they 'walk through life expecting to experience a certain level of unwanted sexual attention'.[29]

3.2 Normalising online sexual harassment

While the normalisation of physical sexual violence has been researched extensively, research on online sexual harassment (eg dating apps) is less comprehensive. Most research on Tinder focuses on the experiences of users or on conversational dynamics on the app. However, a recurring element in a few studies is the connection between having certain gendered discourses and a normalising culture on the app, mostly researched from a feminist perspective.

[26] Heather R Hlavka, 'Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse' (2014) 28 Gender & Society 337.
[27] Katja Gillander Gådin, 'Sexual Harassment of Girls in Elementary School' (2012) 27 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 1762.
[28] Laura Sinko and others, 'Internalized Messages: The Role of Sexual Violence Normalization on Meaning-making after Campus Sexual Violence' (2020) 30 Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 565.
[29] Heather R Hlavka, 'Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse' (2014) 28 Gender & Society 337.

When studying the scripts of Tinder users, a hybrid script was detected that entailed elements of both the traditional and the casual sex script.[30] According to Lee, Tinder also emphasises the gender system and feeds misogyny by 'coolness' and hookup discourses.[31] Users tend to accommodate to the culture and try to successfully 'play Tinder'.[32] Thompson, Hess and Flores further address the harassment, toxic masculinity and misogyny present on Tinder. Firstly they report a 'not hot enough' and objectification through consumption discourse. Several studies have confirmed that the determination of a woman's worth by sexual objectification plays a key role in many conversations. As the appearance of a woman is treated as a currency on the dating app, men try to lower the desirability of a woman by attacking her appearance upon experiencing rejection.[33] Furthermore, women's disinterest in hookups and their consent is foregone. The so-called 'groan induced' pick-up lines consist of hypersexual declarations with explicit imposed sexual actions on the receiver, implying a certain sexual entitlement and foregoing the possible consent of their Tinder match. This is based on the idea of the male hunter who must seduce the woman. Sometimes, even threats of physical sexual violence are made upon facing rejection. This is justified by a sexual double standard that considers women on dating apps to be sexually permissive.[34]

American women also experience a substantial amount of sexual harassment and normalisation thereof on Tinder. Concepts such as a 'Tinderslut' have emerged and created a new outlet for the sexual double standard. When asking subjects about their experiences, they usually shrug it off. Laughing at or shrugging off instances of sexual harassment is an indication of cultural normalisation.[35] Hanson also frames this harassment using sexual script theory. He explains it as an articulation of heteronormative masculinity. Men are supposed to be sexual agents and show strength and competitiveness.

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[30] Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69; MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432; Julia Metz, Kristen Myers and Patricia S Wallace, '(Re)Mapping the Grey Area: How Sexual Violence is Normalized in Discussions with University Students' (2021) 4 Gender and Women's Studies 5; Laura Byn, 'Swipe, Hook-up and Harassment: The Complex Scripts of Dating Apps' in Gert Vermeulen, Nina Persak and Stéphanie De Coensel (eds), *Researching the boundaries of sexual integrity, gender violence and image-based abuse* (RIDP 2024.2; Maklu 2024).

[31] Jin Lee, 'Mediated superficiality and misogyny through Cool on Tinder' (2019) 5 Social Media + Society 3.

[32] Gözde Cöbek, 'Right of Men to Hook Up: an Analysis of Tinder's Architecture And Its Cultural Interpretations In Turkey' (2023) New Media New Society 35.

[33] Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085.

[34] Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085; Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69; Jin Lee, 'Mediated superficiality and misogyny through Cool on Tinder' (2019) 5 Social Media + Society 3.

[35] MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432.

This may result in committing sexual violence. On Tinder, this behaviour is then justified by using the discourse of humour. Subsequently, women also normalise it as part of using dating apps in order to protect themselves.[36]

While the impact of online sexual harassment may be more limited compared to the impact of experiencing physical sexual violence, it can still have negative effects. Depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress symptoms, loneliness, less self-control and a lower self-esteem have been reported.[37] This reaction is often reinforced when the harassment is not labelled as such, causing victims to not feel validated in their feelings. They can feel as though they are not allowed to feel hurt or as if their experience is not severe enough to be taken seriously. As a result, victims internalise this cultural normalisation by minimising their experiences and thus disempowering their self-disclosure.[38] Normalisation is consequently not only done by perpetrators, but just as much by victims and bystanders.

