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## PhD Dissertation

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# Language and Sexuality in an Online-Mediated World

Interactional Workings of Desire in Heterosexual Online Dating

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## Preface

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# Transcription conventions

All names in transcripts are pseudonyms; identifying details have been changed. In the spoken conversations (article II) and interviews (article IV) phonetic details have been included when they are relevant to the analysis; otherwise spelling is normalized. Omissions have been clearly marked in the transcripts.

(number)	timed pause
[word]	overlap
@	laughter, each token marks one pulse
°word°	low volume
WORD	high volume
*word*	whisper
<u>word</u>	stress
<X words X>	uncertain transcription
word-	unfinished word or sentence/broken off
wo:rd	extension of word
XXX	anonymization
((word))	comment

## 1. Initiating romantic relationships on online dating sites in contemporary society

In 2005 I recorded conversational data of female friends' face-to-face conversations for a project on womens' use of sexist language. A recurrent topic in those conversations was the initiation and negotiation of romantic and erotic relations. Such activities were mainly initiated and developed through the communicative channel of mobile phones. In particular the short written format of the text message appeared to be a preferred way of contacting, flirting, and setting up meetings. Text messages also allowed for the possibility of sharing these romantic activities with friends by displaying the messages, reading them aloud, or reporting specific discourse detail.

March 2005: Spoken conversation between Helle and her female friends

Helle:	<i>i løbet af aftenen havde jeg jo sms'et lidt med ham og at han var i København og jeg var i Hellerup og alt det der ...</i>	<i>during the evening I had texted a bit with him and that he was in Copenhagen and that I was in Hellerup and all that stuff ...</i>
	<i>Og så satte jeg mig ind i natbussen og så øh</i>	<i>And then I got on the night bus and then uh</i>
Iben:	<i>tog den ene sms den anden</i>	<i>one text led to another</i>
Helle:	<i>ja nogenlunde cirka om jeg ikke kunne komme og hente ham han kedede sig og sådan noget og så sagde jeg jeg er på Rådhuspladsen om en halv time men jeg skal op om to timer skrev jeg så ja det skulle han i hvert fald ikke så sagde jeg nå men hvad er det du fisker efter ...</i>	<i>yeah something like that if I could come and pick him up and stuff like that and then I said I'm going to be by the town hall in half an hour but I have to get up in two hours I wrote then so yes he was definitely not so I said well what are you fishing for ...</i>
	<i>nå ja og så mødtes vi bare og så sagde han skal vi gå og så sagde jeg nej det skal vi ikke vi skal have en taxa og så tog vi en taxa og så tog vi hjem og så lå vi i ske og så blev vi nøgne og</i>	<i>well yes and then we just met and then he said should we get going and then I said no we're going to grab a cab and then we went to my place and then we spooned and then we got naked and</i>

In spite of the fact that this data excerpt was collected a decade ago and for different research purposes it comprises the themes that this dissertation sets out to examine: The technologically mediated initiation and negotiation of romantic/erotic heterosexual relations and the ways in which homosocial relations tie into such processes. Based on empirical interactive data, this dissertation examines these issues in the context of the contemporary romantic practice of online dating.

Whereas my original analysis of the above example was concerned with gender, in particular female friends' positioning within groups (Mortensen 2010a), this example demonstrates how I became aware of the crucial role sexuality (and display of romantic-erotic desire) plays in being a gendered subject; in having fun as a woman/man, in connecting with one's friends, in presenting oneself as a recognizable woman/man with recognizable desires both towards friends and romantic/sexual partners, and in socializing one's friends into being women/men. In addition, the data displayed how linguistic practices are a vital resource for being a sexual subject: linguistic tools were constantly used in establishing romantic meetings, in negotiating intimate interactions, in sharing and evaluating romantic/sexual experiences, and in giving meaning to various intimate acts.

The introductory example challenges commonly held views of romantic/erotic desire as both a fixed natural phenomenon and as a psychological state occurring as a private (intra)subjective experience (Eckert 2002:100; Weeks et al. 2003:2), which ultimately eludes language (Harvey and Shalom 1997:1). First, it demonstrates how participants, rather than managing desire as an inner phenomenon, negotiate and navigate issues concerning their romantic and erotic lives in a variety of social ways, both through face-to-face interaction and through technologically mediated interaction. Second, it displays how desire is very much a linguistic construct; desire takes on form and comes in to being through the text messages sent back and forth and through the retrospective narrative the woman from the example tells her friends. Finally, it suggests that desire is an outcome of social interaction: the linguistic construction of desire happens in interplay with interlocutors; the romantically involved man at the other end of the line and the cheering friends are co-constructing desire by receiving and recognizing Helle's speech acts as romantic and sexual. This dissertation is rooted in an understanding of desire/flirtation as a sociocultural and interactive phenomenon. The present dissertation adds to a growing field of research on the interactional and linguistic aspects of sexuality and their essential role in constructing and negotiating interpersonal intimacy.

The introductory example additionally provides an apt micro ‘socio-technological’ historical context for this dissertation. Technological devices have become nodal resources by which erotic and romantic intimacy may be initiated, established, and negotiated in contemporary society (McGlotten 2007). Today, Helle from the introductory example presumably has a smartphone, like seven out of ten Danish adults (Danske Medier 2012), and, hence, is not dependent upon initiating romantic contact with persons already registered among the contacts in her phone. Through the help of a continuous Internet connection she is able to access large networks of available potential partners mediated through numerous online dating apps. The smartphone also enables her to easily share photos, profiles, and correspondence with friends. Thereby, Helle’s friends are turned into participating partners in and spectators to the process of forming romantic and erotic relationships. At the same time, the technology enables her to more comprehensively draw on her romantic practices as a resource in doing relational work with her friends. Within the span of these past 15 years the amount and use of online dating services have grown rapidly. The dating site, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk), figures among the thirty most used websites in Denmark (Danske Medier 2012). Thus, online dating has moved from being a marginal practice to being close to mainstream in contemporary society<sup>1</sup>. Such figures provide only the barest sketch of the implications of online dating for sexuality in general and for romantic and erotic relationship formation in particular.

In this dissertation, I will further explore the relationship between language and sexuality through qualitative empirical studies of romantic/sexual practices on two Danish heterosexual online dating sites, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) and [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk). Based on email and Instant Messaging (IM) correspondence between users, as well as audio-recorded conversations between friends who are reading and assessing dating profiles, I ask the following research questions:

- **How is desire<sup>2</sup> created and mediated through linguistic and digital resources in online dating activities?**
- **How are romantic intimate relations established and negotiated in interaction among users of online dating?**

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<sup>1</sup> This however does not mean that online dating is constructed or perceived as completely unmarked in society and among users themselves (see Chapter 7 (Article IV)).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘desire’ will be discussed in Chapter 2.

In order to examine these general research questions empirically, I pose the methodological questions below:

- How can empirical data consisting of intimate and personal online interactions be collected and which ethical challenges must be met during the process?
- How can interactional analyses that are inspired by conversation analytical principles attain a thorough understanding of the implicit dynamics of flirtation?

My motivation for choosing online dating as the empirical context for studying such issues is twofold. First, the majority of user interaction on the chosen dating websites is carried out through exchanges of text, thus establishing language as a central domain. Second, the online dating sites provide a valuable context for understanding the role played by technology in forming contemporary romantic relationships.

This dissertation focuses on *the interactional aspects* of online dating and therefore calls attention to the empirically under-examined micro-level workings of user interaction. By focusing on the interactive practices of online dating, this dissertation promotes a user-oriented approach to the study of computer-mediated communication; it brings to the forefront of the analysis the ways in which participants make use of the medium in various manners to establish and nourish relations. In focusing on user interactions, this study has been broadened to not only include the romantic interactions among subscribing members of the dating sites, but also the homosocial friendship interactions that evolve around online dating activities, including reading and assessing profiles as a shared social activity among friends. In studying these differing forms of interaction, the analyses provides a basis for understanding issues of desire not as simply a phenomenon constructed between two romantically and sexually involved beings, but rather as a multi-faceted phenomenon that moves along a continuum and takes on various shapes.

My decision to concentrate on heterosexual dating sites is not meant to attribute lesser importance to other sexualities and romantic practices – on the contrary other sexualities are a crucial reference point in constituting heterosexuality – but rather to call empirical and analytical attention to the ‘norm’ often taken for granted in academic research. By illuminating the linguistic work that participants put in to constructing heterosexual desire, I seek to demonstrate that heterosexuality is no less a constructed phenomenon and that heterosexuality cannot be said to be merely one thing, but rather that it consists in complex and delicate discursive practices grounded in

situated contexts. This study does not position heterosexuality at the outset of the analysis, but instead takes an inductive approach to one heterosexual activity, i.e., that of heterosexual online dating interaction, and through empirically grounded analysis seeks to understand the linguistic work put into such an activity.

By discussing the importance of language in constituting romance and the need to examine such processes in the situated contexts in which they emerge, this dissertation adds to a growing field of research on the linguistic aspects of sexuality and their role in forming intimate relationships. Additionally, this study contributes to contemporary scholarship on online discourse and online media's expansive role in the social aspects of human life.

The four analytic chapters of this dissertation consist of four articles written for academic journals; they are composed to address three dimensions of online dating:

- the dimension of research methodology
- the dimension of desire
- the dimension of technology

Through the *dimension of research methodology*, I examine the basic challenge of accessing empirical data in language and sexuality research, thus contributing to general discussions of ethical and methodological approaches to human subject research within the traditions of anthropology and qualitative sociology. Empirical material displaying how desire is conveyed through language use in social life is rare in the field of language and sexuality, due to the considerable ethical and practical challenges. Since accessing empirical data has been such a central and challenging part of this study, I have found it necessary to engage in an analytic discussion of these issues. All too often, ethical discussion and methodological considerations are left out in a rush to get to the results. The research community rarely gets to see actual spoken or written material of how informed consent is achieved in interaction with research participants. In particular, this chapter engages with the concept of informed consent in relating it to researcher subjectivity and participant agency. When looking at the micro-level we discover that this process is not a simple matter of providing a form that is in turn filled in and signed by the participants. The situated context is highly relevant for the quality of the consent; in particular the question of to what level the participant has been treated respectfully. I challenge ideas of conventional protection of research participants. Through detailed analysis, I offer demonstrations of various ways of collecting

intimate online data, thus contributing to the empirical development of the field of language and sexuality.

With respect to *the dimension of desire*, I consider how desire is constructed and negotiated in online dating activities. I shall argue that desire is central to online dating and that the formation of romantic/erotic relationships as participant interaction is ultimately about attaching desire to other members and communicating this potential desire. By focusing on linguistics and interaction, my analyses challenge the mainstream conceptualization of desire as a biological or psychological phenomenon experienced as an inner state. The subject of desire is investigated in two articles projecting two different analytical scopes. Through my first analytic scope, I investigate how desire is attached to male online dating profiles through female friends' shared reading and joint evaluation. In this analysis I seek to broaden the concept of desire to include homosocial aspects, thereby promoting a disruption of traditional understandings of heterosexual desire as a phenomenon existing exclusively between a man and a woman. By analyzing stance-taking and affiliation strategies among female friends, I demonstrate how desire for male bodies is constructed in accordance with the desire for homosocial affiliation. The second analytical scope is oriented towards user-to-user negotiations of romantic interests. By analyzing how desire is communicated in interaction through flirting, I engage with discussions of what flirtation consists of and how it is possible to analyze linguistic material for the more implicit workings of such flirtatious acts. By applying turn-by-turn interactional analysis to the data, I demonstrate that the implicitness of desire is achieved through constructions of future imageries of being together, which I term 'imagined togetherness'. Such imagined togetherness is co-constructed by participants through the deployment of a variety of linguistic resources. Both articles contribute to central theoretical discussion within the field of language and sexuality regarding how to conceptualize and instrumentalize the analysis of desire in linguistic research by offering empirical grounding through analyses of two different contexts in which desire is constructed in interaction.

In the *dimension of technology*, I engage with the technological framework of online dating and how it comes to matter for the participants. An important claim of this analysis is that participant perspectives are essential for understanding online media theoretically, particularly discussions of whether it is possible to differentiate between online and offline modes in contemporary digital society. The aim of this article is not to engage in a theoretical discussion of whether a demarcation of online and offline modes are meaningful or not, but to investigate how users draw on these modes and the inter-relational functions served by users' orientation to them. It



is precisely by looking at how technological functions are overtly articulated by users as either posing advantages or limitations in interaction that the researcher gains access to users' understandings of a specific communicative medium. Interactional analysis demonstrates how users construct and draw on a differentiating media ideology in which the online mode of the dating medium is new and constraining while the offline mode of face-to-face dating encompasses a fuller and freer experience of 'love'. Additional interactional analysis demonstrates that this media ideology serves an important function in that it allows users to communicate subtle flirtatious messages. Thus, the online dating medium takes the form of both a hindrance and a vehicle.

It should be pointed out that the three dimensions cannot be separated entirely. Rather, they blend into each other so that the dimension of research methodology in dealing with research methods naturally touches upon challenges and advantages of online technology; the dimension of desire in dealing with desire constructions in online dating naturally engages with the role of the online dating medium and its technological affordances and constraints of the medium; and the dimension of technology in examining users' media ideologies discusses how users communicate desire. A term that is central to the dissertation in all three dimensions is *flirtation*. When thinking and talking about romantic relationship initiation, the notion of flirtation is commonly used to describe how participants communicate and negotiate romantic interests, i.e., desire. Yet, little is known empirically about flirtatious interaction (Stokoe 2010:262). By discussing and illustrating what flirtatious interaction looks like and how it is put to work by participants in various conversational contexts – from negotiating informed consent to planning an offline meeting – this dissertation, moreover, contributes to a development and grounding of the notion of flirtation. Therefore, my hope is that the study's detailed empirical analysis of linguistic flirting strategies can clarify, inform, and give nuance to future studies and discussion of what we term 'flirtation'.

## **1.2 Overview of the dissertation**

The following chapter, Chapter 2, starts by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The third chapter lays out the local ethnographic context in which the empirical data was collected and describes methods used. Chapter 4 engages in an analytical discussion of the dimensions of research methodology and the challenges in collecting informed consent. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to the dimensions of desire in discussing desire construction in homosocial contexts and flirtatious behavior in heterosexual email and instant messaging (IM) interaction. Chapter 7 shifts away from

the earlier chapters' focus on desire to engage with the technological aspects of online dating. Finally Chapter 8 summarizes the key themes of this dissertation and suggests implications for the study of language, sexuality and online media. The concluding chapter also sketches out some of the ways in which this study may be developed further as well as discussing the enduring issues that face researchers of language and sexuality.

## 2. Theoretical foundations

In the following, I will outline the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The project strives to be inductive in its approach; therefore, the choice of theoretical concepts has been made according to the ways in which key phenomena and recurring patterns have appeared in the data. However, there are general ontological and epistemological concepts that served as a foundation prior to the formulation of the research questions and the design of the project, which also make this something of a deductive study. These I will discuss below. The theoretical and analytical positions, as well as the resulting discussions and conclusions, must be understood as an outcome of a number of choices. The study is based on a selection of positions and approaches grounded in tendencies that unfold in the empirical material, but which are also necessarily informed by my previous scholarly experiences and beliefs.

Since I take an inductive position in addressing the empirical material, the dissertation is essentially interdisciplinary in its approach, drawing on a number of theoretical concepts found in various fields. My overall approach falls within what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) have coined *sociocultural linguistics* i.e., a broad interdisciplinary approach to studying language and social life. My perspective as a scholar is that close, detailed inspection of language in use allows us to understand macro-level norms and ideologies that structure social life. Subsequently, this dissertation brings together diverse theories on sexuality and language to examine in detail the various forms in which participants communicate romantic interests. The present chapter starts out by reviewing the tradition of feminist linguistic scholarship, which I consider to be central to the study of sexuality through linguistic analysis. I then discuss recent debates within language and sexuality research.

### 2.1 Language and gender – and sexuality

In examining romantic relationship initiation this study connects to the study of *language and sexuality*. Cameron and Kulick define the field as: “[...] an inquiry into the role played by language in producing and organizing sex as a meaningful domain in human experience” (2006:1). The term “sex” is used by Cameron and Kulick to specifically draw attention to the erotic aspects of sexuality (Cameron and Kulick 2003a:xi). However, it is not my intention to narrow the understanding of sexuality down to erotic interaction exclusively. In this dissertation, I base my study on a broad definition of sexuality to involve all acts in the present data – erotic and non-erotic – that in any

way point to or draw on sexual desire. Hence, romantic intimacy, such as dating, which does not necessarily involve erotic interaction, is considered to be part of the study of language and sexuality. In line with Weeks, Holland, and Waites, I view sexuality as “diverse contexts in which meanings are attributed to intimacy and eroticism, and the complex social interactions which shape the erotic cultures of different societies” (Weeks, Holland, and Waites 2003:6). Additionally, it is important to note that even though this study focuses on romantically intimate practices, sexuality concerns more than intimacy and eroticism. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) emphasize that sexuality also encompasses practices that are not necessarily erotic or intimate, such as reproduction, which in contemporary society takes various erotic and non-erotic forms (e.g., artificial insemination, surrogate mothers). Accordingly, they suggest the following definition: “the systems of mutually constituted ideologies, practices, and identities that give sociopolitical meaning to the body as an eroticized and/or reproductive site” (2004:470). This definition notably draws attention to the political site of sexuality and the many levels at which sexuality is constituted: both on the micro-level of interactional practices as well as on the macro-level of societal regulations. Though this study is primarily concerned with investigating how sexuality is constituted through multifaceted semiotic workings on the micro-level of online daters’ email and IM correspondences, it is also, however, important to bear in mind that such interaction takes place in interplay with larger ideologies of sexuality. In the following theoretical outline, I will discuss such interplay.

As illustrated in the ‘Language and Sexuality Reader’ (Cameron and Kulick ,eds, 2006), language and sexuality research dates as far back as the 1920s, embedded, at that time, in the tradition of medical research. However, it was not until the 1990s that a united scholarly field came into being, evidenced by a line of publications dealing explicitly with language in relation to sexuality (Harvey and Shalom 1997; Leap 1995; Livia and Hall 1997). The field is a development of language and gender scholarship and thus cannot be viewed as a separate field, but rather as integrated within the field of *feminist linguistics* (Cameron 1985; Bucholtz 2014). In the following section, I outline some of the major trends within feminist linguistics and discuss the relation between sexuality and gender in feminist studies. Thereafter, I turn to the field of language and sexuality and engage with the major debate of this field: the question of whether to focus on desire and identity when examining the linguistic construction of sexuality.

Language and gender as an academic field is commonly viewed as arising in the 1970s, in parallel with other feminist-oriented research in multiple scientific areas. However, gender has been central in linguistic research as an investigation parameter, even in early language studies (Jensen 1898; Jespersen 1922; Skautrup 1921). Whereas early descriptions of the relation between language and gender often carry a misogynistic perspective, feminist founded research approaches the subject from a politically motivated equality point of view, attempting to disrupt a male-dominated scientific field and patriarchal society as a whole (Cameron 1985). The development of the field is often laid out in a tripartite categorization model of *deficit* (liberal feminism), *dominance* (radical feminism), and *difference* (cultural feminism) (Cameron 1995:33). The deficit approach is commonly represented by Lakoff's canonical and influential book *Language and Woman's Place* (2004 [1975]). In this approach, men's ways of speaking are categorized as constituting the norm. "Women's language" is measured according to this acclaimed standard and is based on the many observations of 'deviations'; it is therefore described as inadequate. According to this theory, the reasons for such differences are to be found early in differentiating socialization.

The dominance approach maps women's communicative styles as submissive to men's powerful style, but does not explain this by categorizing women as incompetent language users as the deficit approach does. Instead the phenomenon is viewed as a reflection of patriarchal society. Such approaches are found in Fishman's (1983) interactional analyses of inter-gender interaction, in which she demonstrates how men execute conversational dominance. Similar work has been done on online discussion forums (Herring 1999; Herring and Stoerger 2014).

The difference approach ascribes to a similar dichotomous understanding of men's language and women's language as separate, but rather explains this based on a binary symmetrical cultural model (Tannen 1992 [1990]). According to this understanding, female and male gender – caused by gender-segregated childhood play patterns – develop different vernaculars. Thus, inter-gendered interaction must be considered similar to intercultural communication. Whereas this approach has received much critique as entirely oblivious to gendered power structures, Bucholtz notes that it does provide a refreshing and empowering view on gender in challenging the view on women as victims (2003:50). In a Danish context, the most influential book introducing difference- and dominance-oriented approaches to language and gender has been Scheuer's book 'Den umulige samtale' [The Impossible Conversation] (Scheuer 1998). In this book Scheuer investigates gender differences in job interviews and draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus to explain these, relating differences in gendered interview interaction to both issues of culture and power.

A contemporary wave in the linear representation can be added to the tripartite model and termed *discourse* (poststructuralist feminism); this represents a fundamental break with previous approaches. This approach is rooted in Butler's (1999 [1990]) theory on performativity, which poses an understanding of gendered and sexual categories as variable constructs that appear and are shaped through a dialectic relation between linguistic practices on the micro level of speaker-to-speaker interaction and on the macro level of institutional discourses. In the local context of Danish academia, poststructuralist feminism was introduced by the psychologist Søndergaard (1996) in a socio-psychological study of students' gender attitudes and practices based on interview data, whereas Rosdahl's (2013) work is a later example of a similar approach in conjunction with language-centered methods such as conversation analysis. I will discuss the poststructuralist feminist approach in further detail in the following pages.

The advantage of laying out such a linearly progressing theoretical history is the pedagogical understanding furthered through simple overview categories. However, the disadvantages is that the linear model draw a simplified and, to a certain extent, misleading picture of the development. First, the differentiating labeling of the periods obscures the fact that all of the first three approaches share the fundamental perspective of a binary gender difference (Bucholtz 2014:31). Second, the approaches have in common that they present gendered issues as universally shared, thus promoting an idea of a unified way of being woman across sociocultural contexts. Therefore, such theories may be criticized for advocating a hidden essentialism in presenting all women as sharing a cultural essence that differentiates them from men (cf. Crenshaw 1990; Walker 1983).

Moreover, the linear type of representation implicitly communicates that earlier theoretical understandings give rise to new and more modern approaches that are immanently more 'true'. Earlier understandings can thereby easily be rejected as less informed and old-fashioned from the point of contemporary knowledge. Through the use of the term *genealogy*, Foucault (1984) points to the problem of linear theoretical histories and argues that they are centered on an illusory understanding of the rational thoughts' progressive movement, independent of sociocultural and historic contexts. Alternatively, Foucault suggests a genealogic mapping: from a contemporary position, a backward motion is initiated in which the lines of a theoretical approach are drawn. Instead of a rational process of knowledge, accumulation of a contemporary research field is understood as a knot of multiple theoretical lines.

In line with this, I shall put forward a poststructuralist conception of gender and language and a following move to include sexuality and desire in the scholarship. Throughout this discussion I will draw lines back to parallel and additional directions and understandings underpinning this contemporary frame.

Whereas the issue of sexuality has most profoundly entered feminist linguistics throughout the latter part of the 1990's and the early 2000's (e.g., Cameron and Kulick 2003a; Kathryn Campbell-Kibler 2002; Harvey and Shalom 1997; Leap 1995; Livia and Hall 1997), along with the rise of queer theory approaches to gender as inseparable from issues of sexuality (Butler 1999 [1990]), sexuality has always played a central role in gender studies. Particularly in the 1980s, sexuality in relation to gender was on the agenda in the so-called "sex wars" (Duggan and Hunter 2006). These discussions were led by sex-positive feminists on the one side, who fought for women's right to sexual pleasure on their own premises (e.g., Califia 1988; Samois<sup>3</sup> 1982), and on the other side, by the anti-pornography movement who considered heterosexual penetrative sex in general and pornography in particular as inherently oppressive to women, and hence as an act of symbolic violence (e.g., Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988). The sex-positive feminists criticized the anti-pornography movement for imposing and reproducing a puritanical sexual morality that ultimately did not free women, but rather reinforced the patriarchy. In turn, sex-positive feminists' promotion of alternative lesbian sexual practices – in particular butch/femme role play and bondage, domination, sadism, masochism (BDSM) activities – were heavily accused by the anti-pornography movement for building on patriarchal conceptualizations of sexual practice and, thereby, supporting the capitalist male-dominated porn industry.

Apart from the political implications of this discussion, it also produced interesting theoretical debates that are relevant to considering sexuality as an academic subject of study. Rubin (1984) and Sedgwick (1990: 24-36) launched the idea that sexuality/desire and gender should partly be separated analytically in academic research to make it possible to investigate sexual hierarchies and sexual diversity without letting an essentialist binary gender model and sex-negativity shape or control the understandings and conclusions:

Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications,

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<sup>3</sup> This name refers to a group of activist researchers publishing under the same group name, among them Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia.

feminist theory has some explanatory power. But as these issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes misleading and often irrelevant [...] In the long run, feminism's critique of gender hierarchy must be incorporated into a radical theory of sex, and the critique of sexual oppression should enrich feminism. But an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality must be developed (Rubin 1984:34).

One of the fundamental questions that such suggestions raise is whether it is possible to separate gender and sexuality so that sexual practices may operate outside a dichotomous gender system. This theme of studying sexuality in terms of sexual practices has reoccurred in the field of language and sexuality, yet in a somewhat different framing. This I will return to in Section 2.5. Additionally, Rubin and Sedgwick's arguments have interesting epistemological implications: how is it possible to question issues of gender and sexuality in research without imposing and reproducing a simplistic binary understanding of men/women, normative/deviant, good/bad, natural/artificial, and so on? As I will discuss in the following section, this is ultimately proven to be difficult since sexuality and gender are interdependent and thus mutually constitutive within an overarching system of *heteronormativity* (Butler 1999 [1990]). Yet, this does not mean that such epistemological considerations should be entirely dismissed; they help us think about how we formulate our research questions, which research design we choose, and what implications this may have for our understanding of sexuality and gender.

## **2.2 Heteronormativity**

This study focuses on the online interactional practices of *heterosexual* members of online dating sites. Whereas the sexual practices and identities most commonly under academic discussion are sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, this study turns the analytic gaze to normative behavior as it actually plays out in interaction.

Through the development of the term *heteronormativity*, Butler argues that a performance of gender always also encompasses a performance of sexuality and vice versa; gender and sexuality are inextricably linked by an "internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 30). Butler demonstrates that the regulating gender ideal is dominated by an expectation of mandatory, natural, and spontaneous heterosexuality: 'woman' and 'man' are not simply conceptualized as fundamental contrasts, but also as expressions of desire directed at their counterparts. Hence, heterosexuality is the key component in constituting a binary gender system. It



is according to this system that every gendered and sexual practice is understood and valued. Thus, the linguistic features that index femininity and masculinity simultaneously give rise to expectations of heterosexuality. This system forms the absolute prototype against which all alternatives are viewed as deviating. Butler points out that the dichotomous gender model and heterosexuality are generally thought to comprise two reciprocal constitutive elements. Intelligibility as a man or a woman respectively demands that one actually or potentially desires and is desired by the gender/sex that one does not identify as. Unequivocal gender identity, thus, demands that the individual's direction of desire can be identified as heterosexual, and likewise that heterosexuality functions as an implicit confirmation of the dichotomous gender model.

This linkage is constituted through a system of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality, *the heterosexual matrix*: “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized (Butler [1990] 1999:208, Note 6). Within that framework, bodies only make sense (and only count as bodies that matter) when sex, gender, and desire cohere according to the heterosexual scheme of ‘opposites attract’. Thus, the heterosexual matrix organizes and regulates gender and sexuality by privileging certain ways of acting, thinking, and feeling about sex over others. The heterosexual matrix is defined legally, medically, economically, and culturally as normal, natural, and desirable and, thus, constitutes a basic principle in Western society. Butler's deconstruction of this naturalized framework seeks to call into question the linguistic and performative moves by which those systems proliferate.

The concept of the heterosexual matrix builds on radical feminist thinking, particularly Rich's development of the term ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ in her essay, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980). According to Rich, heterosexuality is to be viewed as a political institution that has a key political function in maintaining the gender hierarchy and subordinating women to men. This institution needs to be re-examined in order for women to escape oppression. The essay was in explicit opposition to contemporary mainstream feminism. Rich proposed that much feminist work kept women in a disempowered position by not making visible the oppression imposed by political institutions' heterosexual structuring of society. Rich argued for increased attention to women's emotional ties to women – the so-called *lesbian continuum*. By encouraging female relationships, regardless of sexual desire, heterosexuality as an institution would be called into question (Rich 1980: 648).

Bucholtz (2003:50) points to the challenges in these radical feminist ideas conceptualizing heterosexual romance as fundamentally oppressive to women, in that they tend to

position all women who enter into heterosexual relationships as victims. My analysis will demonstrate that female participants can be agentic in heterosexual romantic encounters and that issues of gender play out in very subtle ways in interaction (see Chapter 7, Article IV).

A great deal of early research on gender and language was based on romantic heterosexual couples' interactions or on experimental settings designed to mimic such circumstances (Fishman 1983; Tannen [1990] 1992; Zimmerman and West 1975) without dealing with issues of sexuality. In contrast, the majority of research produced within the field of language and sexuality – and this also goes for research within recent gender studies more broadly – has focused on sexual categories and practices not fitting a heteronormative model. As much as this has provided invaluable insights into the variety of ways of being sexual and has contested the power of the heterosexual matrix, it has simultaneously forged an empirical understanding of heterosexuality based on what it does *not* look like and less on what it *actually* looks like. Hence, heterosexuality has primarily been understood through negation and contrast. The critical political motivations for not favoring the study of heterosexuals must be acknowledged: heterosexuality has functioned as the unquestioned norm throughout history in all areas of research. Yet in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the workings of heterosexuality, I would argue that it is necessary not simply to study heterosexual practices through what they are not, but simultaneously to include studies that concentrate on the micro workings of heterosexual interaction. By studying the linguistic and embodied labor that goes into passing as an intelligible man or woman, and thereby ultimately demonstrating the constructionist basis of heterosexuality, scholarship can add to the critical understanding of the powerful workings of heteronormativity. This study is an attempt to go in this direction. Therefore, this project contributes to the expansion of studies of sexuality within the field of language and sexuality by focusing on heterosexuality as an object of analytic concern rather than a taken-for-granted norm.

Because Butler's work is written within the genre of philosophy, it has little empirical grounding and her enterprise is fundamentally a theoretical and ontological discussion of gender and sexuality. Correspondingly, much of later feminist academic work stemming from Butler's ideas has remained theoretical, rather than examining particular practices. Sociocultural and anthropological linguistic studies, on the contrary, have, in line with these fields' academic traditions, approached Butlers' work from an instrumental perspective, attempting to convert queer theoretical concepts to empirical analysis. Hence, sociocultural linguistics and linguistic anthropology have contributed to the further development of these concepts.

One central sociolinguistic and ethnographic study of heterosexuality is Eckert's elementary school ethnography through which she coined the term 'heterosexual marketplace' (1996; 2011). This term describes the practice of pairing off in heterosexual couples as a prerequisite to gaining acceptance and social status. Kiesling draws a similar point through his ethnographic observations of how narrations of erotic encounters, so-called "fuck stories", work as an important systematized social practice with almost ritual connotations within masculine college culture (2002). Heterosexuality has so far been studied within language, gender, and sexuality from a queer theoretical perspective in such various contexts as phone calls (Kitzinger 2005), adults' and children's everyday talk (Coates 2013; Ericsson 2012), Western Latin dance culture (Schneider 2013), conversations among unacquainted interactants (Ericsson 2011), school interaction (Milani and Jonsson 2011; Eckert 2011; 1996), and male college culture (Kiesling 2002). Relevant to these studies is that heterosexuality acts as a taken-for-granted resource in these interactions while at the same time complex embodied and linguistic work goes into co-constructing and maintaining this norm. Cameron and Kulick further note that not all practices carried out by heterosexuals need to constitute heteronormativity; heteronormativity consists of a line of particular practices that promote: "the middle-class nuclear family, involving a stable, monogamous (preferably marital) and reproductive (within 'sensible' limits) sexual relationship between two adults (not too young or not too old) whose social and sexual roles are differentiated along conventional gender lines" (2006b:9).

In relation to the study of heterosexual online dating, some dating websites draw on a recognizable dream of pairing off as heterosexual romantic couples. The fantasy is activated and maintained through the sites' visual and textual universe and through users' activities on the sites. Relating this to Eckert's notion of the heterosexual marketplace in which individuals are socialized as sexual beings with certain values that can be traded, we can view these online platforms as a digital expansion of this marketplace. The heterosexual market, thus, draws on and comes to install a collective heterosexual romantic fantasy that has social as well as affective implications for subjects' lived experiences.

### **2.3 The linguistic turn – gender as performativity**

Poststructuralist feminism has been particularly influential to feminist linguistics by providing theories that emphasize the pivotal role of language in bringing the social world into being. Theories of poststructuralist feminism connect to a larger trend within the humanities and social

sciences that has been dubbed *the linguistic turn*: a profound interest in the workings of language in the social world. One of the most influential ways of conceptualizing language in relation to gender and sexuality has undoubtedly been Butler's notion of 'performativity', the idea that gender and sexuality are brought into being through the repeated discursive enactment of cultural norms. Butler's approach is relevant to this study as it lays out a theoretical foundation for understanding sexual subjectivity in connection to language by weaving language philosophy together with social theory. Butler develops her theory of performativity by bridging Austin's (1962) *speech act theory*, and Derrida's (1972) notion of *iterability*. However, since none of these theories takes into consideration the dialogical nature of linguistic exchange, they do not, from an interactionist point of view, constitute a fully comprehensive framework for linguistic analysis. I will return to the centrality of dialogic aspects in analyzing language in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.

Austin argued that linguistic acts fundamentally contain a performative element, which problematizes any attempt to differentiate between talk and action. Hence, embedded within language lies action: "[...] by saying something a certain effect follows" (Butler 1997:3). This is clear when the expression of the speech is equal to the act, as for instance when a judge proclaims somebody 'guilty of charge'. Based on this Butler argues:

"[...] gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result" (Butler [1990] 1999:34)

Whereas Austin emphasizes the importance of speaker intention in order to make performatives work, Derrida argues that performatives work because they express conventional forms that are already circulating before the speaker utters them. With the notion iterability, Derrida reasons that language in general works because it is quotable (1988 [1972]:7). Hence, a speech act does not get its performative power because of speaker intention, but rather because it reiterates meaning that is already in circulation. Accordingly, sexual identity has to be repeatedly and interactionally achieved in citing conventionalized sexual expressions. Cameron and Kulick (2003:127) use the example of pick-up lines, such as "do you come here often?", to demonstrate the workings of citationality in romantically intimate contexts. Pick-up lines work as expressions that communicate desire in conventionalized ways. Cameron and Kulick argue that such stylized forms are part of and re-circulated in discourse and can be recognized as mediating desire across contexts. "Do you come

here often?” can, thus, be cited in non-sexual contexts and through its conventional quality activate an associated sexual innuendo.

Derrida’s use of the term iterability further addresses the potential for change embedded within the act of repetition in that iterability means both to repeat and to change. According to Derrida, the repetition of signs always contains slight displacement. Butler (1993:187-88, Note 7, 8) uses this point to emphasize possibilities for subversion. The theory of gender as performative has been critiqued for not leaving room for individual agency (McNay 2000; McNay 2004; Benhabib 1995). Such critique is partly met by bringing in the crucial point of iterability, thereby focusing on the possibilities of signs being transplanted into unforeseen contexts and cited in unexpected ways: all signs may be reiterated in ways that do not conform to their speaker’s or writer’s original intentions, thereby making the possibility of failure to identical citation intrinsic to the sign.

Based on her extensive ontological and theoretical discussions, Butler argues that discourse is to be understood as containing a fundamental performative element, which makes it difficult to simplistically distinguish between speech and acts. Additionally, discourse is to be understood as those frames and connections through which something and somebody appears and is given meaning – and this goes for matters like the body and biological processes that we take to be pre-discursively given (Butler 1993). Performativity, thus, is the “relationship between what Butler would call its ‘literal performance’ and the unconscious foreclosures and prohibitions that structure and limit that performance” (Kulick 2014:68). Hence, ‘discourse’ comes to encompass two meanings: 1) language in use and 2) “sets of propositions in circulation about a particular phenomenon, which constitute what people take to be the reality of that phenomenon” (Cameron and Kulick 2003a:16). In line with other scholars (cf., Cameron and Kulick 2003a:16-18; Cameron and Panovic 2014:4-6) I do not keep these two meanings distinct in my analyses, but think of them as closely interconnected and mutually constitutive in the practices of online dating

Butler adds to these understandings and develops the concept of performativity into a complete theory on subjectivity. She does this by combining the idea that language does not simply refer meaning but that it consists of a concrete action-producing practice, with the Marxist philosopher Althusser’s notion of *interpellation* (1971): the idea that a subject’s identity emerges by being named and called out (Butler 1997:25). For Althusser the subject is constituted by being addressed in speech. Althusser’s example is the policeman who yells “hey you,” and thereby makes the person who is called out feel guilty. Both Foucault (1976) and Butler use Althusser’s notion of

interpellation to further develop their understanding of subjectification processes. According to Althusser, the subject is called into existence through various social invocations – interpellations that at the same time as shaping the subject also establish it as a subject. On a macro level, subjectification is the mechanism within society that organizes, takes care of, and controls inhabitants. It is possible to manage people through the production of subjects in that subjects' actions are made somewhat predictable. On the micro-level subjectification functions more fundamentally through subjects' own individual disciplining. The subject is not forced to carry out particular actions, but rather regulates its own actions in order to become a subject.

This study of online dating does not address performativity explicitly in the analyses carried out. Rather the theory of performativity serves as a basis for understanding the way language works in social contexts. I take the idea of speech acts as performative and, thereby, as central to human subject formation as a theoretical point of departure. Hence, the linguistic practices of online daters are considered to be central in creating desire and in constructing heterosexual subjects within a regulating frame of heteronormativity.

## **2.4 Language, gender and sexuality as interaction**

Butler addresses the importance of the interactional aspect in her theory of performativity by repeatedly stressing the centrality of performing acts that are intelligible to others. However, the interactive perspective is given more detailed attention in other socio-constructionist theories of gender. In the following, I will engage shortly with the theory of *doing gender* since this approach nuances and underscores the importance of interactivity, which plays a vital role in this dissertation's analytical methodology.

The American sociologists West and Zimmerman posed the famous *doing gender* theory in their 1987 publication "Doing Gender." Yet, the theory and the article had been in the works for nearly a decade ahead of their actual publication (West and Zimmerman 2009). According to the authors, gender is something that we *do* in inter-participant relations rather than something that we *have* or *are* outside of this interaction. Their approach is developed with inspiration from two canonical figures within the social sciences: Goffman and Garfinkel. Goffman's approach (1959; 1977) focuses on how individuals strategically handle their public appearance in interpersonal relations/activities. Garfinkel (1967) and the school of ethnomethodology investigate how participants create collective categorizations in quotidian

practices. Based upon these ideas, West and Zimmerman pose the notion of a sociocultural gender identity as “doing” in interpersonal relations, which for the individual is all about constructing coherence and recognition when in front of others. That gender is to be understood as a social construction and not as biologically given is exemplified by referring to Garfinkel’s (1967) case study of the transgendered woman Agnes. Agnes grew up as a boy but took on a female identity by the age of 17. She later underwent genital reassignment surgery. According to Garfinkel, in order to take on a recognizable gender identity, Agnes went through an elaborate learning process of how to behave in a way that would pass as normative gender behavior (1987:134). It is this learning process that West and Zimmerman take to be central in their understanding of gender: ‘doing gender’ consist in a process of repeatedly performing acts that are recognized as consistently feminine or masculine. Whereas the doing gender approach provides valuable insights by illuminating the interactional dimension of gender in quotidian practices, it does not – in the same way as poststructuralist feminism – manage to explicitly address how sexuality is intrinsically intertwined with gender.

The doing gender theory has been taken up by conversational analysts who have conducted numerous empirical analyses of how gender and sexuality are the result of interactive accomplishments (e.g., Stokoe 2003; Speer 2005; Kitzinger 2005). Conversation analysis is a development of ethnomethodology in its commitment to analyze the details of interaction, focusing on conversation moment by moment. Conversational analysts thus work to illuminate how interactional structure constructs social organization. Regarding the study of gender (sexuality has so far and similar to other feminist linguistic approaches only been given moderate attention in this strand of research), conversation analysts argue that bringing gender into the analysis is only relevant when speakers overtly demonstrate an orientation to gender. This rather radical premise found its most dogmatic expression in Schegloff’s (1997) engagement with feminist interactional analysis. Schegloff argued that feminist analysis imposes a political project on interactional data, which causes misinterpretations of interactional moves. Through analysis of a heterosexual couple’s interaction, Schegloff demonstrated that much of what might appear to be interruptions on the male’s part, and thus what might be interpreted as a micro-level demonstration of male hierarchy (e.g., Fishman 1983), did in fact work as responses in the sense of agreements and assessments (1997:174-80). Through this demonstration Schegloff argued against “smuggling” gender into the analysis. Schegloff did not, however, fully exclude the validity and relevance of applying grand-scale social theories into the analysis of interactional data; feminist analysis is possible, but only

when based on the clearly evident interactional visibility of gender and not on the analysts' own theoretical and political interests. Schegloff argues for a certain order of analysis, insisting that a strictly text-based analysis should be carried out first, as a stepping-stone and a guarantee for not superimposing social concepts before the linguistic basis is adequately solidified. This method is a major inspiration for the methodological point of departure in the present study. However, such versions of conversation analysis raise problems when considered in conjunction with Butler's theory of heteronormativity as a fundamental societal structure in Western society according to which gender and sexuality becomes meaningful. Hence, critics have suggested that gender is omnipresent, always operative in discourse in that it lends fundamental meaning to speakers' interactional moves. It raises the question of whether conversation analysts' consider gender and language as two separate categories in which the gender category is sometimes made relevant through linguistic articulation, but as such also exists as a phenomenon outside language. Wowk (2007:141) criticizes ethnomethodology and conversation analysis for not taking any particular position on a continuum between realism and social constructionism. Stokoe acknowledges that ethnomethodology does not take any theoretical stance on the ontology of reality: "instead it respecifies issues of what is real and authentic, including what is true about identity as matters for members themselves to deal with" (Stokoe 2000:156). In this sense conversation analysis could be viewed as a method rather than a theory that is concerned with mapping the micro-workings of social interaction as they become meaningful for the participants directly involved in these acts. Grounded in this belief appears a critique of poststructuralist approaches for "subverting and ironizing participants' sense of integrity of their world" (Stokoe 2000:157).

