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Where to start?

Initiating post-match chat interaction on Tinder

Abstract

Although Tinder is one of the biggest dating apps in the world, a core feature of the platform is still scarcely researched: the chat function. In this chapter we analyse how Tinder users initiate interaction with their matches. The data consist of post-match chats of 10 Dutch Tinder users, analysed based on digital CA. We found that initiating interaction is often done by launching a first topic immediately, rather than by other possibly relevant actions such as greeting, identifying, or initial inquiries, and that chats are opened with actions that critically elicit a response. In these topic initiations, users also tend to orient to originality and commonalities with the matched user. Our findings indicate that Tinder openings are strongly tied to the specific digital environment (profiles, the abundance of dating candidates) *and* to the goal of the interaction: flirting and/or getting to know one another. Making a response relevant is the key to initiating a potentially ‘effective’ chat, as this gets the conversational ball rolling. Doing so in an original fashion makes the user stand out from “the crowd”.

1 Introduction

Although Tinder is one of the most popular dating apps in the world, a core feature of the platform is still scarcely researched: the chat function (but see Licoppe 2020; Licoppe 2021). Users create a profile consisting of one to nine photos, some basic information like gender, age and possibly work/education and can also provide a short description, a so-called “bio”, about themselves. The app then presents profiles of other users within a certain radius of the user’s current location. Users choose whether they want to get in touch with

someone by swiping left (no) or right (yes). When both parties approve, a match is established, and the users can start chatting. This text-based chat forms the bridge between a match and a possible offline encounter and is thus a crucial phase of the dating trajectory. Getting the conversational ball rolling may determine the success of the chat and thus impact whether the users will arrange a date. In this chapter we analyse how Dutch Tinder users initiate chat interaction with their matches. Our aim is to examine how the specific social and mediated context of the app factors into Tinder chat openings. The analysis first describes how conversation starters on Tinder are structured, finding they regularly include a topic initiation, not just greetings. We further analyse these topic initiations for how they are related to the specific social and technical context and affordances of Tinder, including the interactional work that is done to elicit a response from the recipient and to stand out from “the crowd”.

Openings are crucial to any type of interaction. A conversation is “a substantive, naturally bounded stretch of interaction comprising all that relevantly goes on from the moment two (or more) individuals open such dealings between themselves and continuing until they finally close this activity out” (Goffman 1981: 130). Openings are thus an essential part of conversations, and they are highly organised (cf. Schegloff 1986). In openings, some matters are established: 1) *copresence*, meaning participants see themselves as socially present to each other (Goffman 1963); 2) mutual availability; and 3) mutual recognition. As the structural organisation of an opening is affected by the nature of the interaction (cf. Sidnell & Stivers 2013: 261), Tinder chat openings may also be assumed to be closely intertwined with their mediated context. Tinder chat openings have not been studied yet, but identification and recognition, greetings and topic proffers have been found to be pertinent to (landline and mobile) telephone calls and Facebook chat openings. Therefore, we briefly review these studies on openings in other mediated contexts.

2 Background

2.1 OPENING A TELEPHONE CALL

Openings of landline telephone calls have probably received the most attention in CA-related research. The main point of reference of studies into telephone calls (Luke & Pavlidou 2002) is Schegloff’s (1986) analysis of 500 American landline calls between friends and family members. He found that these openings tend to consist of four sequences (Schegloff 1986: 116):

1. the summons-answer sequence
2. the identification-recognition sequence
3. a greeting sequence
4. initial inquiries

What follows these sequences is the *anchor position*, i.e., the point at which the reason-for-the-call is presented, typically by the caller (or the initiator of the contact, in case of a missed call). Participants treat deviations from this pattern as marked. For example, when a first topic is introduced before reaching the *anchor position*, participants interpret this as there being some urgency to the matter (Schegloff 1986: 117).

It has been argued that such highly organised openings in landline calls ensure that the essential opening issues are dealt with before ‘the reason for the call’ (Hopper et al 1990): when the summons is not answered, there is no *copresence*. The identification-recognition sequence ensures that both parties, lacking visual cues, can confirm they are speaking to whom they think they are speaking. The greeting and initial inquiries allow to check for mutual availability. Hence, the interactional structure of landline telephone call openings serves rather specific social functions.

The typical opening sequences described by Schegloff (1986) have become more explicitly recognisable as mediated by the technology of landline telephony with the examination of openings of *other* types of interaction, such as mobile telephone calls. Mobile call openings are in many respects similar to landline calls (Hutchby & Barnett 2005), but there are also differences, for example related to the fact that mobile phones (in Western cultures) tend to belong to individuals rather than to “households”/ groups of people (Hutchby & Barnett 2005). This difference is reflected in the absence of an identification-recognition sequence in mobile phone calls. While self-identification is common practice in Finnish landline calls, in Finnish mobile phone calls it usually only occurs when the recipient does not know the caller (Arminen & Leinonen 2006).

Another practice that is tied to the assumption that a mobile phone is generally answered by its owner is *pre-voice sample answerer identification* (Hutchby & Barnett 2005). In this type of identification, the caller pre-identifies the answerer by producing a second summons after the phone has been picked up (e.g., *Hullo Sammy*, spoken by the caller Neil to answerer Sammy, Hutchby & Barnett 2005).