When normalisation of online sexual harassment is studied, qualitative research often gauges for the attitudes of the respondents and their environment concerning certain (sexual) remarks and behaviour. Firstly, endorsing rape myths is an important indicator of a normalising attitude and a tolerance for interpersonal violence, frequently referred to in the literature as finding coercion a legitimate way to gain compliance in intimate and/or sexual relationships.[39] This can be predicted from sexual gender roles, adversarial sexual beliefs (ie distrust of the opposite sex) and sexual conservatism. The second element is a general tolerance of sexual violence which entails not adequately naming or labelling experiences as such. This can be done by minimising, laughing at or shrugging off instances of sexual harassment or calling it a misunderstanding. Lastly, and in line with the endorsement of rape myths, victim blaming is also a powerful indicator of normalisation.

While the connection between the traditional script and physical sexual violence is widely confirmed, the connection with online sexual violence is not. For this reason, the overarching doctoral research of this paper studies the connection between the sexual scripts of Tinder users and (their attitude concerning) online sexual harassment. Research solely on (the normalisation of) sexual harassment on Tinder is not extensive either. However qualitative research into the experiences of dating app users shows that

[36] Kenneth R Hanson, 'Collective Exclusion: How white heterosexual dating app norms reproduce status quo hookup culture' (2021) 92 Sociological Inquiry 894.
[37] Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and others, 'Dating Apps: A New Emerging Platform for Sexual Harassment? A Scoping Review' (2024) 25 Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 752.
[38] Laura Sinko and others, 'Internalized Messages: The Role of Sexual Violence Normalization on Meaning-making after Campus Sexual Violence' (2020) 30 Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 565.
[39] Martha R Burt, 'Cultural myths and supports for rape' (1980) 38 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 217 .

normalisation is in fact happening on many dating platforms.[40] It therefore can be hypothesised that normalisation is also present on Tinder.

4 Methodology

The research population is narrowed down to heterosexual students (18-25 years old) studying in Ghent, Belgium.[41] This population is applying and perfecting the scripts they were taught as young adolescents in romantic or sexual contact on a daily basis. Students are more often confronted with hook-up culture and dating possibilities, both in real life and online on dating apps.[42] This paper is focused on heterosexual scripts as each sexual dynamic is scripted by gender and literature has provided a thorough basis for heterosexual romantic or sexual interactions.[43]

The final stage of this doctoral research will answer the question: 'To what extent does the normalisation of online sexual harassment on Tinder, result from and/or impact the sexual scripts of students in Ghent (18-25 years) using Tinder?'. In the previous paper, the sexual scripts of students are analysed.[44] In this current paper, the extent and nature of the normalisation of sexual harassment happening on Tinder is researched. This sub-research question is supported by two hypotheses, each divided into two sub-hypotheses testing the receival of textual (a) and image-based (b) sexual harassment. The first hypothesis (1a&b) assumes that active Tinder users experience significantly more sexual harassment than non-users of dating apps. The second hypothesis (2a&b) assumes that

[40] Laurie Penny, *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2013); Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (Springer 2017); Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212; Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69.

[41] The survey is conducted in Dutch as this is the mother tongue of the research population. Allowing respondents to reflect in their first language is likely to result in more nuanced and rich qualitative data. A translation of the quotes is available upon request.

[42] John K Sakaluk and others, 'Dominant Heterosexual Sexual Scripts in Emerging Adulthood: Conceptualization and Measurement' (2013) 51 The Journal of Sex Research 516; MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432.

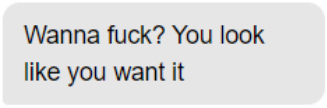
[43] Jessie V Ford, 'Unwanted Sex on Campus: The Overlooked Role of Interactional Pressures and Gendered Sexual Scripts' (2020) 44 Qualitative Sociology 1–2; 31–53.

[44] The occurrence of a hybrid script – containing both elements of the traditional as well as the hook-up script – on Tinder is confirmed. Moreover, the sexual scripts of active Tinder users are different from the scripts of the control group with non-users. Tinder users have an overall more traditional script when it comes to courting and the sexual double standard. Concerning the concept of casual sex, control respondents have a more traditional discourse; Laura Byn, 'Swipe, Hook-up and Harassment: The Complex Scripts of Dating Apps' in Gert Vermeulen, Nina Persak and Stéphanie De Coensel (eds), *Researching the boundaries of sexual integrity, gender violence and image-based abuse* (RIDP 2024.2; Maklu 2024).

active Tinder users experience significantly more normalisation of this sexual harassment than non-users of dating apps. The final reciprocal impact of the scripts and normalisation is studied with interviews in the next research phase.