Ultimately, and similar to Schegloff's critique, Stokoe and Speer question the scientific evidence of poststructuralist methods in that they are not in sync with participants' phenomenological experience of the social world. Wetherell (1998) argues for a compromise: a combination of the technical instrumental approach and poststructuralist discourse analysis, which creates a theoretical and methodological framework that considers the micro-workings of speaker-to-speaker interaction as well as how larger workings of power tie in to these social processes and vice versa.

These discussions have contributed two useful aspects to the field of language and gender. First, they have raised a relevant awareness of the dangers of assuming a priori that gender is always operative in foreseeable ways. Second, they have underscored the need for taking participants' own understandings of gendered identity categories and their relations into account.



However, strict conversation analysis that promotes the premise of only addressing the issue of gender when it is overtly articulated in interaction, on the contrary, reduces the social context to a concept of an independent and isolated here and now. Much sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological theory has demonstrated that social meaning-making happens in much more complex ways such that linguistic features and ways of interaction may be invested with various and multifaceted meanings that develop across time as well as context in conjunction with larger societal ideologies (e.g., Ochs 1992).

## **2.5 The field of language and sexuality – issues of desire and identity**

The relation between language and sexuality was put most directly on the agenda through the linguistic turn and Butler's theory on performativity. Outside academic discussion, a quick glimpse on representations of sexual practices within the public domain of popular culture clearly demonstrates how language is vital to sexuality: instruction books on how to perform 'dirty talk' (e.g., "Talk Dirty To Me!: The Good Girl Guide to Bedroom Talk" (Bockler 2014), collections of pick up lines (e.g., "Pick-Up Lines: Become a Chick Magnet" (Hughes 2009)), fictional erotica ("Fifty Shades of Grey" (James 2012)), scripted talk in porn, and so on. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity, we can understand all of these cultural products, and the linguistic practices they describe and guide, as producing and shaping sexuality itself.

Research in language and sexuality has offered valuable contributions to the grounding and development of queer theory by providing empirical evidence to poststructuralist theory on sexuality. While the field of language and sexuality has offered perspectives on sexual issues within a broad range of cultural contexts (e.g., Leap and Boellstorff 2003; Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw 2014), the majority of such publications have appeared within Anglo-American academic contexts, thus making the field most prevalent in these geographical areas.<sup>4</sup> In Danish research contexts, issues of language and sexuality are restricted to phonetic language attitude studies (Maegaard and Pharao forthcoming; Pharao et al. 2014) and – in the periphery of what might be considered linguistic studies – socio-psychological analyses based on interviews of

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<sup>4</sup> This line of inquiry has been termed *queer linguistics* by some, thereby explicating the poststructuralist and political approach taken from poststructuralist feminism – often dubbed 'queer theory' (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013). Despite the fact that my study draws on theoretical insights from queer theory, I have, throughout this theoretical discussion, chosen to use the general term of feminist linguistics to make relevant the long tradition and wider approaches that a poststructuralist approach to studying sexuality connects with.

students' attitudes to gender and sexuality (Søndergaard 1996) and queer studies of various types of written discourse: secondary school curriculums (Frederiksen 2008), parliament minutes on gay rights debates (Petersen 2012), and witness accounts in rape trials (Heinskou 2010). Thus, sexuality is so far a rather understudied issue in Danish language research – a trend, as Ericsson (2011) notes, that is also apparent in Sweden.

Language and sexuality research has been characterized by a debate concerning whether to focus on identity or on desire. The notion of desire was introduced at the early beginnings of the field, taking form in Harvey and Shalom's edited volume 'Language and Desire' (1997). Throughout the introduction the authors' ways of describing desire somehow entail an understanding of desire as a pre-discursive phenomenon, an inner force that comes from the inside out:

While uncompromising in its demand for attention, desire is also elusive and destined to fade. **To attempt to encode it – to write it, to speak it – is a way of capturing it**, of attempting to delay the onset of its decline, and in providing us with a trace of the vividness of our experience once it is past. But to give linguistic form to our desires for another human being is also, importantly, to try to understand an experience that **overwhelms** us and thereby threatens constantly to **outmaneuver and outclass our verbal resources**, the principal means at our disposal for ordering and making sense of our lives (1997:1) [emphasis added].

This quote touches upon one of the challenges by introducing the notion of desire into the linguistic study of sexuality. Since desire carries a theoretical history within psychology, in particular psychoanalysis, and thereby tends to point to internal dynamics that exist outside language, it poses a fundamental contradiction to poststructuralist theories on the linguistic construction of the sexual and gendered subject. By describing desire as a phenomenon with the capacity to "outmaneuver" and "outclass" language, Harvey and Shalom articulate the ways in which this pre-discursive understanding of desire contest the methods and understandings of linguistically grounded analysis. Therefore, this description implicitly, and presumably unintentionally, positions linguistic analysis as not fully adequate for capturing the workings of desire. If desire is something that exists in some prior form and can only tentatively be captured by language, how may a linguist then grasp and

study this phenomenon? Harvey and Shalom seem to get around this challenge by categorizing language as the individual's primary resource for "ordering" and "making sense" of the world and of a phenomenon like desire. Hence, in spite of Harvey and Shalom's descriptions of desire as something 'more' than what can be articulated linguistically, they nevertheless place language as central in understanding this phenomenon.

Harvey and Shalom base their approach on Lacanian psychoanalysis and thereby link up with a strain of feminist theory termed "French feminism" rather than queer theory. In Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan 2007), desire is closely connected to language; however in Lacan's theory, a pre-linguistic state exists. Lacan's project is to recast Freud's understandings in drawing on Saussurean linguistic philosophy. Lacan theorizes desire according to three orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. At the early stage of life, the infant experiences itself as part of the mother. Hence, subjectivity has not yet been formed. As the language system – what Lacan terms "the symbolic order" – enters the infant's understanding of the world, the infant experiences a divide from the nurturing mother, which, in turn, instills a longing for reaching back to the imaginary order previous to division. This longing is where Lacan places desire. Based on this fundamental divide – instilled through the symbolic order/language – desire is connected to the feeling of lack of a stage in life where subjectivity has not yet been formed. Hence, desire seeks the dissolution of the self.

Although Harvey and Shalom introduced the notion of desire into the linguistic study of sexuality, it was not until three years later that a real academic debate took shape. The debate was fueled by Kulick's provocative review (2000) of the academic field of gay and lesbian language as focusing on identity, which according to him had resulted in ignorance towards the potential of erotic desire to transcend fixed identity categories. According to Kulick, desire does not need to act according to identity categories. In focusing on identity, researchers had ultimately overlooked key dynamics of sexuality by not considering phenomena such as fantasy, desire, repression, pleasure, fear, and the unconscious (2000:27). Similar to some of the arguments in the sex wars, Kulick called for a focus on sexuality as erotic practice in its own right rather than as part of strict identity systems. Kulick's critique was further developed and supported in his following work with Cameron in which the idea of placing desire at the forefront of the analysis was promoted throughout the book and given theoretical foundation:

“[...] sexuality is a social and psychological phenomenon that often exceeds, and sometimes contradicts, the sexual identities people consciously claim or disclaim. What people desire often clashes with, undermines or disrupts who they consider they are or ought to be.” (Cameron and Kulick 2005:113)

Their purpose then became to explore the ways in which sexuality extends beyond self-proclaimed identity. From their perspective identity can be understood as: “not all kinds of linguistically constructed subject positions – something consciously claimed and disclaimed by the subject.” Thus there are acts that lie outside a conscious identity project that might prove difficult for the researcher to discover if fixed identity categories are the starting point of analysis.

In their discussion Cameron and Kulick offer theoretical grounding for the notion of desire by piecing together elements from critical theory (Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari) and psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan). While it might prove to be problematic to establish this kind of ‘patchwork’ conceptualization, since some of the theories are ultimately contradictory to each other, Cameron and Kulick offer pioneering work in an attempt to try to find academic ways of articulating sexual practices outside of the identity framework, thereby potentially creating an approach that can illuminate new aspects of the connection between language and sexuality. By alluding to Freud, the authors emphasize the fundamental role that sexuality plays in human life: “sexual desire is a constitutive element of human existence” (Cameron & Kulick 2003:108). Freud’s human developmental model has played a central role in relating sexuality to society. According to Freud, the human sexual force is restricted (and nevertheless articulated; Foucault 1976) – through socialization. Sexuality is, thus, placed in the realm of repression and prohibition. It should be noted that Freud himself does not use the term desire in talking about sexuality, but rather uses the term ‘libido’, thereby referring to a system of bodily anchored attraction and sexual arousal (the object of repression): a force constantly counteracted and denied by the socialized (and self-socializing) mind (Foucault 1976; Freud 2000 [1905]). Later psychoanalytic theoretization has come to focus on the lack in Lacan’s conceptualization of desire. Psychoanalytic models of desire carry a risk of simplifying the complexity of human sexuality in that they sketch out a universal socio-behavioral model that easily obscures sociocultural diversity. Desire is placed as an absolutely central feature of human motivation and hence everything can potentially be traced back to it. This is problematic since such universal human models are in danger of overshadowing any phenomena that do not fit them. Cameron and Kulick introduce the theories of Deleuze and Guattari into their

desire framework as a way of posing a similar critique. According to Deleuze and Guattari, and Deleuze and Parnet (2002), desire is not exclusively sexual, but can also be the desire for sleep, food, etc. Foucault raises a similar point in *History of Sexuality* Vol. 2 (1990), but whereas the paraphrasing of Deleuze and Guattari and Parnet's discussion of desire seems to present sexual desire on equal footing with other kinds of desire, Foucault emphasizes that sexual desire obtains a special status in society by being subject to extensive regulating practices. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the task is not to discuss the origins of desire and subscribe to the universal developmental model like psychoanalysts do, but instead to map desire as geography. Yet it remains unclear what exactly is meant by a geographical approach (Cameron and Kulick 2003a:110-111). A challenge of this enterprise is that Cameron and Kulick, in general, offer very few notes on concrete ways of instrumentalizing the study of desire. Even though their approach appears to be practice-centered it is not very instrumental; method-oriented issues are formulated as questions to the reader/the research community: "How do we do the mapping?" (2003:113). This dissertation may be viewed as one way of answering this question by providing examples of how to approach one particular activity, that of online dating.

Whereas the debate that followed Kulick's publication in 2000 has most often been described as a debate of desire versus identity, the debate covers a wider range of questions and issues and is not as contested as it is sometimes represented to be. Cameron and Kulick's desire approach has been welcomed and acknowledged for bringing sociolinguists' attention to new features that have usually not been taken into consideration in traditional analysis, such as affective expressions (Eckert 2002:104). The critique of Cameron and Kulick's accentuations of desire generally concerns three points: 1. Desire as a psychic or social phenomenon, 2. Desire as connected to identity or not, 3. Desire as distinctive linguistic features or not.

First, Eckert (2002) points to the pitfalls that the notion of desire tends to carry with it: focusing on desire carries the risk of naturalizing and, thus, mystifying sexuality. Whereas Kulick argues that a focus on identity reduces the social meaning of semiotic resources into the meaning of membership of a particular identity category, Eckert suggests that a focus on desire might potentially do the same thing. Society mystifies and romanticizes desire, and in the study of desire, Eckert says: "we have to problematize not only its objects but its source" (2002:105). To assume that desire can be pinpointed independently of social categories is to potentially suggest that desire is natural, not social, and thus, a strict focus on desire might end up promoting essentialism. Rather, Eckert emphasizes, linguists should direct their interest at the social dimension of desire, while

questioning discourses about nature and origin: “The management of emotion is not simply a matter of suppressing the natural – but of constructing it” (Eckert 2002:106). Moreover, by presupposing and discussing the origins of desire outside of language we might risk marginalizing the study of language.

Further critique is directed at the theoretical history that the notion of desire carries with it. By referring to psychoanalytical theory Kulick (2000) (and to some extent Cameron and Kulick) is criticized for promoting an understanding of desire as an essentially psychic phenomenon (Bucholtz and Hall 2004:480). According to this critique, a psychoanalytically inspired approach is too one-tracked for the field of language and sexuality that carries a tradition of working interdisciplinarily in illuminating the complexity of cultural and social dynamics. Although, in the co-authored work of Cameron and Kulick the psychoanalytic approach is combined with critical social theory, thereby diminishing an exclusively psychological understanding of desire, desire remains vaguely defined as ‘practices that can be mapped’; it thereby presents a very broad phenomenon, which is difficult to deploy in concrete empirical analysis.

The second issue of the desire approach that has been criticized is the attempt to separate desire from identity as a way of developing the field in new directions. This suggestion found its strongest articulation in Kulick’s early work and took on a more compromised form in his co-authored book with Cameron, in which identity is eventually suggested to be part of the study of language and sexuality, but not the entire thing (2003: xi). However, the exercise to talk about desire and identity as separate entities proves to be difficult. According to critics, this enterprise rests upon a misrepresentation of identity research as a line of inquiry that views identity as labels of fixed and homogenous groups (Bucholtz and Hall 2004:473 ff.). Yet sociolinguistic and anthropologic identity studies of the 1990s and 2000s were, on the contrary, based on the idea that social and linguistic practices were invested with social meaning in particular social contexts, which in turn came to index particular identity categories (e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Along this line of thinking, the researcher must acknowledge the fact that:

“we can identify semiotic resources, but trying to separate them from the people that use them is assuming a homogenous speech community. Semiotic resources are laden with their social histories, relating what an individual does to things that categories of people do. Those categories may be the classical

ones, they may be related to the classical ones, or they may lie somewhere else altogether” (Eckert 2002:105).

I might add to this critique that decreasing the focus on the ways in which desire relates to identity also risks ignoring the complexity of the ways in which desire intersects and draws on various social categories such as race (Milani 2013; Piller and Takahashi 2006), class (Trautner 2005), and gender (Ehrlich 2007). For instance, Milani demonstrates how desire in contemporary South Africa is attached to racialized bodies in ways that mirror and intertwine with socio-historical dynamics of Apartheid at large.

Bucholtz and Hall, additionally, pose an interesting critique by arguing that essentialist research may be legitimated in two ways: theoretically and politically. First, essentialism as a tool is not invalid in the sense that it can be said to acknowledge the fact that identity is crucial in humans’ understanding of themselves as subjects (2004:478). This reflects Butler’s point about subject formation happening through repetitions of recognizable semiotic practices within the heterosexual matrix, thereby placing fixed identity categories as a fundamental part of subjectification. Second, essentialism might have a political justification in improving visibility and recognizability of marginalized groups, giving them a voice (2004:477). Similar political advantages can be said to have come out of both deficit- and difference-based gender research in that it put women on the research agenda.

The third point of critique concerns whether desire can be said to be distinctive linguistic features or not. Harvey and Shalom propose that: “the encoding of desire results in distinct and describable linguistic features and patterns” (1997:3); and Kulick later similarly suggests that the study of desire should be:

“an exploration of how the phonological, prosodic, lexical, and discursive elements of what are understood to compose a phenomenon like “women’s language” (or “gay language”) are available to any speaker to use (and any hearer to interpret) regardless of whatever the speaker may think about his sexuality, gender, or anything else (Kulick 2014:70).

According to Bucholtz and Hall (2004:480), this is paradoxically catching the promoters of desire in the trap of insinuating that there latently exist practices that are distinctively erotic and sexual

independent of context; something authentic that exists across time, space, culture, and context. In contrast, Bucholtz and Hall as well as Eckert all point to the importance of taking the social context into account. The same linguistic features may have very different social meanings depending on the contexts. The social context is certainly essential in understanding linguistic practices; however, this does not mean that all linguistic interaction in a romantic context like online dating can be regarded romantic, hence expressions of desire. In Chapter 6 (Article III) I argue that parts of the correspondence between users on the online dating sites can be regarded as more “neutral” getting acquainted activities, whereas particular sequences within this larger project of getting to know each other (termed ‘imagined togetherness’) can be demarcated as communicating and creating desire. However, I am not suggesting that it is possible to talk about universal, distinctive linguistic resources that carry the meaning of desire/flirtation (e.g., a compliment does not always communicate desire) – it ultimately depends on the interactional context.

The search for distinctive linguistic features and patterns denoting desire also touches upon the question of accessibility: do all people have access to the same linguistic resources? Not necessarily, I would argue. Even though the same linguistic feature may be deployed across social groups drawing on complex indexical fields (Eckert 2002:102), social structures of society and power to a certain extent determine who can say what to whom. This could potentially be taken further to say that ideologies and institutions to a certain extent determine what particular people can fantasize about (cf., Milani 2013; Piller and Takahashi 2006).

Several publications (e.g., Canakis, Kantsa, and Yannakopoulos 2010; Kyratzis and Sauntson 2007) have come out of the debate discussed above, all of which acknowledge desire as one aspect of the study of sexuality, but without subscribing to any definite site in the debate. Rather, the following publications argue for an integrated approach in which issues of desire and identity are considered in conjunction.

As these discussions make evident, desire does not lend itself to easy or simplistic definitions. In this dissertation I work from the perspective that, in a few words, desire may be understood as that “which we lack but want” (Kiesling 2005:699). Though this definition clearly does not address the complexity of definitions and problems above, it may do service as an adequate starting point in the present study: a study of the mechanisms by which participants construct and handle the objects of desire may not be dependent on a final and fixed definition of desire. Rather, I would argue that it is dependent of the existence of desire, and no one would deny its existence. Therefore, the desire expressed by the participants in this study may



unproblematically be broadly termed a ‘desire for a romantic partner and a romantic relationship’, which, broken down, consists of attraction to a complex cluster of aspects (e.g., specific physicality, sexual behavior, social skills, and affectivity) – all of which entail and inflect on each other (cf., Piller and Takahashi 2006).

In the analytical chapters of this dissertation, I engage with the notion of flirting as one way of socially constructing desire. Flirting is considered an (inter)action that is informed by romantic desire. Flirtation is a colloquial term, and one which most people understand without being able to pinpoint its meaning (Kiesling 2013:106). Through my analytical work, I seek to understand what participants are actually doing: the specific practices. Thus, I pursue to go beyond understanding flirtation as a way in which people manage to fulfill their desires, and to describe in detail what flirting more precisely consists of.

Before moving on to the analysis, I turn to presenting my data and my analytical approach in the following Chapter 3.

### **3. Methodological reflections: Collecting and analyzing online dating data**

In this section, I give an overall introduction to the activity of online dating and in particular to the two dating websites from which I collected the data for this study. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of the full body of material gathered. Since this dissertation is structured as a collection of four articles, the specific data used for each analytical endeavor is described in detail in the methodological subsection of each article. The issue of research ethics will not be discussed in this chapter, but will be addressed in detail in the first analytical chapter, Chapter 4 (Article I). This chapter, therefore, presents a more general outline for the dissertation. After describing the field sites and the dataset, I move on to discuss the overarching analytical approach that has served as a guideline throughout the study.

#### **3.1 Online dating – a modern interactional platform for desire**

The first heterosexual online dating site, [www.match.com](http://www.match.com), appeared in the United States in 1995. Three years later a similar service, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk), was introduced in Denmark. Since then, online dating websites have become popular venues to meet potential romantic partners and are prevalently shaping contemporary dating practices. The use of digital and written communication in managing partner-seeking processes is not a new phenomenon. Personal advertisements predating the Internet have appeared in the form of teletexts and audio voicelinks (Coupland 1996) and, for even longer, as written texts in newspapers and magazines (Coupland 1996; Shalom 1997). Such practices are now transferred to online dating practices through recontextualizations of similar scripts in online dating profiles (Bogetić 2013; Milani 2013).

Online dating sites are discursive platforms that foster initial communication between potential romantic-erotic partners by providing users various tools for communicating and negotiating their desires. Additionally, such platforms expand the romantic market in making accessible “increased information about a wider pool of potential partners than usually available in face-to-face encounters” (Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs 2010:248). Not only do the websites make accessible a large network of potential partners, they additionally improve partner-seeking through the use of romantic compatibility algorithms. Websites differ in the specific process through which they aim to facilitate these services. Regardless of the exact matching process, the websites

typically require members to construct a profile through texts and photographs that convey personal information (e.g., height, body type, age, occupation, etc.), and identify the qualities they desire in a potential partner. Moreover, most websites provide communicative tools such as email and IM, as well as favorites lists (lists that each user can craft individually by adding other users upon which the persons added to the lists are notified through an automatically generated message).

Once initial contact has been established, partners must determine whether to pursue other forms of communication outside of the dating website. Although some online daters engage in a drawn out process of mediated courtship, all of the participants in this study have shown interest in meeting potential partners face-to-face in an offline setting (see Chapter 5 (Article II)).

Danish contemporary society is similar to other Western countries characterized by a large number of single citizens. As of January 2015 there were approximately 1.6 million Danish singles out of a total population of 5.6 million (Danmarks Statistik 2015). Hence, online dating services have a large potential user group. In conjunction with this, Denmark represents a highly digital population in which the Internet occupies a central role in the domestic sphere with 93% of the population having Internet access in their homes (Danmarks Statistik 2014).

Cameron and Panović (2014:112) note that contemporary digital communication is sometimes talked about as a drastic interruption of previous communicative practices. In this line of argument the speed of communication, provided by email and text messaging, is presented as a key example of the radical changes caused by the “digital revolution.” However, the postal service prior to the rise of digital communication offered much faster deliveries making it possible for more rapid and spontaneous communication (Standage 1998). Seider (1984) demonstrates in her analysis of a love correspondence between a young Danish man and woman from 1903-1915 that such exchanges could consist of sending and receiving up to three postcards a day. Whereas the postcard may seem to constitute a simplistic and historic mode of communication, its conjunction of visual and textual channels enabled the lovers to engage in multimodal flirtatious interaction: By choosing slightly erotic images of courting couples in combination with more innocent textual declarations of love, the man in particular was able to implicitly communicate delicate messages. Thus, rather than viewing online dating as a radical break from previous historical dating practices that constitutes a completely new way of interacting, it should be seen as a historical development of already existing complex communicative practices for negotiating romantic intimacy.

Unfortunately, there exist only limited data on the concrete use of online dating in Denmark. The media regularly announce various numbers on user groups, success rates, etc.

However, it is most often unclear where these data derive from. Some numbers are generated by dating websites themselves and can thus be skewed in favor of improving business. For instance, in 2012 the Danish National Consumer Advisory Council accused [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) of misleading advertising in their slogan: “Hvert tredje forhold starter hos os” (Every third relationship starts at our [website]). The dating website was not able to provide accurate documentation for this information and eventually had to change their slogan to: “Kærligheden starter her” (Love starts here) (cf. Detektor, Danmarks Radio 2012). Hence, one has to be cautious of referring to data in this area. In 2011, the principal Danish statistical institution, Danmarks Statistik, for the first time ever carried out a limited statistical study of the Danish populations’ use of online dating services. The investigation has not since been repeated. The numbers show that 300,000 make use of such services online, i.e., 8% of all Internet users in 2011 (Danmarks Statistik 2011). The data also reveal that dating services are used across age groups. However, the largest user group is those between the ages of 25-34; the participants examined in this dissertation fall within this age group (see detailed description of participants in Section 3.3).

### **3.2 The field sites**

Data has been collected from two paid-membership online dating websites: [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) and [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk). These two websites present different platforms for online dating activities, both in regards to design and the audience the websites claim to address. However, both sites were used by participants in this study, with each participant using at least one of the sites, if not both. In the beginning, I had chosen [elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) as the only field site due to its rather homogenous group of users with a degree in higher education, primarily centered in the two biggest cities of Denmark (see description below). However, as participants started moving to [dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) and reporting that they experienced more action on this website, I decided to include [dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) as another field site. Thus, it was by following concrete participants’ practices that I came to choose these two field sites. Hence, this study is not designed as a comparative study of two different dating websites and how these shape dating practices. Rather, it engages with the desire practices of users across dating websites. Therefore, I will only offer an overview description of the websites’ design while acknowledging that much more could be said about the websites’ designs and infrastructures. The figures below display the front page of both dating websites.

Figure 3.1. www.elitedaters.dk



[BRUGERNAVN](#)
[ADGANGSKODE](#)
[LOG IND](#)

[Glemmt adgangskode?](#)
[Husk](#)

[OM ELITEDATERS](#)
[KUNDESERVICE](#)

PROFILER: 49665
LOGGET IND: 5179





### OPRET QUICKLOOK PROFIL

Start med en QuickLook profil, der giver dig lynhurtig adgang til anonymt at se alle profiler i forummet. Fortsæt ved at oprette en synlig profil.

VIDEREGÅENDE UDDANNELSE

☒ ED-Q1
☐ ED-Q2 (Kvote 2)

E-MAIL

GENTAG E-MAIL

ADGANGSKODE

GENTAG ADGANGSKODE

☐ Jeg accepterer [betingelserne](#)

NÆSTE

#### HVAD ER ELITEDATERS?

Elitedaters er et datingforum primært for engagerede og ambitiøse singler. Profilerne indhold vurderes subjektivt af redaktionen, hvor udvalgte optages i henhold til målgruppen.

- Du skal have eller være i gang med en officiel videregående uddannelse.
- Din personlige beskrivelse skal være velskrevet, indholdsrig og original.
- Dit (eventuelle) profilbillede skal være selvkritisk, smagfuldt og opfylde de æstetiske krav.

#### APPS TIL IPHONE OG ANDROID

Tag Elitedaters med i lommen, uanset hvor i verden du måtte finde dig.



[Android Google play](#)
[iPhone App Store](#)

#### HVEM ANVENDER ELITEDATERS?

I kraft af vores grundlæggende adgangskrav er en stor andel af forummets brugere akademikere, hvoraf mange er karrierebevidste i valg af uddannelse og erhverv. Cirka 80 procent er bosat i eller omkring Danmarks større byer. Flertallet er ikkerygere og dyrker motion flere gange ugentligt. De fleste oplyses af morgenaviser og nyheder på statsejede tv- og net-kanaler. Økologi, æstetik og kvalitet er ofte bevidste valg, og international rejseaktivitet er en stor del af det årlige budget.

#### UDVALGTE BRUGERTAGS

Ken Follett  
Familie Dr2  
motion Homeland  
Information  
Leonard Cohen Liv  
Arbejde Psykologi Kunst  
Kultur teater  
kaffe Barcelona DR  
Rejse Vin Italien  
Træning

## URBAN 8



A/ Majbrit Linnebjerg

#### FÅ DIN KUNST PÅ VORE VÆGGE

Er du illustratør, kunstner eller kender du en som er det? Urban Eight er sort stue på Elitedaters, og giver dig mulighed for at pryde de hvide vægge med tanker om kærlighed på nettet. Vi udvælger løbende nye tegnere, der alle får et direkte link vist til deres private eller erhvervsmæssige arbejde.


Send os din e-mail og adressen til din hjemmeside så vi kan se din streg og vi vil kontakte dig.

E-MAIL

HJEMMESIDE

SEND

Figure 3.2. www.dating.dk



[Allerede medlem?](#)
[Log ind](#)

**Danmarks største datingsite.**  
**82.637 singler har været online de sidste 24 timer.**

**Opret din gratis profil nu**

Jeg søger...  
Vælg køn


I alderen ...  
25 år 40 år

Der bor i ...  
Mit nærområde

**Videre**


Opret med Facebook

**Set i TV**




**Bedste datingsite**

Det er ikke kun os selv og statistikkerne, der synes, at Dating.dk er Danmarks bedste dating side. Brugerne på det store forbrugersite Trustpilot er helt enige...



**Derfor Dating.dk**

- ✓ Danmarks største datingsite.
- ✓ De fleste finder kærligheden her.
- ✓ Nemt at finde det rigtige match.
- ✓ Masser af arrangementer.



**De mødte hinanden**

Bare et lille brev - og vupti - han skrev tilbage! Inden der var gået et år havde vi skrevet under på vores hus og året efter blev jeg gravid med vores første søn. Måned efter fødslen blev vi gift!

Sune og Helle

**Kan vi hjælpe?**

- Opret profil
- Kundeservice
- Betingelser
- Cookiepolitik
- Om Dating.dk
- Artikler
- Presse
- Events
- TV

**Dating.dk på mobilen**

iPhone  
 Android

**FREWAY**

Dating.dk ApS  
Brovej 20 A  
8800 Viborg  
Tlf: 33 89 00 00

By looking at the design and various discourse elements that constitute the specific online dating platforms it is possible to form an idea of what is conceived as desirable in each particular context. In the case of *elitedaters.dk*, the websites' definition of being attractive is closely connected to professional and educational status – both for men and for women – since users are required to have obtained a degree in higher education or to be enrolled in a higher educational program. The website was founded in 2005 and as of 2011 the website hosted a group of approximately 30,000 users. 97% of these were self-identified heterosexuals, 59% women and 41% men. 80% of them lived in bigger cities and 73% were within the age range of 28-58.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, *dating.dk* is a much older dating website, founded as the first Danish online dating platform in 1998. The only requirement posed by the website is for members to be above the age of 18, which allows for a much more heterogeneous user group. Unfortunately, *dating.dk* was not willing to provide me with any specific numbers about the demographics of its users. *Dating.dk* brands itself as the largest dating website in Denmark, with approximately 100,000 users. This number as well as the total amount of users on *elitedaters.dk* are taken directly from the dating sites and illustrate the number of users who were online at the specific time or within the past 24 hours. The dating sites typically have a higher total number of profiles, but many of these may be 'passive' profiles, since profiles are not deleted when users do not extend their paid membership. Since even 'passive' profiles still feature in the statistics on total members, the figures on active users provide a more accurate picture of the size of the user group.

The visual layout of the two dating websites is strikingly different. *Elitedaters.dk* presents a professional, clean, and simply colored design (black, white, light green). It brings forth associations of media such as newspapers and official documents, and thus seems to draw less attention to issues of love and romance. The models starring prominently in the photograph in the top left quarter of the page vary continuously through flash play, which presents ten black and white portraits of three men and seven women.<sup>6</sup> These portraits look as if a professional photographer has

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<sup>5</sup> The administrators of *elitedaters.dk* kindly provided me with these numbers.

<sup>6</sup> The unequal gender representation is noticeable; however, there seems to be no clear explanation as to why the website has chosen to feature more female portraits than male. According to their own statistics, the website has almost exclusively heterosexual users and more female than male users. The over-representation of women portraits may draw on a strategy of identification: female users entering the website are met with the visual representation of other (model) female users "just like them," which arguably creates a sense of belonging, inclusion, and safety. On the other hand, the majority of heterosexual female users might expect a design that would address these particular users' male-oriented desire by featuring more male portraits. However, the present design might suggest that identification and inclusion are important issues within the context of online dating. An alternative explanation could be that the website is aiming at attracting more male users and, therefore, presents a design that reflects a male desirous gaze.



taken them, since they all share similar professional lightning and style. The figure below illustrates the varying persons portrayed.

Figure 3.3. Portraits on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk)



The ten portraits present career-minded (5, 6, 7, 8), culturally sophisticated (2, 3), as well as casual (1, 4, 9, 10) personality types: arguably types that fit within the *creative class*. According to Florida (2002) the creative class is a recent socio-economic class that is characterized by producing economic value through the creation of new ideas, new technology, and creative content. Professionals within science, engineering, academia, and communication, as well as artists, all make up the creative class. Moreover, the creative class is known for its casual approach to traditional workplace behavior by setting their own hours and dress codes in the workplace (Florida 2002:117-22). That the website is designed to address the creative class is further supported by the discourse elements in the right bottom corner. This part displays shifting and often humorous graphics that comment on online dating. These graphics are products made by users and are presented, by the website, as a service for users who work within the creative business of graphics and illustrations to promote themselves, since the website then displays a hyperlink to their business websites. In this way career and creativity are positioned in conjunction with romance, thus dictating a form of desire that is tied to professional status and creative skills. Hence, simply by looking at the website's front page we may get an impression of the power exercised by a site's design in determining what kind of desire is possible and preferable.



In contrast, dating.dk presents itself through a layout that contains very little text, but more bold colors (blue, red, green, yellow, white, black). Additionally the background is made up of a heterogeneous gallery of members' profile photographs in real colors. The photographs present men and women from various age groups, in various poses, and engaged in various activities. The prominent display of 'real' users, with non-professional photos, sends a personal and authentic signal. Additionally a hyperlink to the rating of the website as "best online dating website" on Trustpilot (a user rating website) features in the bottom left corner, thereby adding further to the message of popularity and authenticity – this is a site for 'real authentic' users. The bottom right corner features yet another addition to the image of authenticity: positive testimonials by users who have connected romantically through the website.

Neither of the two websites is explicitly labeled as heterosexual in the textual presentation of the site. Nevertheless, gender features as a prominent structuring principle on both websites. When crafting a profile, both the genders of the profile owner and the desired partner need to be selected. On both websites it is possible to desire a same-gendered partner. Dating.dk further offers the possibilities of checking off both male and female, although this is not a possibility on elitedaters.dk. Hence, the websites do not exclusively cater to heterosexual desire. Nevertheless, numbers from elitedaters.dk show that 97% of the members are self-identified heterosexuals. Regarding dating.dk, the testimonials in the bottom right corner clearly communicate heterosexual desire – in particular homogenous and reproductive heterosexuality. The figure below illustrates a selection of these representations. In total the site features 22 testimonials – all of which are heterosexual couples. 14 out of these state that they have gotten married, 3 that they are currently engaged, and 7 that they have had children.

Figure 3.4. Testimonials from www.dating.dk

 <p><b>De mødte hinanden</b></p> <p>På Dating.dk aftalte vi at skulle mødes - derfra gik det hurtigt. Vi griner sommetider af, at vi har kendt hinanden i 4½ år, været gift i 4 år og allerede har 4 børn.</p> <p>Rikke og Martin</p>	<p><b>They met each other</b></p> <p>On Dating.dk vi arranged to meet - from there it took off. Vi some times laugh about having known each other for 4½ years, having been married for 4 years and already having 4 kids.</p> <p>Rikke and Martin</p>	 <p><b>De mødte hinanden</b></p> <p>Bare et lille brev - og vupti - han skrev tilbage! Inden der var gået et år havde vi skrevet under på vores hus og året efter blev jeg gravid med vores første søn. Måned efter fødslen blev vi gift!</p> <p>Sune og Helle</p>	<p><b>They met each other</b></p> <p>Just a small letter - and whoops - he wrote back! Within one year we had signed the lease of our new house and the year after that I was pregnant with our first son. The month after the birth we got married!</p> <p>Sune and Helle</p>
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In addition, dating.dk features a gendered color-coding of names, as exemplified in the figure of an IM box below. Here the female name is displayed in pink and the male name in blue.

Figure 3.5. Color-coded IM box from www.dating.dk



Again we see that the website imposes an image of what desired romance looks like. In this case, it is not as much connected to professional status as it is connected to traditional values of the heteronormative couple and the nuclear family.

For all of those participants in my study who had profiles on both dating websites, elitedaters.dk was the first dating website that they had tried. They reported that this website had appealed to them due to its seriousness and the likeliness of meeting “equals.” However, female participants in particular soon reported that they did not experience enough activity. They described elitedaters.dk as a rather “dead website” and found the male users to be too “slow” to initiate and respond. In contrast, female participants described dating.dk as a more active and playful platform, which generated more initiations and messages. This was viewed as positive and more entertaining, even though it also meant that they were confronted with more “støj” (noise), meaning more unserious requests. In fact, the one participant I had the chance to interview who had only tried dating.dk expressed that he found elitedaters.dk too pretentious. As this participant had made the decision to “go online” he wanted to go “all in” and be “honest about it,” which for him meant to purchase a membership on the biggest dating website, dating.dk.

In addition to the two online dating websites, Facebook, private email accounts, and text messages turned out to be supplementary platforms for participants to communicate through. This reflects a general tendency for contemporary youth to “maintain multiple and constant lines of communication with their intimates over mobile phones, instant-message services, and social network sites, sharing a virtual space that is accessible only by those intimates” (Pascoe 2010:121). In 3 out of the total 14 instances of correspondence in my corpus, users switched to Facebook at some point in their conversation. In one of these interactions the primary reason for switching communicative platforms was practical: the male participants’ membership on the dating website was about to expire and he did not wish to pay further money for extending his membership – as a solution he provided his Facebook profile name to the woman he had been communicating with and the conversation continued through Facebook’s private messenger channel. A similar reason made another couple switch to using their private email accounts. In yet another correspondence, the data collector used Facebook to ask for informed consent after a correspondence had ended and one of the participants had deleted their profile on the online dating website. Facebook was additionally made relevant in two other interactions as users talked about finding each other on Facebook to seek out more information about each other.

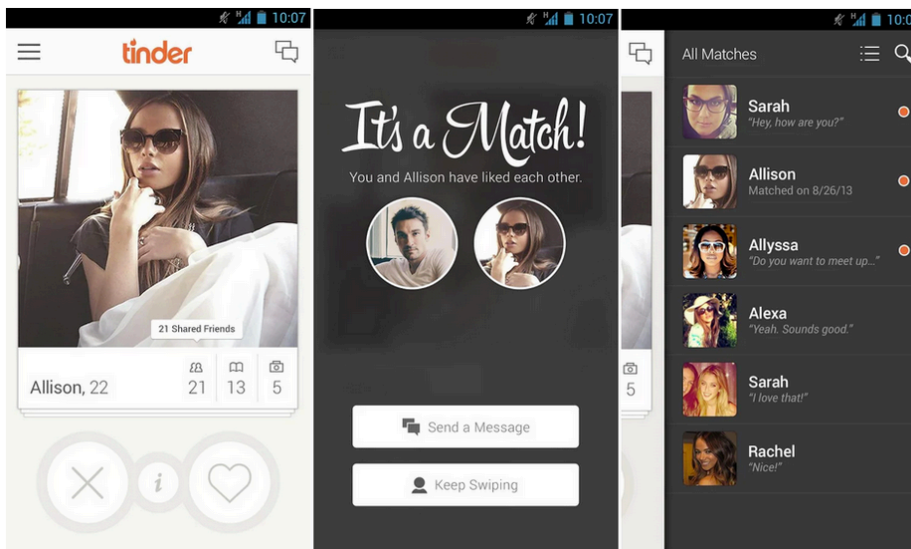
This makes clear that shifts in communicative channels provide new affordances (and constraints) and that there might be various levels of intimacy connected to different platforms. Gershon (2010) has noted that people attach different moral values to different media when negotiating their intimate lives and that choice of medium is therefore not simply a matter of technological affordances and constraints, but simultaneously carries important social meanings. Moreover, Madianou and Miller (2011) note that each type of media through which an interaction is played out should not be treated independently since they form part of a wider media landscape in which meaning and usage must be understood in relation to other media.

In this dissertation, I do not engage with the social meanings attached to media and platform shifts, but focus on the micro-workings of user-to-user interaction within the frame of the online dating websites; in all 14 of the cases these constitute the initial phase of contact. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ongoing media shifts are reflected in my data and that such shifts both are the results of the handling of practical obstacles as well as an evolving trajectory towards increased intimacy. The general tendency in my corpus is that participants move from emailing or IM through their profiles on the online dating websites, to (in some cases) sharing private email and Facebook account information, to eventually exchanging phone numbers (in the

cases in which a face-to-face offline meeting was planned). Finally, the multi-use of various communication technologies are not exclusively relevant in the initial process of romantic relationship formation, but must be assumed to continue throughout long-term, steady, and committed relationships in contemporary digital society.

Towards the end of my data collection process, the online dating scene changed through the launch of the free smartphone dating app Tinder.

Figure 3.6. Tinder



Many of my participants as well as the broader group of my personal social network downloaded the app and crafted a profile. This was an easy task compared to joining an online dating website, since Tinder linked up to users' already existing Facebook profiles and could draw biographical information and photographic material directly from this account. Within a few minutes – and without paying any money – participants could have a dating profile and, thus, access to a large network of singles. The interactional interface of Tinder is additionally simple; it displays profile photographs prominently with an easy 'yes-no-swipe-function' through which users can quickly decide if they are interested in the displayed other: a swipe to the left communicates 'no,' a swipe to the right communicates 'yes'. Another key function of Tinder, which separates it from the dating websites described above, is the built-in GPS-regulation. By use of a mobile device's built-in GPS the dating profile automatically displays the geographic locus of the profile owner and her geographic proximity to the person viewing her profile. Users' profiles are only displayed to each other when in close proximity (Tinder users can choose preferred proximity in the app settings).

This allows for users to get in touch with other users in close proximity and immediately act face-to-face on a potential attraction established through the online medium. As Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2014)(2014) discuss, this constellation “layers virtual and physical places in ways that affect people’s visibility to each other” and provides a potential for every context to become romantic. Such recent developments demonstrate how online and offline contexts are becoming increasingly intertwined allowing online media to tune and reconstruct offline contexts in real time.