The reverse is also possible, in which the called pre-identifies the caller (*pre-voice sample caller identification*, Hutchby & Barnett 2005). This is tied to the technological affordance (present in both landline and mobile phones) of the “caller ID”, which enables callers to show their number/name before the summons is answered. This means the caller’s name appears on the display when the answerer has the caller’s number in their telephone’s phonebook, which allows the recipient to identify who is calling based on the summons. The impact of this affordance is found in openings where answerers identify the caller - usually by saying their name - *before* a voice sample has been given (e.g., *Simone*, spoken by the answerer Kisha to caller Simone after picking up, Hutchby & Barnett 2005). Hence, the introduction of caller ID impacts how and when users identify the other party during the interaction and, specific to mobile phones, Western users orient to the idea that the answerer is always the owner of the phone. Similarly, openings of text-chat interaction are related to contextual and technical factors.

2.2 INITIATING A CHAT INTERACTION

While Internet Relay Chat (IRC) openings were found to resemble face-to-face and telephone openings including greetings and salutations (Rintel et al. 2001), opening sequences in Facebook chats between friends were different from telephone call openings (Meredith 2014). For one, the summons consisted of the first message(s) sent, which implies the platform produces an aural and visual cue. This means that the summons in chat *always* does something else interactionally, apart from checking availability (Meredith 2014: 126–127) (or *copresence*), because a message needs to be sent in order to create a notification and get the recipient's attention.

Meredith (2014) identified three types of summonses in her data set: 1) greeting tokens; 2) personalised summons, like 'Babe!' (similar to mobile phone answers); and 3) topic initiations, in which the first turn was essentially treated as the *anchor position*. These topic initiations were not treated as marked by the chat users, showing topic initiations in chat are unlike those in telephone openings, in which starting the call with a topic initiation instead of the typical opening sequences may indicate urgency (Meredith 2014).

Regarding their design, topic initiations in Facebook chat often consisted of *topic proffers* (Meredith 2014: 126). Topic proffers in turn are often questions, allowing the recipient to embrace or reject the topic. These proffers tend to address topics that concern something in the recipient's knowledge domain or experience (Schegloff 2007: 170). Designing a first post in this way shows an orientation to the specific conversational partner(s) (cf. *recipient design*, Sacks et al. 1974: 727).

Lastly, the identification sequence found in landline telephone calls was not found in chat openings (Meredith 2014). This was related to the affordance of chat that the (nick)name of the other party is always available, making the sequence redundant. Similar to the openings of mobile telephone conversations, users seem to presume that the owner of the profile is also the one answering the summons. The lack of an identification sequence shows that users orient to the underlying principle that: '(...) "one should not tell one's coparticipants what one takes it they already know" (Goodwin 1979: 100)' (Meredith 2014: 127).

It should be noted that the Facebook chats examined by Meredith (2014) involved (Facebook) friends. Possibly, summoning works differently in chat conversations between strangers. It is this type of setting which is relevant to online dating.

2.3 FLIRTING AND (ONLINE) DATING

Openings that are most often associated with the context of flirting are pick-up lines. Although there is some interactional work on flirting (e.g., Speer 2017; Haugh & Pillet-Shore 2018; Oktarini 2020), pick-up lines have, to the best of our knowledge, not been studied empirically. However, Sacks (1992) did conduct a small experiment with a group of students (49). He asked them to write down a pick-up line, finding that pick-up lines were overwhelmingly phrased as a question (Sacks 1992: 102). Furthermore, the local environment

was employed in pick-up lines to co-categorise speaker and recipient (Sacks 1992). For example, by asking someone who is standing at the bus stop if they know when the bus will arrive, the environment (the bus stop) is not only employed to justify the interaction, but also to co-categorise both parties as potential passengers (Sacks 1992). Similarly, participants of a speed dating event orient to the context of speed dating in their conversation (not per se in the opening), displaying a shared naivete towards the activity and in doing so co-categorising themselves as similar kinds of people for whom speed dating is an atypical activity (cf. Turowetz & Hollander 2012: 653). Apparently, co-categorisation is common in the activity of getting acquainted, which is also relevant in flirting/dating.

There are roughly two types of platforms in online dating: dating sites and dating apps. Although these environments have become blurred in recent years (dating sites tend to be complemented by an app), they still differ substantially. Dating sites tend to have a larger focus on profile information. They show possible profiles of interest based on many possible search terms and filters. If a user is interested based on the profile, the owner of the profile can be contacted through a text message (e.g., chat or e-mail). Dating apps tend to have more concise profiles and show potential profiles of interest based on filters such as age, gender, and location. They only allow for interaction via chat once both parties have approved (a so-called 'match'). How users initiate chat interaction through these platforms has rarely been the topic of research (but see Mortensen 2017).

Research on Tinder specifically, has mostly focused on profiles and swiping behaviour (e.g., Ingram et al. 2019; Olivera-La Rosa et al. 2019; David & Cambre 2016), but there are also some studies of Tinder chats (Licoppe 2020; Licoppe 2021). These analyses provide insights into Tinder as an interactional space. First, similar to how strangers in face-to-face interactions use (an aspect of) the immediately available context as a first topic (Maynard & Zimmerman 1984), Tinder users tend to employ information from the other's profile in their chats, which can be linked to the profile as the only mutually available context in online dating (Licoppe 2021). Second, it has been found that Tinder users orient to "ghosting", which refers to the phenomenon that one party unilaterally breaks off contact by not producing more posts (Licoppe 2021). One of the practices users employ to avoid being ghosted is the use of first pair parts (FPPs) to establish conditional relevance (Licoppe 2021). Third, Licoppe (2020) found that there are substantial differences between Tinder chats and chats on Grindr, a dating app specifically for men interested in men. On Tinder, users tend to cycle through numerous topics, while on Grindr users arrange meetings much sooner. Furthermore, elaborate¹ answers seem preferred on Tinder, since this provides hooks for next turns, while on Grindr users tend to give laconic answers, seemingly avoiding interaction about more personal matters (Licoppe 2020). Hitherto, the ways in which users initiate Tinder chats has not been analysed in detail.