The discourses on Tinder and the experiences of its users are best discovered using interpretative methods. A mixed-methods self-report approach in the form of a qualitative survey is used. Two gender neutral vignettes of hypothetical harassing messages were constructed in which the subjects were asked if they ever received a similar message, how they felt about this and how their environment reacted to it. The first vignette illustrates textual sexual harassment:

'Out of nowhere you suddenly receive this message from a match on Tinder:'



This hypothetical situation has been constructed to be clear and not open to interpretation. By using the notions of 'out of nowhere' and 'suddenly', it is clear that there is no previous consensual sexting or hints. This message may therefore be classified as a sexually harassing message when received without further context as it falls under the scope of online unwanted sexual attention.[45]

The second vignette targets the receival of image-based sexual harassment: 'You have a nice conversation with a match on Tinder. Your match asks for your mobile number to WhatsApp. As you have a good connection, you agree and give your mobile number. The first thing you receive is a message with a photo of exposed, intimate genitals (think: breasts, penis or vulva).'

As this vignette does not target consensual sexting between two consenting adults, an element of surprise and non-consent was inserted in the vignette, stating that the image was 'the first thing you receive' after giving your phone number. As no consent could have been given or assumed from the context, this message can be labelled as sexual (gender) harassment.[46]

The last part of the survey questioned how subjects give meaning to the concept of sexual harassment. They were asked separately whether they found either vignette harassing or intimidating and to define sexually harassing or intimidating behaviour. Both a quantitative analysis as well as a thematic analysis is conducted. A significance level with a p-

[45] Azy Barak, 'Sexual Harassment on the Internet' (2005) 23 Social Science Computer Review 77.
[46] Azy Barak, 'Sexual Harassment on the Internet' (2005) 23 Social Science Computer Review 77.

value of 0.05 is used for the statistical analysis. For the qualitative coding, a blended approach is used combining deduction and induction.[47]

5 Results

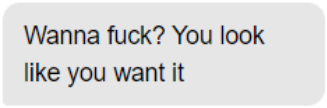
5.1 Demographics

1430 respondents started the survey, of which 267 responses were withheld. Since extensive responses were necessary to retrieve rich and valid data and the fall-out presented itself early on in the survey, only complete survey forms were taken into account. This resulted in 82 Tinder users and 185 control group respondents. N is therefore always 82 for the Tinder group and 185 for the control group, unless explicitly noted otherwise. For accurate interpretation, a distinction must be made between concrete percentual counts of the respondents in quantitative comparisons (either between both groups or within a group between genders) and the frequency of occurring themes (often feelings or experiences) and descriptive data within the groups derived from qualitative coding.

Of the Tinder respondents, 54.88% are women and 45.12% are men. 61.73% are between 18-21 years old and 38.27% are between 22-25 years old (n = 81). 37.80% are doing an academic master, 34.15% an academic bachelor and 28.05% a professional bachelor. 96.34% of the Tinder users are single, 2.44% (2) are in an exclusive committed relationship, and one respondent is in a non-exclusive open relationship. The control group consists of 185 respondents and has the same demographic variables as the Tinder users yet has never used a dating app. 71.35% are women, 28.65% men. 72.43% are between 18-21 years old and 27.57% are between 22-25 years old. 48.63% of the control group is doing an academic bachelor, 28.96% is doing a professional bachelor and 22.40% is currently doing an academic master (n = 183). 64.86% of the control group respondents are in an exclusive committed relationship, 34.59% are single and one respondent is in a non-exclusive open relationship.

5.2 Sexually harassing message

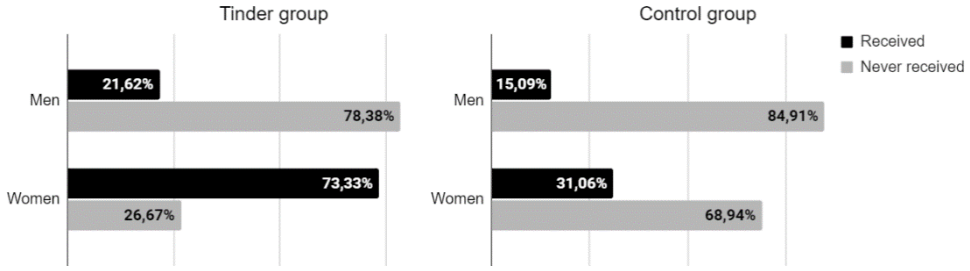
'Out of nowhere you suddenly receive this message from a match on Tinder:'



[47] Melissa E Graebner, Jeffrey A Martin and Philip T Roundy, 'Qualitative Data: Cooking Without a Recipe' (2012) 10 Strategic Organization 276; Noel J Pearse, 'An Illustration of Deductive Analysis in Qualitative Research' (2019) 17 EJBRM 143.