Within a few months after its launch, Tinder was on everybody’s lips in my social network, and was being described and debated in newspapers, talk shows, magazines, etc. As a result, many who I asked about participation in my research project in this later period were using Tinder. In my data set, I have one interaction from Tinder, which has been used partly for the analysis in Chapter 7 (Article IV) and partly as background information. Hence, Tinder only takes up a marginal part of this study. However, if I were to collect my data set today, it would presumably consist primarily of interactions from Tinder, because of its current popularity and large number of users.

### **3.3 Methods, data, and participants**

A large proportion of research on online dating has been conducted within the fields of sociology, psychology, and communication, focusing on such issues as self-presentation, self-disclosure, and misrepresentation in dating profiles (e.g., Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006; Hancock and Toma 2009; Whitty 2008). This body of research is based on data in the form of profile texts, interviews, and questionnaires. Within the field of language and sexuality, profile texts have similarly served as data material for understanding desire (Bogetić 2013; Canakis 2010; Coupland 1996; 2000; Jones 2012; Milani 2013; Shalom 1997). Only a few studies have been conducted based on interactional data: Del-Teso-Craviotto (2006; 2008), Jones (2005), and King (2011, 2015) have studied multi-user chat room interactions collected with varying ethical responsibility;<sup>7</sup> Adams-Thies (2012) has studied one-on-one cybersex interactions in which the researcher himself was involved as a participant.

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<sup>7</sup> Whereas Del-Teso-Craviotto collected data by anonymously taking screen dumps of chat room interactions and never obtained informed consent from participants, both Jones and King worked together with the dating websites to make information about the ongoing research available to users.

This study is based on a body of material that comprises various kinds of data. The main core consists of naturally occurring spontaneous user-to-user interaction between active online daters on the two dating websites. Additional data comprises audiovisual recordings of friends reading profiles together, participant observation, ethnographic style interviews, and informal conversations with users. The tables below present an overview of the complete data set.

Table 3.1.

User-to-user interaction						
	Format	Participatory data collector	Interlocutor	Dating site	Date	Length (words)
1	IM, Facebook messages	Maria <sup>8</sup>	Bo	dating.dk Facebook	Nov. 2011	4,359.00
2	IM	Maria	Jonas	dating.dk	Jan. 2012	1,736.00
3	emails, IM	Cæcilie	Peter	elitedaters.dk	Nov.-Dec. 2011	3,560.00
4	emails, IM, Facebook messages	Cæcilie	Karsten	elitedaters.dk Facebook	Dec. 2011-Jan. 2012	2,471.00
5	emails	Cæcilie	Kasper	dating.dk	Nov. 2012-Dec. 2012	1,252.00
6	emails	Mette	Sune	elitedaters.dk	Dec. 2011	1,479.00
7	emails	Mette	Andreas	elitedaters.dk	Dec. 2011	1,302.00
8	emails	Mette	Morten	elitedaters.dk	Nov.-Dec. 2012	1,387.00
9	emails	Mette	Nikolaj	dating.dk	March 2014	1,942.00
10	emails, Facebook messages	Mads	Nanna	elitedaters.dk	May-Nov. 2011	209.00 (96,374,00) <sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>9</sup> The large size of this correspondence is due to Mads and Nanna sharing their additional Facebook correspondences over the course of the following 7 months as they started dating and entered in to a more serious relationship. I have excluded Mads and Nanna's Facebook correspondence from the total number of words in the data set, since this type of conversation has not been used as part of the analysis due to its different nature.

11	emails	Mads	Line	elitedaters.dk	Sept. 2011	569,00
12	emails	Anna/Rasmus	Anna/Rasmus	dating.dk	July-Aug. 2012	3,191.00
13	Emails, IM, text messages	Trine/Anders	Trine/Anders	dating.dk	Jan. 2014	4,640,00
14	IM	Michael/Helle	Michael/Helle	Tinder	Jan. 2014	1,070
						Total <u>29,167.00</u>

Table 3.2.

Evaluative readings of dating profiles			
Format	Speakers	Medium	Length (hours)
screen tracking	Stine & Louise	dating.dk	1.04.24
face-to-face audio recording			
screen tracking	Cæcilie & Kamilla	elitedaters.dk	1.02.01
face-to-face audio recording			
screen tracking	Kristoffer & Hans	dating.dk	1.50.55
face-to-face audio recording			
			Total 3.57.20

Table 3.3.

Online and offline participant observation – researcher dates					
Format	Ethnographer	Interlocutor	Dating site	Date	Length (hours)
emails face-to-face audio recording	Kristine (me)	Niels	elitedaters.dk	Dec. 2011	1.23.15
emails face-to-face audio recording	Kristine (me)	Lars	elitedaters.dk	Jan. 2012	2.25.02
					Total 3.48.17

Table 3.4.

Online participant observations			
Format	Ethnographer	Dating site	Date
Field notes	Kristine (me)	elitedaters.dk dating.dk	Sep.- Feb. 2011

Table 3.5.

Interviews				
Format	Interviewee	Dating site membership	Date	Length (minutes)
audio recording	Stine	elitedaters.dk dating.dk	Jan. 2014	1.26.32
audio recording	Cæcilie	elitedaters.dk dating.dk	Feb. 2014	0.47.49
audio recording	Maria	elitedaters.dk dating.dk	Feb. 2014	1.26.13
audio recording	Anna & Rasmus	elitedaters.dk dating.dk	March. 2014	1.11.46
				Total <u>4.52.10</u>

Table 3.6.

Informal conversations about online dating				
Format	Recorder	Interlocutors	Date	Length (minutes)
audio recording	Kristine (me)	Mette, Rune	Jan. 2012	0.33.22
audio recording	Kristine (me)	Mette, Rune, Lasse, Bettina	Jan. 2012	0.35.08
audio recording	Kristine (me)	Stine	April 2012	1.02.43
audio recording	Kristine (me)	Mette	March 2014	1.19.34
				<u>3.50.18</u>



Table 3.7.<sup>10</sup>

Dating profiles (texts, photos, schematic information)		
Format	User	Medium
Screenshots	Cæcilie	elitedaters.dk
Screenshots	Maria	dating.dk
Screenshots	Mads	elitedaters.dk
Screenshots	Line	elitedaters.dk
Screenshots	Nanna	elitedaters.dk
Screenshots	David	elitedaters.dk
Screenshots	Christina	elitedaters.dk
Word document	Mette	dating.dk
Word document	Nikolaj	dating.dk

Due to the delicate nature of the material and the resulting difficulties in accessing data while securing informed consent from all participants, the data collection process has not been as strictly designed and executed as one might encounter in other research projects. Whereas I had initially thought that I would be able to collect the data within six months, the period of data collection eventually extended over the course of three years (September 2011- March 2014). This study focuses on an interactive perspective on online dating, primarily in terms of user-to-user interaction. It has, therefore, been key to involve participants closely in the process of data collection. Accessing interactive data from romantic contexts ultimately proved to be an even more challenging, complicated, and time-consuming endeavor than I had initially anticipated. In the following subsections, I will describe the various ways in which I got in touch with users and eventually gathered my material.

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to the data in table 3.1.-3.6. a number of participants also provided me with their profile texts and photos. However, this type of data was not systematically collected by me, since the aim of this study was to gather data to analyze the *spontaneous* interactional aspects of online dating. Of course, online dating profiles are interactive nature, since they are written to an anticipated reader and are read by other users. Nevertheless, they constitute a very different and less spontaneous and immediate type of interaction than the email and IM correspondence (table 3.1.). Hence, the dating profile data in table 3.7. have not been analyzed in detail, but, instead, worked as ethnographic background material. Analytically, I consider the format of online dating profiles as they are co-read by pairs of friends in spontaneous interaction, thereby putting the perspective of the users to the forefront of analysis rather than providing my own readings and interpretations of such profiles.

### 3.3.1 The researcher profile: Approaching informants professionally

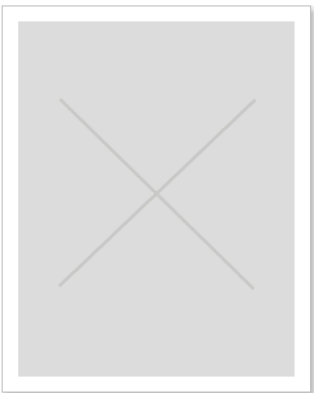
As a way of approaching the users of online dating, I contacted the administrators of the two dating websites. I informed them about my research project, and asked about demographic information on users and whether they would be willing to assist me in getting in touch with potential participants for my research project. Dating.dk did not respond at all. Moreover, they blocked my profile text when I later paid a membership and put up a profile with text providing information about my project. Elitedaters.dk, in contrast, was open to the research project and thought that they might gain something from the study. They offered me a free anonymous profile for three months that I could use to get in touch with users. They asked me to be careful in my way of approaching users and to mainly approach academics and people in the communication business or academia, who they assumed would have a better understanding of the research project. They would have to approve my profile text and the profile did not allow for a personalized name. Instead, I had to stick with the universal name 'demo user' (demobruger), as this type of profile was a default profile for visitors. In return, they asked me to contact them after I had conducted the study to inform them about my findings.

Figure 3.7. Anonymous researcher profile on www.elitedaters.dk

● demobruger

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ANMELD   SKRIV NOTE   TILFØJ FAVORITLISTE   SKRIV BESKED   VIS IKKE IGEN



**BASISOPLYSNINGER:**

Kvinde 27 år, Storkøbenhavn

Højde: 175 cm høj

Normal Kropsbygning: (60 kg.)

Rygevaner: Ikke ryger


Har ingen børn

Senest online: I dag 13:36

Profil er opdateret: 06.01.2012 11:25

**SØGER:** Mand 20–55 år:  
**DANMARK**   **SVERIGE**  
Alle områder   Alle områder

**GRUPPER**



**KARRIEREINFORMATIONER**

UDDANNELSESOMRÅDE:	Kommunikation, medier og sprog
UDDANNELSESTITEL:	cand.mag. i Dansk
UDDANNELSESNIVEAU:	LVU – Bachelor + Kandidat evt. Master (4–6 år)
UDDANNELSESSTATUS:	Færdiguddannet
BESKÆFTIGELSESTATUS:	Lønmodtager
BESKÆFTIGELSEOMRÅDE:	Kommunikation, medier og sprog
JOBTITEL:	Ph.d-studerende
STILLINGSNIVEAU:	Faglig beslutningstager (Funktionær, mellemleder mv.)

Even though the profile was a default visitor's profile, it still utilized the same setup as traditional profiles. I was thus immediately confronted with the issue of mixing my private self in with the presentation of my professional self. The basic information to be displayed next to my potential profile picture included obligatory information about my physical appearance (height and weight). Furthermore, information was required about my age, my smoking habits, and whether I had children. Being forced to mention my body in and of itself does not differ from fieldwork in offline settings in which the researcher is constrained to her body; however, in this setting the framing of my body was sexual and romantic from the outset. I was not simply meeting participants as a researcher with a certain body, but I was meeting participants as a potentially desirous body. Furthermore, I was forced to express my own desire as I was required to choose a gender, age, and geographical setting for the types of persons that I was seeking. I regularly changed my gender preferences in order to seek and visit both female and male profiles. I debated whether to upload a photo of myself for a long time. I thought it would be more ethical if the users had a chance to actually see the person they would donate their intimate data to. Yet on the other hand, putting up a photo of me would be buying even more into the romantic and sexual frame that the site had laid out. I therefore chose not to upload a photo, only to realize that profiles without any photos did not really get any visitors.

In my profile, I refrained from filling out optional lifestyle information to keep the profile simple and with a research focus. The profile text was structured as an informational text about my research project and as advertising for participants to donate their email and IM conversations. The affordances of this particular type of profile were that I was formally acknowledged by the site and that I could refer to the fact that the site was accepting of my research. It gave my research purposes a more professional and safe image, and was a 'cleaner' way to interface with the users. It was also a way to better control assumed intentions so that visitors were not confused by an assumed private romantic intention – even though the formal layout of the profile did challenge the distinction between professional and private self-presentation. The disadvantages on the other hand were that only very few users visited and responded to my profile, presumably because of the anonymous username and the lack of profile picture.

From this profile, I wrote emails to users informing them about my research project and asking for them to participate by donating interactional material. Before their donations, I required that they secure informed consent from their interlocutors (I will discuss practical and

ethical issues further in Chapter 4 (Article I)). Most users never answered these emails, some responded with a no, and others showed limited interest, but never responded with any donations.

Simultaneously to using this dating profile, I made flyers and posters, which I distributed at University of Copenhagen, Aarhus University, Denmark's Technical University, several dormitories, and workplaces. Moreover, I made a similar post on my Facebook profile, which I asked my network to share. A few people contacted me based on this outreach, but none of them ended up donating any material. It eventually proved most successful to work with active online daters who I knew through my personal social (online and offline) network. This I will discuss further in Section 3.3.4 and Chapter 4 (Article I).

In the end, my initial profile ended up mostly serving as a resource for my participants to refer to when asking for informed consent. This was an easy way for them to lead their interlocutors to more information about the project and also helped them emphasize that it was an authorized project, approved by the dating site and with a “real” researcher behind. Although I saw the obvious affordances of having a more anonymous and formal profile, I soon came to realize that I would have to engage more actively in the activities of online daters if I wanted to get in touch with participants and understand the social dynamics of online dating.

### **3.3.2 Combined research and private profile**

In contrast to my fieldwork on *elitedaters.dk*, I had no luck with getting in touch with the administrators of *dating.dk*. Instead, I signed up for a membership similar to regular users and crafted a profile. However, the administrators closed off this profile after a couple of months with a standard message that the profile text did not fit the dating website's constraints.

Based on my experience from my researcher profile on *elitedaters.dk*, I decided to design this profile to fit somewhere in between a personal and a professional profile. I anticipated that by having a profile that fit more into the general design of users' profiles I would receive more visits and thus be able to get in touch with more users. This approach was partly inspired by the sociologist Jacobs' (2010) experiment of displaying herself as a ‘sexy researcher’ in order to conduct ethnography and get in touch with participants on an online porn dating website. I gave the profile the name “Ms. Research” as way of hinting at my researcher identity, while still keeping a flirtatious tone. The profile displayed information about the fact that I was a researcher focused on online dating and that I was looking for people who were interested in participating in my study. In the profile photo, I wore a buttoned-up cardigan and glasses, tilting my head and looking from

below into the camera. The attire and glasses were meant to give off a more professional look, but also played with connotations to popular cultural fantasies and images of the “sexy librarian” (Poulin 2008:6-7) and the “geek chic” (Inness 2007). A tilted head pose and a gaze into the camera from below were deployed as a way of emphasizing femininity. In his analysis of gendered positions in visual commercials, Goffman (1979) describes how the tilted pose and the gaze from below among others expresses feminine submission; this pose and gaze therefore added further emphasis on my gender. From my personal experience with a photo-less profile on elitedaters.dk, and my simultaneous studies of users’ profile evaluations, I had realized that visual documentation was key to getting in touch with other users. The figure below shows the profile.

Figure 3.8. Combined profile on www.dating.dk

The screenshot shows a dating profile on the website www.dating.dk. The profile belongs to a user named 'Ms. Research, 27 år'. The profile includes a photo of a person with dark hair and glasses, a bio section, and a list of personal details.

**Profile Header:** Ms. Research, 27 år (with a green heart icon and a star icon). A button 'Rediger profil' is visible.

**Bio:** Bor i København S (2300), jeg har ingen børn. Jeg er 175 cm, vejer 60 kg og er slank af bygning. Jeg søger venner mellem 22 - 45 år i hele landet.

**OM MIG**

**"En ung kvinde, der forsker i internetdating"**  
Jeg er interesseret i internetdating både professionelt og personligt.

Mellem kl. 9 og 17 (cirka): Er jeg ph.d.-studerende på Københavns Universitet, hvor jeg arbejder på et projekt om sprog i internetdating. Jeg studerer sproget i email- og chatsamtaler mellem brugere, og søger lige nu materiale fra brugere på dating.dk!

Mellem kl. 17 og 19: Vil jeg nok oftest ligge på en måtte og dyrke pilates, spise aftensmad (fordi jeg ligesom små børn allerede er middagssulten kl. 17!), hænge ud med folk i mit kollektiv, høre noget højt musik, gå en tur rundt i byen.

Mellem kl. 19 og 24: Gå til koncert, se film en spændende film i biffen (af en eller anden grund ser jeg mange dokumentarer for tiden), lytte til et radioprogram, besøge nogle venner, tale i telefon med nogle venner, drikke mig fuld.

Mellem kl. 24 og 07: Sove (jeg har nogle meget syrede drømme!), danse, læse en god bog, tænke, gå til fest.

**Stå tidligt op**  
Kan lade sig gøre

**Min drømmedate**  
Gerne noget atypisk, hvor man bliver overrasket

**Mig om 10 år**  
Det kan være det hele...spændende at tænke på! Måske arbejde jeg på et universitet, måske er jeg i udlandet...

**JEG SØGER**

Personer - faktisk både mænd og kvinder - der vil donere email- og chatsamtaler fra dating.dk til min forskning. Hvis du donerer materiale til projektet vil du modtage et gavekort på 300 kr. valgfrit fra gavekortet.dk.

**MERE OM MS. RESEARCH**

Hårfarve	Mørkebrunt
Øjenfarve	Blå
Uddannelse	Kandidat
Jobtype	Andet
Branche	Forskning og undervisning
Musik	Indie og grunge
Politik	Venstreorienteret
Stjernetegn	Løve

It made a great difference to have a photo that presented a more feminized version of myself that fit with the style of the website, since it essentially brought more visitors to my profile. However, the messages typically contained private content in which I was approached as a regular user of the website. Most people who contacted me did not seem to have read my profile text beforehand. I typically responded that I was researching online dating practices and asked them if they would be interested in participating in the project. From this profile, I additionally contacted other users by email and asked them if they would be interested in donating interactional material from their online dating activities. The answers to my requests were varied. Some users got insulted, while others provided long answers in which they rejected being part of the project, but offered elaborate personal views on the activity of online dating. Some even offered to meet me to talk more about online dating; however, I never took this opportunity, since it was not entirely clear to me what the intentions behind such a meeting were, which essentially made me feel somewhat uncomfortable and unsafe.

In addition to the participant observation I undertook through my profile, one of my participants who was a current user of dating.dk invited me along to a private offline party for selected users. She had been contacted by a male user who had established a Facebook group for singles who were interested in meeting each other at offline private parties. The initiator had assembled the group primarily by inviting various users of dating.dk to join the Facebook group. Through this Facebook group, users arranged parties for each other in their private homes. I took part in one of these parties and had casual conversations with people about online dating experiences. I did not pursue studying the practices of this particular group further, since I was primarily interested in spontaneous online user-to-user interaction as it played out in the context of the online dating sites. The group had recently been formed at the time I took part (fall 2011) and is still active. Thus, future research would benefit from following such “outbreaks” from online dating websites to see how users take advantage of networks offered through online dating platforms to establish other networks and alternative forms of romantic meetings.

Figure 3.9. Participating in party arranged by the Facebook group.



Ultimately, my ethnographic experiences with the profiles on both *elitedaters.dk* and *dating.dk* demonstrate the substantial difficulties in keeping the researcher's romantic and erotic subjectivity out of the data collection process. When entering a romantic space such as an online dating website, the ethnographer is confronted with both the websites' and other users' positioning of her as a romantic subject. Therefore, I soon came to realize that I could not draw any tight or clear distinctions between my professional and private self when doing participant observation on online dating websites.

### **3.3.3 The private profile: Being part of the game**

After having tested out the professional researcher profile on *elitedaters.dk* and the more flirtatious researcher profile on *dating.dk*, I engaged in more auto-ethnographic methods by supplementing my presence online with a private profile on *elitedaters.dk*. I gave this profile a personalized name (BlackBird) and uploaded a private photo in which I was wearing makeup and a dress. Similar to the profile on *dating.dk*, a slightly tilted head pose and a gaze into the camera from below was intended to further strike a feminine note. The photo was not specifically created for the dating profile, but was taken from a photo album from a family dinner. The fact that I was engaged in an activity in the portrait made me think that the photo would potentially be more eye-catching in that it set it apart from the majority of front page profile photos on the dating site in which people were not engaged in any activities. I created a profile text that described the activities that I liked to do as a way of describing myself. I tried to come up with a textual style that avoided clichés as far as possible and that deviated slightly from other profile texts to make it stand out a bit. This approach


was recommended by the site in its guide for writing a good profile text. I did not mention that I was working on a research project on online dating. The generic information about my occupation revealed that I was a PhD student in the area of the Humanities, specifically communications.

Figure 3.10. Illustration of private profile on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk)

**MIN FORSIDE**
ONLINE LIGE NU
20 NYESTE BILLEDPROFILER
BRUGEROPLYSNING

*Lige nu!: Fortæl kort om din dag, dine projekter, dine oplevelser m.m.*

[Rediger](#) | [Slet](#)



1
[Rediger](#)

**I DAG**

Ingen nye [besked\(er\)](#)

1 [ny\(e\) profilbesøg](#)

0 [ny\(e\) favorittilføjelser](#)

0 [ny\(e\) debatindlæg](#)

0 [ny\(e\) gruppeindlæg](#)

**STATUS**

Dit seneste login (før nuværende): I forgårs 16:27

Du har senest opdateret [din profil](#): 10.01.2012 22:17

Vis mig som:   ●

Profilstatus: [Godkendt & aktiv](#) ⓘ | [Standby indstillinger](#)

Medlemskab: [Begrænset adgang på eliteDaters.dk](#) [Forlæng](#)

From my private profile, I engaged in what could be termed ‘romantic participant observation’. Bolton describes his combined private and professional sexual encounters with gay men at his field site in Belgium as “sexual participant observation” in which “all perceptions and experiences are potentially data” (1995: 148) (also see Adams-Thies 2012). The affordances of having a private profile were that it provided me with the option of not simply being a voyeur. By setting up a private profile, I was “part of the game,” as other users looked at my profile and engaged in immediate interaction. By actively participating in this way I got to understand how online dating works – from setting up a profile to going on a date.



My personal investment in my profile gave me a better sense of the thoughts and considerations that were connected to the process of presenting oneself as an attractive potential partner. Bringing in my own romantic emotions and desires – my own “erotic subjectivity” (Kulick and Willson 1995) – made me vulnerable and thereby in some ways balanced out the power asymmetry between my participants and me as a researcher. On the other hand, it also gave my private self a backdoor to escape through, allowing me to save face, as I could always refer to my research as my primary motivation if I did not receive the desired attention. By engaging with users on romantic terms I got a sense of the interactional style and more generally the website culture. Depending on how far I was willing to go, I received access to various stages of interaction. I thereby gained a deeper respect for intimate online interaction and it made me acutely aware of the difficulties in when and how to ask for informed consent. Apart from connecting with participants romantically, this approach additionally gave me a different connection to my other participants who donated material. In my continuous conversations with them I could share, and compare my own personal experiences. Through having and being able to share firsthand experiences, I took away some of the voyeuristic associations connected to the fact that I was gazing at other people’s intimate affairs.

Having a personal profile aligned with my private romantic status as single and as somebody interested in finding a long-term partner. In this way, I could justify my presence on the online dating site as I had clear personal and emotional motivations in interacting with users, apart from my professional motivation. When I later started dating somebody more seriously, it became hard to justify even having a profile on an online dating site, since I no longer had any private motivation for being there. Investing my own romantic and emotional life in the research project through a private profile did not result only in advantages as discussed above. Rather, the combined personal and professional romantic engagement did create challenges: at some point it became hard for me to distinguish among my motivations. At certain points I pushed myself emotionally in favor of my research project, while at other points my research project interfered with my personal romantic desires.

The crafting and participation through these three different profiles all falls within the methods of *online ethnography* (Androutsopoulos 2008) and *virtual ethnography* (Hine 2000) in which the researcher enters into an online community and engages in participant observation. However, researchers have noted that ethnography on practices online cannot necessarily be studied in an isolated manner from offline contexts (Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger 2008; Miller and

Slater 2000) (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2013; Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger 2008; Miller and Slater 2000). In Chapter 5 (Article II) I consider such inter-relations between the online practice of friends' viewing dating profiles and their simultaneous offline face-to-face interaction. Along the same lines, Boellstorff notes that "technology is now ubiquitous worldwide, and few, if any, future fieldwork projects could ever constitute 'fieldwork unplugged'" (2012:39). Hence, contemporary ethnography in any context will, to some extent, have to consider how digital technology tie into human practices.

#### **3.3.4 Participants**

The participants of this study were all active online daters at the time of the data collection process. The core part of the data set – the 14 spontaneous user-to-user interactions – was collected by 10 participatory data collectors who agreed to collect data from their own activities. This they did by asking their interlocutors for informed consent and, upon agreement, passing on the correspondences to me as screen shots or Word documents. Some participatory data collectors donated several interactions with varying interlocutors. In three of the cases, donations were made by current romantic couples who had met through the dating websites and saved their past correspondence (Anna & Rasmus, Trine & Anders, and Helle & Michael). In Chapter 4 (Article I), I describe this particular method in detail and engage in elaborate discussion of the connecting ethical perspectives.

I knew some participants personally and got in touch with others through friends and colleagues. Two of the participatory data collectors were close friends of mine who, at the time, I had known for three years each. Due to strict anonymity, I will not explain the detailed relationships between each participant and myself. Revealing in close detail exactly how we know each other and what type of relationship we have would potentially lead to participant identification. Our friendship generally consisted of sharing personal ups and downs and meeting each other for various leisure activities that sometimes included mutual friends. The rest of the participatory data collectors are all friends of friends or colleagues whom I for the most part had never met before, or in a couple of cases had met on one previous occasion. As with the other participants, these were people who I got in touch with through my own social network. The additional participants who have engaged in recordings of shared readings of online dating profiles, interviews, and informal conversations are all people from my personal network whom I know to various degrees – a few are close friends, and others are acquaintances who are connected to the same social network.

Generally, I experienced the most success in accessing intimate data through people I already knew. The already existing confidence between us made it less uncomfortable for the participants to talk about and share their intimate lives. Additionally, they generally shared an interest in my research project. I realize that the nature of my relationship with (some of) my participants might have lead participants to make selections in the material that they chose to donate, in order to make it ‘fit’ into the personae they would wish me and future readers to see. This has been the unfortunate reality of collecting these intimate data, which I ultimately cannot control for.

Due to the method of involving and relying on donations from participatory data collectors, I only have detailed demographic data on half of the involved participants, whereas the other half is limited to the facts that are delivered in interaction. Since data has been collected through my personal network, the data is necessarily influenced by my demographic position. Imagining another ethnographer with a different demography collecting similar data, this study would potentially have looked very different. The participants were all located within and around the two biggest cities in Denmark: Copenhagen and Aarhus. They were in the age range of 26-33 at the time of the data collection process and for the most part were enrolled in a program for higher education or had recently obtained a degree in higher education and were working at their first full-time professional job. None of them had been married previously and all of them were at a stage of life in which they were looking for more serious relationships while at the same time occasionally engaging in less serious relationships. The online dating services thus offered a relevant platform for them to seek for such relationships.

### **3.3.5 Audio recordings and screen tracking**

In addition to using participatory data collectors’ donations of spontaneous user-to-user interaction and conducting participant observation, I collected audiovisual recordings of friends engaging together in online dating activities. From my observations in my own network I became aware of the importance of sharing online dating activities with friends. Showing one’s friends the profiles of users that one found attractive was a typical way of engaging friends in one’s romantic life. I therefore arranged for three recordings of such interactions between three pairs of friends. The interactions were arranged by me and cannot, therefore, be considered spontaneous. However, they simulate a type of activity that was naturally occurring among these friends. Moreover, the recordings were made in the private homes of the participants, thereby securing a familiar setting. The recordings were carried out through the use of the screen-tracking software Hypercam, which

records the screen movements and the sound on and around the computer. This type of recording gave valuable insights into how desire is attached to the various discourse elements of online dating profiles, while simultaneously providing evidence of how this ties into homosocial offline relations. Chapter 5 (Article II) presents a detailed case study of one of these recordings, while the two other recordings have served as ethnographic background information, which helped me shape my analysis.

In addition, I conducted interviews with 5 participants. These interviews were semi-structured – with open-ended, non-directive questioning of the participants’ experiences with online dating. The interviews were conducted late in the data collection process, after I had already carried out analytic work on some material. This allowed me to explore matters that I had observed in the interactional material and topics in which I was particularly interested. In addition, it gave me a chance to discuss my initial analytical understandings with some participants. In most cases the participants knew me before I interviewed them, although some I met for the first time. During the entire period of data collection, I additionally recorded 4 informal conversations about online dating. These were instantiated in private situations in which I spent time with friends and the talk spontaneously fell on the issue of online dating experiences. If the topic of online dating came up, I would ask if I could turn on the recorder on my smartphone. These recordings have all served as ethnographic background information.

While analyzing the data, I have been aware that in both interviews and more informal conversations, the interlocutors were aware that they were participants in a research project and therefore acted accordingly. A research interview should not be considered similar to an ordinary conversation but rather constitutes a distinctive type of speech event that is “more clearly tied to the context of the interview than to the situation it describes” (Briggs 1986:3). In this situation the interviewer plays just as influential a role as the interviewee in what is said – the conversation is a *joint* construct. In this dissertation, interviews have been particularly useful for documenting explicit statements of ideology, including media ideology. While self-reported data such as interviews should not be viewed as reliable indications of participants’ actual practices, such data can reveal the cultural beliefs that interviewees hold about online dating. The interviews undertaken for this study have allowed participants to talk retrospectively about their practices and beliefs. By combining the elicitation method of the interview with participant observation and micro-analysis of spontaneous user-to-user interaction, it has been possible to study the differences between what people say they do and what they do.

### 3.4 Analytical approach

In my theoretical chapter, Chapter 2, I have discussed how this study is inscribed within the broader field of feminist linguistics, in particular poststructuralist feminism. Hence, my view on language is based on the understanding that language is performative, i.e., in saying something participants create and bring about change in the social world. Moreover, performatives consist of interplay between the micro-context in which an utterance is uttered and the ways in which this utterance reiterates (and is forced to reiterate) circulating discourses.

Much feminist theory has primarily been engaged with ontological and epistemological discussions of how sex, gender, and sexuality come about in the world and how this can be grasped scientifically. Hence, less effort has been put into instrumentalizing such ideas and offering concrete methods for how to proceed towards empirical research. This reluctance to prescribe particular research methods can be seen as aligning with more epistemological positions that refrain from authoritatively valuing one method above others. Empirical feminist research is generally characterized by “methods pluralism,” while sharing a tendency to step back from large meta-narratives about gender and sexuality, towards polyphonies of small, specifically located and contextualized stories (Lykke 2008:160). Similarly, this dissertation focuses on the immediate practices among a small group of users of two particular dating sites. Therefore, this study is not searching for explanations that can be applied universally. The approach deployed here directs its focus towards a particular practice in a particular context at a particular time and, by studying this narrowly, presents an analysis of one practice – out of many potential practices – through which desire and sexuality is articulated and managed. Hence, this acknowledges the micro-context as crucial for understanding social meanings as well as the notion that sexuality is a plural phenomenon that looks different in different contexts and that, accordingly, needs to be studied as such.

In Danish feminist poststructuralist scholarship, theoretical concepts have been put to work on written empirical data through the methodological framework of critical discourse analysis (e.g., Frederiksen 2008). In this dissertation, I similarly approach the subject of sexuality through the lens of language, however I do so while focusing on language as an interactional phenomenon. In analyzing online dating as interaction, I draw on certain forms of interactional analysis, including conversation analysis (CA) (Schegloff 2007) and dialogism (Linell 1998; 2009).

CA argues that by examining actual instances of everyday interaction the researcher can document the processes through which the organization of a particular social undertaking is built. Based on a project of privileging the perspective of participants, the approach of conversation analysis directs its attention to the micro-levels of specific sequences of talk and the issues made relevant by participants within these sequences. CA proposes to go beyond the simple focus on content to consider the delicate details of discourse structure in order to understand how participants create social meaning. By focusing on sequences of ongoing talk, it becomes possible to investigate how participants make visible to each other the meanings of the actions they are performing (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008). The focus on sequentiality rests upon the understanding that utterances cannot be studied in isolation, but have to be viewed in relation to prior and subsequent turns in order to interpret their meaning. Hence, utterances cannot be viewed as autonomously produced by the speaker who performs them. Rather, the speaker and hearer create meaning together. Hence, when studying email and IM interaction between online daters it is not possible to isolate single users' emails and analyze their social meaning. Rather, they must be studied in conjunction with their responses in order to illuminate the situated meaning that is attached to linguistic features.

Dialogism further draws attention to mutual dependence between utterance and activity: on the one hand, the activity type – for instance a romantic dinner – influences what can be said and how it can be said, while on the other hand, the utterances that are being performed constitute the activity itself (Linell 2005; cf. Ericsson 2011:89). In the case of online dating, users' engagement in email or IM correspondence can therefore be said to design their contributions in relation to the sequential context of turns which have proceeded and are currently ongoing, while simultaneously shaping such contributions through the larger project of the activity; testing the potential of the interlocutor as a romantic partner, setting up a romantic face-to-face meeting, etc.

Whereas conversation analysis focuses on the context that is "demonstrably relevant to the participants in the event being examined" (Schegloff 1997:165), dialogism works with a broader understanding of context.

[...] a given piece of discourse is embedded within, or activates, a matrix of different kinds of contexts (or dimensions of context). Nothing is a context of a piece of discourse in and by itself, as it were "objectively". Instead, we have contextual resources, potential contexts that can be made

into actual, relevant contexts through the activities of the interlocutors in dialogue (Linell 1998:128).

According to this view, linguistic features carry the potential of activating multiple contexts. Context is not understood as simplistic static backgrounds, which the linguistic features refer to automatically. Rather, utterances contain a field of possibilities for contextualization, which may be activated to various degrees in interaction (cf., Scheuer 2005:35). Linell argues that the study of interaction should both consider “immediate contextual resources,” like the issues studied in the conversation analytical framework such as sequential position, as well as “mediate contextual resources” such as participants’ pre-given knowledge and assumptions and sociocultural structures (Linell 1998:130). Hence, Linell promotes an approach that comprises both situated interaction as well as sociocultural practices. This approach links up with the broader concern, which I share with sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), of illuminating the complex ways in which language is pressed into service at multiple social levels at once.

In taking the larger context into consideration, ethnographic methods are salient. Within approaches to studying language as an essential resource for composing and structuring the social world (e.g., sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology) the methods of *participant observation* (cf., DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) and *interviews* (cf., Briggs 1986) have been deployed as a productive way of understanding the varying and very local meanings that participants attach to linguistic forms in specific contexts. The online ethnography that I have conducted through my three dating profiles and multiple interviews has provided me with this type of broader background information.

In the case of this study, ethnographic approaches have been deployed as an important supplement to the interactional data (e.g., participant observations through researcher dating profiles, interviews, informal conversations). However, the ethnographic data are somewhat limited and could have been expanded in several ways by conducting participant observation for a longer period of time and by following selected participants systematically in their various engagements with online dating. As I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 4 (Article I), following participants systematically in their dating activities poses fundamental ethical challenges in that the majority of the interaction happens in very intimate and fragile settings with other participants, which do not easily allow for a researcher’s observations without severely interfering to the participants’ romantic projects.

In analyzing my data, I have been inspired by the CA's tradition of 'unmotivated looking' (Have 2007:120-21), while acknowledging that the researcher always has some kind of motivation for looking into a piece of data (Psathas 1990:24-25, Note 3). The point is to encourage analysts to stay 'open' to new phenomena. In this vein I have explored my data inductively, with the intention of having no specific presuppositions. I have noted the phenomena that stood out to me as essential in studying and understanding how romantic relationships are formed in the various interactional data that I have been able to collect. My analysis has typically been composed of turn-by-turn analysis in understanding utterances by looking at their responses. In this sense, conversation analysis has worked as a store of tools for making sense of the micro-workings of my data while additionally considering larger cultural contexts and psychoanalytic notions, such as excitement and fantasy (cf. Chapter 6, Article III), thereby pushing the boundaries of strict sequential analysis.

The data material that I have been working with consists primarily of written discourse – a format that has traditionally been given less attention within interactional scholarship. However, recent research on written digital interaction (text messages, IM, etc.) has demonstrated that the tools of CA are applicable to such textual communication (Laursen 2012; Meredith and Potter 2014). However, certain attention has to be given to issues of asynchronicity in terms of interrupted adjacency pairs (the structure of first pair part followed by second pair part, for instance 'question-answer') due to the nature of technology.<sup>11</sup> In this study, I have treated the informal written discourse of the user-to-user interactions as a matter of naturally occurring spontaneous interaction, structured by the same principles that CA and dialogism prescribe. Cameron and Panović (2014) note that written communication mistakenly tends to be understood as relating to more formal genres that follow institutionally-set rules of spelling. However, ever since the teaching of free composition essays in schools, writing has been used for private interaction and everyday casual communicative purposes (Pedersen 2006; cf., Ahearn 2003). In this vein, I view writing and reading as "local, variable and context-dependent practices" (Cameron and Panović 2014:26), which should be studied accordingly.

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<sup>11</sup> Herring (2004) has developed an elaborate and influential analytical framework for studying computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) that prescribes an inductive approach comprising various methods, yet with particular attention to technological matters (Herring 2007). In this study I have, however, focused on the approaches of conversation analysis and dialogism in keeping my primary focus on the interactional aspects of online dating practices.



In the above sections I have described the challenging data collection process, which lays out the groundwork for this study. In the following chapter (Chapter 4), I will turn to an analytical discussion of the ethical issues relating to collecting empirical material of this kind.

## **4. Article I**

# **Informed Consent in the Field of Language and Sexuality: The Case of Online Dating Research**

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### **Abstract:**

In order to understand how sexual and romantic relations are established and negotiated in discourse, the field of language and sexuality is dependent upon empirical data from naturally occurring spontaneous interaction. However, detailed discussions of research methods are lacking in the field. In this article, I explore ways of accessing intimate spontaneous data in a heterosexual online dating context. Through interactional analysis of three types of online dating interaction, I examine the multi-faceted context for securing informed consent while at the same time preserving participants' intimacy. I argue that institutionalized informed consent procedures may undercut participant agency and expose symbolic violence towards their carefully built interactional framework. The analysis demonstrates participants' ability to negotiate ethical issues and to turn such issues into a contribution to the ongoing flirtatious interaction. As a result, I suggest a method that integrates participants' interactional expertise in the consent-gaining process.

**Keywords:** ethics, informed consent, participant agency, online dating, flirtation, intimacy

## **1. Collecting naturally occurring intimate data**

Sexual and romantic encounters consist of a broad range of acts performed through various interactional modes such as physical touch, variation in voice quality, and use of certain emoticons. It is difficult to investigate these various modes using reported and experimental methods. Exploration of naturally occurring data from spontaneous interaction thus represents a much-needed contribution. However, accessing human subjects' romantic and sexual interaction is not a straightforward task for any researcher, as is evident from the relatively few publications based on intimate interactional data within the field of language and sexuality. Consequently, the field is dependent on a continuous discussion of ethics and methods based on researchers' nuanced experiences.

When collecting data from romantic/sexual interaction, the issue of informed consent – basically understood as a negotiation of power relations – becomes especially pertinent since sexual contexts attach erotic meaning to issues of power {Citation}. As I demonstrate, one important mechanism in flirting is to play with dominant and vulnerable positions in interaction. This playful connection between power and the sexual dynamic forms blurry grounds for negotiating informed consent. Analysis, however, demonstrates that participants are capable of successfully incorporating informed consent as a resource within the flirtatious framework.

Informed consent is key to legitimizing a researcher's ethics. Yet it proves difficult to define what exactly constitutes fully informed consent. Each research situation contains complex layers of power distribution, confronting the researcher with unpredictable ethical dilemmas (Thorne 1980). Further complexities are added by contemporary digital society, in which the researcher must navigate endless accessibility in a context in which the lines between private and public are exceptionally blurry (Hine 2013). Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012) introduce 'the principle of care' as a non-institutionalized ethical standard for ethnographers. The principle is universal and requires the researcher to exercise empathy and care for her participants and ensure to the greatest extent possible to give back to the community. This principle ultimately forefronts the researcher's local knowledge and ethics instead of institutionalized standards.

In this paper, I discuss the intricate context for securing informed consent in empirical research on language and sexuality. As a field that investigates very intimate areas of people's lives, it is important to consider means of collecting informed consent in which participants' intimacy is preserved. When collecting romantic and sexual data, the researcher must provide the best possible

conditions for the participant's agentic choices and be careful not to produce humiliation in the romantic interaction by imposing supercilious ethical understandings. I argue that institutionalized informed consent procedures may undercut participant agency. The approach that I assert here connects to 'the principle of care' as the valuation of participants is at the forefront of ethical considerations. Through detailed interactional analysis of consent collection in three types of online dating data, I demonstrate the advantages of implementing consent in ways that recognize participant agency and participants' interactional projects by drawing on their contextual expertise.

### **1.1. The challenges of informed consent**

Across national borders and scientific organizations, the requirement of informed consent is a basic part of the ethical code. The concept goes back to the Nuremberg Trials, which called for voluntary and informed consent in response to the Nazi regime's horrifying medical experiments on non-consenting individuals (Robinson 2010). The Nuremberg Code (1947) was reiterated in the Helsinki Declaration (1964) outlined by the World Medical Association, which is still considered the worldwide standard for biomedical research. In an American context, further ethical control was developed throughout the 1960s, following revelations of methods used in, among other cases, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-1972) in which diseased participants remained uninformed and untreated despite the discovery of treatment. Request for informed consent has later come to cover a broader range of research fields, including the humanities and social sciences. Converting a research ethics model for controlled experimental frameworks to such dissimilar scientific areas is not a straightforward process since these varied research traditions work with quite different methods and data types (Marshall 2003).