3 *Data and methods*

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

The data consisted of 96 post-match Tinder chats of 10 Dutch users. Following Licoppe (2020; 2021) these users were interviewed about their experiences with chat via the app and a corpus was made of the chat conversations they donated for research. Participants were found in the researcher's own network and through snowball sampling², with a prerequisite that participants would be willing to share some of their chats.

Ten participants were found (five cisgender³ men, five cisgender women). They all received higher education, were between 21 and 30 years of age and resided in larger Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Rotterdam, Zwolle). The interviewees' main reasons for using Tinder was to find a (temporary) romantic and/or sexual partner, similar to the average Tinder user's motivation (cf. Sumter et al. 2017). Entertainment and getting a better idea of their own place on the 'market place' were given as secondary reasons by some. None of the participants had a Tinder Premium or Gold account (paid services that unlock extra features of the app), so all participants had access to the same affordances.

The interviews provided context for the analysis of the chat conversations and insights into users' experiences with the app. They lasted for approximately 90–120 minutes and were audio-recorded. All participants consented to the interview being recorded and to recording any chats they shared during the interview. Using a topic list to guide the interviews, participants were asked to show examples for each topic to gather a relatively broad scope of chats. Topics included what the users considered a pleasant/unpleasant chat conversation, how they know someone is interested, meeting someone (or not) after a chat, ghosting (the conversational partner abandoning the chat), the offline context in which they used the app, and more. A general question was used to start the interview, and the first question with relation to showing chats was: "What happens after a match is established?". We also asked participants' opinions about and appreciation of the chats. Each interviewee donated between five and nineteen chats. Twenty-four chats consisted of an unanswered summons (one or more messages). The chats ranged in length from 1–15 messages to longer conversations of 40–100 messages. Length of the messages varied as well, ranging from 1 word (or a GIF [Graphics Interchange Format] or a single emoji) to more than 100 words. On average, messages consisted of 6–10 words.

The 96 chats were analysed using conversation analytic methods (ten Have 2007; Sidnell & Stivers 2012). We first made a collection of chat openings. These openings were analysed in a fine-grained manner, looking at actions and sequential organisation, turn design, and how this relates to previous research on openings and to the (technological) setting of Tinder (profiles, multimodality, timing of posts) (cf. Giles et al. 2015). This resulted in subcollections of opening posts on the basis of how they were structured: 1) a greeting and possibly initial inquiries; 2) a greeting, possibly initial inquiries, and a topic initiation; and 3) a topic initiation. Because topic initiations were prevalent in the opening posts, the latter two subcollections

were further analysed. For this analysis, we excluded chats in which the first post never received a response (44 out of 96 chats), because we were also interested in how topic initiations were responded to. The data were discussed in multiple data sessions (cf. ten Have 2007). For this chapter, excerpts of the chats were translated into English by the authors; typos are not mirrored in the translations.

3.2 ETHICS

There is little precedent for how to collect Tinder chat data in an ethical way (see also Condie et al. 2017). We explain our considerations and precautions in some detail (cf. Stommel & De Rijk 2021) to advance the discussion of how we can protect users without regarding the whole research area as off-limits.

Tinder chats take place in the private sphere, meaning they are only visible to both parties in the chat. Moreover, the conversations are highly personal, concerning potential (romantic/ sexual) relationships. Therefore, it is extremely important that the Tinder users who donated their chats are untraceable. To protect users, all data have been anonymised using pseudonyms and by removing all identifiable information such as photos, locations, and work/study details by blurring photos or using placeholders for textual information. Because Tinder does not offer the option to search for individual profiles and because these chats are not available publicly, it is virtually impossible to trace the participants of our study.

However, ethical conduct requires more than rendering participants untraceable. While the participants of the interviews consented to the use of their anonymised chats, their interactional partners did not. Asking these others for consent or providing an opt-out was near-impossible and had required the participants to approach each of their relevant matches through Tinder itself. Apart from practical issues (this is a lot to ask of participants), this manner of approaching users would also be far from ideal, as it would be an inappropriate context to recruit participants; recruitment through Tinder would be invasive, possibly even harmful.

This problem does not alleviate our responsibility as researchers. It is often difficult or impossible to ask users for consent in the case of online data, such as tweets, forum posts, etc. Therefore, it is important to consider what harm the research could do to unknowing participants. Previous research found that many concerns of users are related to the link between their utterances/posts and their (online) identity (Golder et al. 2017). First, they fear to be made fun of or even bullied because of what they posted. Second, they are concerned that organisations or governmental institutes would use the data to disadvantage them. Third, they are concerned that their utterances are torn from their context, transforming what they tried to communicate (Golder et al. 2017, 9). In our study, these concerns are overcome by making it impossible to trace back the utterances to their source.