5.2.1 *Prevalence*

Exactly half of Tinder respondents have already received a similar message, 80% being women and 20% being men. 73.33% (n = 45) of women and 21.62% (n= 37) of men on Tinder have received a similar message to the vignette. These numbers are twice as high as in the control group where 26.49% of the respondents have received a similar message. Of those, 83.67% were women and 16.33% men. In total 31.06% (n = 132) of the female students and 15.09% (n = 53) of the male students in the control group received a similar message. Tinder users receive significantly more harassing messages than respondents from the control group. Likewise, the gender of Tinder users is a strong indicator for the receival of messages. In the control group, the gender is significant (but the correlation is weaker than in the Tinder group).



5.2.2 *Perception*

68.29% of the Tinder users who have received a similar message, experienced this as negative, 29.72% as neutral and 2.44% (1) as positive (n = 41). Users who are new on Tinder often react more neutral when receiving this kind of message. They possibly have less experience and therefore feel less frustration when it comes to harassing messages than long-time users. Compared to the control group, the experience of the respondents is very similar with 65.31% experiencing this as negative, 28.57% as neutral and 6.12% as positive (n = 49). There was no significant difference in the experience of both groups.

Tinder respondents had many different feelings upon receiving this message: they felt discouraged, disrespected/objectified, stated it was 'to be expected when you're on Tinder' or felt uncomfortable and pressured to participate. However it must be noted that quite a few respondents label this kind of message as simply ‘very direct’ and thought that the sender was at least ‘honest about their intentions’. The control group was less tolerant and feelings of disgust and objectification were more frequently coded than in the Tinder group. This might be a sign of less normalisation of harassing messages in the control group.

While most Tinder respondents did not appreciate receiving the message initially, a large part of the friends of the respondents reacted jokingly to the story. Respondents reported

feeling ‘okay’ with this reaction because ‘they were not that hurt’ or because ‘they also laugh when their friends receive it’. This is in contrast with them reporting feeling bad, dirty and disrespected upon receiving this message earlier in the survey. It seems like some respondents adapted their scripts to the cultural standards and what they're supposed to feel, even if their initial feeling was negative and they felt offended. The Tinder users who hadn’t shared this kind of message with anyone, didn't think it was a big deal or important enough to mention, stated that it happened all the time, were embarrassed about it or wanted to forget it as soon as possible.

> 'But these messages have become so normalised on Tinder that it's now often like, ‘oh, okay’ and you go on with your day.' – ResT65F

In the control group, the majority of the friends found the message to be dirty, not okay or they reacted angrily. A smaller number of friends laughed at it. Some of the respondents agreed with their friends' reaction, either laughing along or feeling confirmed in their shocked or negative reaction. Other respondents expected more support from their friends. The respondents who never told anyone, did not want to talk about it, didn't think it was a ‘show off’ or didn't find it important enough. Comparing the qualitative coding of the experiences between the Tinder group and the control group, there is more normalisation noticeable among the friends of Tinder users.

5.3 Sexually harassing image

‘You have a nice conversation with a match on Tinder. Your match asks for your mobile number to WhatsApp. As you have a good connection, you agree and give your mobile number. The first thing that you then receive, is a message with a photo of exposed, intimate genitals (think: breasts, penis or vulva).’

5.3.1 Prevalence

23.17% of Tinder respondents have received a sexually explicit image from a Tinder match. Of these (n = 19), 52.63% (10) were women and 47.37% (9) were men. In total, 22.22% (n = 45) of women and 24.32% (n =37) of men on Tinder received such an image. These percentages more similar to those of the control group than compared to the previous vignette. 21.08% of the control respondents have received such an image. Of these (n = 39), 76.92% (30) were women and 23.08% (9) were men. In total, 22.73% (n = 132) of women and 16.98% (n = 53) of men of the control group received such an image. Tinder users do not receive significantly more images than non-users. Gender is also not significant in either of the groups. An explanation for the similar receival of pictures could be that the Tinder app itself does not allow exchanging images. Several respondents note that they used to receive these kinds of images more often in the past. This could indicate increased awareness post #MeToo or that students are simply growing out of the initial experimental stage of digital sexuality.

5.3.2 Perception

57.89% of the respondents that have previously received this, perceived it as negative, 31.58% as neutral and 10.53% (2) as positive (n = 19). Respondents reported feeling mostly disgusted, objectified and uncomfortable. Some of the positive emotions were flattered and excited. The control group reacted more negatively: 76.92% of the respondents experienced this negatively, 12.82% neutrally and 10.26% (4) positively (n = 39). The fact that most respondents experienced this negatively was also reflected in their feelings. While there is relative difference in experience between the Tinder group and the control group, the significance is not measurable as the frequencies in the Tinder group are too low.