Federal and institutional review procedures vary largely from country to country (Hearnshaw 2004). In Denmark, where I am based, only biomedical research is subject to review by a national ethics board. Research in the humanities and social sciences is regulated by the Act on Processing of Personal Data (Act No. 429 of 31 May 2000), requiring that all registration of personally identifiable information be approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency. In comparison, the USA possesses a wide-ranging system of institutional control in which every American university possess Institutional Review Boards for all research involving human subjects

(Berg, Appelbaum, Lidz & Parker 2001).<sup>12</sup> A similar system has developed in the UK where a step towards more standardized review boards was taken in 2006 in the Economic and Social Research Council publication 'Framework for Research Ethics'.

According to Thorne (1980), informed consent includes three dimensions: 1) that participants are provided with knowledge about the research project, 2) that participants can decide voluntarily, and 3) that participants have the competence to make a qualified choice. Power is central to requirements of informed consent as the concept rests upon the assumption that researchers are more powerful than participants. With the reflexive turn in anthropology (e.g. Behar & Gordon 1995, Clifford & Marcus 1986), a discussion of the researcher's role was initiated, which also – led by feminist and postcolonial researchers – came to focus on asymmetrical power relations in the field: between male and female researchers, between the Westerner and the other, and between the researcher and the researched (Golde 1970, Said 1978). Further discussions on research ethics have focused on the practical and structural difficulties in applying universal consent procedures to various cultural contexts (e.g. Christakis 1992, Dorian 2010, Fluehr-Lobban 1994, IJsselmuiden & Faden 1992, Robinson 2010).

The concepts of power used in this article are inspired by the two arguably most influential scholars in this area. On an abstract level I draw on Foucault's concept of power as not being 'in the hands' of individuals or institutions, but as a 'floating' discourse governing relations between social agents (Foucault [1975] 1995, [1976] 1990). On an interactional level I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and symbolic power as a regular base for dominance, control, and authority, i.e. power legitimized by social norms and positions, inflicted on individuals by individuals. Along these lines, Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1993) argue that power relations are always situated and highly influenced by the method selected by the researcher. When engaging in participant observation, the researcher takes up various interactional positions and engages in changing relationships that all possess varying and contradictory levels of authority. The authority that the researcher is presumed to carry by force of her institutional status may well be contested by participants' local statuses as gatekeepers of the community under study.

In order to prevent counterproductive power execution, bearing in mind that power and thus potential exploitation are immanent in all human relations, the concept of informed

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<sup>12</sup> Critique of the IRBs has been raised in an American context, highlighting a lack of understanding of ethnographic complexity caused by a one-sided biomedical focus (Plattner 2003) and overshadowing interests in protecting the institution ahead of participants in potential lawsuits (Adler & Adler 2002).

consent attempts to create freedom of choice. Accordingly, the action of asking for informed consent aims to enable agency. While the term ‘agency’ carries a long history of theorization and scholarly discussion, Ahearn’s basic definition serves as a starting point: ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn 2001: 112). With a focus on research ethics, this definition may be elaborated upon with ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to choose or to say no.’ Frank (2006) argues that the general discussion of agency has privileged resistance, resting upon a simplified binary model of submission versus resistance. The assumption that freedom and resistance are universally desired proves to be problematic when confronted with various cultural contexts (Mahmood 2005, Gagné & McGaughey 2002). Taking into consideration a complex understanding of power, human actions are not simply a matter of free will or force but rather of both means working simultaneously. Research ethics would thus benefit from moving beyond dualistic conceptualizations of power distributions and agency. As specified by the American Anthropological Association, ‘it is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant’ (2009:3). Ultimately, an open dialogue of research goals and more abstract issues of power and emotional involvement should be encouraged by the researcher throughout data collection and beyond (AAA 2012). Such aspects of power and affect become especially pertinent when studying sexuality – an area that contains opaque distributions of dominance and vulnerability.

## **1.2. Ethical challenges of ethnographic research on sexuality**

Within sexuality studies, Humphreys’ Tearoom study (1970) of anonymous sexual interaction among gay men stands as the paramount example of unethical practice. For two years, Humphreys took on the role of a voyeur in the so-called tearooms in the parks of St. Louis, Missouri – public restrooms in which men have anonymous sex – and observed sexual behavior. In addition, Humphreys registered the license plates of the visitors’ cars, enabling him to later seek out the participants’ home addresses in public registers and thus follow up his observations with a survey among the unknowing participants in their homes. The survey was untruthfully presented to be part of a study on mental health issues. Most scholars have reacted with disapproval to the applied methods (e.g. Babbie 2004, Warwick 1975), though a minority acknowledge the study’s contributions to understanding sexual culture in public spaces and regard Humphreys’ methods as ingenious (Nardi 1996).

When investigating sexuality, power issues are further complicated by the fact that dominance and submission, resistance and willingness are loaded with erotic connotations. Such

symbolic meanings may blur the understanding of what counts as resistance and exploitation (Kulick 2003). The researcher's sexuality was kept out of methodological discussion until the 1990s – with a few exceptions (Cesara 1982, Malinowski 1967, Rabinow 1977) – when three edited volumes were published that focused specifically on the anthropologist's sexuality (Kulick & Willson 1995, Lewin & Leap 1996, Markowitz & Ashkenazi 1999). Instead of denying aspects of sexual desire, all three volumes argue for embracing such issues as an ethnographic resource. According to Kulick:

Sexual desire in the field can call into question the boundaries of self, threaten to upset the researcher-researched relation, blur the line between professional role and personal life, and provoke questions about power, exploitation, and racism (1995:12).

Sexual dynamics between researcher and researched may have very different consequences and effects depending on local culture and community, leading to either acceptance and closer connections to participants (Goode 2002, Lunsing 1999, Newton 1993) or lack of connection and reinforcement of gendered and racialized power dynamics (Dubisch 1995, Fitzgerald 1999, Moreno 1995). The most obvious means of handling this complex situation may be to provide extensive (paternalistic) care of research subjects, through which the researcher takes precautions on behalf of the participants. However, participants may respond negatively to the researcher's attempts to safeguard participants' romantic and sexual lives since they may feel capable of managing these issues according to their own preferences and moral sense (Lunsing 1999). In such cases, it becomes evident how institutionalized informed consent – despite good intentions – easily undercuts participant agency.

Further challenges occur in the field of language and sexuality in terms of collecting and recording naturally occurring intimate interaction. A focus on naturally occurring recorded data has emerged in the field as a result of improved technology and human subjects' familiarity with media alongside scholarly acknowledgement of the many subtle verbal and embodied interactional aspects in the performance and the negotiation of sexuality. However, the field faces great empirical challenges in addressing the question of how language is used as a resource in naturally occurring sexual interaction. Most studies are based on reported interview data (e.g. Jacobs 2010, Kitzinger & Frith 1999), scripted and mediated data (e.g. Channell 1997, Hall 1995), written texts (e.g. Canakis 2010, Coupland 1996), and time-limited interaction such as speed dating data (e.g. Korobov 2011, Stokoe 2010). Accordingly, documentation and targeted analysis of spontaneous flirtatious face-to-face interaction is rare (Kiesling 2013). This lack of naturally occurring spontaneous data is

suggestive of a major methodological challenge in the field. With the rise of online communication, intimate interaction is now partly carried out in spaces that are easily accessible to the researcher. However, rather than representing a simple solution to the methodological challenges, this change poses new and complicated ethical questions.

### **1.3. Ethics of researching sexuality online**

The ethics and morality of private sexual practices relative to the public space of the Internet has become a widely discussed issue since celebrity sex tapes started circulating on the Internet (Hillyer 2004). The web-wide sharing of private recordings raised issues of the immorality and power connected to the act of sharing footage on another's sexual practice without consent. Private sexual activities have turned in to a popular genre known as 'amateur porn' (Paasonen 2010), and the Web is currently full of user-generated pornography – without the level of the human subjects' consent to share their intimate lives always being completely clear.<sup>13</sup>

Within language and sexuality research, publications are predominantly focusing on gay men's sexual online behavior (e.g. Bogetić 2013, Milani 2013). Few researchers have investigated intimate online interaction, presumably because of difficulties in accessing naturally occurring data (Adams-Thies 2012, Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008, Jones 2005, King 2011, 2012).

The anonymity of the Internet has enabled researchers to observe online forums without participating or revealing their identities (del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, Sanders 2005, Zimmer 2010). Other researchers have taken the approach of the human subject research model, arguing that participants are ultimately the producers of online content and must be dealt with according to the same rules and obligations as participants in offline settings (D'arcy & Young 2012, Hudson & Bruckman 2004). This approach is emphasized in the Association of Internet Researchers' basic ethical principles (2012).<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Accessing intimate interactional data**

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<sup>13</sup> 'Sexting' – the activity of sending text messages including erotic talk or images – is a further example of how private sexual activities are digitalized and potentially put into wider circulation without consent from participants. The recent development of popular self-censoring apps such as SnapChat and iDelete (programs that automatically deletes messages and photos a number of seconds after the receiver has viewed them) clearly demonstrates the demand for ethical agency in intimate digital contexts.

<sup>14</sup> Critics of a universal application of the human research subject model argue for a textual understanding of the Internet rather than a spatial understanding that mirrors offline contexts (Bassett & O'Riordan 2002). According to this argument, certain parts of the Internet such as community magazines and walls may be considered a cultural production of texts in public circulation, which does not require the same ethical precautions as do private interactions.



In 2010, I set out to collect data from spontaneous romantic encounters. I was immediately confronted with the complications of imposing standardized ethical norms on research participants in their intimate settings. For my co-authored Master's thesis (Mortensen and Tuborgh 2008; Mortensen 2010b), I collected intimate conversations by instructing participants to carry out 'self recordings' (Schøning & Møller 2009) of spontaneous flirtation between themselves and others at private parties. Prior to designing our project, we had undergone no ethical training since such a program was neither required nor even offered to students at our university. The greatest challenge was that of ensuring informed consent from all participants. Apart from practical complications such as controlling consent from every single participant in a party setting with numerous people coming and going, we were confronted by an unwillingness from our recording participants to inform any of their interlocutors about the research. They refused the idea of gaining consent, pointing to their own emotional involvement in the situation. They feared that their immediate relationships and chances for a romantic common future would be violated and that their own positions in the interaction would change drastically. Consequently, we allowed participants to wear a hidden microphone and record whenever they wished as they attended parties.<sup>15</sup>

After receiving the recordings, we took ethical precautions by obscuring all identifiable information, by letting the recording participants censor intimate parts of the recordings that were potentially too intimate, and by not playing any of the recordings to an audience. By progressing in this manner, we managed to pursue our aims and work with naturally occurring flirtatious data. The data provided the rare opportunity to address a variety of issues, such as the role of language in seduction, interactional strategies for initiating or refusing sex, and issues of power and agency in sexual encounters. According to the Danish Act on Processing of Personal Data, our project should have been reported to and approved by the Data Protection Agency. However, my co-author and I were unaware of the general legislation due to our lack of ethical training. In May 2010, I published an article analyzing anonymized excerpts of the data in a volume on youth language edited by my advisor (Mortensen 2010b) as well as presented the project at international conferences. Here, the results were met with great interest as well as with reluctance since the data was considered unethical due to a lack of informed consent. My research method had led me to an unfruitful situation in which I had results that could potentially contribute to important

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<sup>15</sup> This approach – unusual as it may seem – connects to a long tradition of covert research in sociology in which the researcher's hidden role is viewed as a legitimate methodology (e.g. Calvey 2008, Goffman 1961).

discussions of the performance of human sexuality in interaction, but these results were based on data that could understandably not be acknowledged by an international research community.

Confronted with other scholars' critical approach to my data, I investigated the Danish legislation and in turn retrospectively informed the Danish Data Protection Agency. Its answer was ambiguous. On the one hand, the Agency stressed that research containing information about human subjects' sexuality requires prior approval and the ensuring of consent from all participants. On the other hand, I was given permission to publish my data in research articles as long as no individuals were identifiable.

My initial experience of collecting spontaneous romantic interaction demonstrates how the current informed consent situation – including institutional variability, lack of training, and the complexity of consent in different research situations – is hindering advancement in the field. My experience makes clear the urgency of resolving some of these ethical issues through scholarly discussion. The ethical challenges of my early research have formed the foundations of my current concern with ethics in online research on language and sexuality. In the following, I will discuss different means of implementing informed consent in intimate online settings.

### **3. Three ethical approaches to collecting intimate data online**

For my PhD research, I decided to explore the growing field of online dating based on spontaneous interactional data. This ongoing project explores how heterosexual white young adult users of online dating negotiate intimate relations in interaction and how they use language and visual resources to construct and express desire. In my data collection process, I focused on two Danish dating sites – a smaller site with approximately 30,000 users and a larger site with approximately 100,000 users. Both sites emphasize in their codes of conduct that information from all users should be treated as private and confidential, that privacy and rights of data ownership are to be respected. Based on this, I treated the sites as private communities. Ultimately, the authors behind the profiles produced their self-presentations for a specific audience, that of the dating community, and could not be regarded as consenting to an academic audience (D'Arcy & Young 2012).

The data set consists of various data types, three of which I will discuss in this article: 1) participant observation, 2) data collected by participants, and 3) recordings of offline interaction with online content. According to Hine (2000), researchers studying computer-mediated communication need to be full participants to truly understand the nature of the online culture they are investigating. With the aim of understanding the dynamics of online dating, I created a personal

profile through which I visited male users' profiles, took field notes, corresponded with multiple male users, and eventually went on offline face-to-face dates with two users. Before going on a date, I informed the men about my research and my combined private and professional interests, and in both cases, the men consented to meet me and take part in my study.

Alongside engaging in participant observation, I had a small group of active online daters consisting of eight individuals who volunteered to collect and donate correspondences. I term these 'participatory data collectors'. In these cases, the collectors worked as temporary fieldworkers and gathered informed consent autonomously during interaction. To protect the identity of the participants, I provided users with pseudonyms and anonymized all identifying information such as locations, occupations, family relations, etc. (which is true for this article as well).<sup>16</sup> This was the minimum of protection I provided for all users whose data I accessed. I further implemented ethical precautions by letting the participants select which data to share, thereby creating a more agentic space for my participants.

Through conversations with users and participant observation, I was made aware that users engaged their friends in their online dating activities by showing the profiles of the people in which they had an interest to each other during face-to-face interaction. I then recorded conversations between friends who read and evaluated online dating profiles together. In research on online dating, a large number of studies have focused on self-display and self- and other-presentations in dating profiles, with only little attention being paid to the reading and consumption of dating profiles (Jones 2012). Increased use of social media has made online social contexts closely intertwined with offline contexts since most young people make daily digital appearances through which offline relations are negotiated (Jones 2004; Stæhr 2014). To capture the intertwined dimension of digital and face-to-face interaction in the process of reading online dating profiles, I recorded simultaneous spoken conversations and web movements of two pairs of female friends and one pair of male friends while jointly engaged in reading online dating sites. In this case, only the friends gave informed consent, not the owners of the profiles that were being evaluated.

In the following analysis, I discuss the three types of data, each of which frames different approaches to informed consent.

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<sup>16</sup> I have chosen not to treat participants' screen names as publishable, acknowledging that I thereby lose an important object of analysis. Screen names on the dating sites are often creative and work as one of the tools available to users in their self-presentation. However, publishing screen names does not assure full protection of participants as these are sometimes traceable on the Web (Androutsopoulos 2013).

### ***3.1. Consent-gaining in romantic participant observation***

During the period of data collection, I logged on through my personal dating profile every day for a month and then more sporadically for the next five months. While online, I searched through male profiles and wrote field notes. Eventually, I started corresponding with various male users – some conversations were initiated by me, others by male users. Researchers have pointed out the difficulties and confusion in ensuring fully informed consent when the researcher carries more than simply the role of a researcher – for instance: the role of a wife, lover, close friend, or teacher – since such relationships facilitate contexts in which participants may tend to forget the fact that casual and intimate conversations also form part of a data set (Barton 2011, Coates 1996, Irwin 2006).

My approach was to be present as my private self but not keep my professional engagement with the medium hidden. In my profile, I had checked the relevant boxes with information on my occupation, revealing that I did research in online communication but without specifying the concrete topic. I did not typically address the topic of my research myself, but if asked, I did tell openly about my research. My general approach was to engage in e-mail conversations with users on a more private level at first and then reveal my research interests when the interaction got a little further and a potential offline face-to-face meeting was discussed. Revealing my combined interests was always a difficult point as I feared that my interlocutors would get offended and feel exploited. However, I was surprised by my interlocutors' responses and displays of agency in the interaction. It soon became clear that participants were capable of using their agency in rather delicate ways to turn the research into an interactional vehicle contributing to their own romantic projects.

The following excerpt demonstrates how Niels manages to discuss ethics when confronted with my researcher status while using the new information as a way to flirt with me. The conversation was initiated by Niels through an e-mail sent from his dating account to mine. On this basis, a correspondence of six e-mails followed over a period of 12 days. Afterwards, Niels and I went on two dates until I decided not to continue our meetings as I did not feel ready to engage in further developing the relationship. Prior to the following excerpt, Niels had suggested that we should meet face-to-face.

### Example 1

**December 12, 2011 1:29pm**

**Author: Kristine**

Original:		Translation:	
01	Jeg kunne godt være frisk på at mødes engang i næste uge.	01	I would be up for meeting sometime next week.
02	Denne uge er jeg lige på kursus i Sønderjylland	02	This week I'm just taking a course in Southern Jutland
03	Inden vi mødes, skal du dog lige vide, at jeg pt. er i gang med et forskningsprojekt i internetdating på KU og derfor nok ikke kan lade helt være med at have det med et eller andet sted i tasken.	03	Before we meet, however, you should just know that I'm currently doing a research project on online dating at KU [abbreviation for University of Copenhagen] and thus probably can't really not bring that along with me to some extent.
04	Det ændrer dog ikke ved, at jeg som privatperson godt kunne tænke mig at snakke videre med dig...	04	However, it doesn't change the fact that, as a private person, I'd like to keep talking to you...

**December 12 2011, 3:24pm**

**Author: Niels**

Original:		Translation:	
05	Bedre sent end aldrig.	05	Better late than never.
06	Det lyder spændende med dit forskningsprojekt.	06	It sounds exciting with your research project.
07	Jeg sætter virkelig stor pris på din ærlighed, at du ikke bare mødtes med mig og lod mig sidde der uvidende om hvad du "bruger" mig til ;)	07	I really appreciate your honesty, that you didn't just meet me and let me sit there without knowing what you're "using" me for ;)
08	Jeg stiller sgu gerne op, hvis du skal have et interview eller	08	I don't mind volunteering if you need an interview or some

	nogle spørgsmål besvaret, bare det bliver anonymiseret i projektet, det er klart.		questions answered, if it gets anonymized in the project, of course.
09	Det er faktisk modigt af dig at fortælle mig det, synes jeg.	09	It's actually pretty brave of you to tell me, I think.
10	Nu håber jeg selvfølgelig ikke du bare klapper i som en østers og det bare er mig der sidder og udleverer mig selv...ha ha.	10	Now of course I hope you won't just be all quiet and that it'll be just me sitting there and giving myself away...ha ha.
11	Nå men, pyt anyways, det sjove ved dette medie er vel i virkeligheden også, at man ikke rigtig har noget at miste...andet end tid selvfølgelig.	11	Well but, whatever anyways, the fun thing about this medium is really also that you have nothing to lose...other than time of course.
12	Vil mægtig gerne mødes over en kop et-eller-andet, om ikke andet kan du jo fortælle mig, hvad du der nået frem til i din forskning indtil videre (kunne jo godt bruge nogle fifs...ha ha).	12	I'd really like to meet for a cup of something, at least, you can tell me about what you've found in your research so far(I could use some tips...ha ha).
13	Næste uge engang er fint med mig.	13	Next week sometime is fine with me.

Information about my researcher status is delivered in one sentence (03) after two initial sentences accepting the invitation and delivering practical information relevant for setting up the meeting (01-02). The sequential order of the communicative moves immediately raises ethical questions. Mentioning the research project after assenting to Niels' invitation has implications. The encouragement of his advances towards an intimate relation obviously may impact on the following negotiation of consent. This is supported by Niels' consecutive orientation to the project as a context for flirtation. Niels' decision on whether to participate in the research, thus, becomes embedded in a symbolic game of exchange. Using Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework it may be argued that since Niels has been given a preferred response to his invitation, he is, in virtue of social norms, obliged to give something in return, i.e. consent.

Moreover, the presentation of the research project is mitigated by use of hedges ('lige' (just), 'helt' (to some extent), 'nok' (probably)) and the metaphorical expression 'et eller

andet sted i tasken' (03), which literally translates to 'somewhere in the bag'. This suggests that the research is to be viewed as a secondary thing and only provides Niels with a vague idea of how and to what extent my researcher status may influence our future date.

Considering the ideal of fully informed consent as providing the research subject with information about potential risks and harms, both the sequential order and the mitigated nature of the research presentation can easily be criticized. It is doubtful whether Niels can be considered to possess enough information to make a competent choice as to whether to participate. On the other hand, the very open-ended description of my researcher status and how it may influence our future meeting gives Niels the opportunity to deploy his own limitations for participation rather than being forced into a conventionalized understanding of research ethics.

Turning to Niels' response, the information about my researcher status is generally encountered positively. After an introductory term that politely expresses a preference for having been made aware of the research project at an earlier state of the correspondence (05), Niels moves on to apply his own ethical code to the situation. He sets up the scenario of what he would have found unethical – and then evaluates the current situation as not being that scenario (07). He thereby uses the situation to review his own limits for ethical appropriateness. The new information of my combined interests furthermore gives him occasion to think aloud about the future meeting under these new circumstances (10). Here he places an implicit request for the meeting not to exclusively be an interview but also a date and thereby draws focus to the private and romantic aspect of the meeting. Niels does not simply manage to express his ethical opinion on the changed situation but also turns the new information and the resulting researcher-researched-relationship into something flirtatious. The expression “‘bruger” mig til ;)” (“use” me for ;)”) (07) indicates exploitation and suggests that Niels now views me as somebody taking advantage of him for professional reasons. However, “bruger” (use) is put in quotation marks and ended by a blinking smiley, both of which function to make the statement more playful and even potentially flirtatious. He further plays up this dynamic by jokingly positioning himself as a novice and me as a coach (12). Through this playful orientation to the new power relation between us, Niels could be viewed as positioning himself as the vulnerable object and me as the dominant subject playing on a sexual innuendo of pleasurable dominance and exploitation. That Niels is capable of keeping the situation flirtatious could be seen as a demonstration of agency on his part. By turning our new positions into a flirtatious dynamic, he sexualizes my researcher position and thereby draws some of the professional power out of that same position.

Niels' display of agency is a reminder that research participants enter the encounter with their own interactional projects as well as their own – and maybe more relevant – ethical codes that they may be capable of applying. In this case, a more equal context for discussing ethics was made possible by the open-ended description of the research project. This does not mean that the researcher should neglect any ethical precaution, but rather that she should be aware that institutional protection also carries the risk of ignoring research participants' autonomy.

Looking back, it is clear that there might have been more correct ways of creating a situation in which Niels could give consent. I could have provided him with more information, could have addressed my research interests earlier on in our e-mail interaction, or could have been more explicit about my confused feelings regarding my mixed role as researcher and private self. Yet undertaking inductive research in general and romantic participant observation more specifically offers no straightforward overview of the consequences of the research. When informing Niels of my researcher status, I had no idea how it would actually affect our meeting.

My own romantic involvement was in some ways even an advantage in the sense that it potentially balanced out some of the authority immanent in my institutional status. By engaging my private romantic self, I simultaneously took up a vulnerable position. I wanted Niels to like me and was curious as well as nervous about how our date would turn out. Revealing my researcher identity was a difficult task and made me anxious of whether my professional career would stand in the way of private opportunities for finding a romantic partner. I found that the giving up of control, which can always be only partial, and the exploration of less predictable and opaque situations gave rise to understanding intimate interaction in a new way. By being insecure and privately invested in the data, I gained access to the emotional experience that is attached to the process of writing to a potential partner, setting up a meeting, and eventually dating. Other researchers report that active use of their sexuality in data collection gave rise to similar insights into the embodied and affective aspects of a sexual culture (Jacobs 2010, Lunsing 1999). Online dating is both an entertaining enterprise as well as a vehicle for exhaustive and intense affective experiences including joyful expectation, intimate recognition, and sad disappointment. I found that possessing lived experiences of these workings not only made me a connected interviewer and observer, but also provided me with solid ground for asking the right research questions.



### ***3.2. Participants' negotiation of informed consent***

Through the method of romantic participant observation, I was in charge of how my interlocutors were informed about the research project. In the following example, I let my participatory data collector autonomously handle the gaining of consent and thereby gave up control. As will become clear, the interactional context does not vary considerably from the example above.

When working with participatory data collectors, I chose to let them decide the best way of collecting informed consent from their interlocutors. As these were intimate situations, and much was at risk for my data collectors with regard to their emotional investment in the online dating activities, I decided that it was important to value their senses of the most comfortable means of collecting consent. Rather than imposing institutionalized ethical standards of how and when to collect informed consent, I considered, based on my previous research experience, that my data collectors' own expertise in online dating and intimate interaction was a better parameter for ethical decisions. I thus gave my participants the choice of how to collect informed consent according to what they felt most comfortable with in each situation. The participants working as participatory data collectors may have been more interested in protecting their own interests than those of their interlocutors. They may have felt in debt towards me to ensure data and, therefore, have presented the projects in favorable ways that would lead to consent. However, the majority of my participatory data collectors did not gain consent from any of their interlocutors, which demonstrates that many participants have been presented to the research in ways that have made them comfortable not to consent.

I initially offered my participatory data collectors the option for me to do the job of collecting consent for them by getting in touch with their interlocutors during or after their interaction. None of my data collectors viewed this as an attractive offer as they wished to control the situation themselves in a more direct manner. I sent each of the data collectors an e-mail describing the aim of the project, the types of data the project sought, how data would be handled and anonymized, my contact information, and an invitation to contact me with any type of questions. My participants used this informational e-mail to forward or copy-and-paste directly into e-mails in the process of seeking consent. This independent means of collecting informed consent resulted in a variety of approaches. The same data collector did not necessarily choose the same approach in every case but adjusted the task to the individual circumstances. Most of my data collectors, however, chose to collect consent at the end of complete correspondences. Only in three cases did they collect informed consent at the beginning of or during the conversation. This

tendency indicates that before addressing the topic of consent data collectors in this context aimed at establishing good personal relations with potential participants. A similar trend was obvious in the case between Niels and myself in the previous example. Arguing that the fieldworker acts strategically and deliberately in creating close relationship that may more easily lead to consent would be mere speculation. But, as the following example confirms, the sequential order is worth reflecting upon since the interaction prior to the negotiation of consent establishes conditions imbued with power that may influence participant's willingness to consent.

An additional important point when using participatory data collectors and conducting of online participant observation is that community members may experience this as an intrusion. Studies on attitudes towards researchers on publicly accessible mailing lists discussing sensitive and controversial topics show that researchers are in some contexts viewed as "research paparazzis" and "lurkers," threatening a safe and confidential environment (Chen, Hall & Johns 2004). The method of engaging active members in a community during data collection may be criticized for further internalizing the "lurking" activities of the "research paparazzi." On the other hand, as I argue in this article, integrating data collection into users' ongoing activities puts the members in charge and grounds ethical decisions such as when it is appropriate to ask for an interaction to be part of data in the users' situated knowledge. King (2009) offers a fruitful approach for enabling an open space for users to question and discuss research activity. By sending out e-mails to chat room members and designing a website with information on the research, users were offered an opportunity to interact with the researcher and discuss potentially undesirable research activity.

The following excerpt once again demonstrates the flirtatious and ambiguous circumstances under which informed consent was obtained. The collection of consent is negotiated in the beginning of a chat conversation. The chat occurred between my participatory data collector Maria and Jonas, a male user of the dating site in which Maria was then a member. This conversation was the first contact between the two members and was initiated by Maria.

## Example 2

Original:	Translation:
01 Jonas: ja, som du kan læse er jeg ret ny i 'gamet' - du også?	01 Jonas: yes, as you can read, I'm pretty new to the 'game' - you too?

<p>02 Maria: hehe nej ikke helt. Så kan godt lærer dig op. Men jeg er nok alligevel ret splittet med det, ligesom dig.</p> <p>03 Denne gang er jeg her som bidrager til noget forskning.</p> <p>04 Jonas: jo tak, lidt oplæring vil jeg værdsætte - synes det er en spøjs 'verden' herinde</p> <p>05 ?</p> <p>06 du er her for at studere folk, ikke af egen interesse?</p> <p>07 se det er endnu mere spøjst og næsten lidt unfair ;-)</p> <p>08 Maria: Hehe. Ja. Undskyld. Er her også fordi jeg gerne vil. - ikke af tvang. Tænk hvis man mødte en sød fyr..</p> <p>09 Jonas: ja du kunne jo 'risikere' det :-)</p> <p>10 Maria: Det er en pige der laver en Phd i net- dating.</p> <p>11 Ja, netop.</p> <p>12 Jonas: ok</p> <p>13 Maria: Kan derfor ligeså godt spørge dig om du ville have noget imod at vores samtaler også var et bidrag?</p> <p>14 Jonas: det er helt fint med mig</p>	<p>02 Maria: haha no not really. So can train you. But I'm probably pretty torn about it anyway, like you.</p> <p>03 This time I'm here as a contributor to some research.</p> <p>04 Jonas: yes please, I'd appreciate some training - I think it's an odd 'world' in here</p> <p>05 ?</p> <p>06 you're here to study people, not for your own interest?</p> <p>07 see that's even more odd and almost a bit unfair ;-)</p> <p>08 Maria: Haha. Yes. Sorry. Am also here because I want to. - not by force. Imagine if one met a sweet guy..</p> <p>09 Jonas: yes you might 'risk' that :-)</p> <p>10 Maria: It's a girl who does a PhD in online dating</p> <p>11 Yes, right.</p> <p>12 Jonas: okay</p> <p>13 Maria: Can just as well ask you if you'd be against our conversations also being a contribution?</p> <p>14 Jonas: that's perfectly fine with me</p>
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The activity of directly asking for and giving consent is managed rather easily within two turns (13-14). However, when viewing the fuller context, it is clear that the activity is embedded in a complex flirtatious exchange initiated by Maria. The question then arises: To what is Jonas actually consenting?

The first incident of flirtation appears prior to Maria's revelation of her identity as a participatory data collector. Maria uses Jonas' question about whether she is new to online dating (01) to create a playful relation. Based on her status as an experienced user of online dating Maria flirtatiously offers to train Jonas (02) which Jonas in turn accepts (04). She uses the Danish term 'lære dig op' (train you), a verb that is most often used in a workplace context, in which a boss or more experienced colleague trains a new employee to handle a profession. The offer and the lexical choice together invokes a power dynamic in which the more capable and experienced interactant tells the novice what to do. Maria, thus, offers to train Jonas in the task of using an online dating site, which further means to seduce potential partners and in turn to potentially seduce her. By offering to be Jonas' trainer or 'master', she creates a relationship that has potential erotic connotations. The offer furthermore works to link them together as the training would possibly be something that could go on for longer than simply the interaction here and now. Here dominance and authority is taken up and played with, contributing to a flirtatious 'feel' in the interaction. In relation to informed consent, this negotiation of dominant and subordinate positions is remarkable as negotiating power relations is ultimately what informed consent is all about. In both the case of Maria and Jonas and the case of Niels and myself, participants construct a flirtatious tension by positioning each other according to relations of power.

Similar to the previous example the discussion of consent is integrated in an ongoing intimate exchange that arguably generates mechanisms of giving and receiving, potentially placing Jonas in an indebted position indulged to consent. Jonas initially responds to the new information by critically questioning Maria's motivation for engaging in online dating (05-06) and further assesses the situation as 'spøjst' (odd) and 'unfair', indicating that he does not approve. However, the following blinking smiley smoothens out the negative assessment and thereby preserves and encourages the flirtatious atmosphere in the conversation.

The flirting is further developed as Maria, after apologizing, hints at a potential match between herself and Jonas (08). She here turns away from her personal account to a more general

scenario by deploying the generic ‘man’ (generic ‘one’ or ‘you’), rather than using the first person pronoun ‘jeg’ (I). The strategy of deploying generic forms in flirtatious interaction is a tendency that is seen across more of the conversations in my data set. By changing between personal and generic forms, Maria creates a flirtatious dynamic in which she can express interest but avoid being explicit. Jonas responds to this potential scenario by bringing in the second person pronoun and thereby Maria in to the situation, but still keeping it open by leaving himself out (09). He thereby confirms a potential match between them.

On top of these instances of flirtation, Maria directly asks Jonas for his consent to participate in the research, and Jonas agrees (13-14). At this point, Jonas has only been given very limited information about the research project and potential risks and harms, and this information has been part of a flirtatious dynamic. As a result, his consent cannot be considered fully informed according to institutional standards (Thorne 1980). If this would be the complete discussion of consent, it would be easy to argue that Maria uses the flirtatious situation exploitatively to get Jonas to consent quickly to what she thinks is an interesting research project. However, Maria does not leave the negotiation at that. She continues a discussion throughout the remaining chat conversation in which she addresses the question of her motivation. Following up on this, she e-mails Jonas my written description of the research project.

Giving participants agency in intimate situations relies on an assumption that they know best when it is appropriate to bring in a request for consent. This approach allows for their personal preferences and style. At the same time, it requires the researcher to give up complete control. When letting participants collect consent, the researcher cannot fully ensure what and how much information is communicated. The researcher must also be prepared to accept a variety of approaches since the collection of consent is influenced by both personal style and the particular situation in which the interaction unfolds. Furthermore, some participants will have more agency than others, which may cause unwanted exploitation. The question arises as to whether it is unethical to give up control and responsibility as a researcher and let participants manage informed consent autonomously. This may lay out the groundwork for more manipulative ways of collecting consent in which the responsibility and care for *all* participants is sacrificed. As it is an emotionally invested person who collects consent, this person’s private interactional project may overrule basic ideas of responsibility and care for the other participant. On the other hand, the emotional involvement may also add a unique sensibility to the situation. It is possible that bringing in institutional norms about consent in individual intimate situations would be more disruptive and

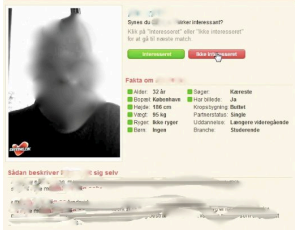
even more unethical. The two above examples both demonstrate how standardized implementations of informed consent run the risk of exposing symbolic violence towards participants' carefully constructed intimate frameworks. Bearing in mind that collecting fully informed consent is never possible in ethnography (Barton 2011, Thorne 1980), engaging participants' own approaches may be a more fruitful means of accessing their intimate interaction. One possible way of doing this with a stronger focus on securing every participant's interests could be to have an open ethical discussion with participatory data collectors prior to the data collection process. Such a discussion could address issues of dominance and vulnerability and potentially make data collectors more sensitive to different levels of agency in interaction.

#### ***4.3. The ethics of non-present digitally represented participants***

In the two above examples, the participants demonstrated agency in their abilities to question the research situation and further turn it into a beneficial interactional circumstance. However, in the final example, not all participants take part at the same level of interaction and thus do not have the same conditions for displaying agency. When collecting data that focuses on the reading of online dating profiles and the cohesion between online and offline contexts, the researcher is immediately confronted with questions as to who counts as participants and whether various modes mean various levels of participation and thereby various rights among participants. Should evaluation of an online profile on a dating site be considered an evaluation of a publicly circulating digital text or an evaluation of a participant?

The following excerpt demonstrates the difficulties in managing the ethical codes of the human subject research model when working with combined online and offline data. The excerpt is taken from a conversation between the close female friends Louise and Stine. The women are aged 29-30 and had, at the time of the recording, an online dating profile on a large Danish dating site. The women had met at Louise's house to dine. After dinner, they sat together in front of Louise's laptop, logged on to their dating accounts, and browsed 43 male users while discussing the men's attractiveness and potential as romantic partners. The excerpt demonstrates a negative evaluation in which both looks and profile text are commented on.

### Excerpt 3

	Original:		Translation:	Screen:
01	Louise: ej	01	Louise: no	
02	Stine: <u>YYY</u> ((brugernavn))	02	Stine: <u>YYY</u> ((username))	
03	Louise: ja o:g retardo	03	Louise: yes a:nd retardo	
04	Stine: han har fået et <u>spark</u>	04	Stine: he got <u>kicked</u>	
05	af en hest	05	by a horse	
06	da han var seks år gammel	06	when he was six years old	
07	[eller sådan noget]	07	[or something like that]	
08	Louise: [O:KAY] hvordan kan man starte med en tekst	08	Louise: [O:KAY] how can one start with a text	
09	YYY ((citerer to sætninger fra begyndelsen af mandens profiltekst om, at han ikke møder nogle søde piger i sin hverdag))	09	YYY ((quotes two sentences from the beginning of the man's profile text in which he writes about not meeting any sweet girls in his everyday life))	
10	allerede der så ved man jo at du er		already there, one knows that you're	
11	smånederen		kind of lame	
12	Stine: ja	Stine:	yes	

In the excerpt, the two women quickly affiliate in a negative evaluation of the man's looks, initiated by Louise (01, 03) and followed up by Stine (04-07). Louise then moves on to assess the beginning of the man's profile text by quoting two sentences from the text that she finds particularly unattractive. The women's evaluation continues beyond this excerpt, constructing further negative assessments.

In this type of recording, the users who were evaluated had not been informed about the recording nor given their consent to the recording. The men did not consent to be part of my research, yet they did accept to be evaluated by other users on the dating site. In the recordings, the male users appeared exclusively through the digital texts and photos of their dating profiles. The question thus arises: How should one deal with data when a third person enters the interaction in the form of a digital representation? Must there be special ethical considerations when user profiles are recorded quoted as part of another conversation of which the profile owners are not actively a part? Choosing a textual approach to online material, the dating profiles could be viewed simply as texts that have been put out on the open Web for others to see and evaluate and thus do not apply to the human subject research model. However, participants produced these texts and are represented through them (cf. Bolander & Locher 2014). Are the online profiles to be viewed as participants in the interaction or simply material circumstances around and within the conversation, comparable to two people reading and talking about content in a magazine? Consuming online dating profiles may be compared to watching a performance (Jones 2012). In this type of interaction, the audience directs its gaze at the performer and claims the right to evaluate the performance. This creates an asymmetrical power balance, as the performer cannot claim the same rights. Yet, as Jones argues, an online dating site is set up not just for subjects to display themselves to desiring gazes but also for subjects to communicate. The profiles thus represent ongoing communicative acts between participants. The male user in the above excerpt is communicating with the women by having made certain photos available in a certain order, by having made certain standard information available (such as height, weight, age), and by having written a certain profile text. Through the act of visiting someone's profile, the dating site will automatically send a message to the profile owner with information about the visit and a link to the visitor's personal profile. This means that the women in turn make themselves available to the man's evaluative gaze through the act of visiting his profile. The interactive situation is thus not strictly asymmetrical but rather a complex context of transmitting and evaluating representations.



The data's complex constellation of participants also creates a complex situation for representation. In any publication or presentation of the recording, all identifiable information about the men, including photos, has been strictly anonymized to assure as much protection as possible. Yet the male users who appear in the data have had no chance to influence the way in which they are represented in the data and in academic publications and presentations. The men represent themselves to the unclear addressee of the female audience on the dating site, the women then represent the men through their evaluations to one another, and I finally represent the men through the women's representation in academic analysis. With this type of data, I as a researcher have limited resources to represent the men in a non-harmful way since my representation is shaped by the women's mostly negative and objectifying representation. Working with this data set, I ask myself if I reproduce the women's objectification in my representation. It may well be that I further some of the negative objectification of these men in my academic processing of the data, but by having a critical approach, I hope to minimize potential harm.

All research is perspectival one way or another. In this particular case, I have chosen the perspective of the reader and how the reading of profiles is carried out as a shared activity in online-offline contexts. As a result, my analysis does not focus on the men's representations *per se* but instead on the women's interpretations and evaluations of those representations in their search for a romantic partner. In this sense, the women could be regarded as more fully participating in the study. By having proceeded in this way, I hope to contribute further knowledge on an aspect of online dating that is lacking attention – while accepting the risk of not giving all participants the same rights of influencing the final academic representation of them.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed my experiences in collecting naturally occurring intimate online data through various methods. The article is not an attempt to produce a set of universal guidelines on how to conduct empirically bounded language and sexuality research. Rather, I have explored my methods and reflections with the goal of making evident the multifaceted research context of ethnographic and empiric research in the field of language and sexuality. My three methods each present their own sets of ethical challenges: *The method of romantic participant observation* creates fuzzy boundaries between the researcher's professional and private selves and thereby creates a difficult and unclear context in which the research subject can choose whether to participate. At the same time, data shows that the research subject can be capable of agentively negotiating both

research and romantic connections. The researcher's romantic involvement not only produces an ambiguous context for the concept of informed consent; it also facilitates a more vulnerable position for the researcher and thus gives access to emotional insight into the process of online dating.

*The method of participatory data collectors* is an attempt to value and make use of participants' own intimate knowledge. By letting participants independently collect data and negotiate informed consent, the researcher avoids interrupting the intimate situation with conventionalized ideas of how and when consent should be collected. Giving participants the freedom to negotiate informed consent in their own ways ultimately gave me access to intimate data that I would not otherwise have been able to access. Loosening control at the same time runs the risk of giving certain more agentive participants a superior position from which they may potentially exploit others in favor of personal agendas. Being unable to care equally for all participants is a great risk to run, and as I have discussed, there may be improved ways of working with participatory data collectors by training them in research ethics prior to the collection process.