A fourth concern of users is that it feels 'creepy' or 'scary' to be the subject of research. In our study, we hope to alleviate this concern as the focus is on patterns in the chat interaction, not on anything related to the users

themselves. To further take users' concerns into account as much as possible, the profiles of the chat partners were not copied and thus not included in the study, as these *are* strongly tied to the users and how they present themselves. The bio (textual part of the profile) is never cited since these texts are likely to be viewed by Tinder users and thus potentially recognisable. Where relevant for the analysis, we paraphrase profile information that was gathered during the interviews.

3.3 TINDER AS AN INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT⁴

On Tinder, the only way to reach out to your match is through the chat feature. When a match is established, users receive a notification. Both users in the match are able to initiate a chat (unlike some other services, like Bumble, where a woman is able to start a chat with a man, but not vice versa). Users can have multiple matches and chat with multiple others at the same time. Users can also easily "unmatch", after which it is not possible to continue the chat, unless a match is re-established through swiping.

While chatting, the profile of the other party is readily available, by clicking the profile photo above the chat box. Apart from the name, age, 1–9 photos and possibly a concise text, the profile page shows the current physical distance between the user and their match (the other party). Some participants noted in the interviews, that they always view the other's profile before initiating a conversation, implying the profile can be a reason to refrain from chatting with the other party. Thus, a match does not indicate that users are (very) keen on starting a chat per se.

Furthermore, Tinder offers the possibility to customise the chat functionality, for example by turning off read-receipts. If this function is on, chat partners can see whether their latest chat messages were seen by their match. Users can also turn off push-notifications received while the app is closed. One can choose notifications of new matches or of new chat messages. During the interviews, some participants explained that they turned off chat notifications, because receiving many notifications in a short time was annoying. When notifications are switched off, users only know whether their match sent a new message when they open the Tinder app. Depending on the user, the app is opened with intervals of hours or even days. Therefore, long silences before a response on Tinder are hardly comparable to silences in online chatrooms or online multiplayer games. In those online environments, users tend to ask for or explain their reasons for not responding within a certain amount of time (usually several minutes at most) (Collister 2008). On Tinder, multiple days between posts do not seem to affect the "success" of a chat and users do not tend to apologise or explain long silences in our data set.

Users cannot see if their matches are online, but they can see if the other is typing. Tinder also adds a date and time code to the chat when the time between messages is longer than 15 minutes. A time stamp is also available for each individual message by tapping the message, but our data set lacks these time stamps. So, when there is no time code in our data set, this means that the post appeared within 15 minutes after the previous message.

Lastly, Tinder offers the use of emojis and GIFs and the option of sharing songs and a phone number. Sending a photo is not possible, but it is possible to comment on photos of the other party's profile. These comments then appear with the photo in the chat. Tinder does not have a quote feature.

4 Findings

We first describe the ways in which Tinder openings were structured in terms of action(s) like greetings, initial inquiries, and topic initiations. Then, we present two patterns we identified in topic initiations specifically, namely orientations to originality and to commonalities with the “match” (i.e., the recipient).

4.1 OPENING INTERACTION

For the sake of brevity, we use the term “conversation starter” to refer to all posts the initiating user sends before the recipient responds. In terms of action(s), we found three types of conversation starters:

1. a greeting and possibly initial inquiries
2. a greeting, possibly initial inquiries *and* a topic initiation
3. a topic initiation

Extracts 1–3 are examples of these three types of conversation starters⁵. In Extract 1, Lorenzo opens the chat with a greeting. Kiki responds two days later with a return greeting. The next morning, Lorenzo makes initial inquiries (message 3) to which Kiki responds that evening.

Extract 1. Type 1

1	Mon, 18th, 22:55	Lorenzo	Hey	<i>Hey</i>
2	Wed, 20th, 22:08	Kiki	He :)	<i>Hi :)</i>
3	Thu, 21th, 11:09	Lorenzo	Alles goed?	<i>Everything okay?</i>
4	Thu, 21th, 19:56	Kiki	Yes. Met jou?	<i>Good. And you?</i>

Extract 1 thus shows a case in which a greeting sequence is completed before another sequence is initiated, even when there are long stretches of time between the posts.

There are also cases in which the greeting and inquiries are made as a conversation starter, not waiting for a response but grouping first pair parts (Type 2) (cf. package post, Hutchby & Tanna 2008). Extract 2 is an example,

consisting of a greeting ('Hey Chantal') and a topic initiation ('What are you looking for in a boyfriend?').

Extract 2. Type 2

1	Sat, 29th	Edo	Hey Chantal, gevonden!! 👀 Wat zoek je in een vriendje?	<i>Hey Chantal, found him!! 👀 What are you looking for in a boyfriend?</i>
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Lastly, conversation starters may straightforwardly consist of a topic initiation without any greeting or general inquiries, as can be seen in Extract 3.

Extract 3. Type 3

1	Sat, 7th, 9:00	Roger	+1 voor je anthem! Ik begon me al af te vragen of ik de enige was die ze kent 😊	<i>+1 for your anthem! I was starting to wonder if I was the only one who knew them 😊</i>
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An opening on Tinder consists of less steps than the canonical telephone opening (cf. Meredith 2014). In Tinder chat, the summons always does something besides summoning, thus the summons-answer sequence takes a different form and is often combined with other actions, like greeting, initial inquiries (type 1 and 2), and even initiating a first topic (type 2 and 3). Second, there is no identification/recognition sequence as the name of the other party is always readily available.

In conversation starters that consist of more than a greeting, we see that the initial inquiries are done and/or the first topic is introduced immediately after the greeting, which shows that in Tinder chat, the sequences do not form adjacency pairs like in spoken conversation, but that first pair parts are produced in series without waiting for a second pair part (cf. Meredith 2014).