73.68% (n = 19) of Tinder users have come forward to their environment about receiving this kind of image, usually by telling their friends. They were affirmed in their own negative feelings which made them feel good and supported. 76.92% (n = 39) of the control respondents have shared this story with someone, also most often with friends. Sometimes these friends were shocked which validated the feelings of the respondents. Other friends reacted like it was normal or laughed about it. This made respondents feel disappointed, angry or shocked. However some respondents themselves also laughed about it. The ones who did not tell anyone had various reasons for not doing so: shame, not wanting to damage the reputation of the sender or fear of damaging their own reputation. Some also stated that they told no one because it was not going to make a difference and that this happens to many, or they did not think it was necessary.

5.4 Giving meaning to sexual harassment

To gain insight into the perception, tolerance and normalisation of sexual harassment of Tinder users, users were also asked whether they would label vignette one and/or two as sexual harassment. In order to not only understand the meaning they give to sexual harassment but also measure the perceived severity of the messages, they were provided with the option to label the instances as intimidating. The frequency of the coded answers was compared to the amount of respondents (n) per group and is illustrated with coverage percentages.

5.4.1 Vignette one: textual message

Within the qualitative answers of 82 Tinder users, the first vignette was coded harassing or intimidating 26 times (31.71% coverage). The main reason for respondents to label this message as harassing is that consent was foregone by the sender. It was found to be intimidating only (and not harassing) 24 times. Four Tinder users stated that the online component of this message inherently meant that it could not be sexual harassment but only intimidating. It was coded not harassing nor intimidating 61 times. For both the control group and the Tinder group, the main argument for not labelling the message as sexual harassment is that they find a certain responsibility to further act upon the message to lie with the receiver. It is stated that the power is in the receivers' hands and they

can/should just ignore or block the sender of the message and move on. The second reason for Tinder users is that it is not severe enough to pass the threshold of sexual harassment because it is 'just' an online message. One respondent also states that you can expect this on Tinder.

> 'The receiving party can always cancel the match, ignore it or simply not pay attention to it.' – ResT46M

> 'If you're 'not okay' with it or don't want it, then you just ignore it.' – ResT40M

For the 185 respondents in the control group, the message was coded harassing or intimidating 78 times (42.16 % coverage). The most mentioned reason was the sexualisation of a person and the fact that consent is foregone. It was found to be just intimidating 40 times. It was coded not harassing or intimidating 87 times.

It can be concluded that the majority of Tinder users do not find this kind of message harassing or intimidating. When comparing both groups, the control group finds the message from vignette one more frequently harassing and intimidating than the Tinder group does. Respondents from the Tinder group seem to have a higher tolerance for sexually harassing textual messages. Both groups also place partial responsibility in the hands of the receiver, yet the Tinder group does this more frequently. One respondent also stated: 'this is something that happens to many women, so I do not immediately see it as transgressive behaviour'. This seems to imply that sending or receiving this message is not problematic because of how frequently it happens. This can be another indication of the normalisation of the phenomenon.

5.4.2 Vignette two: image

The second vignette in which an explicit image was received without previous consent was found to be more harassing or intimidating. The Tinder group labelled this incident as sexual harassment or intimidation 84 times (102.44% coverage). Intimidating only was coded 5 times. Tinder users found this not harassing or intimidating 20 times.

> 'Again, just unmatch and delete' – ResT73M

In the control group, receiving this image without consent was coded harassing or intimidating 142 times (76.76% coverage) and intimidating only 13 times. It was found not harassing or intimidating 26 times.

It can be concluded that the majority of both Tinder users and non-users find receiving this image without previous consent harassing or intimidating. For both groups, the most important reason was that no consent was asked. The picture was unsolicited and unwanted. It can be noted that the control group still finds the image from vignette two more harassing than the Tinder group. The most frequent explanation of the respondents to label the behaviour as not harassing or intimidating is that the responsibility to act lies on the receiver. This was found five times in the Tinder group (coverage 6.10%) and five times in the control group (coverage 2.70%), which is a higher ratio in the Tinder group

compared to the amount of respondents. Tinder users seem to place the responsibility on the receiver more frequently.

5.4.3 Defining sexual harassment

In order to better understand how Tinder users give meaning to sexual harassment, they were given the opportunity to define the concept freely. The definition respondents came up with consisted of several different elements. Firstly the lack of consent was omnipresent. The second most mentioned element was a type of sexual behaviour. Thirdly the negative feelings this behaviour can evoke were mentioned by some respondents. Lastly the framing and possible consequences were sometimes included.