*The method of offline data with online content* raised a fundamental ethical issue of who to consider a participant when some participants' appear purely through digital representations. This situation is not unique to online dating since communication with and about people represented on various digital platforms is steadily increasing with the popularity of social media. In my approach, I did not seek informed consent from the owners of the dating profiles that appeared in the recording. In this sense, I did not view them as participants to the same degree as the two participants having the conversation about them. To me, there is no clear answer as to how to view these digitally represented participants. I did try to protect the profile owners by anonymizing all identifiable information. However, the data creates a complex context for representation in which I am limited to producing a third-hand-removed representation that can only be based on the women's negative and objectifying evaluations.

Overall, I have suggested an open approach that creates an agentive space for participants by allowing the inclusion of their interactional expertise and ethical codes. I have argued that institutional standards for gaining consent may risk disrupting participants' carefully constructed intimate frameworks. My data has demonstrated how participants are perfectly capable of integrating discussions of research-related power issues into their ongoing romantic interactions. In the attempts to access spontaneous intimate interaction, it is thus worth incorporating participants' personal ethical approaches, acknowledging their fine-tuned skills for preserving intimacy. Such an approach potentially nourishes exploitative behavior but may also be a more

respectful means of accessing the intimate lives of research subjects. The method of accessing participants' intimate lives will vary according to context, and researchers may have different experiences with the same approaches. All too often, method-oriented discussions are left out of scholarly articles and presentations in the rush to reach the results. Yet these discussions are necessary for developing the field and further improving empirically based understandings of language in intimate interaction. It would be impossible to conclude this article with a standard suggestion of how to ethically collect data on intimate material. Instead, I hope that these reflections will form part of an ongoing discussion of methods in the field of language and sexuality.

## **5. Article II**

# **Women's Homosocial Constructions of Heterosexual Desire in Online Dating**

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### **Abstract**

Using the notion of homosocial desire (Sedgwick 1985), this article explores how homosociality ties into heterosexual desire in an online dating context. During the past two decades, the number of users has increased rapidly and online dating today forms a key context for negotiating romantic relations. Thus, online dating practices are rich fields for investigating the workings of desire. Based on audiovisual recordings of two Danish female friends engaging in online dating activities, this article demonstrates how participants, through joint stance-taking, co-construct shared desire and adjust individually-produced desire to create homosocial affiliation. Hence, in this case, heterosexual desire construction is a collaborative undertaking generated through homosocial bonding. The performed desire carries a strong physical focus, partly produced by the participants' attention to bodily detail and partly through the dating site's visual design. The article concludes by arguing for the incorporation of attention to homosocial aspects in research into heterosexual desire.

**Keywords:** Online dating; Homosociality; Desire; Heterosexuality; Stance-taking

## **Introduction: Homosocial aspects of desire**

Researchers within the field of language and sexuality (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2004, Cameron and Kulick 2003a) have debated the methodological difficulties in investigating a phenomenon such as desire in linguistic and interactional analysis, as it is most often understood as an internal state of the individual's body and mind. As Eckert states:

We tend to view desire [...] as an individual, private, thing. It is desire, in other words, that brings the mystification into the study of sexuality, and it is in contemplating desire that we are inclined to fall into an asocial and naturalized view of sexuality. The challenge, then, is to adopt an approach that focuses on the social mediation of desire. (2002:100)

At the same time as desire is considered to be an individual experience, the enactment and negotiation of desire is commonly portrayed as the exclusive interaction between two mutually desiring participants – a man and a woman. However, studies of adolescent girls demonstrate that numerous participants are involved in the act of planning, negotiating and establishing heterosexual romantic relations (Eckert 2011, Kotthoff 2008). Thus, the negotiation is not merely constituted by two romantic partners, but also includes subsidiary participants who co-act in the process of constructing certain persons as acceptable and attractive objects of desire. Homosocial constructions of desire have primarily been examined among adolescent girls and young men in offline settings (Georgakopoulou 2007, Kiesling 2005) and in literary studies (Sedgwick 1985). As the Internet becomes a key social context for people seeking romantic partner, the question of how subsidiary participants take part in online flirtation emerges. Scholarly approaches to online dating practices have focused on interaction and self-and other-presentation among users online, whereas homosocial aspects of such practices – i.e. how user's social networks take part in the process of finding, assessing and communicating with potential partners – remain under-studied.

This article examines how heterosexual online dating may also involve homosocial activities. Based on audiovisual recordings, analyses show how homosociality frames heterosexual desire construction. The article addresses two questions: (1) How is female heterosexual desire for online-mediated men and male bodies enacted in talk in a homosocial context? (2) How can desire be understood as a phenomenon established and negotiated by social actors beyond those involved

in the romantic act? By use of the concept of stance-taking (Du Bois 2007) it is demonstrated how homosocially related participants assess male objects according to affiliation on the interpersonal level. It is argued that, in this case, acts of desire are collaborative undertakings, as the production of heterosexual desire is generated through homosocial bonding.

### **Heterosexual desire and homosociality in interaction**

Since digital communication technologies have entered the domestic sphere (Baron 2008), making computers and smartphones an integrated part of the individual's social life, romantic practice is now partly enacted in online contexts. Thus, online dating practices are rich fields of desire production as members continuously, through various modes, articulate and negotiate sexual and romantic wants (e.g. Bogetić 2013, Jones 2012).

Within the field of language and sexuality, desire has been theorized with inspiration from psychoanalysis and poststructuralist understandings of power, contributing an emphasis on social and linguistic manifestations (Cameron and Kulick 2003a). In a few words, desire may be understood as that “which we lack but want” (Kiesling 2005:699)<sup>17</sup>. The desire constructed by the women in this study may be broadly termed as a “desire for a romantic partner”, which, broken down, consists of attraction to a complex cluster of aspects (e.g. specific physicality, sexual behavior, social skills and affectivity) according to which a potential partner is valued.

In her groundbreaking book *Between Men* (1985), literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers the term *homosocial desire* as a concept for understanding how desire is constructed in social contexts. Desire is a dialogic phenomenon; a social relation rather than an inner individual state. Sedgwick argues that desire operates in a triangular form in such literary themes as marriage arrangements and male rivalry concerning a woman. In these situations, two men are linked in a homosocial relation via a woman. By drawing a line to connect the male subjects in this literal love triangle, Sedgwick highlights the desire established between them. The female object is a conduit for this. Thus, Sedgwick's work illustrates the patriarchal structures of society in which women are traded as commodities and vehicles for the males' reciprocal desires. Sedgwick uses *homosocial desire* as a blanket term for all forms of desire within same-gender interaction, ranging from erotic desires at one end of a continuum, to social desires at the other

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<sup>17</sup> This simplified definition serves as a starting point for thinking about desire, but should not elude one from considering the more complex workings of desire and its relation to power. For further discussions, see Harvey and Shalom (1997) and Cameron and Kulick (2003b).

(1985:2). This paper focuses on two interrelated aspects of homosocial desire: *Heterosexual desire*, i.e. sexual and romantic desire directed at the opposite gender, and *homosociality*, i.e. the interactional negotiation of both heterosexual and homosocial desire in same-gender contexts.

Not surprisingly, given its origin in masculinity studies, research into the concept of homosocial desire within language, gender and sexuality has been deployed primarily in analyses of men's interaction (Kiesling 2005, 2011, Milani and Jonsson 2011). A body of sociolinguistic work on girls and women talking desirously about boys and men also exists, but is not explicitly framed in terms of homosocial desire, but rather by such concepts as friendship and connection among female peers (Eder 1993; Georgakopoulou 2007; Kotthoff 2008; Mortensen 2010a). As Kiesling (2002, 2005, 2011) points out, heterosexual desire is a widely used resource for performing homosocial desire. While the women also use heterosexual desire as a resource for forging a homosocial relation, this article aims to understand how stance-taking in homosocial interaction creates a framework for the construction of heterosexual desire. As demonstrated, the women's desire for homosocial engagement makes them adjust and negotiate their expressions of heterosexual desire.

### **Taking desirous stances**

In the present study, I map Sedgwick's triangular model of homosocial desire onto the linguistic model of the stance triangle (Du Bois 2007), since the process of desire construction in this context is ultimately carried out by taking desirous stances towards male objects. According to Du Bois, stance-taking comprises the explicit act of expressing one's stance towards a stance object, while at the same time it includes acts of subject positioning and intersubjectivity. Any type of stance is enacted dialogically and always includes three simultaneous aspects: Evaluation, positioning, and alignment (Du Bois 2007:169). This triangular model allows us to understand how stances of shared desire create social bonds between subjects in interaction. The stances taken by the women in the present case function as the projection of desire onto online male bodies while at the same time establishing solidarity in the homosocial relation. The most outspoken way of doing stance in this context is through assessment talk, defined by Goodwin and Goodwin as "evaluating in some fashion persons and events being described within talk" (1992:154). The online dating site constitutes an environment that invites assessment talk, as participating in the site's activities partly consist in assessing other members. Through assessment sequences, users articulate and negotiate

specific romantic/erotic preferences. By observing the objects being assessed, the assessables, and how these are evaluated either positively or negatively, it is possible to understand what is being viewed as desirous in this context. Additionally, turn-by-turn analysis of how interpersonal stances are achieved through alignment and affiliation (Stivers 2008) gives concrete insight into how desire is generated through homosocial bonding.

In this study, the women's stances may be understood as elements in the process of heterosexual female identity construction. According to Thurlow and Jarworski (2011:245) social identity may be conceptualized as the accumulation of stances taken over time. Bucholtz (2009:2) points out that stances do not directly index specific identity categories such as gender or sexuality, but are better understood as interactional moves for constructing personas. The stances taken by the women in the present study should not be interpreted as direct indicators of the identity category of "heterosexual woman". Rather, they are part of the activity of developing coordinated erotic taste. Arguably, this activity feeds into a broader construction of identity, as it is carried out repeatedly in various contexts, accumulating positions that in interplay with larger macro-level ideologies produce solid heterosexual identities.

While stance-taking has recently been investigated in relation to online environments (Jones, Schieffelin and Smith 2011, Walton and Jaffe 2011, Kang and Chen 2014), such studies focus purely on the online mode. Likewise, although online media have been accorded a great deal of attention in recent research, online dating is still under-investigated. Within the tradition of language, gender and sexuality studies, a majority of the existing work focuses on gay men's online dating and erotic activities (e.g. Canakis 2010, King 2011, Milani 2013). Most existing research on heterosexual online dating has a main focus on textual self- and other-presentation in dating profiles (e.g. Ellison, Heino and Gibbs 2006, Jacobs 2010, Frohlick and Migliardi 2011). The interactional aspect of online dating has not gained as much attention in the literature, perhaps due to challenges regarding the collection of naturally occurring data with informed consent<sup>18</sup>. However, a few researchers have examined the interactional strategies of users in heterosexual and gay dating chat rooms, based on interactional data (Adams-Thies 2012, Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008, Jones 2005, King 2011)<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Mortensen (2015) elaborates on the topic of the collection of intimate data.

<sup>19</sup> All scholars focus on chat rooms, which in the case of Danish online dating services are a form of communication that is losing its popularity. For instance, the most used dating service in Denmark, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk), does not even offer the option of participation in general chat room interaction, but solely offers personal emails and private chats.



In the present study, I focus on interaction both online on the dating site and offline in front of the screen, in order to examine how shared stance-taking at the micro level of turn-by-turn interaction shapes the construction of desire.

### **Browsing together**

As part of a larger project on language and heterosexual desire, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork among female users of online dating. From observations and interviews, it appeared that engaging in each other's online dating activities was a widespread practice. Most commonly, such activities would consist of showing specific male profiles to each other – an activity that increased throughout my fieldwork as the shared accessibility to dating sites enhanced via smartphone applications<sup>20</sup>. More rarely, collective dating activities would involve recommending male users to friends, if they were considered to be a better match for a friend. Following up on this observation, I asked two female friends to record their shared engagement in online dating activities. The recording was initiated by me, but it documented a common everyday activity when spending time together.

This paper focuses on the conversation between Louise and Stine (both names are pseudonyms). The women were aged 29 and 30, respectively, at the time of the study, and had been close friends since their teenage years. Both were experienced online daters, with profiles on and off the largest Danish dating site, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk). The women's way of spending time together involved regular meetings and weekly phone calls in which they, amongst other things, would talk about personal romantic and erotic activities. The recording was carried out one evening at Louise's apartment home. Throughout most of the recording, the women were logged onto Stine's account. At the end of the conversation they briefly logged onto Louise's account and then returned to Stine's. During the conversation, the women browsed through 43 male profiles – 34 while logged onto Stine's profile and nine while logged onto Louise's profile.

The recording was made using the screen-tracking software Hypercam. This software enables the researcher to audio record face-to-face offline interaction, as well as visually tracking

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<sup>20</sup> Since I conducted the major part of my fieldwork in 2011-2012, online dating has advanced rapidly in line with general digital development. The most striking change was the launch of the application Tinder, which works as a simple application that connects to members' Facebook account and smartphone GPS. Thus, users are supplied with quick and accurate information on a potential partner's social network and geographical proximity. More than 150,000 Danes are currently using Tinder. My ongoing observations of the dating culture among research participants and my own personal network show that the convenience and constant access to the online dating market provided by smartphone applications, has increased the homosocial activity of co-assessing potential romantic partners.

the screen and the cursor movements of the simultaneous online interaction. The excerpts in this article are represented as multimodal transcriptions in order to capture spoken conversation, cursor movements and screen activity. This type of audiovisual online and offline data offers a unique opportunity to look at the construction of heterosexual desire, while also providing insight into how simultaneous homosocial interaction plays into this process. It has been pointed out that strict distinction between online and offline modes cannot be upheld since participants treat the two modes as intertwined; users give social meaning to online activities in offline contexts, and vice versa (e.g, Stæhr 2014a). The recorded Hypercam data offers an insight into how online and offline modes are synthesized in immediate interaction. Being able to analyze face-to-face interaction simultaneously with screen activity provides a basis for understanding how participants manage interaction with multiple participants and in multiple modes at the same time. Moreover, access to both cursor movements and spoken conversation opens up a perspective on how online media are read and given meaning, since the data demonstrates which online functions are operated by the users and which features on the screen are given value. In the transcription of the excerpts, mouse activity is documented, since working the mouse in this context is an important interactional resource. Mouse maneuvers generate points of attention and arguments in the verbal interaction, and thus they become a medium for turn-taking (cf. Raudaskoski 2003). As it will become evident in the analysis, talk and cursor acts are entirely integrated, since talk manages attention on the screen and cursor movements manages talk. Therefore, online and offline interaction cannot be distinguished as two aspects deriving from two different places, but must be viewed as one complex context of multimodal interaction.

### **The dating site as a frame for desire construction**

Recent statistics from Denmark show that around 500,000 people out of a total population of 5 million make use of online dating services (Danske Medier 2012). [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) is the oldest and largest dating site in Denmark, founded in 1995 and hosting approximately 100,000 users. The site primarily serves heterosexual users and offers membership that allows users to create a personal profile, view others' profiles, and be viewed by others. To be able to contact other users, a paying membership of DKK 219 (around USD 40) is required.

On entering the site, the women are presented with a row of male users who fit their predefined search criteria. Figure 1 depicts a male profile as viewed through Stine and Louise's

accounts. The dating site interface enables the multimodal display of the user, involving photographs, written text and graphic elements.

Figure 1: Male personal profile on www.dating.dk

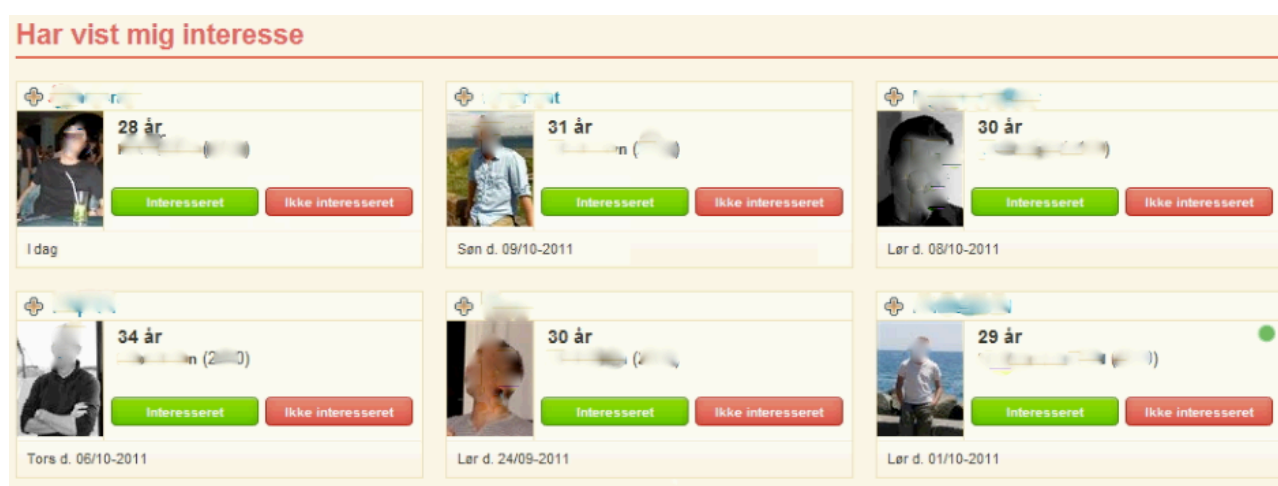


The display of the male user is divided into several parts, featuring a clear information hierarchy. A profile photo features prominently as the largest element in the layout (1). A short list of facts has a central position in the profile, informing the reader of physical characteristics, geographical location, children status and preferred type of relationship (2). Below, a previewed list of additional photos appears (3), which the reader can click on to enter a photo album with further visual information. The actual profile text in which the profile owner describes himself in a continuous text appears as the last section and requires the reader to scroll down to view the full text (4). The women's reading paths generally follow the structure laid down by the site, i.e. they first orient towards the large profile photo, and then typically access the photo album (3). Hence, the site's information hierarchy plays a dominant role in determining to which aspects of the objects desire is attached. The profile design clearly serves to categorize looks and physical attributes as prominent aspects of a romantic partner. Only few users act against the visual focus of the profile by simply not uploading any photos to their profile. However, in such cases Stine and Louise reject the profile

owner without even reading the text. This corresponds to information from other users who, when interviewed, reported that they had remarkably more success in getting in touch with other users when they uploaded photos to their profiles.

The profile view further offers a line of matching options and interactive choices, of which the women make use of the “Perfect Match” scheme (5) and the interested/not-interested function (6). The match scheme helps the visitor to quickly assess whether she is compatible, according to predefined preferences (age, height, weight, body, smoking habits, geographical proximity, children status, preferred type of relationship, and whether the profile includes photos). If all predefined categories fit each party’s preferences, the display will show a full green circle with a blinking golden star. Once again, the site’s predefined parameters for a “perfect match” influence what users may be oriented towards when defining the right partner. However, the site offers an additional service for individual preferences via an advanced search function in which preferred details of appearance, career and lifestyle can be entered. The “interested/not-interested” function (8) is used as a channel for initial contact, as it allows the reader to inform the profile owner of her interest without having to send a personal email. The function is applied by clicking either the color-coded green “interested” or red “not interested”, whereupon the reader – if interested – will be listed among other interested visitors on the profile owner’s account, as seen in the Figure below.

Figure 2: List of interested visitors on Stine’s profile



This is the most favored communicative function among the women. It is the first option they are oriented towards when they enter their accounts, and they keep returning to this list. This is a simplified and very binarized way of expressing potential desire, or the lack thereof, and as such restricts the users in terms of the ways that they can categorize each other. Rather than spending time and emotional energy on producing a free text via an email, the interested/not-interested option appeals to users, as they can quickly test reciprocal interest. The simple selection enhances the number of users who can be communicated with, thereby creating an efficient means of communication. Additionally, the function seems to encourage a pick-and-choose attitude, since saying yes or no is operated through a simple click on an icon.

In the following, the women's shared reading and assessments of the male profiles will be examined. The analysis focuses on how they construct and negotiate shared desire, knowing that the architecture of the dating site plays into the desire that they are able to produce.

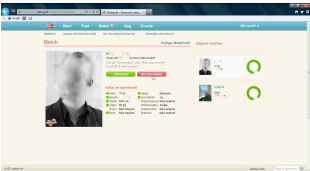
### **Non-desire, desire and adjustments**

In the analysis I demonstrate how the participants, through stance-taking practices, engage in the activities of doing non-desire, desire and adjustment of desire. The analysis of this article falls into three sections. Firstly, I focus on how non-desire is co-constructed through collaborative format tying (Goodwin 2006) and distinction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Secondly, I explore how initial non-desire can be negotiated into shared desire. Finally, I examine how individual desire is adjusted to ensure affiliation in the homosocial relation.

### ***Constructing shared heterosexual non-desire***

Most of the conversation between the women is characterized by the joint achievement of stances on the male users they browse through. The composite nature of these stances suggests that the construction of non-desire is just as important an online dating activity as the construction of desire. The excerpt below demonstrates how the women co-construct negative assessments of a male object.

Excerpt (1)<sup>21</sup>

	Speaker	Turn	Mouse movements	Screen
1	LOU:	<p>°ej undskyld° men er han ikke en lille bitte smule bælgøjet</p> <p><b>°excuse me° but isn't he a little bit pop-eyed</b></p>		
2			Stine holds the mouse still throughout the following 28 turns.	
3	STI:	<p>jo</p> <p><b>yes</b></p>		
4		<p>så er det li- han har sgu da lidt- et meget rundt hoved</p> <p><b>then it's just- he's really got a bit- a very round head</b></p>		
5	LOU:	@[@@]		
6	STI:	[@] @		
7		<p>han [mangler da-]</p> <p><b>isn't he [lacking-]</b></p>		
8	LOU:	<p>[uden at være] tyk</p> <p><b>[without being] fat</b></p>		
9	STI:	<p>mang[ler]</p> <p><b>lack[ing]</b></p>		
10	LOU:	<p>[så er] han faktisk meget-</p> <p><b>[he's] actually quite-</b></p>		
11	STI:	<p>mangler han ikke lidt kindben</p> <p><b>isn't he lacking a bit of cheekbone</b></p>		
12		<p>og lidt [ø:h]</p> <p><b>and a bit of [u:h]</b></p>		

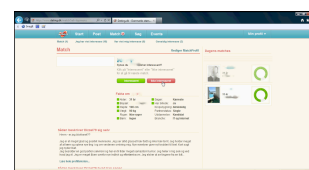
<sup>21</sup> See the index of transcription conventions at the end of this article.

13 LOU: [KÆBE]  
[JAW]  
14 han mangler kæbe  
**he's lacking jaw**  
15 STI: og kæbe  
**and jaw**  
16 LOU: men han mangler også  
kindben  
**but he's also lacking**  
**cheekbones**  
17 og så lidt  
**and then a bit**  
18 ej jeg ve:- °og så lidt  
retardoøjne°  
**argh I do:n't- °and then a**  
**bit retardo eyes°**  
19 STI: ja  
**yes**  
20 LOU: kuk kuk ((animated))  
**cuckoo ((animated))**  
21 STI: @ @[@@ @@@]  
22 LOU: [@@ @@@]@

Stine presses the  
“not interested” icon  
and the page changes  
to the next profile  
on the list.



DETAIL



Louise starts out by assessing the man negatively, according to his looks, i.e. his eyes (1). Initially, she lowers her voice noticeably while expressing an attention getter: “ej undskyld” (“excuse me”) – signaling that what follows may challenge general rules of politeness. Thus, the derogatory adjective (“bælgøjet”, “pop-eyed”) has been prepared for and thereby potentially mitigated. The only other instance of “undskyld” in the conversation appears just before a similarly derogatory

utterance. Interestingly, this use of mitigation suggests that a participation framework specific to the ongoing activity is at work. Since they are, at the moment of talking, logged onto Stine's profile, Louise has reason to refrain from exercising epistemic stance authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005), i.e. in this context from producing radical first-turn assessments, especially negative ones. In other words, she avoids downgrading candidates that Stine might approve of, and vice versa.

It should be noted that in previous assessments of 11 other men, Louise has shown no reluctance whatsoever to offer immediate negative comments. In this case she does not, thus potentially making this man a special case. So it may be argued that by lowering her voice and mitigating her assessment, she potentially draws attention to this candidate.

What follows, consequently, is an evaluation of a series of attributes. Stine introduces another assessable – the man's head being "round" (4). This observation sets off simultaneous laughter and thereby affective affiliation (5-6).

In following turns (7-17), the women further construe the male object as laughable and deviant by pointing to several deficiencies in his facial features (jaw, cheekbones). This is accomplished through rapid interaction containing, for example, overlapping turns (7-8, 9-10, 12-13) and co-produced turns (11-13). In adolescent girls' assessment talk, Goodwin observes, overlapping turns are a "[...] way the participants can display that their minds are together" (2006:202). In the excerpt, another means to obtain this effect is the continuous use of "lidt" ("a bit") – Stine in lines 4, 11, 12 and Louise in 17, 18. Overall, the women obtain full affiliation in that every candidate object of assessment (jaw, cheekbones, etc.) is readily acknowledged or topped (11-18).

In 18, Louise draws a full circle by returning to the eyes. She emphasizes her initial observation, using an even more degrading term "retardo øjne" ("retardo eyes"), hinting at a person with disabilities. And she lowers her voice. Whispering indicates a change of mode and may thus be considered an act of intimacy in this context. This build-up of affective affiliation is ultimately acted out in lines 20-22 with ridicule and mutual laughter. Finally, Stine clicks the "not-interested" icon thus ending the assessment activity. This move is fitted into the women's laughter and it may therefore be regarded in parallel with a spoken turn contributing to the ongoing interaction.

By comparing the man to a person with disabilities, he is positioned as an unsuitable object for desire under heteronormative ideologies. Research within disability studies has shown that both the media and broader ideologies depict disabled men and women as asexual (Gartner and Joe 1987, Haller 2000). Since gender and sexuality are intrinsically bound together, the man is not



only desexualized, but also demasculinized, (Robertson 2004), thus exposed to an overall marginalization in the heterosexual marketplace (Eckert 2011). As the women metaphorically “dissect” the male object, they align in the assessment that every part of his physical appearance is unsuitable for desire. Thus, this could potentially be interpreted as an abilist act tying into and reproducing larger ideologies for which bodies can be attached with desire.

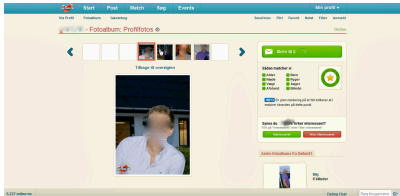
Tied to the women’s positioning of the other is an oppositional positioning of themselves as normative and attractive subjects within the same heteronormative ideology. In their collaboratively produced assessment, they affirm each other’s positions as abled heterosexual women and recognize their co-performed non-desire as normative. By co-constructing stances and by drawing on encompassing ideologies of disability as asexual, the women highlight their difference from the man (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005). This demonstrates how non-desire functions as an important element in producing heterosexual desire in homosociality, as it works to link the women together and develop coordinated erotic taste.

### ***Constructing shared heterosexual desire***

Even though non-desire takes up a major part of the women’s browsing activity, non-desire can also be negotiated into desire. Male users’ desirousness or the lack thereof is not simply decided upon once and for all, but developed and modified throughout and by means of the interaction. As Stine and Louise are interacting via various modes with the profiles of the male users – photos, personal profile texts, and textual facts about various characteristics such as occupation, body type and geography – they negotiate shared desire according to this information, as well as in relation to each other. The following analysis demonstrates how the women build changing assessments, thus demonstrating that stance is an accomplishment of the interaction.

In the second excerpt, the women first align in a negative assessment of a male user. Later, the assessment is moderated and turned into a positive assessment. After having gone through the automatically generated matches, the women turn to the visitor’s list, which is an overview of users who have visited Stine’s profile. Here they click into a profile in order to review the photos and information.

## Excerpt (2a)

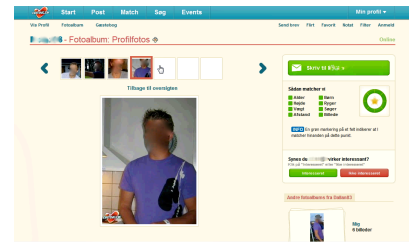
	Speaker	Spoken language	Mouse movements	Screen
1	LOU:	okay der får du sgu da <b>okay there you really get some</b>		
2		kindben eller kæbe eller et eller andet <b>cheekbone or jaw or something</b>	Louise clicks on the first photo in the photo album and the photo changes.	
3		[til gengæld] også noget af en næse <b>[on the other hand] also a bit of a nose</b>		
4	STI:	[og næse] <b>[and nose]</b>		
5		<b>(1.37)</b>	Louise clicks on the next photo.	
6		men er næs- en stor næse ikke også betyder det ikke også noget andet <b>but isn't nos- a big nose also a sign of something else</b>		
7	LOU:	han [ser sgu da <u>sød</u> ud] <b>he [looks really <u>sweet</u>]</b>	The photo changes - delayed response to the previous click.	
8	STI:	[han er- meget <u>sød</u> ud]		

[he's- looks quite sweet]

9

(4.64)

Louise clicks  
on the next  
photo.



Louise clicks  
back to the  
profile  
overview.

10

nå hvad skriver han  
**well what does he write**

Louise  
scrolls down  
to the man's  
profile text  
and moves the  
mouse across  
the text.



00:11:30 – 00:12:44:  
OMITTED, the women read  
through the man's profile text  
and search through his photo  
album

11 LOU: @@[@@@@@@@@ ej prøv lige  
at se hans næse der]  
@@[@@@@@@@@ oh just take a  
look at his nose there]

Louise moves  
the mouse  
towards the  
man's nose.



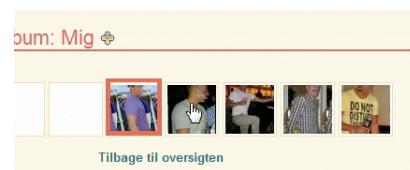
DETAIL

12 STI: [@@@@det er bare om at  
bytte rundt på noget @@@]  
[@@@@ it's just about  
switching something  
around @@@]

13 LOU: [@@@@@@@@@@@@@]

14 STI: [@@@@@@@@]

Louise moves  
the mouse to  
the photo  
album index  
and clicks on  
the next  
photo.

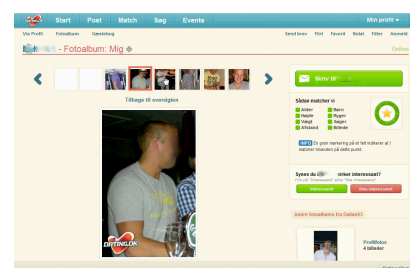


15 [0]

16 LOU: [0]

17 @@@ @ [0]

18 STI: [ej] det ved jeg ikke Louise clicks  
[oh] I don't know on the next  
photo.



19 (1.4)

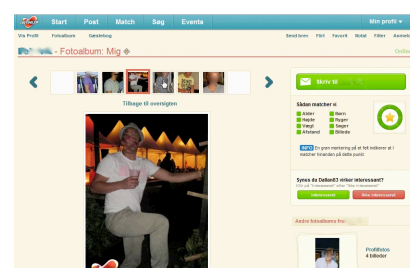
20 [ej det eddermame en  
Günther han har]  
[oh it's a freaking  
Günther he's got]

21 LOU: [ej den er den er  
eddermame stor]

[oh it's freaking big]

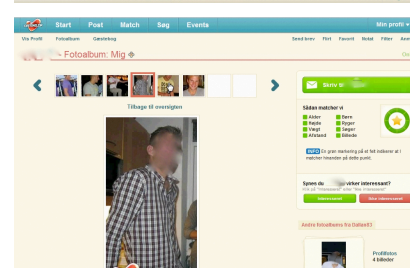
22 (2.0)

Louise clicks  
on the next  
photo.



23 forfra er [han altså-]  
from the front[he's  
really-]

Louise clicks  
on the next  
photo.



25

Louise clicks  
on the next  
photo.

[illegible]

26 han ser da rimelig ø:h

Louise moves the mouse to the man's username and clicks on it - leads back to the profile overview.

[Start](#)
[Post](#)
[Match](#)
[Søg](#)
[Events](#)

[Min profile](#)

[Videofoto](#)
[Fotobøger](#)
[Gæstebog](#)

[Send besked](#)
[Følg](#)
[Kontakt](#)
[Næste](#)
[Arkiveret](#)

[Oprette](#)

**Mand 28 år**  
**Bor i Frederiksberg (2009)**  
 2 år her ind

Jeg har ingen barn

Jeg riger ikke

Jeg er 188 cm, vejer 88 kg og betegner mig selv som **almindelig** (i troens)

Jeg søger **Kæreste**. Jeg søger i **min landsted**. Du skal være mellem 20 - 34 år

**Sådan matcher vi**

- ☐ Alder
- ☐ Børn
- ☐ Indkomst
- ☐ Religion
- ☐ Røge
- ☐ Værelse
- ☐ Indkomst

**Se også** [her](#) en række meldinger af de 10 bedste af 17 mulige venner på dette profil

**Søger du** [en eller flere venner?](#)

**Se også en (indtalt)**

<a href="#">Hans</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>
<a href="#">Gardner</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>
<a href="#">Hans</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>
<a href="#">Hans</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>
<a href="#">Hans</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>
<a href="#">Hans</a>	<a href="#">Bendt</a>

27 LOU: han ser rimelig stor ud

28 STT: rimelig stor udia

29 LOU: næ det er han ikke engang

Louise drags  
the mouse to  
the  
information  
about the  
man's height  
and weight.

30 (1.39)

31 STI: årh næsten en halvfems

32 LOU: jo jo men men og så ø:h Louise  
 rent vægtmæssigt moves the  
**yeah yeah but but and** mouse  
**then u:h in terms of** across the  
**weight** physical  
 information  
 and marks  
 height and  
 weight.

**Mand, 28 år.**  
 Bor i  5 km fra dig  
 Jeg har ingen børn.  
 Jeg ryger ikke.  
 Jeg er **188 cm, vejer 88 kg**, og betegner mig selv som **almindelig** af bygning.   
 Jeg søger **Kæreste**. Jeg søger i **min landsdel**.  
 Du skal være mellem **20 - 34** år.

33 STI: ja DETAIL  
**yes**  
 34 LOU: det er da sådan meget  
 nor- altså  
**it's well quite nor-**  
**really**  
 35 **(1.55)**  
 36 \*normalt\*  
**\*normal\***

As in the first excerpt, the assessables in this sequence are primarily the male user's physical body parts. From lines 1-3, the man is assessed positively, in contrast to the male user in the previous example, but this is eventually moderated into aligning negative assessments of his nose (4-5). The size of the man's nose continues as a topic of conversation throughout the excerpt (12-25), but in between, as they search through the man's profile, the women co-construct more positive assessments of his general looks (8-9) and his body type (27-42)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Stine's utterance in line 13: "det er bare om at bytte rundt på noget" ("it's just a question of switching something around") refers to previous turns in which she has been comparing the male user's name to a sexual term. This adds to the sexual innuendo that she continuously brings into the evaluation.

Aligning assessments are produced on several levels. In line 8-9, they accommodate syntactically as Stine changes the structure halfway through to match Louise's. Stine seems to set out to utter the expression "han er sød" ("he is sweet"), but then changes the wording to match Louise's "han ser sød ud" ("he looks sweet"). Later, the women use similar prosodic and lexical features to create affiliation. In response to a photo they say, in overlap: "ej det eddermame en Gynter han har" ("wow it's a freaking Günther he's got") and "ej den er (.) den er eddermame stor" ("wow it's freaking big"). The turns are synchronized with "ej" ("wow") – in itself an explicitly affective exclamation and here almost shouted out. Wordings are practically repeated in overlap and with identical prosody. Furthermore, deployment of identical intensifiers displays reciprocity. Thus, the women create affective affiliation in turn taking, lexis, syntactics, and prosody.

The physical focus of Louise and Stine's assessment talk is further reflected in their use of the mouse. In this example, the mouse becomes a part of the offline body by serving as a virtual index finger that can play out gestural moves (12). The cursor touches the virtual male face, pointing out the features talked about, in this case the nose. Through both virtual touch and discussion of the size of the man's nose, and the relation between his height and weight, his body is made almost touchable and physically present. Here, the women incorporate the mouse into their activity and make use of it for interactional purposes, both by stressing specific utterances and by drawing attention to specific details of the men's appearance. In addition, the mouse is the tool by which they can act upon their desire, since clicking on certain icons such as the "interested" icon serves as a desirous act, in that it sends a message to the man in order to indicate romantic/erotic interest.

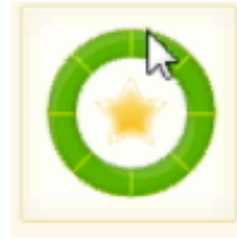
### *Shared enactment of desire*

After negotiating the man's desirousness and affiliating aligning in a mostly positive assessment, Louise urges Stine to actively approach the man, which, in turn, is developed into a shared "plan to act on" their constructed desire.

#### Excerpt (2b)

37	der er perfect match	Louise moves
	((blød stemme))	the mouse to
	<b>there's a perfect match</b>	the "perfect
	((soft voice))	match"

scheme.



DETAIL

38 (1.25)

39 og han er online ((blød  
stemme))  
**and he's online ((soft  
voice))**

Louise draws  
the mouse  
back to the  
profile  
photo.

40 sikker på du ikke er  
interesseret  
**sure you're not  
interested**

Louise draws  
the mouse  
towards the  
center of the  
page and  
further up to  
the right  
corner.

41 ej jeg må hellere lade  
være med at styre musen  
**no I'd best not control  
the mouse**

42 STI: nej øh øh hvis bare tryk  
interesseret men [hvis  
du:-]  
**no uh uh if just press  
interested but [if you:-]**

LOU: [°det er din°]  
43 [°it's yours°]

STI: han skriver så svarer du  
**he writes then you'll  
answer**

44  
45 (2.19)

46 LOU: det er i orden  
**that's ok**

The mouse  
is moved  
to the





"interes-  
ted" icon,  
and clicks

After agreeing on a man's desirousness the women have to decide whether to approach and express their interest by clicking on the interested icon and thereby initiating contact. In this case, Louise is the vehicle for reaching a decision on this matter. Through simultaneous linguistic and cursor acts, she draws Stine's attention to the fact that the man is a "perfect match" and that he is online, thereby implying that communication in real time is a possibility (37, 39). At this point, she deploys prosody by softening her voice, perhaps to create a more intimate and confidential, maybe even romantically loaded, atmosphere. Here, Louise's performed desire is interactionally channeled into Stine's. As they are logged onto Stine's account, Stine will appear as the sender of any information about romantic interest, even though Louise may be the one to operate the mouse.

After a pause with no response from Stine, Louise takes up another strategy, withdrawing from her attempts to convince Stine to approach the man: "ej jeg må hellere lade være med at styre musen" ('no I'd best not control the mouse') (41). Here, it is made clear that by controlling the mouse Louise is able to actively act upon her own desire for the man, on behalf of Stine. Regarding the system of turn-taking, the mouse control (or the lack thereof) may be viewed as a turn, which regulates who is speaking when. She thereby offers Stine the opportunity to take control of the mouse and choose whether to approach the man or to move on to the next man on the list. Stine responds by rejecting the offer, instead engaging Louise further in the enactment of desire by instructing her to answer if he returns the interest with an email (51,53). Through this utterance, she abstains from the option to express her desire individually and instead actively engages Louise in potential future romantic activity. This explicit wish for co-enacting desire demonstrates that the homosocial context does not simply frame the activities preceding heterosexual interaction between Stine and the male user. It also comes to frame the potential future heterosexual interaction, as Stine pre-engages Louise in future correspondence with the man.

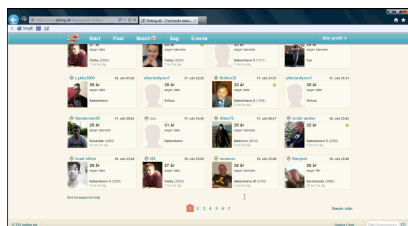

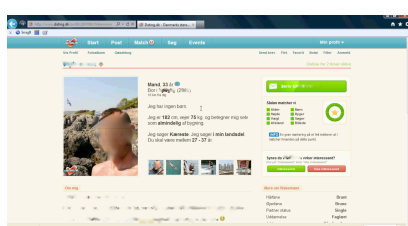
Taking desirous stances does not always function as a more or less agreeing process. Discrepancies between individually constructed desires do appear in the data. The following example demonstrates how personal stances are adjusted in order to maintain affiliation in the homosocial relation.

## *Negotiating and adjusting desire*

In excerpt 3 the women are searching through the list of who has visited Stine's profile in the past. Here, Stine specifically draws attention to a male user that she has seen on some earlier occasion and found desirable. She begins with a presentation of the man, in which she assesses him positively. As Louise does not align completely, Stine adjusts her initial evaluation.

The excerpt demonstrates more generally how the construction of affiliation in the homosocial relation comes to frame the desire that Stine can produce towards the specific man.

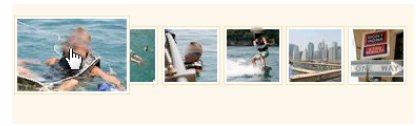
### Excerpt (3)

Speaker	Turn	Cursor movements	Screen
01	STI: nu skal jeg vise dig en jeg synes var meget sød <b>now I'll show you someone who I thought was pretty sweet</b>	Stine clicks on the "next-page" icon in the lower right-hand corner.	
02	ham der <b>this guy</b>	Stine points to the man's face on the photo and clicks on it so that they enter the man's profile.	 DETAIL
03	LOU: nå XXX (mandens brugernavn) ((oplæsningsstemme)) <b>huh XXX ((the male's user name)) ((reading voice))</b>		
04	°ja°	Stine scrolls	

°yes°

05 STI: HAN ser sød ud  
HE looks sweet

down the page.  
Stine points  
to the second  
photo in the  
photo album  
and clicks to  
enter the  
man's photo  
album.