The three types of openings posts were relatively equally distributed in our data (see Table 1). Topic initiation in the opening post (type 2 and 3) is thus a common practice on Tinder, occurring in more than half of the chats.

Table 1. Distribution of types of opening posts

Type	Chats (n = 96)
1) Greeting and/or initial inquiries	39 (40,6%)
2) Greeting and/or initial inquiries and topic initiation	24 (25,0%)
3) Topic initiation	33 (34,4%)

Given the prevalence of topic initiations in first posts, we now analyse their design, what they achieve and how they are responded to. Aside from their prevalence, topic initiations are also of interest for further analysis, because

they may be assumed to be particularly relevant for the process of “getting to know the other person” and thus warrant further analysis.

4.2 TOPIC INITIATION IN/AS A CONVERSATION STARTER

In all following sections we only look at type 2 and type 3 conversation starters that received a response (type 2, $n = 18$; type 3, $n = 26$) (see Method section). We examine the example of Edo and Chantal more closely (Extract 4).

Extract 4. Partial repeat of Extract 2

1	Sat, 29th	Edo	Hey Chantal, gevonden!! 🙋 Wat zoek je in een vriendje?	<i>Hey Chantal, found him!!</i> 🙋 What are you looking for in a boyfriend?
2	Sat, 29th, 23:04	Chantal	Hee Edo! Heb ik even geluk! Wat ik zoek? Hmmm goeie vraag....	<i>Hi Edo! Lucky me! What I'm looking for? Hmmm good question....</i>

Edo opens the chat with a personalised greeting (‘Hi Chantal’) followed by ‘found him!! 🙋’, which implicitly refers to Chantal’s bio. At the end of her bio, she writes: ‘I’m looking for a boyfriend, do you know anyone?’. ‘found him’ *treats* the profile question as a first pair part (cf. “retrosequence”, Schegloff 2007). While emojis do not have a clear-cut meaning, the 🙋-emoji potentially embodies Edo’s availability – the raised hand signals something like ‘I’m here’ or ‘I volunteer’. Thus, Edo’s topic initiation responds to Chantal’s bio, meaning it is designed for Chantal specifically and depicts him as someone who carefully read her bio before starting the chat. This type of recipient design (Sacks et al. 1974: 727), by drawing on contextual information like the bio, seems typical for chat openings more generally (cf. Stommel & Te Molder 2016). Then, he asks: ‘What are you looking for in a boyfriend?’, expanding on his topic initiation with a question. This makes a response relevant and shifts the topic in a more serious direction, inviting Chantal to elaborate on what type of person she is looking for and thus also allowing her to deny that she “found him”.

These two characteristics of topic initiations, being 1) recipient-designed based on the profile information (41 out of 44) and 2) containing a first pair part (35 out of 44), can be found in most type 2 and 3 opening posts, as can be seen in the examples in this chapter. We now turn to another aspect of topic initiations in Tinder chats.

4.3 TOPIC INITIATION: ORIENTATION TO ORIGINALITY

Recently, users orient to originality in their opening posts. Extract 5 shows a conversation starter from James to Kiki. Kiki’s bio mentioned that she likes

to play videogames. James initiates a conversation with a question ('what games do you play?'), which is preceded with a self-deprecating preface: 'Here's another boring opening.' This preface comments on the conversation starter, implying James knows what counts as a good conversation starter. He thus wards off the critique of being boring *and* orients to the norm not to open a chat in a boring manner. The latter aspect is related to the context of Tinder: 'another' refers to conversation starters from *other* matches Kiki may be assumed to receive.

Extract 5

1	Wed, 1st, 14:07	James	Hier nog een saaie opening: welke games speel je?	<i>Here's another boring opening: what games do you play?</i>
2	Fri, 3rd, 23:18	Kiki	Ik zou zo een lijst kunnen typen en er wen uir mee bezig zijn 😊	<i>I could type out a list and just take a whole hour doing so 😊</i>
3			Sorry voor de typos. Gaat lekker	<i>Sorry for the typos. Going strong</i>
4			Over het algemeen point & click indies. Veel oude spellen. Een paar nieuwe, maar vaak blijven het indies. Op dit moment veel Stardew Valley. Ik raak er al een beetje op uitgekeken dus zodra mijn pc meeverhuist ga ik starten met Obduction. Daar wacht ik al 3 jaar op 😊	<i>Generally point & click indie games. Many older games. A couple of new ones, but mostly indies. At the moment a lot of Stardew Valley. I'm starting to get bored with it already so as soon as my pc is moved with me I'll start with Obduction. I've been waiting for that game for 3 years 😊</i>

Thus, the preface achieves two things. First, it positions James in relation to other possible matches starting a conversation with Kiki. Second, it portrays James as someone who knows the Tinder convention that you shouldn't use a "boring" question to open a chat. Paradoxically, James thus shows that despite his "boring opening" he knows the rules of the game and is therefore a Tinder-savvy interactional partner. He is orienting to originality as an important quality, without doing something original there and then. Kiki's elaborate response treats James' choice of topic as worthwhile ('I could type out a list and just take a whole hour doing so'), implicitly denying James' self-deprecating preface of his own opening question.

In Extract 6, Jip comments on his own opening using an account for this first topic rather than a preface.