The most prominent element was the lack of consent. Four main themes were found. The first theme was coded as 'without consent/unsolicited'. Respondents very frequently included the idea that the messages/pictures/behaviour were uncalled or unasked for. It seems that a positive expression of the will in the form of consent is required for the behaviour not to be labelled as sexual harassment. Secondly, the fact that an act was 'unwanted' was the deciding factor. This focuses on an internal feeling and not an expression of this feeling, yet it was one of the most important deciding factors in defining what sexual harassment means to the respondents. This shows that a clear delineation of what entails sexual harassment can be tricky as many respondents base their judgement on an internal feeling of willingness. The third element was the crossing of boundaries. Lastly, foregoing refusal and insisting by the perpetrator was also mentioned several times. This element has a different sentiment to it than the previous variations of consent. A few respondents explained that specific behaviour could only be sexual harassment if a 'no' was explicitly expressed yet the other party ignores this and continues their actions. The consent threshold for sexual harassment is clearly higher for some respondents.

The second most coded element in the definition concerned the sexual behaviour itself. This was categorised in hands-off and hands-on behaviour. Hands-on behaviour is understood as physical acts and consisted for respondents of rape, assault and inappropriate touching. Inappropriate touching was mentioned the most. Hands-off behaviour entailed inappropriate looks, online acts (sexual images, sexual messages and stalking) and verbal acts (psychological intimidation and sexual remarks).The sending of unwanted sexual images and making sexual remarks were mentioned most frequently.

The third most coded element in the definition of sexual harassment were the negative feelings these actions can cause. The negative feelings mostly entailed experiencing fear and feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. Behaviour perceived as negative that is not enjoyable was also found frequently in the data, which again seems to refer to an internal feeling and willingness. Respondents also mentioned that it is dependent on the person making the call and that context is crucial. Lastly, the consequences of sexual harassment were also mentioned, mainly the possible damage to one's (sexual) integrity.

6 Discussion

Whether seeking a long term commitment or just company for the night, many (young) adults turn to Tinder. The app does not merely create opportunities for positive romantic or sexual experiences as prevalence percentages of sexual harassment between 57% and 88.8% have been found. Furthermore, indications of a normalising culture thereof on Tinder have been detected.[48] This research paper sheds light on the prevalence and type of sexual harassment Tinder users encounter and the way they perceive and define these messages compared to non-users of dating apps with the aim of unravelling the present culture on Tinder.

Consistent with the literature on the prevalence of sexual harassment on dating apps, hypothesis 1a (Tinder users experience significantly more textual sexual harassment than non-users of dating apps) is corroborated. 50% of Tinder respondents have already received a sexually harassing textual message, which differs significantly from the 26.49% prevalence among non-users. The 50% prevalence among Tinder users consists of 80.49% female and 19.51% male users. Percentages are especially high for female Tinder users as in total, 73.33% of women and 21.62% of men on Tinder have received a similar harassing textual message. These results are consistent with previous literature stating that women are especially at risk. It also indicates a possible facilitation of sexual harassment by Tinder.

Literature has identified several elements that portray a culture of normalisation. From reducing sexual aggressions to everyday behaviour by laughing or it shrugging off and holding perpetrators unaccountable to refusing to label the experience as such.[49] Similar identifying elements were found in the answers of Tinder respondents. When comparing the experiences of users and non-users, 68.29% of Tinder users experienced receiving the textual harassing message as negative, similarly to the control group. The control group however did respond less tolerant qualitatively and feelings of disgust and objectification were more frequently reported. Upon questioning respondents about their reasoning, Tinder respondents stated that the textual vignette was 'just a message' and one should just 'move on'. The message was over half of the times not labelled as harassing or intimidating by the Tinder users, while the control group found it at least intimidating. Some shrugged the messages off as unimportant and everyday behaviour because they are used to receiving them or because 'you should expect this on Tinder'.

[48] Aaron Hess and Carlos Flores, 'Simply More than Swiping Left: A Critical Analysis of Toxic Masculine Performances on Tinder Nightmares' (2016) 20 New media & society 2018 1085; Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212; Laura Thompson, ''I can be your Tindernightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace' (2018) 28 Feminism & Psychology 69; MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432.

[49] Catherine Rousseau, Manon Bergeron and Sandrine Ricci, 'A metasynthesis of qualitative studies on girls' and women's labeling of sexual violence' (2020) 52 Aggression and Violent Behavior 101395.

Upon gauging for the meaning Tinder users give to this message, they seemed to have a higher tolerance for harassment as they labelled the vignette a lot more frequently as not harassing/intimidating than the control group. Literature explains that labelling is often severely impacted by a normalising culture. Similar to some Tinder users, a respondent in the study of Sinko and colleagues doubted her own experience and feelings and was wondering whether it was 'bad enough'.[50] Victim blaming – a powerful indicator of normalisation – was also noted as a primary reason for respondents to label the behaviour as not harassing or intimidating. Respondents seem to believe in a 'shared responsibility' upon receiving harassing messages. Many respondents of both the Tinder and control group stated that the power lies with the receiver to react in a certain way to the message or image and to eg block the sender and ignore the message.