DETAIL

06 nu skal jeg vise dig her  
**now I'll show you here**



07 BOM KØNT ansigt hvad  
BOM ((onomatopoeia))  
**HANDSOME face huh**

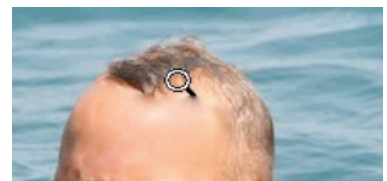
Stine circles  
the cursor  
twice around  
the man's face  
and then moves  
towards the  
upper right  
part of the  
page.



DETAIL

08 ikke så meget hår på hovedet  
men-  
**not too much hair on the  
head but-**

Stine moves  
back to the  
photo and  
points to the  
man's hair,  
then moves  
back towards  
the upper  
right part of  
the page.

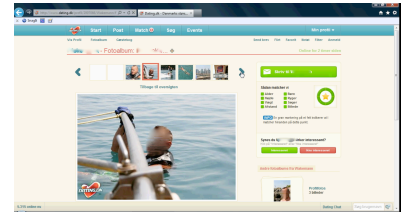


DETAIL

09 ja  
**yes**

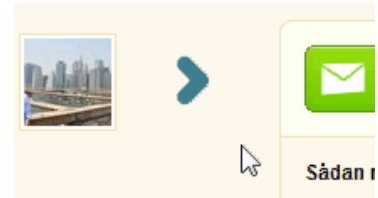
10 LOU: men det er heller ikke håret der-  
**anyhow it isn't the hair that's-**

Stine clicks to the next photo.



11 STI: BOM LÆKKERT ANSIGT  
**BOM HOT FACE**

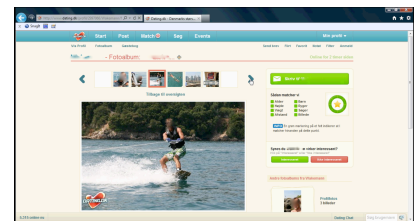
Stine clicks to the next photo.



DETAIL

12 [JE:P] wakeboard  
**[YE:S] wakeboard**

Stine clicks to the next photo.



13 LOU: [ja det er fedt <X hvor er vi bare ikke X> ((mumlende stemme))]  
**[yes it's cool <X how we just aren't X> ((mumbling voice))]**

14 STI: lidt lidt tynd til mig jeg kan godt lide der er lidt mere  
**a bit a bit too skinny for me I like when there's a bit more**

Stine clicks to the next photo.



DETAIL

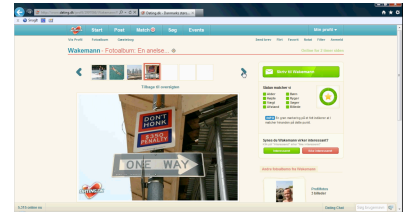
15 LOU: jeg skulle lige til at sige hvor vil du lave en doughnut på ham  
**I was just about to say where are you going to make a doughnut on him**

Stine clicks to the next photo.



16 STI:        @@@ balden  
              @@@ the  
              **buttock**

Stine clicks  
 to the next  
 photo.



Stine opens by introducing – both through talk and cursor maneuvers – an assessable, the man, and taking an evaluative lead toward him with her personally accountable positive assessment (01). The mouse click serves to introduce a new visual topic filling the spot opened by “en” (“someone”) in the verbal turn – specifying by pointing the cursor to the man’s face. Thus, the mouse maneuver emphasizes visually the argument presented in the verbal turns. This goes for the excerpt from beginning to end. As Stine has viewed this man on an earlier occasion, the women are not exploring him together and thereby do not possess the same epistemic stance authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005). Here, Stine takes the role of the presenter, with expertise on the assessable that precedes Louise’s. Prior to this viewing, Stine has categorized the man as attractive and the following joint exploration of him serves as an attempt to engage Louise equally in the desirous stance. This is done as a “guided tour” through the man’s photo album, in which Stine repeats and develops her positive assessment by shifting from a personally accountable past-tense formulation to a declarative present tense, making the evaluation of the man’s desirousness relevant in the current situated context (05). Following, she uses a tag question to downgrade her stance authority, and thereby indicates similar rights available to Louise (07). In the path of her assessment series, she moves from more general comments on the man’s looks to tuning in on his face, drawing attention to it with the cursor (07), thus demonstrating that, in this context, a face in itself may count for the person in total. Throughout her presentation, an accompanying strong affective involvement is build up by onomatopoeia, emphatic stress and increased volume (05, 07, 11, 12).

Louise engages in the positive assessment production, but with strong discrepancies in affective involvement. Typically second assessment production includes upgrade or same evaluation (Pomerantz 1984). However, Louise’s responses throughout appear disengaged and are characterized by delay through preface, low volume, mumbling voice, and unfinished turns (03, 04, 10, 13). This response pattern stands in stark contrast to the previous excerpts in which assessments were co-produced through quick format tying, upgrades and repetitions.

In response to Louise's lack of expressed desire, Stine incorporates alternative assessables, which she assesses negatively, e.g. hair and body type (08, 14). The target lines appear when Stine draws attention to the man's body type, which consequently receives a changed and affectively engaged second assessment from Louise in the form of a critical joking question "hvord vil du lave en doughnut på ham" ("where are you going to make a doughnut on him") (15). In this context, doughnut refers to a roll of fat on the stomach around the navel that, when squeezed together, resembles a doughnut. On several occasions during the conversation the women state that they like men who are "bigger" and not overly muscular. To be able to make "a doughnut" in this context, therefore, refers to this particular physical desire. By orienting towards previous affiliating erotic taste, Louise manages to strengthen the homosocial relation that, in this case, is potentially threatened by an imbalance in erotic preferences.

In the above analysis, an assessable is introduced as attractive by one participant. Yet since the other participant does not recognize the performed desire and agree explicitly, the initial evaluator starts to incorporate more critical commentary, pointing out particular body features as problematic. This adjustment of desire illustrates the influence of the homosocial relation on what kind of desire is possible in this particular context. The desire for homosocial affiliation in this case very clearly frames the heterosexual desire that is produced.

## **Conclusion**

Inspired by Sedgwick's (1985) development of the notion of desire, this article has examined heterosexual desire construction through the lens of homosociality. By discovering homosocial interaction as a setting for the social production and negotiation of romantic and erotic desire, the above analysis has demonstrated how homosociality comes to frame heterosexual desire.

As Stine and Louise engage in the activity of assessing men as desirous objects they build consensual versions of what attractive and unattractive men are like. The production of corresponding interpersonal stances demonstrates the importance of a third party's approval of the object of desire and how a lack of affiliation is dealt with by downgrading the initial desire. As Sedgwick argues, the object mainly becomes desirable through the desire of a same-gender participant – and then, on the other hand, loses its attractiveness if it is not recognized in the homosocial relation. Thus, homosociality influences what kind of desire is possible. This phenomenon highlights the need to include homosocial contexts in order to arrive at a full analysis

of how shared desire construction and negotiation play into and shape the romantic and sexual lives of women and men.

In the online dating context, part of being a heterosexual woman is to recognize and execute a physically focused desire in which appearance and, in particular, physical features are at the center of the evaluation. As the analysis demonstrates, the physical focus is further refined and emphasized by the women as they reduce male users to fragmented body parts (e.g. jawlines, cheekbones, noses or hair), pinpointed with the help of the cursor. This foregrounding of traditional male physicality can potentially be seen as a contestation on the women's part of a hegemonic desire system in which heterosexual men generally value partners according to physical attributes and women according to socio-economic status (Coupland 1996). This is further supported by the fact that the women generally respond with immediate rejection to pure textual profiles that do not feature any visual representations of the male. However, the physically oriented desire is established from the outset by the website design and the general activity of online dating, which by its nature requires assessments of appearance. Thus, the women may simply buy into an established romantic and sexual economy in which the building blocks for hegemonic masculine appearance (e.g. strong jawlines, or noses as symbols for genitals) have the highest value. As Eckert points out, physical attraction is a "social course of learning" (2002:109), and the process of reading and assessing online dating profiles can thus be seen as a way for the women to accommodate and negotiate what female heterosexual desire looks like.

The shared practice of attaching desire to male objects may be described as an inversion of Sedgwick's desire triangle – a way for women to turn the tables and exercise the right to use patriarchal power in the same way as it has predominantly been ascribed to men. The women take up the position of desiring subjects who bond through a shared desire for particular men presented on the dating site. The men thus function as commodities in a consumption process in which heterosexual desire and non-desire can be performed. Furthermore, these same male commodities take on the function of inter-linking the women, acting as a conduit for their social desire towards each other. Paradoxically, the male objects that connect the women in the homosocial relation will eventually interrupt the homosociality, if a romantic heterosexual relationship is formed. As much as the women work to bond in their shared desire, this same desire production works to dissolve their homosocial intimacy.

The inversion of the triangular model may challenge female objectification, but does not as such question the objectification and sexualization of the body itself. In this sense,

heterosexual online dating sites such as the one discussed in this article should not be perceived as a field giving rise to new and hitherto unseen forms of desire construction, but rather as a sustained arena for multifaceted and highly homosocially influenced desire constructions.



## 6. Article III

# Flirting in Online Dating: Giving Empirical Grounds to Flirtatious Implicitness

Accepted by *Discourse Studies* 2015<sup>23</sup>

### Abstract

Various fields have examined the activity of flirting, predominantly based on experimental and reported data; the interactional workings are therefore often overlooked. Based on emails and chats from two Danish online dating sites, this article investigates how users negotiate romantic connections through the flirting strategy of ‘imagined togetherness’, linguistically constructing imagery of a shared future. Using the notion of the chronotope (Bakhtin 1981), turn-by-turn analysis demonstrates how users, embedded in the activity of getting to know each other, tenuously communicate romantic interest by alluding to future points at which they might be together. Central to the strategy is a sequential pattern of avoiding closure and thereby preserving the imagery’s implicitness. The article concludes by arguing that while imagined togetherness functions a way of probing interests and thus protecting oneself from potential rejection, it also draws on fundamental dynamics of fantasy in nourishing the excitement of romantic possibility.

**Keywords:** Online Dating; Flirting; Interaction; Chronotopes; Fantasy

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<sup>23</sup> Revisions will be added in a final version.

## Introduction

Research on the subject of flirting has been conducted in various fields from evolutionary science (Herz and Inzlicht 2002), to psychology (Sprecher, Wenzel, and Harvey 2008), to economics (Fisman et al. 2006). Due to the experimental and reported nature of such studies, the micro-level dynamics of what people actually say to each other in the process of forming potential romantic relationships remains under-examined. Work within the field of language and sexuality has drawn attention to the key role that language plays in individuals' constructions and negotiations of desire (e.g., Harvey and Shalom 1997; Cameron and Kulick, 2003). However, linguists dedicated to empirical methods encounter difficulties when attempting to study the features of intimate language. Assembling empirical evidence that is not from public conversations but from private spontaneous interaction is bound with practical obstacles and ethical challenges. Thus romantic interpersonal communication has been termed a "black box" in language and interaction research (Stokoe 2010). Yet with the past 15 years' development of the romantic market, which has made the Internet a significant context for people seeking romantic and erotic partners, new ways into the empirical black box are being opened. Online dating in particular provides a rich source of insights for the study of linguistic constructions and negotiations of desire since much of user interaction is carried out through exchanges of written texts, thus establishing language as a central domain. Based on email and Instant Messaging (IM) correspondence from users of Danish online dating websites, this article approaches flirtation as ways of interactively constructing and communicating romantic interest and offers a study grounded in real-life spontaneous interaction.

Implicitness has been suggested to be definitional of flirtation (Cameron and Kulick, 2006: 5; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 107-08). However this literature has tended to discuss flirting as part of larger theoretical issues within language and sexuality and therefore do not offer empirical grounds for understanding such implicit workings. This article provides an empirically grounded framework for analyzing implicitness in flirting. By focusing on how users, embedded in the activity of getting acquainted, tenuously construct imageries of a shared pleasurable hetero-romantic future, this study examines how such *imagined togetherness* works as a subtle way of negotiating romantic interests. It is further demonstrated how imagined togetherness is interactionally left unsettled by neither rejecting the imaginative scenario directly nor progressing towards practical planning of a romantic date. The article concludes by arguing that this interactional design plays an important role in maintaining potentiality, ultimately creating fruitful grounds for affective dynamics of excitement and fantasy.

### **Flirtatious implicitness**

Within language, gender, and sexuality research, incipient attempts have been made to define flirting. Such efforts have mainly been theoretical in nature due to the lack of existing comprehensive empirical studies; they are generally characterized by being rather open-ended, suggesting that flirting as a linguistic and interactional feature eludes conclusive definition. According to Cameron and Kulick, flirting can be viewed as a way of constructing, expressing and negotiating desire; it consists of: “a combination of linguistic, paralinguistic and non-verbal features (these may include innuendo, ‘personal’ questions and references, frequent smiling and laughter, speaking softly, holding and periodically breaking eye-contact, etc.)” (Cameron and Kulick, 2006: 5). Comparable to the implicitness, which Cameron and Kulick list as “innuendo”, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet emphasize the intangible quality of the phenomenon: “flirting by its very nature is inexplicit, deniable, and in some important sense playful, not ‘serious’” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013:107). Along the same lines Kiesling places the tacit aspect centrally in his definition by drawing on politeness theory’s (Brown and Levinson 1987) conceptualization of implicit communication: “[...] an off-record negotiation and recognition of interpersonal desire” (2013:106). As a rare example Kiesling offers one instance of empirical evidence. However the analysis focuses on strategies of interactional alignment, leaving the off-recordness as such largely unexamined.

The implicitness of flirting was pointed out almost a century ago by sociologist Georg Simmel in his essay on *coquetry* (Simmel 1919). Coquetry is described as an unstable game between denial and consent, detached from common value norms in a thrilling contraction of positive and negative, of yes and no. By its indefinite nature and embedded lack of closure it creates an open-endedness that lays out pathways of possibilities. Simmel’s thoughts are founded in simplifying difference-based understandings of gender in arguing that women are exclusively the performers of coquetry, thereby not paying attention to the interactivity of the phenomenon nor the underlying gendered power structures that may tie into sexuality. However, Simmel’s text offers a useful description of the implicitness and unsettling nature that is central to flirtatious interaction. In Simmel’s understanding it is precisely the intermediate stage between having and not having that is alluring. Similar dynamics are at work in cruising practices surrounding gay adult theatres. In these contexts there are large sections of time when no sexual activity can be observed, but crucially the

excitement of the possibility is always there (Douglas and Tewksbury 2008). Comparably, online dating provides a context in which numerous profiles are laid out for members to cruise through, carrying the possibility that any of them may turn in to offline romantic experiences. Based on these observations I take implicitness to be a key aspect of flirtation; this will serve as the leading motivation for this empirical examination. The implicit nature of flirtation is a resourceful, cautious strategy for handling the high risk of potential personal rejection, which is an inherent part of initial romantic encounters. However, I want to suggest that the implicit workings of flirting might also serve another function above that of politeness, namely that of nourishing what I term the *excitement of possibility*. As will become evident in the analysis, the participants put a lot of work into postponing the fulfillment of the pleasurable imagined togetherness that they jointly construct. By suspending concrete arrangements for offline dates, I argue that the participants create a tantalizing and playful space for fantasizing, thereby intensifying their romantic desires.

Prior empirically based studies on the micro-level of intimate romantic interaction draw on data from such different settings as couples counseling, speed dating, online dating, and casual friendship talk. Common to all of these studies is that none of them takes on the implicitness of flirting as their focus. Studies on established couples' communication focus on collectively produced narratives offering perspectives on self- and other- positioning (Edwards 1995), collaborative building of couple categories (Mandelbaum, 1987, 2003; Pomerantz and Mandelbaum, 2005), and courtship memories (Tainio, 2002). Interactional research on the initial phases of romantic relationships focus on such various issues as alignment and affiliation (Kiesling, 2011), interactive humor/play (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; Straehle 1993), authenticity (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008), embodiment (Adams-Thies 2012; Jones 2005; King 2011), organizations of partner preference talk (Korobov, 2011a), relationship history talk (Stokoe 2010), resistance to stereotypical gender categorization (Korobov 2011b), and perceived heteronormativity (Kiesling 2013), suggesting that intimate talk and relationship formation consist of a broad range of linguistic and interactional strategies<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Researchers have suggested that flirtatious strategies are heavily influenced by gender norms and are thus played out differently depending on participants' gender positions (Kiesling 2013; Kulick 2003). In the empirical material that forms this study there is an overall tendency towards men initiating more general interaction and specifically flirtatious interaction. However, the data sample is not large enough to draw any conclusions. Important here is that both men and women engage in flirtation. This article does not set out to investigate the gendered dynamics of flirting, but is rather concerned with investigating *how* flirtatious implicitness is composed linguistically and negotiated in interaction, while still acknowledging that heteronormative structures tie into these issues.

Despite the numerous issues examined in the literature on flirtation, none of the referred studies offers analytical conceptualizations or empirical manifestations of implicitness. Hence, the field is in need of empirical data as well as applicable theoretical concepts to address and examine the subtle implicit workings of flirting. Through interactional analysis of five excerpts the following analytical section will explain the sequential patterns and linguistic features of constructing and negotiating imagined togetherness.

### **Imagining offline romance in online interaction**

The data informing this article derives from two Danish dating sites: [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) and [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk). The data set was assembled with the help of seven “participatory data collectors” who collected email and IM data from their online dating activities. The data collectors were active online daters and engaged personally in the interactions. Before donating interactional material, these participants secured informed consent from their interlocutors. For elaboration on ethical concerns related to this method see (Mortensen 2015). In total, the data set consists of 13 email and IM interactions, seven from [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) and six from [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk).

Whereas the data examined in this article are in many ways comparable to chat room data (King 2011, Jones 2005, del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008) and cybersex data (Adams-Thies 2010), they differ in that the format inherently targets offline relationships. Both sites feature specific geographic information on the proximity of interacting users, thus providing relevant information for setting up physical meetings. Additionally, [dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) features user testimonials of couples who met through the website and are now sharing offline lives, documented through textual and photographic descriptions of heteronormative, monogamous, and reproductive couple events: engagement, marriage, children.

In line with this, the majority of the interactions I investigate contain negotiations of offline meetings. Hence, the offline meeting becomes an important potential future event for the participants to point to and negotiate. However this is not done explicitly, but rather in subtle and implicit ways, which will become apparent in the following analysis. To grasp this phenomenon, I draw on Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of the *chronotope* – a term that describes an imagined world or context brought into existence through a fusion of spatiotemporal indicators. Along these lines, the chronotope can be understood as “[...] one way actors make available times and spaces that otherwise would not be phenomenologically accessible” (Dick, 2010: 276). Through the characters

that inhabit the chronotopes and the plot that they are playing out, the chronotope additionally makes sociocultural values evident. Linguistic anthropologists have adopted the theoretical concept of the chronotope as a way of describing configurations of time and space in specific cultures and the attachment of social values to such configurations (Lempert and Perrino, 2007; Silverstein, 2005). In the online dating data, constructions of imagined togetherness appear as a chronotope that tenuously opens up the potential of being together at some future point in space and time. The construction of the chronotope of imagined togetherness projects the participants forward in time and binds them together through some envisioned future shared activity that is experienced through the framework of hetero-romantic offline fusion. Based on this possibility of transgression from the online to an offline context, imagined physical togetherness becomes meaningful to the participants.

### **Online dating as organized flirting**

When interacting through an online dating site, the site itself functions as a frame that invites and legitimizes romantic interaction. This is different from other settings such as a party context in which expressing and negotiating interpersonal desire with other guests may be part of participating in the party, but are not the explicit or sole purpose. The context of the online dating site works as a constant backdrop that endorses romantic and sexual advance. King argues that users become sexualized subjects when entering the space of online gay chat rooms (2012:107). Accordingly their bodies are gazed at and approached differently than in other social spaces. Hence, the social space impacts how specific speech acts and bodies are interpreted. Based on this dynamic, one can potentially conclude that simply by interacting within the social space of an online dating site – e.g., visiting somebody's profile, viewing the displayed photos, and emailing back and forth – users are inherently flirting.

In contrast Stokoe (2010) argues that flirting does not occur in her study of speed dating interaction because participants have no need to make romance relevant. According to Stokoe, “a key function of flirting is to make romance relevant where it might not already be; since romance is “programmatically on the agenda” in speed dating contexts participants have no need to act romantically. Correspondingly, one might anticipate that flirting would not occur in an online dating context, in which, similar to speed dating, romantic intentions are explicated in the activity frame. In this article, however, I demonstrate that participants make use of certain strategies to delicately demarcate their romantic interests in the ongoing activity of exchanging more ‘neutral’

biographical information. Thus I argue that not all acts in an online dating context can be regarded as flirtatious in nature, but that careful micro-oriented turn-by-turn analysis reveals how flirting is incorporated as recurrent sequential passages.

### **Imagined togetherness in interaction**

Svennevig (1999) demonstrates in his study of how people get acquainted in initial interactions that lack of common ground is handled through extended self-presentational sequences that provide the interlocutor with biographical information. Similarly self-presentation is essential in the online dating correspondence used in this study since participants possess limited fact-based knowledge of each other<sup>25</sup>. All of the correspondence is characterized by longer reciprocal self-presentational sequences that appear as both volunteered and prompted. Embedded in these sequences are constructions of imagined togetherness that subtly hint at prospective scenarios of being together. This is the case in nine out of the 13 instances of correspondence. In such constructions the participants who play out the imagined scenario can be more or less specific, either referring directly or indirectly to the interlocutors. These imaginative insertions are responded to in ambiguous manners by the interlocutors not providing closure to the future possibility that has been laid out. By leaving the imagined togetherness unsettled, the sequences continuously nurture the excitement of possibility. After such sequences the participants return to the activity of self-presentation.

### ***The sequential pattern of imagined togetherness***

Extracts 1 through 3 illustrate some of the ways in which imagined togetherness is established in interaction. The first example serves as a straightforward introductory case of how a point of future shared activity is set up following a self-presentational sequence in which Jonas has – prompted by a question from Maria – provided information about his work with photography. The extract comes from an IM interaction on dating.dk.

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<sup>25</sup> It varies largely how much knowledge users have access to depending on the dating service. Both dating.dk and elitedaters.dk offer photographic, textual, and fixed category-based options for self-presentation. The amount of information provided differs among users. Analysis shows that the photographic presentation plays a central role in readers' profile evaluation (Mortensen forthcoming).

## Extract 1<sup>26</sup>

Maria	01	XXX favorit-motivet?	XXX favorite motif?
Jonas	02	uha, det lyder nok kedeligt, men	Oh, it probably sounds boring,
	03	det er 'døde	but it's 'dead things', so
	04	ting', altså bygninger og sådan.	buildings and the like.
	05	Jeg er ikke så meget til	I'm not that keen on portrait
	06	portrætfotografi..	photography..
	07	ikke kun bygninger også mere	not just buildings also more
	08	skæve ting -	quirky things -
	09	mer snap shots agtigt, hvis du	more snapshot like, if you
	10	forstår..	understand..
Maria	11	Javel. Tror jeg forstår.	Yeah. I think I understand
Jonas	12	Hehe	Hehe
	13	Godt	Good
	14	så behøver jeg ikke forklare	then I won't have to explain
	15	nærmere, det er	further, I'm not so good at that
	16	jeg ikke så god til :-)	:-)
Maria	17	hehe. Det er ok. <b>Måske jeg er så</b>	Hehe. That's ok. <b>Perhaps I'll be</b>
	18	<b>heldig at se nogle eksempler på</b>	<b>fortunate enough to see some</b>
	19	<b>et tidspunkt.</b>	<b>examples some time.</b>
Jonas	20	ja måske ;-)	yes perhaps ;-)
Maria	21	Uhh, bliver lige fanget af	Wow, my attention has just been
	22	dokumentar om nogle	caught by a documentary about
	23	teenagere der skifter køn.	some teenagers who are having
			gender reassignment surgery.
Jonas	24	neeeej, noget studierelevant..	ooooh, something relevant to
			your studies..

Maria and Jonas are engaged in the activity of getting to know each other by first talking about Jonas' interest in photography (1-16) and secondly talking about Maria's subject of study (24). The target lines are 17-20 in which Maria, as a solution to Jonas' difficulties in explaining his preferred subject of photography, suggestively establishes imagined togetherness. This she does by delicately introducing an unspecified future temporal notion "på et tidspunkt" (some time) combined with an epistemic adverb, "måske" (perhaps), to which she attaches an activity engaging both of them (Jonas showing her examples of his photographic work). The imagined scenario is constructed as pleasurable through her introductory formulation casting herself as fortunate if the imagined scenario were to come true. The chronotope of imagined togetherness is not necessarily connected

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, information on timing was not donated with this correspondence.



to specific spaces, but can in some cases be centered on an activity rather than a space. Crucial is that all of the imagined scenarios point forward in time through future temporal markers, fusing the participants in some potential shared offline activity. This might be interpreted as Maria fishing for an invitation to a physical meeting or at least to further closeness. Alternatively, Maria's turn could be viewed as not so much an expression of wanting to meet for this concrete activity, but rather as uncommittedly playing with the potential of what this interaction might lead to. Thus, in this case the construction of a future shared activity serves immediate interactional functions for the participants as a subtle way of communicating further romantic interest.

The proposal is handled by Jonas through a mirroring of Maria's ambiguity in re-using the epistemic adverb, pairing it with a winking emoticon (21), thereby leaving the imagined scenario unsettled and open. The emoticon can be viewed as a meta-comment (Darics 2010; Dresner and Herring 2010) that seems to communicate Jonas' interpretation, and recognition of Maria's turn as a flirtatious. Maria contributes to the lack of commitment by changing the topic in drawing attention to a television program that she is simultaneously watching (22-24). This is turned into a self-presentational sequence by Jonas through his other-oriented self-eliciting question (25), thereby shifting the sequence from flirting back into the larger project of getting acquainted.

Example 2 similarly demonstrates how potential shared future activities are proposed and responded to ambiguously. However, in this case the scenario is developed slightly further. The extract is taken from an email interaction between Mette and Morten on elitedaters.dk. Relevant to the excerpt is that Morten professionally sells Christmas trees, which has been a topic of conversation throughout the correspondence.

#### Extract 2<sup>27</sup>

Mette	01	Jeg er pt. den	I'm currently the happy
Nov.	02	lykkelige ejer af en	owner of a really cool
23	03	fantastisk hyggelig	garden in XXX with some
8:46	04	have i XXX med nogle	large broad-leaved trees
PM	05	store løvtræer, så der	so there's always
	06	er jo altid noget at se	something to do
	07	til og ikke mindst nu	especially now when the
	08	hvor bladene falder og	leaves are falling down
	09	komposten kalder.	and the compost calls.
Morten	10	<b>det lyder da dejligt</b>	<b>it sounds really</b>
Nov.	11	<b>med en have i XXX. Hvis</b>	<b>lovely with a garden</b>

<sup>27</sup> In the excerpt, sections have been left out due to space restrictions. It is clearly marked where sections have been left out.

23	12	<b>der skal plantes</b>	<b>in XXX. If you're</b>
9:48	13	<b>grantræer kan jeg evt</b>	<b>going to plant pines</b>
PM	14	<b>være behjælpelig...</b>	<b>I can perhaps</b>
	15		<b>assist...</b>
		((26 words omitted))	
Mette		((7 words omitted))	
Nov.			
23	16	Tak for det fine	Thanks for the generous
10:10	17	granplantningstilbud :)	pine planting offer :)
PM	18	... måske huset her	... my house may be able
	19	lige kan lave sig en	to make a small extra
	20	lille ekstra indkomst	income that way? Then
	21	der? Så kan de	all the Christmas-
	22	juletravle aarhusianere	rushed Aarhusians
	23	selv komme ind i haven,	[people living in
	24	fælde det og få "hele"	Aarhus] can enter the
	25	naturoplevelsen med...	garden themselves, cut
	26	Det må der da være	it down and get the
	27	penge i ;)	"full" nature
	28		experience... There
	29		should be some cash to
	30		be made there ;)
Mette	32	Hvor har du dine	Where do you have your
Nov.	33	juletræer henne?	Christmas trees?
23			
PM			
10:14			

This example follows the same structure as the previous one. Embedded in the activity of getting acquainted through self-presentation, marked by Mette's volunteering personal information at the beginning (01-09) and her other-oriented self-eliciting question at the end (32-33), the participants establish an imagined togetherness: Morten offers in an *if*-clause – the linguistic epitome of possibility – to assist Mette at some possible future occasion (meaning they would spend face-to-face time together) (10-15). Linguistically the activity of talking about time/space constellations that are not phenomenologically accessible in the interaction of here and now can be lexically constructed through spatial and temporal deictic markers as seen in excerpt 1. Moreover, grammatical *irrealis* proves to be a relevant resource in the case of this study as the participants make use of modal verbs and conditional clauses to linguistically mark imagined togetherness<sup>28</sup>. Studies have shown that grammatical constructions of non-reality can be used as a way to minimize

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<sup>28</sup> The term *irrealis* is specifically used in Danish grammar discourse to describe the particular phenomenon of deploying the past tense to signal distance from reality, but not necessarily to communicate non-reality. To avoid misunderstandings I choose, in line with Jensen (2009), to use non-real<sub>is</sub> to refer to grammatical demarcations of phenomena that are not part of the discourse of here and now.

and handle potential face-threatening acts (Jensen, 2009, Ford 1997). In the case of online dating, this function may prove to be valuable to participants since rejection of one's romantic interest is an omnipresent risk within the interaction; nevertheless, as this and the following excerpts demonstrate, constructions of non-reality also work as devices for constructing and maintaining the excitement of possibility. This point is further demonstrated in the typographical ellipses that ends Morten's turn (14). Similar to emoticons, the interpretation of typographical ellipses is largely reliant on the context; they appear with great variation in digital written discourse (Ong 2011). Ellipses also appear in written love letters documented in Ahearn's (2003) study of Nepali youth courtship. As the demarcated omission works to manage cultural norms for what can be written and by who, ellipses also function as a way to leave "meanings intentionally vague so as to invite the recipient to co-construct possible interpretations" (Ahearn, 2003: 114). With his typographical denotation of omission in extract 2, Morten signals that there is potentially more to the constructed togetherness than he has included in his description, leaving it up to Mette to potentially supply what is not there. Moreover, this use relates to what Simpson (2005) has termed "suspension dots", which create tension and excitement in written interaction and in the case of Morten and Mette thereby add to the flirtatious innuendo.

Before proposing his offer Morten constructs a second assessment of Mette's garden, "dejligt" (lovely) (10), adding to the construction of the place as pleasurable, and thereby constructing the imagery of togetherness in a positive light, similar to what occurs in the previous excerpt. Mette responds by similarly assessing the offer positively, adding to the pleasurable evaluation of the scenario, but uses a rather formal linguistic formulation that seem to play on Morten's professional involvement in the Christmas tree business. The formality is however toned down within the same turn through the use of an emoticon and the re-use of suspension ellipses (17-18), after which she enters the scenario and develops it by imagining the profitable possibilities of such a setup (18-30). Rather than inhabiting the future scenario specifically with herself and Morten, she peoples it with undefined generic "aarhusianere" (Aarhusians) (24). Thereby, she does not take up the possibility of romanticizing the future space. However, the ellipses squeezed in between accepting his offer and the following non-personal development of the scenario delicately forms a space for excitement.

The constructions of imagined togetherness also appear as more joking interactions. In such cases, imagery includes highly exaggerated suggestions of shared romantic activities (e.g., travelling, moving in together, having kids).

### Extract 3<sup>29</sup>

Bo	01	Hey du	Hey you
	02	Jeg synes du ser skide sød og	I think you look damn cute and
	03	interessant ud, <b>lyst til at</b>	interesting, <b>would like to</b>
	04	<b>skrive lidt sammen, flytte</b>	<b>correspond a bit, move in</b>
	05	<b>sammen og få en masse møgunger</b>	<b>together and have a lot of</b>
	06	<b>:D</b>	<b>brats :D</b>
	07	Kram	Hug
Maria	08	Progressivt scorereplik	Assertive pick-up line
	09	modtaget.	received.
	10	Og så fordi dine billeder er	And also because your photos
	11	alt for vilde, altså flotte.	are out of this world -
	12	Lad os skrive sammen. En anden	spectacular. Let's correspond.
	13	dag. Nu er jeg på vej i seng	Some other day. Now I'm about
	14		to go to bed
Bo	15	synes godt om, skal også iseng,	like, I'm going to bed too,
	16	skriv nå du for tid, sov godt	write when you have time, sleep
	17	du :)	tight you :)
	18	((three days later)) <sup>30</sup>	
Maria	19	Hej Bo	Hi Bo
	20	Ja hvad faan skriver man lige	Yes, hell what do one write
	21	til at starte med?? Jeg kaster	first?? I'll launch a topic:
	22	et tema ud: 4-hjulstrækker???	four-wheel drive??? but why?
	23	but why?	

This excerpt demonstrates a repetition of the structure of setting up imagined romantic togetherness by one participant, and the simultaneous rejection and acceptance by the other participant followed by a return to prompted self-presentation. In this interaction, Bo presents a chain of causal activities starting with the realistic proposal of writing together, leading to romantic life events. In this case imagined togetherness is presented explicitly, with Bo neither understating the romantic aspects nor blurring the people who inhabit the scenario. Rather, the scenario is exaggerated, jumping from initial contact to complete fusion and thereby activating not simply the possibility of a transgression from the current online context to a physical offline context, but the complete hetero-romantic

<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, information on timing was not donated with this correspondence.

<sup>30</sup> The three-day interval may appear remarkably long. However Bo does not orient to it as accountable in his following response to Maria.

dream, which the dating sites use to market themselves. Despite the bluntness of the question, Bo's turn can be interpreted as drawing on mechanisms of implicitness. Brown and Levinson (1987:219) list overstatement as an off-record strategy, which through extreme exaggeration makes the meaning negotiable and the extent to which the speaker can be assumed to commit to what he has said unclear.

Maria comments on his straightforward manner by delivering a meta-commentary that classifies Bo's initiative as assertive flirting. Her use of walkie-talkie slang, "modtaget" (received), adds a humorous innuendo to the message by orienting to the short-form style of Bo's initiative. This suggests that an exaggerated humorous approach might prompt similar responses. Maria only commits to one part of the imagined scenario by accepting the specific activity of writing together, but leaves out the two romantically loaded subsequent events. She defers the activity of writing to a future point in time, which is acted out three days later when she initiates a conversation that has no connection to Bo's previous romantic imagery, but instead picks up on biographical information laid out in his profile text – his interest in four-wheel drives.

In contrast to the other examples, it appears easy to identify flirting due to the exaggerated naming of romantic events and the responsive explicit classification of this as flirting. However, these cases are rare in the data – in fact only two such cases exist, out of which this is the most direct one – whereas the embedded and ambiguous cases are far more frequent.

The above three examples have all demonstrated how flirtatious proposals are incorporated into the ongoing interactional project of getting acquainted. In the following section, an excerpt is presented in which imagined togetherness is developed in a more complex and ambiguous manner over a longer sequence of turns.

### ***Complicating the structure: Ambiguous constructions of imagined togetherness***

The chronotope of imagined togetherness is not always as clear as in the previous examples, but in some cases turns into sequences in which ambiguous scenarios are tenuously negotiated. The analysis of the following excerpt will focus on the subtleness by which interactants manage to open up vague interpretational possibilities for intimate romantic contact. The following excerpt comes from the email interaction between Rasmus and Anna on dating.dk. Before the excerpt occurred, Anna and Rasmus had written to each other about their current living situations: Anna had

explained about the recent renovation of her apartment and Rasmus had volunteered information about his garden.

#### Extract 4<sup>31</sup>

Anna		((193 words omitted)) <sup>32</sup>	
July			
29			
8:35			
PM			
	01	Måske kan jeg sætte min	I may be able to renovate my
	02	lejlighed i stand, men til	apartment but I lack a real
	03	gengæld mangler jeg en	garden!
	04	rigtig have!	
		((94 words omitted))	
Rasmus		((165 words omitted))	
July			
29			
8:53			
PM			
	05	Synd uden have - <b>sushi og</b>	A pity you don't have a
	06	<b>hvidvin (og bøffer med</b>	garden - <b>sushi and white wine</b>
	07	<b>sovs) med roser i</b>	<b>(and steaks with sauce) with</b>
	17	<b>baggrunden, er en luksus</b>	<b>roses in the background, are</b>
	08	<b>jeg kun kan unde dig ;)</b>	<b>a luxury that I would wish</b>
	09	((56 words omitted))	<b>for you to have;)</b>
Anna		((155 words omitted))	
July			
31			
10:18			
PM			
	10	Måske jeg ikke har en	I may not have a garden but
	11	have, men til gengæld har	on the other hand I'm not far
	12	jeg ikke langt til skoven	from the woods and the sea.
	13	og vandet. Og der kan man	And there you can also enjoy
	14	også nyde sushi, lidt mere	sushi, although it's a bit
	15	upraktisk er det dog at	more difficult however to
	16	medbringe bøffer med	bring steaks with sauce...
	17	sovs...	
		((13 words omitted))	
Rasmus		((112 words omitted))	
August			
1			
5:07			
PM			
	18	Lyder i den grad skønt med	Sounds really nice being so
	19	kort til stranden - jeg	close to the beach - I miss
	20	savner det selv. Havnen er	that myself. The harbor just
	21	bare ikke helt det samme.	isn't the same. Steak with
	22	Bøf med sovs kan dog	sauce however can be fixed -
	23	sagtens fixes - det er	it's just about bringing the
	24	bare med at få Trangiaen	gas jet :)
	25	med :)	
		((10 words omitted))	

<sup>31</sup> In the excerpt, sections have been left out due to space restrictions. It is clearly marked where sections have been left out.

<sup>32</sup> In this correspondence each contribution was rather long, in average 155 words. In order to focus on the exchange around the topic of their living situations I have omitted several words in each turn. During these exchanges, Anna and Rasmus discussed several other topics, i.e. music, sport, work life.

Throughout the excerpt, Anna and Rasmus align in the activity of assessing the recreational qualities of their current homes. Embedded in the development of the topic is an instance of imagined togetherness as Rasmus in lines 5-9 sets up an imagined activity of enjoying specific food in the surroundings of his garden and then brings Anna into this activity by wishing for her to experience this situation. This is not a neutral description of his garden and its recreational benefits, but a romantically tuned presentation in which Anna is brought in as a potential future actor. Chronotopes do not simply project a representation of space-time, but also an “imaginative sociology” of possible lives that inhabit that space-time (Dick, 2010: 277). The material artifacts that Rasmus chooses for setting up the imagined situation – fine dining and roses in the background – all have romantic connotations and seem to draw on well-established discourses of romance and dating culture. The winking emoticon at the end of his turn can be interpreted as adding to the romantic innuendo. This may well function as a pre-invitation to a date – for Anna to enjoy the luxury of outdoor sushi and white wine she would have to come to Rasmus’ place and meet with him – but importantly this is not formulated explicitly as an invitation.

Rather than responding to Rasmus’ turn as if it was an invitation, Anna continues presenting the advantages of her own home through which she transfers the material objects of Rasmus’ imagined scenario to her own home surroundings – the beach and the woods. In her description she attaches a positive verb, “nyde” (enjoy) (14) to the imagery, thereby casting it as something pleasurable. In her description she ambiguously blurs the actors inhabiting the scenario, changing Rasmus’ “jeg” (I) and “dig” (you) into a generic “man” (one) (13), and she presents a practical obstacle followed by typographical ellipses (14-17). In this case the ellipses might simply function as punctuation (Baron 2008; Hård af Segerstedt 2002), but could also be interpreted as a way to signal ‘to be continued’ and thereby would not be presenting the posed obstacle as closing off the scenario. This signal is taken up by Rasmus who offers a solution to the practical challenge while sticking to the sophisticated strategy of leaving out any direct reference to the actors; he does this by omitting a subject completely (22-25). Furthermore, both participants in their co-construction of imagined togetherness deploy the modal verb, “kunne” (can) (23, 32), to construct non-realis, thus making use of grammatical devices to mark the scenario as hypothetical.

This excerpt demonstrates how the participants are able to delicately incorporate romantic imagery of future togetherness while purportedly doing self-presentation. Rasmus and

Anna's engagement in the fine dining scenario is deeply embedded in the activity of delivering biographical information and can thus innocently pass as making conversation and getting acquainted. This exemplifies how difficult it is for the researcher to identify such instances of flirting, as this phenomenon easily might have been left unexamined due to its implicitness.

### *Explicit negotiations of implicitness*

As it has become evident, a key factor in handling imagined togetherness is to avoid agreeing on the specifics of the imagined scenario. The following example demonstrates the work that participants put into not committing fully and thereby extending potentiality. The excerpt comes from an email interaction on dating.dk between Mette and Nikolaj. During the correspondence Nikolaj provided information that over the upcoming weekend he was going to visit the city in which Mette lives. This information gave rise to several constructions of imagined togetherness, which throughout the correspondence was eventually narrowed down to a plan to meet offline. The excerpt demonstrates how the concrete planning of the date is postponed in order to maintain the tension and excitement of possibility.