Extract 6

1	Fri, 11th, 14:05	Jip	Heehee, watvoor “muziekjes” hebben je voorkeur?	<i>Heyhey, what kind of “tunes” do you prefer?</i>
2			Ik dacht ik bespaar je nog meer afgezaagde gamergirl comments en begin gewoon over muziek	<i>I thought I'd spare you even more hackneyed gamergirl comments and just start off about music</i>
3	Sat, 12th, 01:03	Maya	Hey hey! Ahh super fijn haha eindelijk	<i>Hey hey! Ahh so nice haha finally</i>
4			Ik ben zelf wel een trouwe rock fan, maar over het algemeen kan ik overal wel naar luisteren. Beetje hiphop tussendoor kan ook nooit kwaad ^^	<i>I'm a loyal rock fan I'd say, but generally I can listen to anything really. A little bit of hiphop inbetween doesn't hurt either ^^</i>
5			Waar luister je zelf naar?	<i>What do you listen to?</i>

A greeting ('Heyhey') is followed by a question about Maya's taste in music in message 1. The quotation marks ("tunes") refer to Maya's bio which contained the word *muziekjes* ('tunes'). Following the opening question, Jip provides an account (message 2) which is critical of gaming as a topic ('hackneyed gamergirl comments') in contrast with music as a topic, implying this is more interesting or original. The design of the account with 'I thought I'd spare you' presents Jip as taking into account Maya's presumed interests.

The fact that Jip accounts for his conversation starter indicates that there are normative expectations surrounding suitable first topics. This is also evidenced by the use of 'even more' (message 2) which orients to the possible multitude of matches and chats and the interest of standing out from other Tinder users.

Maya's reaction aligns with Jip's account although she only implicitly confirms that she often receives questions about videogames. She accepts his account in message 3 with an affective response token ('Ahh'), an assessment ('so nice'), two laughing tokens and 'finally' which implicitly confirms she frequently receives questions about gaming on Tinder and positively receives Jip's considerateness ('I thought I'd spare you'). The affective token, laughing tokens and superlatives ('so nice' and 'finally') treat Jip's account as humorous. Crucially, both participants orient to Maya's bio for what counts as original and to the norm to be original or different from 'the others'.

4.4 TOPIC INITIATION: OPENING IN A MARKED WAY

In the conversation starters shown in Extract 5 and 6, users orient to the norm that a first topic should be original. Another way users might be seen to be invoking originality on Tinder is by initiating an uncommon interactional activity to get the conversational ball rolling. We call these openings marked because they deviate from most topic initiations in our data set which are first pair parts, specifically information seeking interrogatives (see also Meredith 2014). Extract 7 is an example of an opening which does something different than seeking information, namely initiating a game in which the initiator of the contact *already knows* the ‘correct’ answer the other is invited to give. It is one of only two such instances in our data set (see Extract 9 for the second case). Danni initiates a chat with Lara.

Extract 7

1	Wed, 4th	Danni	We hebben allebei een foto met gekleurde huisjes	<i>We both have a photo with little colorful houses</i>
2			Ik gok dat die van jou in Stockholm is genomen	<i>I'm guessing that yours was taken in Stockholm</i>
3			Nu mag jij raden waar mijn foto is genomen 😊	<i>Now you can guess where my photo was taken 😊</i>
4	Thu, 5th, 17:10	Lara	Nee haha, in Praag!	<i>No haha, in Prague!</i>
5			Die van jou in Copenhagen denk ik?	<i>Yours in Copenhagen I think?</i>
6		Danni	Oehh jammeeer	<i>Ohh toooo bad</i>
7			Praag is wel nice!	<i>Prague is nice!</i>
8			Mooie stad	<i>Beautiful city</i>
9			Helemaal goed geraden ¹⁰⁰	<i>You guessed completely right¹⁰⁰</i>
10			Wanneer was je in Praag?	<i>When where you in Prague?</i>
11	Thu, 5th, 19:40	Lara	Jaa hele leuk stad!	<i>Yeahh great city!</i>

In her conversation starting messages (1–3), Danni initiates the activity of a game rather than an exchange of information. First, she points to a commonality in her and Lara’s profile (‘We both have a photo with little colourful houses’) (message 1). Message 2 provides a guess where Lara’s photo was taken, thus treating Lara’s bio as the resource for the game. The next post then invites Lara to make a guess where Danni’s picture was taken (message 3). Again, the emoji is ambiguous, but it seems to emphasise the game element (“wise” face), for example inviting Lara to be “smart” or

referring back to Danni herself in a playfully self-deprecating way. So, this opening does not seek (more) information about Lara in terms of hobby's or taste in music like in the previous examples, but invites Lara to play a game. Lara aligns, which is "played out" until message 6. Interestingly, Danni then shifts to the information seeking format working towards the question 'When were you in Prague?' (message 10), capitalising on the topic of the game but no longer in the game format. So, the game, in retrospect, served the originality of the opening, and once the conversational ball is rolling, the more common information seeking – getting to know one another – is turned to.

4.5 TOPIC INITIATION: ORIENTATION TO COMMONALITIES

Apart from originality, Tinder users orient to commonalities with their matches. This can be a way to distinguish oneself from other possible matches, namely by highlighting specific commonalities. The conversation starter in Extract 8 is an example of pointing out a commonality instead of looking for one (i.e., noticing rather than asking). In message 1, Roger starts the conversation by complementing Els about her anthem (Tinder profiles may contain a favourite song, which others can listen to through Spotify). In the same message he notes he thought he was 'the only one' who knew this band, highlighting a "special" commonality between him and Els (fan of the same band). In other words, he co-categorises himself and Els ('+1 for your anthem!') and simultaneously places other Tinder users outside of that category ('I was starting to wonder if I was the only one that knew them'). Els accepts the compliment ('Haha thanks!') in message 2 and elaborates on her anthem 'I always say this will be the opening dance on my wedding 😊😊😊' which can be heard as a flirt in the context of Tinder and dating.