Normalisation was also noticed in the reaction of the friends of Tinder users. They often laughed when the respondent shared that he/she had received a harassing message. Even if respondents initially felt bad upon receiving the message, they later reported being 'okay' with this reaction from their friends. This further perpetuates the internalisation of cultural normalisation by minimising experiences and disempowering self-disclosure.[51] The friends from the control group respondents reacted more negatively to the message and were more supportive of their friend. This data confirms hypothesis 2a (Tinder users experience significantly more normalisation of textual sexual harassment than non-users). It also confirms the studies of Christensen[52] and Gillet[53] stating that there is an ongoing normalisation of textual sexual harassment on Tinder.

Aforementioned results inevitably bring to mind the concept of rape culture. Literature states that a rape culture can be recognized by the normalisation and trivialisation of sexual violence (by underreporting or inadequately naming/labelling certain behaviour as such), objectification of women, slut-shaming and victim-blaming.[54] These elements were also clearly found in the survey data, apart from the objectification of women. As the mechanism of Tinder stimulates a superficial decision process based on mainly photos of the users, it is not the best environment to accurately measure societal objectification of women. It must also be noted that there was no general hierarchal suppression of women visible in the data. One respondent made misogynistic comments, but this was an exception in the data. These findings are in contrast – especially concerning the Tinder users – with the meaning that respondents give to sexual harassment. When defining the

[50] Laura Sinko and others, 'Internalized Messages: The Role of Sexual Violence Normalization on Meaning-making after Campus Sexual Violence' (2020) 30 Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 565.
[51] Laura Sinko and others, 'Internalized Messages: The Role of Sexual Violence Normalization on Meaning-making after Campus Sexual Violence' (2020) 30 Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 565.
[52] MacKenzie A Christensen, ''Tindersluts' and 'Tinderellas': Examining the Digital Affordances Shaping the (Hetero)Sexual Scripts of Young Womxn on Tinder' (2021) 64 Sociological Perspectives 432.
[53] Rosalie Gillet, 'Intimate Intrusions Online: Studying the Normalisation of Abuse in Dating Apps' (2018) 69 Women's Studies International Forum 212.
[54] Heather R Hlavka, 'Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse' (2014) 28 Gender & Society 337; Tracey Nicholls, Dismantling Rape CultureThe Peacebuilding Power of 'Me Too' (Routledge 2021).

concept, they find obtaining consent of great importance and recognise the different types of behaviour that can entail harassment. They do however often use an internal feeling of willingness as a criterion for the behaviour in question, which does not aid in clarity on the matter.

When researching receiving image-based sexual harassment, surprisingly only 23.17% of Tinder respondents have previously received an unsolicited explicit image in a similar situation as vignette two from a Tinder match. Comparing this data to the control group, the results are very similar with 21.08% of respondents having received such an image. Even though Tinder respondents received twice as much textual sexual harassment as the control group, they did not receive statistically significantly more graphic sexual gender harassment than their counterparts that have never used dating apps. No support was found for hypothesis 1b (Tinder users experience significantly more image-based sexual harassment than non-users). A possible explanation is that Tinder itself does not allow for the sending or receiving of images.

The data show that 57.89% of Tinder respondents experienced receiving this kind of image as negative, this compared to 76.92% of control respondents. Tinder users experience receiving such a message less negative than the control group. The unsolicited explicit image was however received less carelessly than the textual message. The majority of both Tinder users and non-users labelled this as harassing or intimidating, even if the control group still labelled this harassing more frequently. For both groups, the most important reason was that no consent was obtained. The picture was unsolicited and unwanted. Therefore, there is also no support for hypothesis 2b (Tinder users experience significantly more normalisation of image-based sexual harassment than non-users). The disapproval of unwanted explicit pictures could be the result of more societal consensus or dialogue following #MeToo. Furthermore, there are fewer interpretational options when it comes to an explicit picture that has not been consented to beforehand compared to a textual sexual remark.