#### Excerpt 5

Nikolaj	01	jamen kan være du engang	well perhaps I should give you
March	02	skal ha mit nr så vi kan	my number some time so that we
19	03	aftale tilfældigt og støde	can plan to bump in to each
8:19	04	ind i hinanden :-D	other accidentally :-D
PM			
Mette	05	Det skal jeg, men <b>skal vi</b>	You should, <b>but shall we let</b>
March	06	<b>lade det være en perfekt</b>	<b>this be the perfect</b>
19	07	<b>cliffhanger til i morgen</b>	<b>cliffhanger until tomorrow</b>
8:28	08	<b>hvor vi snakkes ved? Du kan</b>	<b>when we'll be in touch? You</b>
PM	09	alligevel ikke bruge mit	can't use my number to find
	10	nummer til at finde mig på	me on Facebook tonight
	11	Facebook i aften ;-)	anyhow ;-)
Nikolaj	12	jamen vi tar den bare i	well we'll just do it
March	13	morgen.. så må du glæde dig	tomorrow.. then you can look
19	14	og se om jeg os vil i	forward to it and see if I'm
8:30	15	morgen ;-)	still willing to give it to
PM	16		you tomorrow;-)
Mette	17	Orv ja måske er du vildt	whoops yes maybe you'll be
March	18	karrig i morgen :-) ...	totally hard to get tomorrow
19	19	Er den sådan 50-50?	:-)... Is it like 50-50?
8:32			
PM			
Nikolaj	20	nej er ret sikker på det	no I'm pretty sure that it



March	21	kunne være hyggeligt og	could be great to meet up
19	22	mødes og se hinanden ad en	and check each other out for
8:40	23	times tid eller 2 :-)	a couple of hours :-)
PM			

Nikolaj makes attempts to organize practical matters for meeting in his first turn. However, even at this stage in which both parties have agreed to meet, the planning is done in a designedly vague manner using modality devices (epistemic adverb “tilfældigt”/coincidentally, modal verb “kan”/can), thus a level of uncertainty is continuously incorporated (01-04). Mette engages in the activity of planning the meeting in an interesting counterproductive way by explicitly suggesting that they postpone the act of exchanging phone numbers as a way to incorporate suspense (05-08). She refers to the possibility of Nikolaj wishing to ‘stalk’ her through other online platforms (08-11). Lurking and stalking are common online practices among youth in which participants make use of the Internet’s data accessibility to anonymously search and collect biographical information on others (Chayko, 2008; Jones, Schieffelin and Smith 2011). In this case the assumed desire to seek out more information about the other can be interpreted as a sign of enhanced romantic interest, potentially playing on erotic peeping, which the following winking emoticon might to support. Moreover, it might orient to the inherent risk of inauthenticity in computer-mediated interaction such as online dating, which may cause an urge to double-check information through other sources. Nikolaj aligns immediately with the playful suggestion, adding further suspense, which gives rise to a playful exchange that nevertheless ends with Nikolaj reassuring Mette about his interest.

This excerpt demonstrates the work that participants put into keeping the interaction implicit even after both parties have agreed to an offline date. This illustrates the essential role that potentiality plays in these types of interactions. The participants in this case skillfully manage to set up a meeting while keeping flirtatious tension at a maximum.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the implicit workings of flirting as it is played out in online dating email and IM interactions. The article is not an attempt to put forward a universal definition of flirting. I have explored and discussed the central aspect of implicitness by narrowing down one out of many potential strategies: *chronotopic construction of imagined togetherness*. By deploying Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the chronotope the article has suggested an analytical conceptualization for understanding how participants manage to delicately express interpersonal desire by drawing on

romantic configurations of a shared future. The chronotope of imagined togetherness is linguistically constructed both by grammatical (modal verbs), syntactical (conditional clauses), and lexical devices (temporal and spatial deictic markers, epistemic adverbs). Turn-by-turn analysis has additionally demonstrated how such chronotopic constructions are embedded in reciprocal exchanges of biographical information, ensuring that the flirtatious attempts can innocently pass as part of the activity of getting acquainted. This implicit strategy thus makes it difficult for the researcher to identify instances of flirting; this article therefore emphasizes the need for close attention to the tenuous linguistic and interactional mechanisms when researching flirting interaction. Flirting may be embedded in other activities designed to pass as such, but intrinsically carrying delicate messages of interpersonal attraction.

Interactional analysis has further illuminated the recurring practice of leaving the imagined togetherness unsettled by neither rejecting nor progressing towards concrete planning. I have argued that this mechanism does productive work in nurturing the excitement of possibility. The tension of uncertainty about the interactional development and the other person's romantic interests lays out grounds for fantasizing about what might come, and what might happen if... This mechanism links to the "postponement of pleasure", which Deleuze and Parnet (2002:100) argue is a central dynamic in the realm of desire. Desire is not necessarily about immediate fulfillment; rather, incorporations of delay themselves build pleasurable "planes of desire". It is also possible to view this dynamic of postponement as closely connected to fantasy (cf. Hall, 1995). The chronotopic constructions of pleasurable imagery draw on and add to a socioculturally grounded fantasy schemata of romantic physical love. By postponing concretization, participants put work into creating and preserving the gap between imagined togetherness and its fulfillment, thereby intensifying desire and excitement.

By examining empirical evidence, this article has emphasized the centrality of implicitness in flirting as both prudent strategies for communicating and negotiating romantic interests and pleasurable dynamics for nourishing the excitement of possibility. Flirting may well be designed to appear intangible and ambiguous, but by providing attention to complex linguistic details and interactional dynamics it becomes evident how implicitness can be tracked in analysis, ultimately pinpointing flirting as a linguistic and interactional phenomenon.

## **7. Article IV**

# **Constructions and Functions of Media Ideologies in Online Dating Interaction**

Submitted to *Discourse, Context and Media*

### **Abstract**

Over the past two decades, online media have become an ever-more integrated part of everyday social practices. As a result, researchers have pointed to increased cohesion between online and offline social spaces and relationships (Leander and McKim 2003). However, in online dating interaction, users themselves continuously construct and maintain a distinction between online and offline dating practices. This paper discusses the insights provided by a user-oriented interactional approach to conceptualizing the relationship between online and offline. Discourse analysis demonstrates that users linguistically construct media ideologies based on a dichotomous understanding of online and offline spaces, characterizing online dating as new and limited. Additional micro-level interaction analysis of e-mail and chat Instant Messenger data explains how the media ideologies function as rich interactional resources for negotiating flirtatious advances.

**Keywords:** online dating, media ideology, online/offline modes, flirtation, interaction

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, online media have become increasingly integral to conventional social life. Most people in a Western context make daily online appearances to negotiate social relations. Consequently, intimate matters such as romantic practices are now partly enacted in online contexts. This increased cohesion between online and offline social relations has led to a questioning of research approaches based on sharp distinctions between the virtual and the real (Coleman 2010). Online and offline activities are blurring in complex ways and must therefore be investigated as interconnected social spheres (Leander and McKim 2003). In this article, however, I demonstrate that users display a general orientation towards the online dating medium as different from their *real-life* romantic experiences. Such orientations form sets of beliefs about the online dating medium that are clearly based on dichotomous understandings of online and offline.

Through a combination of discourse analysis and interaction analysis of e-mail and Instant Messaging (IM) data from two Danish online dating sites, this article demonstrates that young adult users construct a shared orientation towards the online medium as new, unfamiliar, and distinct from offline face-to-face dating practices. These conceptions do not merely mirror early and common understandings of online contexts as a distinct *cyberspace* but are deployed as a resource in flirtatious interaction. By constructing the medium as a separate domain in which rules are unclear, users co-establish advantageous grounds for negotiating romantic interpersonal relations.

Thurlow and Mroczek (2011:xxi) argue that contemporary studies of computer-mediated interaction should shift from an overwhelmingly medium-centered approach to a user-oriented methodology by paying greater attention to new media users' situated practices. In this article, I take a user-oriented approach to investigating the understandings and interactional workings of online dating. Rather than anticipating the context of online dating as either different from or similar to other types of romantic practice, I deploy users' own articulations to focus on their shared 'media ideologies' (Gershon 2010b), i.e. their beliefs and assumptions about the online dating medium as they appear across the data set. This article does not aim to engage in a theoretical discussion as to whether a demarcation of online and offline modes is meaningful but instead to investigate how users treat modes and what functions such orientations serve. Focus is placed on medium conceptions as they appear in user-to-user interaction as a means of illuminating social reality as it is experienced and constructed by users.

## 2. 'Online' and 'offline'

In the early days of Internet research, online interaction was viewed as a world apart from *reality*. The much-applied term 'cyberspace' indicated an understanding of the Internet as a place of its own (Turkle 1995). Such views praised the anonymity of online communicative channels, freeing individuals from *real life* social categories. Accordingly, the technology's assumed transformative potential was regarded as entailing infinite possibilities for alternative identity construction (Plant 1996; Stone 1996) and transgression of dominant power structures (Schuler 1996; Tsagarousianou et al. 1998).

With the advent of mainstream access to the Internet and the development of multimodal, user-generated content, online-mediated interaction has gradually become quotidian practice. Along these lines, empirical research has provided evidence that online interpersonal communication reflects both micro-level communicative dynamics (Meredith and Potter 2014; Tannen 2013) and macro-level social structures known from offline interaction (Carstensen 2009). Additionally, ethnographic work has demonstrated that social activities are carried out simultaneously online and offline, forming an entangled and blurred reality that is evident on the macro-level of complete societies (Miller and Slater 2000) as well as on the micro-level of local communities (Wakeford 1999; Stæhr 2014) and intimate interpersonal relationships (Chambers 2013; Gershon 2010a).

Such insights have led to a questioning of the boundary that early studies of the Internet drew between real and virtual spaces. Recent scholarship has proclaimed "the end of the virtual/real divide" (Rogers 2009:29), that researchers are should "avoid drawing artificial boundaries based on technological distinctions" (Lehdonvirta 2010:9) and should "go beyond the screen" (Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger 2008:3). This entails a fundamental rejection of the virtual/real divide. Critique of the emerging approach has been posed by Boellstorff (2008), who provides ethnographic evidence of virtual world users' meta-awareness of the gap between the virtual and the real. Boellstorff takes these insights further in arguing that the divide between online and offline is essentially what constitutes the virtual worlds that the studied participants act within. Miller and Slater (2000) offer a more balanced critique by pointing to individual users' varying conceptions of online and offline. Rather than taking users' potential distinctions between online and offline as a determining starting point, they urge the researcher to identify and question such potential dividing practices and their functions on the micro-level.

Online dating constitutes a key activity for addressing the intersection between the online and offline. The online dating practices investigated in this article begin with the initial establishment and negotiation of romantic and sexual relations in the online-mediated context of the dating site. The relations based upon this are typically carried over into an offline context through real-time face-to-face dating. Online dating contexts in which the online-mediated interaction is the sole goal and enjoyment of the interaction, such as cybersex activities, do exist however (e.g. Adams-Thies 2012). Nevertheless, recent developments in online dating point to an increased focus on interactants' offline locations. GPS-regulated online dating apps such as Grindr and Tinder centre on users' locations and geographic proximity in real time. This allows users to get in touch with other users in close proximity and immediately engage in offline face-to-face interaction. Such recent developments demonstrate how online and offline social spaces are becoming increasingly intertwined, allowing online media to tune and reconstruct offline contexts in real time (Blackwell et al. 2014). Despite the documented complexity and assimilation of online and offline social contexts, the conception of a divide is still upheld by the participants in this study.

Following Miller and Slater (2000), this article questions and analyzes online daters' dividing processes as a social accomplishment that serves particular interactional functions. According to Gershon (2010b), such processes construct and reflect local 'media ideologies'. Comparable to Silverstein's concept of 'language ideologies' (Silverstein 1979), which encompasses speakers' expressed beliefs and attitudes towards language structure and use, media ideologies entails "how people understand both communicative possibilities and the material limitations of a specific channel, and how they conceive of channels in general" (Gershon 2010b:283). Whereas there exists substantial work on the representations of language ideologies in media discourse (e.g. Johnson and Milani 2010; Johnson and Ensslin 2007), the issue of media ideologies remains a rather pristine subject of study for new media researchers (i.e. a special issue of *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2010 on 'Media Ideologies'). Media ideologies are necessarily influenced by the techno-communicative tools provided by a specific medium, which may pose interactional affordances as well as restrictions for users (Hutchby 2001; Stanfill 2014). However, it is exactly by looking at how technological functions are articulated by users as either posing advantages or limitations in interaction that the researcher gains access to users' understandings of a specific communicative medium.

### 3. Connecting romantically online

The first online dating site appeared in the USA in 1998, allowing users to create simple profiles and exchange written texts. Online dating services have since grown into mainstream resources for romantic partner seeking. Early versions of mediated partner search pre-dating the Internet, e.g. newspapers, magazines (Shalom 1997), and audio voicelink advertisements (Coupland 1996), have interdiscursively been transferred to online dating practices through recontextualization of similar scripts in online dating profiles (e.g. Bogetić 2013; Milani 2013). Technologies mediate intimacy and sexuality on a daily basis in most Western societies today (McGlotten 2007), and online dating practices have thus come to exert heavy influence on the many ways in which romantic and sexual interaction is played out.

#### *3.1 Interacting at [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) and [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk)*

Enhanced technology and widened Internet access has caused an explosion in the popularity of online-mediated dating practices. Figures from Denmark show that heterosexual dating services rank among the 30 most-used websites (Danske Medier 2012). This development has instigated a change in the activity format of the heterosexual marketplace (Eckert 2011). Through large databases of detailed self-presentational information, users can browse and assess each other's profiles and eventually communicate through IM and e-mail across time and space. Online dating thus expands the local heterosexual marketplace while simultaneously offering a convenient way of participating in romantic activities.

The core of the data set consists of 14 user-to-user e-mail and IM interactions primarily from two Danish dating sites, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) and [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk). One interaction was derived from the dating application Tinder.<sup>33</sup> Data was collected with the help of active users of the dating sites. These 'participatory data collectors' donated their e-mail and IM interactions to the research project upon obtaining informed consent from their interlocutors. To protect participants, all identifiable information was anonymized. For elaborate discussion of the ethical perspectives associated with this method, please see Mortensen (2015). Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants (three men<sup>34</sup>, four women), focusing on personal online dating

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<sup>33</sup> This article will not discuss Tinder in detail but will instead focus on the two dating sites from which the majority of the data was collected.

<sup>34</sup> Two of these interviews were conducted as part of a participant observation date (see Mortensen 2015).

experiences. The interview data serves as complementary evidence for underscoring tendencies that emerge in the naturally occurring IM and e-mail data.


Both dating sites require paid membership for users to engage in interpersonal communication. Even though it is possible to set up a potential bi- and homosexual profiles, both sites are directed at heterosexual customers in their advertisements and are consequently used overwhelmingly by heterosexuals. The sites offer similar communicative functions but differ markedly in size and composition of customers. As the largest Danish dating site, [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk), services a heterogeneous group of approximately 100,000 active users, who represent various age groups, income levels, educational levels, and geographic locations. In contrast, [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) is based on offering its audience a narrow and targeted group (approximately 30,000 users) of highly educated singles by requiring that customers possess a degree in higher education or are currently participating in a higher education. In spite of the fact that the two dating sites differ in target groups, many of my participants had active profiles on both dating sites. They typically purchased their first membership on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk), which was generally viewed as a more serious dating site in terms of user's compatibility and intentions but then transferred to [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) as they experienced little interactive activity and less rapid contact on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk).

The sites offer a variety of text-based communicative functions. A much-used function to initiate contact is the interested/not-interested or favorite function, by which the user can add a specific profile to a personal list of preferred users.

Figure 2

Interested list from [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk)

Har vist mig interesse




28 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

i dag




31 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

Sen d. 09/10-2011




30 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

Lør d. 08/10-2011




34 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

Tors d. 06/10-2011




30 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

Lør d. 24/09-2011



29 år

Interesseret

Ikke interesseret

Lør d. 01/10-2011

Favorites list from [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk)

INDGÅENDE TILFØJELSER

UDGÅENDE TILFØJELSER

Profiler der har tilføjet dig som favorit: 15 i alt, 0 nye()

Find profil i listen

Søg >


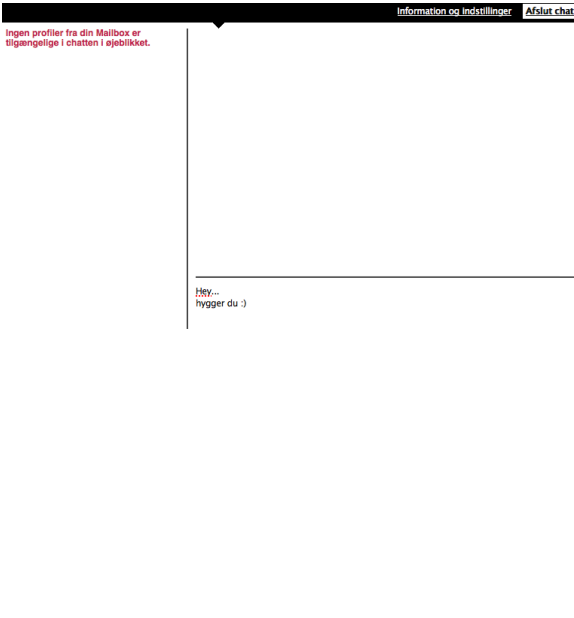
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			Profilnavn:	Profil er tilføjet:		Seneste aktivitet:
<input type="checkbox"/>			(30) A...	12.09.2013 16:10		10.07.2014 17:17
<input type="checkbox"/>			(40) U...	05.06.2013 20:52		09.07.2014 16:16
<input type="checkbox"/>			(36) K...	28.05.2013 21:28		09.10.2013 00:01
<input type="checkbox"/>			(25) B...	07.08.2012 21:27		08.02.2014 17:22
<input type="checkbox"/>			(24) S...	19.06.2012 16:38		14.09.2012 10:50
<input type="checkbox"/>			(40) M...	20.01.2012 20:54		13.06.2012 22:48
<input type="checkbox"/>			(41) S...	13.01.2012 22:01		30.06.2014 00:02

The act is automatically communicated to the profile owner, who can then reciprocate interest by returning the act. The interested/not-interested function thus works as a pre-sequence (Schegloff 2007) preliminary to potential e-mail and IM interaction. By reciprocating interest or otherwise



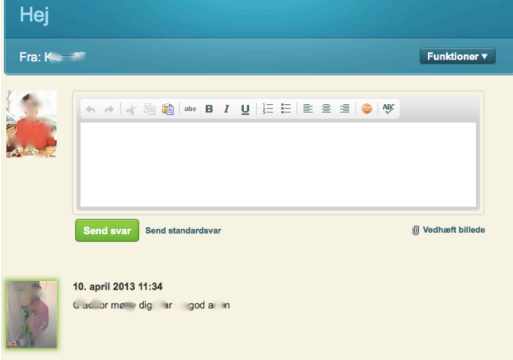

within the techno-communicative scheme, the responder can display the stance that she takes up towards prospective e-mail/IM interaction. This creates a safe context as the users have an indication of whether the person to whom they are writing may accept to engage in written interaction.<sup>35</sup> Through the sites' e-mail and IM functions, users can exchange private written texts in quasi-synchronous and asynchronous interaction. The figures below demonstrate the visual format of the IM and e-mail functions.

Figure 3

IM on www.dating.dk	IM on www.elitedaters.dk
	

<sup>35</sup> The like/dislike function has come to play an essential role in recently developed and highly popular dating apps such as Tinder. The function forms the basis of all communication, as users are only able to contact other users who have reciprocated interest. If users do not reciprocate interest, communication is blocked.

Figure 4

E-mail on dating.dk	E-mail on www.elitedaters.dk
	

The interactions in the data set take on a variety of forms. Some are very short and broken off after as few as three exchanges whereas others develop into long e-mails exchanged over longer periods of time. The users overwhelmingly make use of the e-mail function. A possible explanation for the popularity of the e-mail function could be that the e-mail format does not require users to be logged on simultaneously and generally allows for longer response time. However, some users use the e-mail function for rapid interaction, developing into IM-like correspondences.

The following analyses present two interrelated local media ideologies based on interactional data and supplementary interview data: *the dating medium as distinct, partial, and limited* and *the dating medium as new and unfamiliar*. Additional turn-by-turn analyses of two cases will further demonstrate how users draw upon these ideologies and what interactional functions they come to possess.

#### 4. Online dating as distinct, partial, and limited

To analyze users' media ideologies, all instances have been registered in which the online dating medium was mentioned or referenced in user-to-user interaction. This was the case in 11 of the 14

correspondences<sup>36</sup>. Talk about the medium occurred as individual topics and as embedded sub-comments in various other conversational topics related to the activity of online dating.

Collective understandings of the medium appear as sets of binaries across the data set, evident through a line of spatially/geographically oriented utterances. The construction of oppositional categories can be regarded as tokens of the concrete ways in which participants categorize experience (cf., Fairclough 1992). The spatial/geographical orientation is generally constructed through three sets of binaries: inside/outside, text/talk, and virtual/real. The inside/outside binary is articulated through the Danish adverb ‘herinde’ (in here) on the one hand and ‘ude i den virkelige verden’ (out in the real world) on the other hand.

Ex. 1 (ANDERS<sup>37</sup>)

hvad laver du ellers når du ikke  
flirter med meget uskyldige mænd  
her inde ..?

what do you do when you're not  
flirting with very innocent men in  
here..?

Ex. 2 (METTE)

Held og lykke i datingjunglen  
herinde

Good luck in the dating jungle in  
here

Similar spatial references are evident in other cultural and sexual contexts, such as gay chat rooms in which users deploy ‘room metaphors’ in order to attach a material dimension to the bodily descriptions and fantasies that are played out in interaction (King 2011:19). Moreover, the binary of virtual/real is constructed through articulation of a line of labels that explicate the medium as distinct: ‘konceptet’ (the concept), ‘mediet’ (the medium), ‘det virtuelle miljø’ (the virtual environment), and ‘dating-junglen herinde’ (the dating jungle in here). These articulation processes consist of connecting opposed terms, create a clear distinction between online and offline. These two modes thus come to produce a co-constitutive relationship.

<sup>36</sup> There is no obvious explanation as to why these three exempt conversations had no mention of or reference to the medium. These participants were neither more nor less experienced than the users in the other nine conversations.

<sup>37</sup> All personal names are pseudonyms.

A contrasting of text and talk also appears, connecting textuality with online dating and orality with ‘the real world’.

EX. 3: CÆCILIE	
mennesker lærer man sjældent at kende på skrift.	you rarely get to know people through text.
EX. 4: PETER	
det er svært at beskrive hvordan man virkelig er med ord [...] for mit vedkommende, tror jeg bedst man finder ud af det ved at opleve mig i virkeligheden.	it's hard to describe how one really is with words [...] in my case, I think the best way of finding out is by experiencing me in reality.
EX. 5: ANNA	
jeg synes at for meget skriveri dræber den oprigtige interesse, så jeg tager et stort skridt for mit vedkommende og vil høre om du har lyst til at drikke en øl i den virkelige verden?	I think that too much writing kills the genuine interest, so I'm taking a big step for me and want to ask if you would like to have a beer in the real world?
EX. 6: CÆCILIE	
Det der med at skrive lange stile frem og tilbage, keder mig.	Like writing long essays back and forth bores me.

Textuality is here characterized as a restrictive mode of communication since it does not supply users with sufficient communicative resources for exploring each other and representing their true selves (ex. 3, 4). Moreover, written interaction is presented as posing a threat to spontaneous romantic interaction (ex. 5, 6) by being characterized in negative terms as not providing adequate tools for expressing oneself and connecting romantically. In these examples, it is noteworthy how some statements (ex. 3, 4, 5) simultaneously function to express beliefs about the medium and act as implicit invitations and justification for such invitations. I will return to these points later in the analysis.

In contrast to written self-presentation and interaction, users construct a ‘reality’ that encompasses improved conditions for romantic atmospheres through the enabling of embodied communication. This understanding is termed ‘chemistry’ in three of the conversations.

EX. 7: ANDERS	
kemi i Real life er alt afgørende.	chemistry in Real life is essential.
EX. 8: METTE	
Man kan skrive frem og tilbage i lange baner, men kemi, kemi, kemi ik ;-)	One can write back and forth for a long time, but chemistry, chemistry, chemistry right ;-)
EX. 9: TRINE	
Og godt at finde ud af om kemien også er god i den virkelige verden :)	And nice to find out if the chemistry is also good in the real world :)

The notion of chemistry is similarly articulated in a number of the interviews.

EX. 10: STINE	
det er jo der hvor man egentlig finder ud af om kemien er der fordi så har man også [/] hvor alt er gået skide godt indtil man egentlig begynder at snakke sammen så nogen gange finder man ud af [/] så ja så må det jo bære eller briste så er det vel et spørgsmål om der er kemi og bølgelængde	Well, that's where one really finds out whether the chemistry is there [/] where everything has gone damn well until one really begins to talk together then some times one finds out [/] then yeah then it's make or break then it's a question of whether there is chemistry and you're in tune
EX. 11: ANNA	
Der er så mange ting der går der går tabt i det skrevne altså i forhold til kemi synes jeg at at det kan man altså først finde ud af når man mødes og sidder og har de der okay fanger han det hvis jeg siger det her altså sådan altså de der små ting ikke også øh og et blik og et altså ageren i forhold til hinanden ikke den der interaktion det synes jeg er min erfaring det kan man først finde ud af face-to-face	There are so many things that are lost in the written so in relation to chemistry I think that that one can only really find out when one meet and sit and have those okay does he get it if I say this so like so those little things right uh a gaze and a so acting in relation to each other right this interaction I think that's my experience that one only finds out face-to-face

EX. 12: MARIA

efter kontakten var etableret og  
der var lidt humor og sådan i de  
første par beskeder og sådan så  
havde jeg ikke noget imod at  
mødes på en café og finde ud af om  
jeg også synes der var noget kemi  
eller sådan at man også kunne  
snakke sammen

after the contact was established  
and there was a bit of humor and  
such in the first couple of  
messages and such then I didn't  
mind meeting in a café and find  
out if I thought there was  
chemistry or like if one could  
talk together

The meaning of 'chemistry' is never defined, but it seems to be understood by everyone without further explanation since none of the participants ever orient to the term as accountable. Users agree that 'chemistry' is crucial for connecting romantically and is thus constructed as a presupposition. However, 'chemistry' is mainly experienced outside of online dating in face-to-face offline meetings. This does not mean that written communication is fully exclusive to 'chemistry'. In Trine's comment (ex. 9), the use of 'også' (also) ascribes an experience of chemistry to the written interaction. Yet her utterance reiterates a clear distinction by implying that online textual 'chemistry' is not expected to be directly transferable to an offline mode.

The users thus establish a media ideology that structures two oppositional modes in which the online mode is understood as limited and partial and the offline mode is understood as encompassing the full experience of romance. Looking at the activity of communicating through textual modes more broadly, the written interaction serves an essential function as it is the means of contact in the online romantic market. From this perspective, the text is the outset for establishing a face-to-face offline romantic relationship. As a result, the users' construction of textual communication as a restrictive context for connecting romantically contradicts the practical functions of e-mail and IM interaction. In spite of this, the users co-construct a difference as they engage in linguistic work to prevent the collapse of the online into the offline.

The work that users put into the oppositional division does not, however, mean that the activity of establishing romantic interpersonal relations through online dating sites is a movement that begins online and finds its end point when acted out in offline contexts. This movement is definitely descriptive of parts of the activity in the establishing phase of an intimate relationship, but the activity does not simply end offline. Rather, it is continuously negotiated in online and offline modes as participants use various media in their ongoing communications (Pascoe 2010). Social spaces and relations are thus interwoven. The transitions between online and offline communicative social spaces may be more or less marked, and this may change over time as the relationship develops. As evident in the data, however, the *initial* move from the online-

mediated context to a face-to-face real time setting is constructed as essential and carrying certain values.

#### 4.1 The interactional functions of ‘chemistry’

The following analysis demonstrates how the concept of ‘chemistry’ that forms part of the media ideology of online dating as distinct, partial, and limited can serve flirtatious functions. The excerpt is taken from e-mail correspondence between Cæcilie and Karsten on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) and demonstrates how the concept of chemistry is used as a resource for flirtatiously attempting a rapid development of the online interaction into a face-to-face meeting. Prior to the following excerpt, Karsten had sent one e-mail to Cæcilie.<sup>38</sup>

EX. 13

Cæcilie	01.12.2011 17.58	((157 words omitted))	
		01 Man finder	One never really
Karsten reads:		02 alligevel aldrig ud	finds out anyway
01.12.2011		03 af, om kemien er	whether the
18.00		04 der, før man har	chemistry is there
		05 haft en real life	before one has had a
		06 date...?	real life date...?
		((17 words omitted))	

<sup>38</sup> In the excerpt, sections have been left out due to space restrictions. It is clearly marked where sections have been left out.

Karsten	01.12.2011	((157 words omitted))	
	18:13		
Cæcilie reads:			
02.12.2011			
00.20			
	07	Kemien er så	The chemistry is so
	08	vigtigt, og når du	important and when
	09	arbejder med teater	you work with
	10	så ved du vel også	theatre then you
	11	hvor meget	probably know how
	12	vigtighed man	much importance is
	13	tillægger	attached to body
	14	kropssproget. men	language. but one
	15	man får et relativt	gets a pretty good
	16	godt billede af	picture of the
	17	personen bag. Dog	person behind.
	18	meget farvet af	However, very
	19	folks evner til at	colored by people's
	20	formulerer følelser	abilities to
	21	og karaktertræk	articulate emotions
	22	gennem tekst.	and characteristics
	23		through text.
	24	Hvor længe vil du	
	25	mene at det går før	How much time would
	26	det er socialt	you consider has to
	27	acceptabelt at tage	pass before it's
	28	på en date fra	socially acceptable
	29	første	to go on a date
	30	brevveksling? Vi	after the first
	31	taler helt	exchange of letters?
	32	hypotetisk her ;)	We're talking
	33		strictly
	34	Mvh Karsten	hypothetically here
	35		;) )
	36		Kind regards Karsten
Cæcilie	04.12.2011	((34 words omitted))	
	17.33		
Karsten reads:			
04.12.2011			
17.46			
	37	Spillereglerne i	I have no idea about
	38	forhold til, hvor	the rules regarding
	39	længe man skal have	how long one has to
	40	skrevet frem og	have written back
	41	tilbage her, før en	and forth before an
	42	egentlig aftale	actual date is
	43	sættes op, har jeg	scheduled. But I'm
	44	ingen idé om. Men	not sure that I
	45	jeg er heller ikke	would stick to them
	46	sikker på, at jeg	if I knew them :) I
	47	ville rette mig	think one has to
	48	efter dem, hvis jeg	test it out.
	49	kendte dem :) Jeg	
	50	tror, man er nødt	Have a nice Sunday!
	51	til at prøve sig	
	52	frem.	
	53	God søndag!	



Cæcilie's initial deployment of the term 'chemistry' (01-06) – and the understandings that go along with it – is used as a helpful resource for posing an implicit invitation for a 'real life' face-to-face meeting. The idea that true romantic connection can only be experienced in real life works here as a driving argument for a quick progression towards an offline date. The statement sets up a conditional relationship between 'real life dating' and 'chemistry' so that attraction and personal connection can only be determined outside of the current digital communicative frame.

Cæcilie constructs her utterance as a general statement about the workings of dating by using the generic pronoun 'man'<sup>39</sup> (one) and thereby positions herself as less personally invested. In this way, she manages to save face while simultaneously suggesting potential intimate contact. By adding an ellipsis and a question mark at the end, she constructs the statement as a first pair part of an adjacency pair that sequentially requires an answer from Karsten, which in case of agreement can consequentially lead to an offline date. In this way, Cæcilie's utterance contains a flirtatious ambiguity that opens various response options for Karsten to take, either following the personal flirtatious advance or the neutral meta-discussion of the medium.

Karsten skillfully maintains both tracks by initially adding further general statements on online dating (07-23) and, in continuation, orienting towards the implicit invitation to a face-to-face meeting (24-34). By asking Cæcilie for her opinion on the social etiquette of online dating practice, Karsten activates and draws on the ideology of online dating as an unfamiliar social space, the behavioral rules of which are not completely evident to users. This media ideology will be explained in detail in the following section. In this manner, he manages to express interest in Cæcilie's implicitly suggested project but avoids posing a direct invitation. Instead, he sets the scene by means of reference to online dating as a distinct and unfamiliar practice in order to make Cæcilie the active party. This dynamic can be interpreted as yet another means of saving face in a precarious situation. However, the hinting also functions to make this exchange flirtatious. In his essay on flirtation, Simmel (1984 [1919]), points to a tense relationship between 'yes' and 'no' that is characteristic to flirtatious behavior. Simmel describes the interaction as a constant playful game that alternates between giving in and holding back. Accordingly, "flirtation opens pathways of possibility" (Perper 2010:39). It is specifically the possibility – and not the fulfilled desire – that is alluring. In spite of the problematic deficit-based understandings of gender (Witz 2000) in Simmel's theories on women and their inability to account for the complex indexical meanings of sexual

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<sup>39</sup> 'Man' can be used with a specific reference in Danish but is overwhelmingly used generically (Nielsen et al. 2009). In this case, Cæcilie clearly uses the pronoun with no direct referent.

rejection (Kulick 2003), his observation of the interactional dynamic of flirtation provides a useful framework for understanding the layered meaning potential in flirtatious communicative acts.

Cæcilie subscribes to this dynamic in her next response – this time with a much longer time lapse of four days<sup>40</sup> – by switching between specificity and ambiguity in her use of personal pronouns (39-40, 48-50). The alternation contains a tension as it abruptly shifts between personalizing and anonymizing the utterances, thereby including and excluding the interactants. In this way, the use of pronoun functions as a distancer and advancer (37-49). Again, she abstains from giving concrete expression to the implicit invitation. This dynamic continuously functions as both face saving and flirtatious by keeping meanings and interests implicit.

As with Anna in ex. 5 (“I think that too much writing kills the genuine interest, so I’m taking a big step for me and wanted to ask if you would like to have a beer in the real world?”), Cæcilie invokes the ideology of online restrictiveness and limitation as a justification for implicitly asking Karsten out. This way of using the ideology may have gendered connotations, as it is deployed by female users to legitimize their attempts to speed up the romantic interaction. Since gender is closely connected with sexuality in heteronormative society, gender norms may form an underlying asymmetrical scheme of expectations as to how male and female users should interact in romantic interaction (Butler 1999 [1990]:24). To be intelligible as masculine, male users may thus be required to express attributes such as dominance and assertiveness whereas female users may be required to act submissively and reluctantly. When looking across the data set, heteronormative gendered patterns emerge. In 11 out of the 14 cases, male users initiate interaction, and in 6 out of the 9 cases in which a face-to-face meeting is suggested, male users are the initiators. Interview data supplies supporting evidence that asymmetrical gender structures are at work in the activity of online dating. Three out of the four interviewed female users mention that they were hesitant to be too flirtatious as they did not wish to give the impression that they were easy to engage with sexually rather than being potential serious partners. Moreover, ethnographic observations revealed male users’ frustration with the fact that lack of initiative on their part typically resulted in little or no dating activity.

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<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to interpret any further meaning into the long pause of four days. Long pauses in the e-mail communication cannot be interpreted as marked since the e-mail genre is essentially asynchronous (Meredith & Potter 2014). In this case, Cæcilie does not orient to the longer time lapse as problematic and provides no account, nor does Karsten request any account. This seems to suggest that the pause is not understood as inappropriate in this context and among these users.

In the cases of Anna and Cæcilie, the collective notion of the online mode as a limited and restricted context for intimate interaction works as a helpful resource in acting out a more assertive approach than might otherwise be considered appropriate. The shared media ideology thus comes to work as a tool for more subtle and delicate ways of handling flirtation and gender expectations.

## 5. Online dating as new and unfamiliar

In line with the ideology of online dating as a restrictive context for romantic interpersonal communication, users orient to the format of online dating as an unfamiliar social space in which behavioral rules are unknown and must be appropriated. Even though these participants engage in daily communication through online media, e-mail, etc. and must thus be characterized as skilled media users, a number of them position themselves as puzzled by the newness of technology through a questioning of the techno-communicative tools and their social meanings. The following excerpt is from an IM interaction between Maria and Jonas at [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk).

EX. 14

Maria	01 Og hvad sker der med 02 "interesseret" knappen. Er 03 det ligesom at "poke" på 04 facebook?	And what is happening with the "interested" button. Is that like to "poke" on facebook?
Jonas	05 ja, jeg har aldrig brugt 06 poke-knappen på FB, men 07 hvis man klikker 08 interesseret her, skal man 09 så ikke følge den op med 10 en besked, tænker jeg!?	yeah, I've never used the poke-button on FB, but if one hits interested here, won't one have to follow up with a message, I'm wondering!?

Maria and Jonas join in the project of pondering the meaning of the 'interested' function by both posing meta-pragmatic questions. Through comparison of the functions of the dating site to the functions of Facebook, Maria and Jonas reveal that they are familiar with navigating online communication media. This shared comprehension of the meanings of the techno-communicative functions may be viewed as a 'recontextualization' (Linell 1998) by which participants draw on previously experienced contexts when engaging in new ones. In this case, prior experiences on Facebook work as constructive knowledge that can form an interpretational frame for interaction in the online dating context. The excerpt demonstrates how users engage in shared construction and reproduction of the online dating medium as distinct and new. At the same time, it reveals how the

medium forms a useful conversational topic for the unacquainted participants, a topic to which they can equally contribute and affiliate. As a result, in this case, discussion of the medium creates grounds for reciprocity and community, both key conditions for forming close relationships (Svennevig 1999).

### ***5.1 Flirtatious affordances of unfamiliar techno-communicative functions***

Besides drawing upon the concept of chemistry, the ideology of technological newness is put to work as an excuse for initiating contact. Additionally, resolving the social meanings of the unfamiliar technological functions appears to be fertile grounds for flirtation. The following example is taken from a conversation on [www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) between Cæcilie and Peter. The excerpt begins with Cæcilie's initial e-mail, in which she positions herself as a newcomer, lacking knowledge about the social meanings of the sites' techno-communicative functions. The exchange centers on this positioning, which Peter manages to tune sexually and turn into a flirtatious dynamic.

Ex. 14

Cæcilie	28.11.2011 17:45	((43 words omitted))	
Peter reads: 28.11.2011 18.29	01 Btw. Jeg er ny på 02 dette medie, så jeg 03 havde ikke helt 04 gennemskuet de 05 forskellige 06 funktioner endnu, da 08 jeg på min første 09 tur rundt herinde 10 tilføjede dig til 11 min 12 favoritliste...Og 13 ærlig talt har jeg 14 stadig ikke helt 15 forstået, hvad der 16 ligger i det? Jeg 17 håber, du tager det 18 som et kompliment, 19 og ikke på forhånd 20 afskriver mig som en 21 sær stalker :)	By the way I'm new to this medium so I hadn't really figured out the various functions yet, as I in my first trip around in here added you to my favorite list... And honestly I still haven't really understood what is meant by it? I hope that you'll take it as a compliment, and won't ditch me as a strange stalker in advance :)	
Peter	28.11.2011 19:36	((114 words omitted))	
Cæcilie reads: 28.11.2011 21:37	22 Efter din tilføjelse 23 af mig på din 24 favoritliste er du 25 helt sikkert en	After your addition of me to your favorite list you're definitely a stalker	

		26	stalker i min bog,	in my book, that's a
		27	det er et	first-hand
		28	førstehåndsindtryk	impression that'll
		29	som bliver svær at	be hard to change:-
		30	ændre :-P....	P....
		31	Nej det er gas, så	No, I'm joking, so
		32	no worries :-)	no worries:-)
		33	Ang. en forklaring	Regarding an
		34	på favoritliste, kan	explanation to
		35	jeg måske	favorite list, I can
		36	illustrere det for	maybe illustrate it
		37	dig med denne	to you with this
		38	analogi:	analogy: The
		39	Favoritlisten er som	favorite list is
		40	en slikpose, der kan	like a bag of sweets
		41	fyldes med godter og	that can be filled
		42	som man ellers kan	up with goodies,
		43	gå i krig med at	which one can then
		44	spise med	begin to eat
		45	løbende.... eller,	continuously....or,
		46	blev det lidt	did that get a bit
		47	usmageligt der?	sleazy?
			((209 words omitted))	
Cæcilie	28.11.2011			
	21:55	48	Tak for opklaringen	Thanks for the
		49	med favoritlisten -	explanation of the
Peter reads:		50	så blev jeg det	favorite list - that
28.11.2011		51	klogere :)?	made me wiser :)?
23:20			((286 words omitted ))	

By positioning herself as somebody who lacks adequate knowledge to engage in interaction according to proper social practice on the dating site (01-21), Cæcilie opens up a space in which the flirtatious move, immanent in her act of adding Peter to her favorites list, does not hold the same risk as if it had been performed by an experienced user who must be assumed to know the social meaning of the act. Potential rejection of her flirtatious move may thus not appear personally threatening since her newcomer status offers her a valid and face-saving excuse. At the same time, the orientation to the 'newness' of technology works, in similar ways as in Example 13 above, as a delicate means of legitimizing potentially inappropriately assertive behavior.