Extract 8. Partial repeat of Extract 3

1	Sat, 7th, 9:00	Roger	+1 voor je anthem! Ik begon me al af te vragen of ik de enige was die ze kent 😊	<i>+1 for your anthem! I was starting to wonder if I was the only one who knew them</i> 😊
2		Els	Haha thanks! Ik zeg altijd dat dit de openingsdans wordt op mijn bruiloft 😊😊😊	<i>Haha thanks! I always say that this will be the opening dance on my wedding</i> 😊😊😊
3		Roger	Haha damn dat is wel heel ver vooruit gedacht al heb ik wel een nummer geclaimd daarvoor i gues 😊	<i>Haha damn well that's thinking very far ahead though I've already claimed a song for that I gues</i> 😊

Co-categorisation is something Tinder chat openings have in common with pick-up lines in face-to-face interaction. However, the mutually available context that Tinder users have access to contains different or even more personal information than co-presence generally grants strangers. While initiators of a face-to-face conversation rely on the local environment, like ‘we are both waiting for the same bus’ or ‘we both smoke’, the categories on Tinder can be personalised to a greater extent by using information found in the profile. Extract 9 shows just how specifically recipient-designed such conversation starters can be.

Extract 9

1	Mon, 2nd	Fokke	Kun jij deze zin (1 van m'n favoriete) dan afmaken: "Pohh mien pa en ma stemmen er elk jaar op, Partij van de armoed? Ik weet wel..."	<i>Can you finish this sentence (1 of my favourites) then: "Ohh me dad and mum vote for it every year, Party of the Poverty? I do know..."</i>
2		Ilena	Partij van de uh armoed?	<i>Party of the uh Poverty?</i>
3		Fokke	Ken je die nog niet want dan heb ik een parel voor je	<i>Don't you know that one yet because in that case I have a beauty for you</i>
4		Ilena	OHH IK ZAT TE VER	<i>OHH I WAS TOO FAR</i>
5			CDA is ChristenUnie natuurlijk	<i>CDA is ChristenUnie of course</i>
6		Fokke	Hahaha yesss	<i>Hahaha yesss</i>
7			Prachtig	<i>Beautiful</i>
8			Maar hij zegt ook nog partij van de armoed hahahaha	<i>But he also says party of poverty later hahahaha</i>
9			Love it	<i>Love it</i>

Fokke starts a chat with Ilena by referring to a video fragment he suspects she is familiar with based on her profile. Like Danni (Extract 7), he establishes conditional relevance in an original manner by producing a grammatically unfinished sentence for Ilena to complete (cf. *designedly incomplete utterances*, Koshik 2002). Unlike in Extract 7, Fokke does not explicate the basis for this conversation starter, but he refers to her bio by using ‘then’ in (‘Can you finish this sentence (1 of my favourites) then:’). His first message is thus recipient-designed and highly reliant on being co-members of a niche group, using the referent ‘1 of my favourites’ without any specification. Ilena only has the quote and her own bio to derive what Fokke is referring to.

Thus, the co-categorisation done by Fokke is highly personalised. Not only is the reference he makes focused on one of Ilena’s interests, he narrows down the category to which he counts them both as members by assuming Ilena’s knowledge on this topic and implicitly even testing it. After a further probe from Fokke (message 3), Ilena passes the “test” (message 5), after

which Fokke displays enthusiasm (messages 6 and 7) having established a highly specialised commonality.

5 Conclusion and discussion

Our analysis identified practices related to the initiation of Tinder chats. First, greetings are optional, not default for starting an interaction, merely working towards topic initiation. An explanation for this finding is that it seems difficult to distinguish yourself from others with a greeting (and initial inquiries) alone, making it more likely that no response will follow at all (cf. Licoppe 2021). This is an even bigger hurdle when the chat is initiated while the recipient is not online, and the conversation thus starts (even more) asynchronously. When an opening sequence is produced over the course of hours or even days, little interactional progress is made (cf. Extract 1). This may also explain why openings on Tinder frequently consist of or include topic initiation (type 2 and 3). Second, topic initiation is recipient-designed, drawing on the user's profile. A topic initiation usually consists of an information seeking first pair part. Third, Tinder chat openings normatively orient to originality. Such orientations both ward off potential accusations of being boring and display the user as knowing what counts as original and what does not. Fourth, topic initiations may highlight commonalities, co-categorising the initiator of the chat and the recipient in a highly specialised way. Thus, pointing out commonalities is also a way to stand out from the crowd.

We will discuss how these findings relate to previous research on openings of chat interactions and dating. In line with Meredith's (2014) findings, we see that chat openings on Tinder differ significantly from telephone openings, both landline (Schegloff 1986) and mobile (Hutchby & Barnett 2005; Arminen & Leinonen 2006). This is related to the affordances of chat: the summons always does something else besides summoning, and the name of the profile owner being always available makes identification generally unnecessary, even when initiating contact with strangers.