This paper adds to the existing literature as it first and foremost gives insight into and confirms existing (albeit limited) research on the prevalence and type of sexual harassment users of dating apps experience, specifically targeted to student culture. Furthermore, it offers an almost unique insight into the discourses and perceptions of users upon facing sexual harassment. Empirical literature on the normalisation of this behaviour in the online dating world is scarce. The existing literature either analyses screenshots from conversations posted on Instagram pages that aim to denounce what they label as 'toxic masculinity' or reports experiences of respondents in interviews about Tinder use. The results of this research add significant value as Tinder users were concretely questioned using vignettes about how they and their environment perceive concrete harassing messages. As sexual harassment is a notion that is more often than not understood very subjectively and framed in the eye of the beholder, vignettes can introduce a rather objective framework. Combining the reasonings of Tinder users with the meaning they give to the concept of sexual harassment and the role of consent results in interesting data that spark

further research interest. Why do Tinder users receive twice as much textual sexual harassment than non-users and how is this connected to their higher tolerance for this harassment? How can Tinder users be so aware of the need of consent, yet both this study and Thompson's study find discourses of missing consent that are being normalised? Follow-up research into why image-based sexual harassment has lessened might also be interesting from a preventative perspective. The inability to send images on the app itself is likely not the only explanation. Tinder has also taken other precautions to avoid facilitating this harassment. Users are shown elaborate terms of use concerning sexual safety as the app gives a pop-up asking users to be respectful, respect boundaries of others by asking consent, warning to meet up in public, etc. Furthermore, the app also gives a pop-up containing a warning when wanting to send a message with possible harassing language. Finally, it offers the opportunity to unmatch, block or report a match. However this research showed that these practical measures are falling short. Not only is textual sexual harassment very present on the app, indications of a normalising culture of sexual harassment on Tinder were also confirmed. Showing pop-ups does not suffice when aiming to change engrained cultural, heterosexual discourses. They demand a change in perspectives, attitudes and sexual scripts. Working in an educational, preventative manner with these scripts might provide a more sustained solution to this deep-rooted problem.

It must be noted that this research is limited to a specific population, namely heterosexual students in Ghent from 18-25 years old, and can therefore not be extrapolated without further ado to other populations or cultures. Future research could elaborate on these results by exploring the cultural normalisation on different platforms (eg comparing several dating apps such as Bumble or social media channels) and within other research groups or age groups. In general, normalisation of online sexual harassment (and the connection to certain gendered discourses and scripts) is severely lacking. Seeing its importance in preventative strategies and the shaping of young children into sexually active adults, more research in this field is needed. Even more interesting could be an exploration of the normalisation of sexual harassment in non-heterosexual interactions, both in online and physical environments.

7 Conclusion

Results have showed that (textual) sexual harassment is very present on Tinder. Respondents receive twice as much textual harassment as non-users of the app. They also have a higher tolerance for this type of harassment and do generally not label this behaviour as harassment. It is more frequently normalised by both the respondents and their friends. They even place a partial responsibility in the hands of the receiver to act upon the message and to just block or unmatch the sender. This in stark contrast with non-consensual explicit images as both Tinder users and non-users received a lot less image-based sexual harassment and there was no significant difference between both groups. Whether due to the inability to send pictures on the app or a social consensus, respondents over all agreed that these messages are inappropriate and harassing. Yet the control

group still finds this message more harassing and experiences it more negatively than the Tinder group.

Even though a normalising culture was found on Tinder – and previous literature found discourses of missing consent –, its users are surprisingly aware of the need for sexual consent and the possible behaviour that falls within the scope of sexual harassment. This shows that factual knowledge on what harassment or consent means, is not always translated into daily practices. While some respondents require explicit consent for consensual sexual contact, to many respondents the unwantedness of a certain action dictated its label. This finding is especially interesting as an internal feeling – without an external impression – is not always easy to interpret by a sexual partner. This element might result in miscommunication or misunderstandings about one's intentions and inner will.

While Tinder has already taken practical measures to discourage sexual harassment on its platform, results show that these are insufficient. To actively diminish the prevalence of sexual harassment, a denormalisation of this behaviour is inevitable and highly necessary. Denouncing a culture that condones sexual harassment demands an effective change in discourses, and can only be tackled in the deep-rooted beliefs about gender and (hetero)sexual scripts and romantic or sexual interactions. Interfering in the early stages of adolescence and stimulating an egalitarian discourse that emphasizes active consent, equal agency and respect for sexual integrity and boundaries could effectively wipe out rape culture and its normalising discourses that shrug off sexual harms as daily occurrences.

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This special issue brings together nineteen topical and innovative papers, researching the boundaries of sexual integrity and affirmative sexual consent, gender violence, and image-based or online sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse material and non-consensual sexual deepfakes. It offers an original and nuanced approach to understanding the important legal elements, various agents and harms of topic-related deviant conduct as well as legislative processes aimed at tackling it. In light of recent societal developments, including changes in societal sensibilities, and recent or on-going legislative amendments at national and supranational levels, research on these topics is timely and much needed.

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