In response, Peter delivers an explanation through which he sexualizes the techno-communicative functions of the dating site. By describing the persons added to the favorites list – including himself – as sweets that are eventually to be 'eaten', he constructs an imagery that implies a physical and sexual relationship (33-45). The final meta-commentary attached to his explanation opens up a possible sexual reading by suggesting that this assessment could be 'usmageligt'

(‘sleazy’) (45-47). By offering an explanation, Peter goes along with the newcomer-experienced user-dynamic. This positioning strategy is evident in several interactions across the data set and works flirtatiously by drawing upon a power dynamic in which the teacher teaches the student. In these online dating interactions, the dynamic becomes flirtatious through embedded sexual connotations of a dominator. In this case, Peter teaches Cæcilie how to deploy the favorites-list function by potentially adding sexual meaning to it and thus draws upon an established erotic dynamic of the more experienced individual teaching sexual practice to the less experienced individual. Rather than simply offering an objective explanation, Peter offers a subjective sexual interpretation, followed by a request for second assessment, which works as an invitation for Cæcilie to engage in asserting his creative analogy and thus respond to his sexualized tone.

In response, Cæcilie tones down the flirtatious attempts by thanking Peter in a neutral manner (48-51) and by implying additional confusion through a question mark (51). However, she ends her sentence with a smiley that may serve as recognition of Peter’s joking interpretation and a mitigation of her own downplaying of the sexual tone. Cæcilie thus uses her continued unfamiliarity in a way that contrasts with how she drew upon the same ideology in her previous turn. Whereas articulation of the medium as new and unfamiliar was deployed in the first turn as a way of legitimizing assertive flirting behavior, the same ideology is used as a resource to close off the sexual frame initiated by Peter in the second turn.

This example demonstrates how an orientation towards the medium as a space with hitherto-unknown social rules works as a resource for saving participants’ face when posing advances towards other users and legitimizing potentially unintelligible gendered behavior. Furthermore, the activation of the ideology of newness and unfamiliarity works as both a driver and blocker of flirtatious dynamics.

## **6. Conclusion**

Discourse analysis has demonstrated that participants use linguistic articulations of binaries to co-construct a media ideology in which the online mode is oppositional to the offline mode. Whereas the idea of offline interaction, conceptualized as ‘reality’, encompasses the experience of ‘chemistry’, which ultimately provides access to the full romantic experience, the online dating mode is largely invested with negative values as providing a limited, partial, and restrictive romantic interactional space. Associated with the construction of the online dating context as a

distinct and limited social setting is an expressed unfamiliarity with its techno-communicative tools, which creates fertile grounds for recontextualization processes in terms of reciprocal attachments and negotiations of social and communicative meaning.

The additional analysis of user-to-user e-mails and IM provided an opportunity to understand the interactive aspects of media ideologies on the micro-level. This part of the analysis demonstrated how discursive reiterations work as a resource for users in interaction. By drawing upon the understanding that the full romantic experience can only appear offline, users flirtatiously pose advances and negotiate future romantic meetings. The construction of online dating as something unfamiliar and requiring skills that one must acquire further works as a resource for handling romantic advances. Moreover, the invocation of media ideologies appears to function as a delicate resource for handling potential underlying asymmetrical gender structures and expectations.

By investigating the relationship between online and offline from a user perspective, this article has demonstrated the new insights provided by a user-oriented approach to users' conceptualizations. In both user-to-user interaction and in interview interaction, users continuously construct a separation of online and offline spaces to which they attach differing values. Such observations underline the importance of orienting towards users' perspective when forming an understanding of social practices. Rather than dismissing the separation of online and offline as outdated and obsolete, I have placed participants' meaning making and articulations at the forefront of analysis. Users' constructions of a divide can thus be approached as a social resource, and the interactional affordances of maintaining a distinct understanding emerge.

## 8. Conclusion and perspectives

Through four analytical chapters this study has offered insight into the user practices of two online dating sites and has discussed theoretical and methodological approaches to such issues. The analyses all point to language as vital in the process of constructing and communicating desire, and therefore demonstrate how attention to linguistic and interactional detail can enrich the study of sexuality in general as well as online-mediated romantic interaction in particular.

I set out to examine the relation between language and sexuality as it is manifested in interactions on online dating sites. I have specifically focused on understanding the following two general research questions: 1. *How is desire constructed and mediated through linguistic and digital resources?* 2. *How are intimate relations established and negotiated in interaction among users of online dating sites?* In this endeavor, I have asked two methodological questions, which have been a necessary means to discussing my general research questions: How can empirical data consisting of intimate and personal online interaction be collected and which ethical challenges must be met? How can interactional analyses inspired by conversation analytical principles attain a thorough understanding of the implicit dynamics of flirtation?

In this final section, I bring together the discussions from the four analytic chapters and address the perspectives of this study. I begin by summarizing the main results of the analysis and relate these to the research questions under five subheadings concerning the multiple aspects of desire:

- Desire as a methodological challenge
- Desire as a social phenomenon
- Desire as a processual phenomenon
- Desire as an implicit phenomenon
- Desire as a technological phenomenon

These five aspects present an empirically grounded way of thinking about desire that aims to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. This may be viewed as a bottom-up theoretical framework for studying desire: the five aspects were not laid out ahead of the analysis, but have emerged from the data as examined throughout the dissertation. The framework is, naturally, heavily contextual, based on a young, educated, Western population. Hence this framework will presumably look different and result in different points if applied to incomparable settings. This model of desire should not be



seen as a universal framework. Rather, it is my hope that this model will add to empirically grounded research on desire within language and sexuality studies, and will contribute to further and collective development of bottom-up understandings of desire.

After discussing these five aspects, I move on to discuss the implications of the empirical conclusions to feminist linguistics as well as the broader field of gender studies and media studies. Finally, I end this chapter by addressing some overall challenges to the study and discuss future research perspectives.

### **8.1 Desire as a methodological challenge**

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that empirical analysis of naturally occurring spontaneous interaction is essential in understanding the complex ways in which desire is at work in interpersonal relations. However, the researcher is confronted with extensive practical and ethical challenges when attempting to enter into romantic private contexts. In spite of this fundamental challenge, there persists a lack of nuanced discussions of research ethics within the field of language and sexuality. In response to this, I have attempted to push the empirical grounding of the field further by engaging in a reflexive discussion of my experiences in collecting data from romantically intimate settings.

In Chapter 4 (Article I), I argue that institutionalized informed consent procedures may undercut participant agency and induce potential symbolic violence in their carefully built interactional framework. The analysis of three different types of data discusses the balancing act of treating both data collectors and participants ethically. As a result it demonstrates participants' skilled abilities in negotiating ethical issues and in turning such issues into a contribution to the ongoing flirtatious interaction, thereby highlighting autonomy and agency of participants as a central part of the related ethics. This analysis touches directly upon my first methodological question of how to collect empirical data consisting of intimate and personal online interactions and what ethical challenges are faced during this process. In answering this question, I suggest a method that focuses on the quality of the consent, not the format. The article advocates a reflexive approach in which the format of consent should be highly adaptable as opposed to typical institutional fixed forms. The analysis demonstrates that standardizing the implementation of informed consent can in fact result in unethical practices as it may disrupt the carefully built intimacy between the engaged participants in unpleasant ways. Instead, I argue that drawing on participants' interactional expertise in the consent-gaining process by letting them decide when and how consent is collected ultimately

offers a more respectful approach. When participants are put in charge of negotiating informed consent, it improves the conditions for preserving romantic intimacy, which, naturally, is crucial to these types of interactions. Hence, despite the often-good intentions of formalized institutional consent layouts, the detailed empirical engagement with this part of the data collection process demonstrates that such institutional versions can actually end up being unethical from another point of view.

To approach desire as a methodological challenge further raises the important questions of which analytical tools to deploy in order to grasp the workings of desire in linguistic data. This is the concern of the second methodological question regarding how interactional analysis inspired by conversation analytical principles attains a thorough understanding of the implicit dynamics of flirtation. I will discuss this question comprehensively below under the subheading *Desire as an implicit phenomenon*. At this point, I wish to further emphasize the interdisciplinary approach that this study has taken.

This research has been inspired by sociocultural linguistics' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) understanding of relations between language and the social world as a complex phenomenon that correspondingly requires multiple methods and approaches in order to elucidate. In this dissertation I have combined concepts from feminist and literary theory (homosocial desire, heteronormativity, chronotopes) with contemporary theories of interactional linguistics (stance), linguistic anthropology (media ideology), and analytical methods from conversation analysis (turn-taking). I have illuminated how desire takes shape in initiating and probing romantic relations from various perspectives. This dissertation, therefore, represents one example of how the field of language and sexuality might proceed as an interdisciplinary association of fields concerned with sexuality in relation to language, society, and technology.

I have worked with a combination of types of data (user-to-user and homosocial interactional data, participant interviews, participant observation, and active engagement of researcher subjectivity). In particular, I wish to point to the valuable insights of participant observation and researcher engagement. By being present as a user on the dating websites, and actively taking part in various activities through my own profile, I gained valuable insight into not simply the specific workings of the sites' infrastructure and the communicative culture in these contexts, but also a first-hand experience of the affective side of these activities. Whereas affect has not been a developed focus of this study, future research would potentially gain from engaging in more detail with the affective aspects of online dating in order to discuss a crucial part of romantic

interaction. This is most obviously done by tuning in to affective expressions (Eckert 2002) in naturally occurring spontaneous interaction. Nevertheless, ethnographic insights gained through the active and affective engagement of the researcher subject has the potential of adding further interesting layers to such analysis.

## **8.2 Desire as a social phenomenon**

In Chapter 2 on the theoretical foundations, I have engaged with discussions and theories of desire. I have argued for an approach to desire that is not concerned with origin, but rather focuses on social practices. I have discussed the problems in considering desire as a biological and psychological phenomenon, as it easily leads to essentialist and homogenous understandings, which ignore the sociocultural shaping of desire. In Chapters 5 and 6 (Articles II and III) I have worked to tease apart the ways in which sexual desire is articulated linguistically by participants, with close attention to the situated contexts, and have thus stepped back from scholarly work taking sexuality as naturally given. The analyses have demonstrated that it is not enough to conclude that desire can be studied as a single-sided social phenomenon, but that it is necessary to consider the *many complex ways* in which it is a social phenomenon. The activities surrounding the activity of establishing a romantically intimate relationship do not exclusively involve interaction between two potential partners; this activity also involves homosocial contexts.

In Chapter 5 (Article II) I have examined how female friends engage in the activity of reading and assessing male users on [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk). Using the notion of homosocial desire (Sedgwick 1985), this article explores how homosociality ties into the heterosexual creation of desire. Detailed study of the audiovisual recordings demonstrates how participants, through joint stance-taking, co-construct shared desire and adjust individually produced desire to obtain homosocial affiliation. Hence, in this case, heterosexual desire construction is a collaborative undertaking generated through homosocial bonding. Apart from reading and accessing male profiles, the female friends also engage in shared writing of emails to a male member. However, the expanded homosocial romantic activity of collectively writing love letters emphasizes that constructing heterosexual desire is a shared process that reaches beyond the intimate love sphere of the heterosexual couple. Hence, the conclusive point of this analysis argues for the incorporation of attention to homosocial aspects in research into heterosexual desire.

In Chapter 6 (Article III) I have investigated the interactional practices through which users of online dating manage to initiate, explore, and test romantic relationships through email

interaction. I have specifically engaged with the common and simplifying notion of *flirting* as a means to express, negotiate, and fulfill desire. Through the identification of the flirting strategy of ‘imagined togetherness’, i.e., linguistically constructing imagery of a shared future, I have examined how users, concerned with the activity of getting to know each other, tenuously communicate romantic interest by alluding to future points at which they might be together. Central to the strategy is a sequential pattern of avoiding closure and thereby preserving the imagery’s latent possibilities. The article concludes by arguing that while imagined togetherness functions as a way of probing interests and thus protecting oneself from potential rejection, it also draws on fundamental dynamics of fantasy in nourishing the excitement of romantic possibility. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that it is through social interaction that participants create tension and the excitement of possibilities. By engaging in detailed analyses of social interaction we can study workings that are commonly considered to be innate and internal; constructing and probing desire, as well as creating tension and fantasy proves in these interactions to be a social accomplishment that the participants jointly arrive at by making use of various semiotic resources.

In arguing that desire is a social phenomenon, I have additionally demonstrated how the body is crucial to such social processes. Hence, suggesting that desire in online dating is socially constituted through linguistic practices should not lead to an exclusion of bodily matters. In particular Chapter 5 (Article II) accentuates the importance of physicality in constructing desire by demonstrating how female users overwhelmingly focus on attaching desire and non-desire to the face and body features of male users. Thus, this study proves that the body persists in its central role in the realm of desire as a site that is continuously inscribed with sociocultural values. However, the body that we meet in the domain of online dating is not a fixed entity, subject to the rules of biological science, but an unbounded entity that can be endlessly fragmented in the stimulation of desire. The body here becomes a materiality that is made meaningful through talk as it is dissected and carved up in particular ways. The analysis of Chapter 6 further shows how material objects other than bodies are attached with desirous meanings and how such objects can carry a symbolic value in communicating desire (white wine, sushi, planting trees together, etc.). These material objects are, similar to the bodies, made meaningful through talk; and it is particular ways of packaging such objects together in combinations that create romantic connotations.

In considering desire as a social phenomenon, the analysis has also touched upon issues of gender. Despite the fact that gendered patterns have not been the emphasis, gendered issues have emerged in the analysis, in particular in Chapters 4 and 7. In Chapter 4 (Article II), the

empirical analysis demonstrates how female friends produce a very physically centered desire in which they split men into body parts to which they ascribe desire and non-desire. This can be viewed as a contestation on the women's part of a hegemonic desire system in which heterosexual men generally value partners according to physical attributes and women according to socio-economic status (Coupland 1996). Moreover, while this may be read as an agentive act on behalf of the women in this study, it may also be interpreted as a patriarchal way of constructing desire, which has been adopted by mainstream technology and, in turn, powerfully imposed onto the women's ways of managing their desire by structuring their reading paths through the online dating profiles.

The shared practice of attaching desire is described through analysis as an inversion of Sedgwick's desire triangle – arguably a way for women to turn the tables and exercise the right to use patriarchal power. The women take up the position of desiring subjects who bond through a shared desire in the consumption of masculine body fragments. These fragments come to work as a strong resource in affiliating the women; acting as a conduit for their social desire towards each other. Paradoxically, the male objects that connect the women in the homosocial relation will eventually interrupt the homosociality, if a romantic heterosexual relationship is formed. As much as the women work to bond in their shared desire, this same desire production works to dissolve their homosocial intimacy. Thus, as much as this analysis foregrounds the female friends' mutual affective bonds as a contestation of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) it simultaneously reveals how conventional heteronormative desire plays a powerful role in managing the inter-female relation.

In Chapter 7 (article IV) the analyses discuss how media ideologies come to work as efficient strategies for women to pose flirtatious advances. In this case we see tentative evidence that a heteronormative gender binary may be at work on the surface of interactional structures, in that men tend to be the ones to initiate contact and offline face-to-face meetings and that women express some concern in being too assertive in their approach to male users (however the data material is too limited to draw any conclusions). However, when looking more closely at the detail of turn-by-turn interaction we see that female users come up with sophisticated and subtle strategies to progress romantic intimacy in ways that do not dramatically confront normative gender identities and thus make their own acts accountable in the realm of heteronormativity. Thus, via delicately deployed strategies the female users pass as recognizable desirous heterosexual women while at the same time very actively engaging in the process of seduction. This demonstrates the danger of

subscribing to strict gender binaries since such views can easily overshadow the fine-grained strategies through which participants manage to display agency and slightly twist the binary gender system at the level of user-to-user interaction.

Turning to the two research questions, these chapters suggest that desire is constructed and mediated through the usage of a variety of semiotic resources: grammar, lexicon, typography (ellipses, emoticons), cursor movements, visual representations of bodies (profile photos), references to romantic material objects, and schematic digital communication functions (interested/not interested scheme). It is precisely through their ability to deploy multiple communicative tools concurrently that users manage to produce, handle, and maintain the subtleness of romantically intimate interaction. As demonstrated, desire is not a simple and straightforward matter of explicitly communicating what one wishes and longs for, but rather a phenomenon that is tenuously handled and produced collectively along the way in various social contexts. Moreover, the deployment of linguistic features happens in a dynamic interplay with larger ideologies of heteronormativity in which the semiotic resources put to use both come to reproduce and twist such systems.

### **8.3 Desire as a processual phenomenon**

Chapters 5 and 6 have demonstrated that desire is a social phenomenon collectively created, developed, probed, and negotiated by participants. An additionally important point to this aspect is that desire changes in this process. Desire is not one thing that participants bring into the interaction in order to fulfill it as quickly as possible. There may be a form of ‘omnipresent desire’ that is produced and reproduced through larger ideologies of collective romantic fantasies existing in heteronormative society. However, this does not mean that this initial form appears as a firm and solidified phenomenon that participants act according to, with the ultimate purpose of reaching its concrete fulfillment.

The theorization of desire as a phenomenon repressed (by society and by oneself) which implores for release<sup>41</sup> appears as a reductionist model in light of the detailed interactional analyses of desirous interaction. Such a model does not seem to give credit to the lustful and

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<sup>41</sup> However, in Lacanian theory this can only be a tentative release; the fundamental desire for reaching back to the imaginary state of total fusion with the mother can never be reached.

pleasurable acts of maneuvering towards fulfillment. Thus the analysis does not simply shed light on the practices that people engage in, in order to fulfill their desires for romantic and sexual intimacy, but conceives of those practices as enjoyable in themselves; activities that might be considered preliminary in the perspective of a repression/release model are in themselves about experiencing desire: they form lustful and pleasurable aspects of sexuality. Hence, desirous interaction does not just consist of people trying to meet a goal – it is not necessarily about reaching the end goal all the time – the process itself is crucial to experiencing lustful aspects of desire. In Chapter 6, (Article III, the analysis demonstrates how participants enter into a playful game of postponing a concrete meeting and thereby extend the ongoing interactional process of implicitly communicating and probing desire. Therefore, in this dissertation I argue for an approach to desire as not just a social phenomenon that can be studied in interaction, but also as a *processual phenomenon*. This line of reasoning creates room for thinking about desire in more complex ways as an ongoing process, and as continuous social actions, rather than as a simple linear move from ‘lack’ to ‘fulfillment’. This essentially feeds back into what desire is thought to be because it suggests a way of approaching desire that is not about the origin and fulfillment of a need, but as a social and processual phenomenon being built – and which people put effort into continuously building over time.

Hence, the two research questions can be further answered by suggesting that desire is not simply produced and negotiated with the help of a variety of semiotic resources, but that these resources are deployed in ongoing dialogical processes in which the object of desire might eventually change, diminish or expand to new areas.

#### **8.4 Desire as an implicit phenomenon**

Suggesting that desire can be approached as a social and processual phenomenon does not imply that desire is entirely explicit or articulated in interaction, right there for the researcher to point at. By engaging in an interactional analysis of the implicit workings of flirting – an aspect that has repeatedly been emphasized in both popular as well as academic attempts to describe flirtatious interaction (yet without concrete examples of what this looks like or means) – I have sought to offer empirical groundings for such ideas. The idea of romantic love as something unspoken but tacitly implied, something that one senses and hints at rather than articulates blatantly, also shines through in the users’ own discourse on love. In Chapter 7 (Article IV), I have demonstrated in both interview and email/IM data that romantic love exists as an ideology that disdains agency, claiming

that love “happens” to individuals through the metaphysic and thus mystified workings of “chemistry.” According to this ideology of love, ultimately, no one has to indulge in any form of concrete action. Yet when examining users’ interaction it becomes obvious how desirous interaction does not just happen by itself, but that it is produced through moves performed by the interlocutors in close attention to each other’s responses.

I have indulged in discussion of these issues by applying a concept originally developed within the framework of literary theory, the *chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981), in order to discuss how participants avoid being concrete, and hence overt, about potential romantic interest by setting up imagined future time-spaces in which they hint at shared romantic intimacy (‘imagined togetherness’). Implicitness is linguistically constructed by strategic use of generic deictic time markers, generic pronouns, epistemic adverbs, and non-realis (modal verbs). These imageries position a point of departure for flirting, in that the interlocutors may choose to enter the imagery and elaborate it, by such linguistic means placed in time-space, or leave it and move on to other conversational topics and possibly other, more everyday configurations of space and time. Hence, the implicitness is not tantamount to invisibility, but appears when linguistic detail is taken into consideration. Additionally, participants typically engage in interactional routines of not providing conclusive details for setting up a future meeting, but instead leave these open and undecided. Such interactional moves work as a productive technique for extending implicitness and thus open up room for excitement about what might happen in potential times and spaces (‘excitement of possibilities’). This feature of flirtatious interaction touches upon more psychic aspects: cognition in terms of fantasies and affective mechanisms in terms of excitement. At this point the analysis takes a precarious step by engaging with phenomena that are most often understood within the domain of the human psyche, potentially challenging the approach to desire as a social phenomenon that may be studied in interaction. Thus, this aspect of analysis engages with the discussion of desire within the field of language and sexuality (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Cameron and Kulick 2003a; Eckert 2002; Kulick 2000), re-raising the concerns with desire as a concept that might lead to mystified and speculative conclusions regarding the human psyche. However, by addressing such issues as excitement and fantasmatic imagination, the analysis suggest that there is more to implicitness than avoiding threats to face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Whereas, the social mechanisms of face (Goffman 1959) are certainly at work in these interactions, since the danger of losing face such as through rejection is inherently a part of the activity of online dating, I argue that sticking to such explanations carries the risk of overlooking crucial dynamics that are also at work in desirous



interaction. My analysis can be seen as one way of attending to these challenging aspects in empirical study and it can certainly be developed further. The analysis is, nevertheless, put forward as suggestion input which should serve as a basis for reflection in the ongoing academic endeavor of empirical language and sexuality research.

The issue of the implicitness of flirting has made me engage with my second methodological question on how interaction analysis may also capture implicit aspects when each participant's contribution is interpreted in relation to its response. One answer to this is that if we study the interaction and attend to details in language use and interaction, we can actually point to concrete strategies made use of by participants tenuously communicating flirtatious messages. Thus, implicitness is there and can be pinpointed in interaction. Yet this is not a full answer. As the analyses in Chapter 3 (Article I) suggests, flirtatious meanings can also be built in interaction by participants' tenuously drawing on conventionalized erotic ideologies, imageries, and positions. In this article, I argue that some turns work flirtatiously because they point to encompassing erotic discourses of role-plays between master and novice (submission and dominance), which in the concrete context adds a sexual and flirtatious but also potentially oppressive layer.

Similarly, in the analysis of imagined togetherness in Chapter 6 (Article III) the constructed scenarios in some cases draw on symbols with romantic connotations (e.g., sophisticated dining in a rose garden), which are objects that circulate in mainstream discourse as romantically loaded symbols. Such indexical meanings are not explicated; thus, their analytic relevance partly rests on the researchers' own membership knowledge. However, leaving such layered meanings out of the picture would be tantamount to suggesting that we can only investigate the surface of romantically intimate interaction. Rather than concluding that we cannot ultimately address such indexical meanings without sacrificing scientific integrity, I think that these issues should encourage the field of language and sexuality to continuously draw attention to how conventional erotic codes and mainstream understandings of sexual activity work in tandem with context-bound meanings: they may be in coherence with each other or they may be torqued in interaction. However, it is central to acknowledge global discourses on the erotic and on sexuality broadly as a resource, working within the many layers of micro turn-by-turn interaction.

## **8.5 Desire as a technological phenomenon**

Due to the swift development of online technology, I have argued that desire should also be considered a phenomenon shaped by technology. Communication technology is not an entirely new means in the domain of sex and love. As the opening example from 2005 demonstrated, the mobile phone has served as a tool in establishing romantic and erotic connections ahead of the contemporary ceaseless access to the Internet. And earlier research has demonstrated how newspapers, landline phone connections, and television have similarly functioned as mediums for connecting people according to their desirous wishes (Channell 1997; Coupland 1996; Shalom 1997). However, as the Internet interweaves society even further, technology obtains a central role in the realm of sexuality.

In this dissertation, I have engaged with the role of technology by focusing on how romantic contact is initiated and unfolds in online communicative contexts. In addition, I have taken a step further to illuminate how online and offline modes intertwine by examining data that simultaneously involve online activity and interactions as well as offline face-to-face interactions (Chapter 4 (Article II)). This type of data has offered valuable insight into how online dating is not solely a matter of online interaction, but that such online activities reach far beyond the online dating platform, influencing and functioning as an important means for nourishing and maintaining other types of relationships outside the sphere of romance.

The context of email correspondence among romantic partners may be thought of as a more private mode of romantic communication. However, as my analyses have shown, the new online-mediated channels of romantic/erotic relationship formation have, on the contrary, given rise to a whole new dimension of sharing, as intimate details are archived and thereby easily drawn into new contexts. The improved technological development of dating practices and the current influence of smartphone and tablet apps provide constant and easy accessibility to private and intimate affairs, making such affairs easy shareable among friends, both in online and offline contexts. Hence, online and offline modes work in tandem in creating complex reciprocities.

The element of archival storage, additionally, ties into the consideration of desire as a processual phenomenon. By filing past and ongoing correspondences in users' inboxes, the online dating sites provide participants with the possibility of going back and re-experiencing – and even re-interpreting – flirtatious moments, and thus expand the process of desire temporally in new ways i.e., the ability to switch back and forth between alternate time-spaces.

However, while online and offline modes must be considered to be intertwined, it may prove that distinctive divides are nevertheless pertinent to participants. In the context of online dating, users continuously construct and reproduce a distinction between online and offline dating practices. In Chapter 7 (Article IV), I demonstrate how users linguistically construct media ideologies based on a dichotomous understanding of online and offline spaces, characterizing online dating as constrained, new, unfamiliar, and artificial. By activating the ideology of newness and unfamiliarity, users are able to make unaccountable flirtatious advances since these advances can be justified by their not really knowing what they are doing. Moreover, mutual talk about the medium as constraining is in turn deployed creatively by the participants as a stepping-stone in the progression towards an offline date. Users can thus be said to hide behind the technology in order to flirt. In doing so, they undercut their own complaints about the technology being inadequate for creating "chemistry." One minute the medium is a hindrance, the next a vehicle. Hence, the stipulated newness of the technology – the medium – affords opportunities for daters to save face and manage other people's impressions.

At the same time as the online dating sites work as mediator for desire and as platforms for communicating such desire, analyses show that dating sites are *productive* in creating and shaping desire. By engaging with how online dating profiles are read and evaluated in Chapter 4 (Article I) I have pointed to how the dating sites' information hierarchy plays a dominant role in determining to which aspects of the objects desire is attached. The profile design of dating sites clearly serves to categorize looks and physical attributes as prominent aspects of a romantic partner. This is reflected in the assessments in which potential partners' physicality is discussed intensively. Moreover, the site's predefined parameters for a "perfect match" influence what users may be oriented towards when defining the right partner. Hence, the dating sites' infrastructure and information hierarchy heavily structures desire.

When returning to the first research question we can, thus, say that desire is constructed and mediated through digital resources, not simply by users' deploying emoticons, visuals, etc., and by making use of the dating sites' various communicative functions, but also by the dating sites' architecture that co-constitutes what kind of desire is possible. In relation to the second research question, we see that romantic intimate relations are established and negotiated by drawing on media ideologies of newness and restrictiveness as an efficient tool for posing flirtatious moves and progressing towards romantic connection.

## **8.6 Future directions for the empirical study of desire**

In the above sections I have laid out a theoretical framework that has emerged from my data. In the following, I will briefly discuss what future directions such results may take.

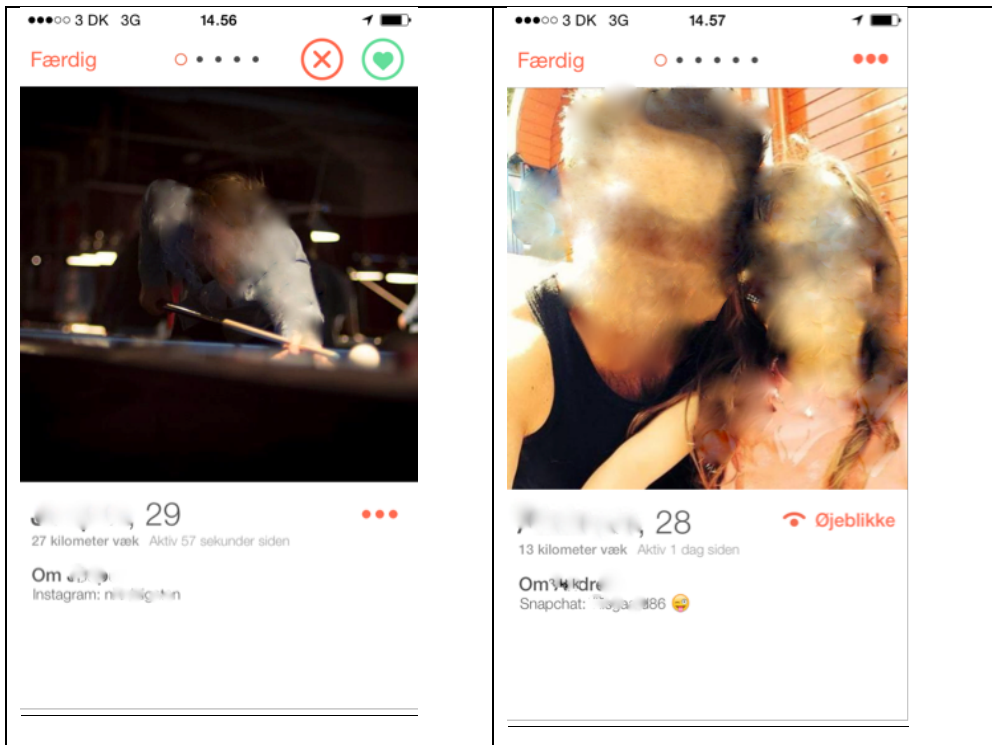
The model of desire as developed here is based on a very limited set of data material; the main core being 14 email correspondences (in total 29,167 words) and supplementary data consisting of homosocial recordings (3 hours and 57 minutes), 1 month of daily online observations and 6 months of sporadic observations, 4 interviews, and 4 informal conversations. Hence, the results are necessarily qualitative in nature. This means that the study cannot draw any large-scale conclusions that are representative of Danish adults' dating practices at large. However, the qualitative nature of the study has been inevitable due to the ethical challenges connected with the intimate nature of the subject. By using participatory data collectors, I have depended upon participants' willingness to obtain informed consent and donate material. The data I have gained access to has been selected by my participatory data collectors and may, therefore, be skewed by their private interests. Future research would naturally benefit from a larger and more stratified data sample. Nevertheless, the data of this dissertation forms, to my knowledge, the largest existing corpus of this nature. This ultimately points to a desperate need for more interactional data. This dissertation should be considered a study that has set out to pave the way for the empirical study of initial romantic interaction. Future research will hopefully offer alternative empirical contexts that will reflect more peoples' experiences, thus improving both theories and methodologies of desire.

Issues of gender and power, additionally, present interesting and burning questions that can help to continue to develop the proposed framework for desire. In future work it would be interesting to investigate in a larger corpus of data for how gender comes to matter against a background of a priori preferences in the interaction between online daters. How do gendered expectations and expectations of gender work as constraints and resources in these types of interactions? As Korobov (2011) has demonstrated in speed dating interactions, stereotypical gender performances may to some extent not be as relevant in romantic interactions, since underscoring similarities rather than differences is central when getting along in conversation. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate if the local cultural context of egalitarian Scandinavia may influence users' gendered partner preferences and in which ways gender-specific desire intersects with other social categories such as class, age, race, body ability, etc.

Additionally, questions of materiality and affect present interesting directions for developing a framework for desire. This dissertation has focused on the linguistic articulations and negotiations of desire and thus has not provided in-depth attention to material and affective aspects in this context. Within feminist scholarship, debates concerning poststructuralism's ignorance of such aspects have been longstanding and are ongoing (e.g., Barad 2003). However, though structures of material power and affect may surely be said to be fundamental to the participants' work with sexual and romantic relations, the aim has not been to question such large-scale sources and outputs. Future analysis would benefit from addressing such material and affective aspects of sexuality to see how interplay between discursive articulation and materiality is intertwined in the realm of sexuality. As Bucholtz (2014:39) has noted, feminist linguistics has great potential for forging a union of discursive and materialist perspectives. Online dating platforms can serve as fruitful fields for developing such academic work in asking which bodies are attached with various values, which discourses circulate around physical togetherness, and in which ways the economic market plays into the process of valuing bodies, and so on.

In this dissertation the issue of technology has been addressed in terms of users' media ideologies and how these are put into action in email and IM correspondence. A further key aspect of technology is the institutional power imposed by the design of the online dating sites. Future research would benefit from working toward developing ways of addressing such issues. One fruitful way could be to conduct comparative multimodal analysis (e.g., Kress 2009) of the interfaces of various online dating sites – or what Stanfill (2014) has termed “discursive interface analysis.” In this way researchers could lay out a detailed mapping of the ideologies of desire as they are presented through interplay between text, sound, images, and channels of communication. Technology is developing rapidly. Within the three and a half years in which this study was conducted there have been noticeable changes to the online dating scene. Smartphone-based apps like Tinder have become increasingly popular, introducing new communicative resources for users. Profiles, such as the ones presented in figure 8.1., demonstrate how users refer to other online platforms in their profile texts (e.g., instagram, snapchat), thereby reflecting a ‘poly-use’ of media. This lines up with what Miller (2012) terms ‘polymedia’: an interplay of social activities across different social media sites. Hence, future research will have to consider not simply a single dating website, but many more platforms simultaneously in understanding the complex ways in which users negotiate romantic desire.

Figure 8.1. Tinder profiles linking to Instagram and Snapchat (see text in the bottom of the profile)



Moreover, current development in online dating services demonstrates how the Internet is increasingly moving from an overwhelmingly textual and visual discursive space towards an *audiovisual* space. In 2015 [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk) launched a YouTube channel through which users can present themselves audiovisually in moving pictures.

Figure 8.2. [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk)'s YouTube channel



Hence, the semiotic resources at hand are developing in even more complex ways, requiring researchers to develop analytic tools that can illuminate the social meanings attached to this multiplicity communicative channels.

In conclusion, this dissertation has, through detailed analysis of various types of empirical material, developed a model for addressing desire through five aspects. It is my hope that this framework will contribute to resolving some of the tension that has been prevalent in language and sexuality studies throughout the heated debates around sexuality, desire, and identity. Conducting an empirical study of romantic relationship formation demonstrates that theoretical concepts in themselves can rarely grasp the complexity of empirical reality. When approaching a phenomenon like desire from an empirical angle we become able to unfold the multifaceted ways in which participants go about their everyday lives, putting work into creating, negotiating, enjoying, and fulfilling their desires in dynamic interaction with others. It is my hope that future research will continue the empirical endeavor and generate new and exciting understandings of this complexity.

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## English summary

This study concerns language and sexuality in online dating practices and addresses how these issues can be studied empirically with a focus on interaction. Based on a dataset consisting of user-to-user email and instant messaging (IM), audio-recordings and screen-tracking, and participant observation and interviews from two Danish online dating websites ([www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk) and [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk)), this dissertation sets out to examine how desire is created and mediated through linguistic and digital resources in online dating activities and how romantic intimate relations are established and negotiated in interaction among users of online dating. The overall approach falls within sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), i.e., a broad interdisciplinary approach to studying language and social life. My perspective as a scholar is that close, detailed inspection of language in use allows us to understand macro-level norms and ideologies that structure social life. Subsequently, this dissertation brings together diverse theories on sexuality and language to examine in detail the various forms in which participants communicate romantic interests. The study is structured through 4 analytical articles, which are framed by an introductory chapter, a theoretical chapter, a methods chapter, and a conclusion.

In the first article, Article I, examine the basic challenges of accessing empirical data in language and sexuality research, thus contributing to general discussions of ethical and methodological approaches to human subject research within the traditions of anthropology and qualitative sociology. Through close interactional analysis of how informed consent to research participation is collected in various settings I challenge conventional ideas of the protection of research participants. Instead, I propose an ethical approach that is developed in close connection with participants themselves and which is highly adjustable to fit the intimate setting.

In Article II, I investigate how desire is attached to male online dating profiles through female friends' shared reading and joint evaluation. By analyzing stance-taking and affiliation strategies among female friends, I demonstrate how desire for male bodies is constructed in accordance with the desire for homosocial affiliation. Thus, this article seeks to broaden the concept of desire to include homosocial aspects, thereby promoting a disruption of traditional understandings of heterosexual desire as a phenomenon existing exclusively between a man and a woman. In Article III, I analyze how desire is communicated in interaction through flirting between users in emails and IM. By applying turn-by-turn interactional analysis to the data, I demonstrate that the implicitness of desire is achieved through constructions of future imageries of being together, which I term 'imagined togetherness'. Such imagined togetherness is co-constructed by participants through the deployment of a variety of linguistic resources.

In the final article I engage with the technological framework of online dating and how it comes to matter for the participants. It is precisely through looking at how technological functions are overtly articulated by users as either posing advantages or limitations in interaction that the researcher gains access to users' understandings of a specific communicative medium. Analysis demonstrates how users construct and draw on a differentiating media ideology in which the online mode of the dating medium is new and constraining while the offline mode of face-to-face dating encompasses a fuller and freer experience of 'love'. Such media ideologies serve an important function in that they allow users to communicate subtle flirtatious messages. Thus, the online dating medium takes the form of both a hindrance and a vehicle.

The dissertation concludes by suggesting a theoretical framework for the study of language and desire that is based on the empirical findings of the analyses. This bottom-up framework considers desire along five different lines (a methodological challenge, a social phenomenon, a processual phenomenon, an implicit phenomenon, and a technological phenomenon) and discusses how these foci contribute to an empirically grounded understanding of the workings of desire.

## Dansk resumé

Baseret på et datasæt bestående af bruger-til-bruger e-mail og chat korrespondancer, lydoptagelser og screen-tracking, deltagerobservation og interview fra to danske netdatingsider ([www.elitedaters.dk](http://www.elitedaters.dk), [www.dating.dk](http://www.dating.dk)) undersøger denne afhandling hvordan begær konstrueres og medieres gennem lingvistiske og digitale ressourcer i online datingaktiviteter, samt hvordan romantiske intime relationer etableres og forhandles i interaktion blandt brugere af netdating. Afhandlingens overordnede tilgang falder inden for 'sociokulturel lingvistik' (Bucholtz & Hall 2005): en bred interdisciplinær tilgang til at studere sprog og socialt liv. Mit forskningsmæssige perspektiv er at tætte og detaljerede analyser af konkret sprogbrug giver adgang til forståelsen af normer og ideologier på makro-niveau som strukturer det sociale liv. På baggrund af dette trækker afhandlingen på forskellige teorier om seksualitet og sprog med henblik på at undersøge de varierende former hvorigennem sprogbrugere kommunikerer romantiske interesser. Undersøgelsen består af fire analytiske kapitler, der er indrammet af et introducerende kapitel, et teoretisk kapitel, et metodekapitel samt en afsluttende konklusion.

I den første artikel undersøger jeg den grundlæggende udfordring i at skabe adgang til empirisk data i sprog- og seksualitetsforskningen og bidrager således til generelle diskussioner af etiske og metodiske tilgange til studiet af mennesket inden for antropologi og kvalitativ sociologi. Gennem interaktionel analyse af hvordan informeret samtykke til forskningsdeltagelse indhentes i forskellige kontekster, udfordrer jeg konventionelle forståelser af deltagerbeskyttelse. Som alternativ fremsætter jeg en bøjelig etisk tilgang der udvikles i tæt sammenhæng med de involverede deltagere selv, og som kan tilpasses den enkelte intime situation.

I artikel II undersøger jeg hvordan begær knyttes til mandlige datingprofiler igennem veninders fælles læsning og evaluering af disse. Ved at analysere holdningstilkendegivelser og positionering ('stance-taking') samt tilslutningsstrategier, demonstrerer jeg hvordan begæring af mænds kroppe konstrueres i samklang med begær af den homosociale tilknytning mellem veninderne. Således søger artiklen at udvide forståelsen af begær til også at inkludere homosociale aspekter og promoverer dermed et brud med en traditionel forståelse af heteroseksuelt begær som et fænomen der eksisterer udelukkende blandt en mand og en kvinde.

I den tredje artikel analyserer jeg hvordan begær kommunikeres i interaktion igennem indirekte flirtestrategier mellem brugere i e-mail- og chatkorrespondancer. Ved at anvende tur-for-tur interaktionel analyse, demonstrerer jeg at indirekthed opnås igennem konstruktioner af forestillede scenarier for fremtidigt samvær hvilket jeg betegner 'imagined togetherness'. Sådant forestillet samvær samskabes af deltagerne ved anvendelse af en række lingvistiske ressourcer.

I den sidste artikel undersøger jeg den teknologiske ramme i netdating samt, hvordan denne får betydning for brugerne. Det er netop ved at kigge på hvordan teknologiske funktioner artikuleres eksplicit af brugere som enten fordelagtig eller indskrænkende i interaktion at forskeren kan opnå adgang til brugeres egne forståelser af et kommunikativt medium. Analysen demonstrerer hvordan brugere konstruerer og trækker på medieideologier i hvilke netdatingens online kontekst fremstilles som ny og begrænsende mens den offline kontekst med ansigt-til-ansigt dating indeholder en fuldere og friere oplevelse af 'kærlighed'. Sådanne medieideologier tjener en vigtig funktion idet de tillader brugerne at kommunikere subtile flirtende beskeder. På den måde fungerer netdatingmediet både forhindrende og befordrende på samme tid.

Afhandlingen konkluderer ved at fremsætte en teoretisk ramme for studiet af sprog og begær, som er baseret på de empiriske resultater fra analysen. Denne empirisk funderede model betragter begær ud fra fem forskellige linjer (som en metodisk udfordring, som et socialt fænomen, som et processuelt fænomen, som et implicit fænomen og som et teknologisk fænomen) og diskuterer hvor disse aspekter kan bidrage til det videre empiriske studie af begærsdynamikker.