The finding that topic initiations are common is in line with previous research on chat (cf. Meredith 2014), indicating that users exploit the affordances inherent to the technology. Where a greeting may be used to check the availability, it is likely that opening with a topic initiation is done to elicit a response as soon as the recipient becomes available: "[In] a context where the recipient's availability is not yet established, chat-starters may design their turns to best mobilise a response *when* the recipients become available" (Meredith 2014: 167, emphasis in original). Our analysis supports this explanation, because the Tinder topic initiations were overwhelmingly recipient-designed and often contained information seeking first pair parts, designed to elicit a response (see also Licoppe 2021).

It has been suggested that topic initiation is done when availability is already established (Szymanski et al. 2006). However, Tinder does not provide any information regarding availability, so this cannot explain our

findings. Thus, we bolster Meredith's (2014) claim that greetings can be done to check availability for synchronous chat interaction, while topic initiations are done to elicit a response regardless of availability. We also found that users initiate interaction with a greeting *and* a topic initiation at the same time (type 2 openings), which shows that greetings and initial inquiries do at least more than checking availability.

Another suggested explanation for the prevalence of topic initiations in chat, is that it is related to a 'continuing state of incipient talk' (cf. Schegloff & Sacks 1973), which implies the conversation does not have to be re-opened even if there has been a gap in the talk. Meredith (2014) rejects this as an explanation of her findings, on the basis that the topic initiations she found were often the first things posted in a chat. She studied chats between (Facebook) friends, whereas our data consist of chat openings between strangers. Therefore, our findings support her rejection of a 'continuing state of incipient talk' as an explanation of topic initiations further, as we can also be certain that the online interaction is not a continuation of offline or preceding online talk.

So, it seems that in chat, mutual availability and co-presence are not relevant for opening interaction. This is likely tied to the affordance of chat, which allows for a state of what Licoppe (2004) calls "connected" presence, in which presence is not simply the opposite of absence and where the physically absent party renders themselves present by "multiplying mediated communication gestures" (Licoppe 2004: 135). In other words, the relationship is strengthened by phatic communication regardless of physical distance, sending text messages or doing short calls, enabled by the connectivity inherent to mobile phone technology at any place, at any time, (Licoppe 2004). Chat through mobile phone apps always provides an open channel for communication for users to instigate or continue talk (cf. SMS, WhatsApp, Telegram). Despite physical absence, or in the case of Tinder, despite being strangers, participants are connected.

Due to the Tinder swiping functionality preceding the chat and the list of matches from which users navigate to individual chats, users are confronted with potential competition with other matches. This competition is implicitly oriented to in meta-comments as part of conversation starters, which refer to other possible matches that open chats. In face-to-face flirting, competition may also be relevant, but this is likely to involve other interactional means (e.g., gaze and other non-verbal cues). On Tinder, one cannot be certain of the recipient's attention and/or investment in the interaction. It is also unclear how many others have an open channel with your match, which amplifies the (feeling of) competition. Thus, the affordance of Tinder to have multiple matches at the same time and easily switch back and forth between chats, makes standing out from "the crowd" crucial.

Highlighting commonalities is a way to distinguish oneself on Tinder, as Tinder users are generally looking for others with whom they have things in common (Neyt et al 2020). Pointing out a commonality can be a strategy to start the chat in an original way. The more specific these commonalities are, the more effective such a conversation starter potentially is, as it reduces the chance that others highlight the *same* commonality. However, standing out

is not necessarily an explanation for these conversation starters, because the reverse is also true: a conversation starter can also be used by the *initiator* to gauge if the match is interesting to them.

Flirting on Tinder thus shows some similarities to speed dating, as well as some differences. Trying to establish something shared using context information is done in both environments, as seen by the co-categorisation of Tinder users and how speed daters discuss the act of speed dating itself (and claiming a shared naivety towards the activity) to establish some common ground (Turowetz & Hollander 2012). However, on Tinder the context of the profiles allows for co-categorisation in a much more specific manner than in speed dating. While speed dating was found to follow an interview-like format (Stokoe 2010), Tinder is characterised by first pair parts that center on originality, either in terms of action or topic.

The importance of standing out is supported by the orientation users show to originality in their topic initiations. Sending an original conversation starter, by choosing an original topic or opening in an uncommon way, projects an interesting or playful chat. This makes it more likely one catches the attention and/or receives a response. Catching attention may be not only related to socially “standing out”, but also to the relevance of being noticed in the constant stream of messages and notifications on mobile phones. Opening posts never receiving a response and thus going unnoticed is a common phenomenon in digital/online interactions (cf. Giles et al 2015). A catchy starter may increase the chance that the recipient actually notices the post. The relevance of socially standing out from the crowd is also evidenced by the meta-commentary in openings that accounts for lack of originality. By criticising their own opening, users orient to the norm that openings on Tinder should be original and present themselves as Tinder savvy.

Overall, opening a Tinder chat is intricately interconnected with both the technical/design affordances of the app and the social context of dating. Those who optimally exploit the available means, are likely to be most successful in Tinder dating.

NOTES

- 1 Elaborate answers can be understood as answers in which more information is given than needed, i.e. when orienting to the maxim of quantity as described by Grice (1989) (Licoppe 2021).
- 2 Method of data collection where participants recruit additional participants from their personal network.
- 3 Cisgender people identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. The antonym would be ‘transgender’.
- 4 Based on the Tinder version of Spring 2020.
- 5 All transcripts represent the way users constructed their posts. Some users pressed “send” after each sentence, while others sent posts containing multiple actions. The transcripts reflect this with each new line representing a new post. This is relevant because it indicates whether the recipient had any opportunity to respond in between posts.

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