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Reflective Approaches to Analyzing Digital Discourse

Riki Thompson

Abstract:

With the rapid changes in digital media, the need for research methods that address the constantly changing landscape are vital. In a perfect world, researchers design a plan and implement methods to ensure that data collected answers the research questions developed at the beginning of the process. However, with the speed at which digital technology changes and the convergence between online and offline lives, traditional research methods designed for the analog world are often inadequate. As the line between the real and virtual becomes blurred, with people utilizing social media as a primary form of networking and communicating, researchers must contend with new challenges and opportunities for recruiting, interviewing, collecting and analyzing digital discourse data. By assessing the research situation through an interdisciplinary lens to find common ground between disciplines to solve problems, researchers can develop more effective tools. To understand digital culture and situated communicative practices, many scholars argue for digital ethnography approaches that are inherently flexible and adaptive to issues that may arise from the field (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Hine, 2015; Varis, 2016). Though a case study of online dating research, this chapter will present guidelines and suggestions for engaging in reflective research practices that allow digital discourse researchers to be more responsive to serendipitous interactions and work within a social justice framework to give back to the community.

Reflective Approaches to Analyzing Digital Discourse

Riki Thompson

1. Introduction

With people utilizing digital technologies as a primary form of networking and communicating, researchers must contend with new challenges and opportunities. Jones and colleagues (2015) have pointed to the inadequacy of traditional research methods for digital discourse studies, calling for methods that move beyond the analog and allow us to understand the complexity of digital discourse practices. When we allow ourselves to remain curious, be flexible, and make changes along the way, we can be responsive to the shifting landscape of technologies and participants' needs. Through an examination of my online dating research, I show how a reflective research approach can enrich digital discourse studies, be responsive to serendipitous moments, and provide avenues to give back to the community or communities studied. In my connecting digitally study, I wanted to know how people presented themselves on their profiles, perceived other users on the platforms, and made decisions about whom to date.

When I set out to explore intersections of discourse, technology, identity, and interpersonal connectivity, I intended to rely on multimodal critical discourse analysis (Ledin and Machin 2019; Machin 2013; Machin et al. 2016; O'Halloran et al. 2019) as the primary framework for analyzing dating profiles and platform design. To triangulate my discourse analytic interpretation of textual and visual data, I wanted to also conduct interviews and observations of participants engaging in digital dating practices but was less versed in such methods.

Best practices in interdisciplinary research remind us that some problems are more complex and require the integration of methods and theories across diverse sets of perspectives (Repko et al. 2016; Szostak 2015). There has been a resurgence in methods that take an eclectic approach, creatively employing available tools and materials from different traditions to come up with unique solutions to novel problems (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Kincheloe et al. 2011; Maxwell 2013). Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's (1966) "do it yourself" approach known as "bricolage," which rejects the idea of following a pre-established plan or set of methods in favor of a more spontaneous and improvisational use of resources at hand, Maxwell suggests that qualitative researchers employ an interactive and reflexive model in which "the activities of collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing the research questions, and identifying and addressing validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing the other" (2).

In hopes of finding a "magic bullet" to structure my patchwork of methods, I embarked on a deep dive into the literature on human-centered design and user-experience (UX) design, ethnography, and media studies. I deduced that while my project shared data collection practices used in design research, I was adapting methods for different aims. Similar to my study, design fields employ ethnographic approaches and terminology but—unlike my project—they focus on user needs and inefficiencies in the products themselves (User Experience Professionals' Association 2012). In contrast, my research focuses on technology to make conclusions about patterns of use and to understand experiences.

As I continued my pursuit, I found threads of social media research building bridges to ethnographic methods. Several studies provided valuable frameworks for rethinking protocols and ethical considerations related to participant observation, interview processes, and data collection and description, but none was "just right" for my purposes. For example, Jørgensen's (2016) media go-along method, derived to analyze hookup and dating apps,

“allows the researcher and participant to navigate and talk about media in that they have sensorial access together and simultaneously” (60). With the media-go along, participants give a “guided tour” of an app while the researcher asks participants to move to specific screens on an app (like profiles and messages) and/or expand on themes (through what are called thematic routing invitations). Robards and Lincoln’s (2019) scroll back method allows researchers to access “complex traces of everyday lives” (2) through a person’s social media history, with the researcher and participant navigating together and serving as co-analysts of social media data. Finally, Light et al. (2018) developed the walkthrough method, incorporating observation and field note generation while the researcher employs a step-by-step walkthrough technique to move through a platform interface to understand how it guides users. Unlike the media-go along and scroll back methods that are conducted as part of an interview with participants, the walkthrough method allows the researcher to explore an app and its functionality independently. Rather than searching for “the” appropriate method, I shifted my thinking and welcomed new discoveries as an opportunity to develop my own customized toolkit to serve the needs of my project while adapting methods for digital discourse studies.

I also turned to the field of ethnography with its rich tradition of observation as a tool for understanding culture, while recognizing that I was not an ethnographer in the truest sense of the word. Mackenzie (2018) has shown how digital discourse researchers can integrate reflexive and semi-ethnographic approaches to gain the benefits of an iterative research design by utilizing the tools of the trade, such as field notes and memo writing, along with early coding of data for identifying themes and refining interview questions “without necessarily making a commitment to the full immersion in a culture that is traditionally associated with ethnography (Green and Bloome 1997)” (31). As researchers have increasingly turned to ethnography to study digital culture and practices, Varis (2016) argues

that our understanding of ethnography needs to continue evolving beyond “traditional” or “pre-digital” ethnography to deal with the demands of multilayered communicative contexts. She suggests that digital ethnography is an approach rather than a set of certain techniques as “there is no one-size-fits-all solution, not least due to the myriad of different communicative environments that digital communication encompasses” (61). When looking to study language, social media, and the culture of online dating, I found that taking an ethnographic approach provides a flexible and adaptive method that remains open to issues that arise from the field.

Ethnographic approaches have been increasingly utilized to study digital discourse as the internet and social media have become vital spaces for sociality, cultural knowledge, and production. Several toolkits have been proposed across disciplines to support research endeavors motivated to understanding intersections between digital technology and sociality. During the first decade of the millennium, Hine (2000) proposed “virtual ethnography,” Kozinets (2009) offered “netnography,” and Pink (2009) suggested “sensory ethnography.” In the last decade, we saw “ethnography in virtual worlds” by Boellstorff and colleagues (2012) and “digital ethnography” as suggested by Pink and colleagues (2015).

As the field of ethnography has shifted from valuing an object-focused method to more of a “reflexive” practice looking to “understand the social *meanings* and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting” (emphasis in the original) (Brewer 2000: 11), ethnographic approaches have proven to offer a robust complement to discourse analytic research goals. In fact, digital discourse researchers have called for the integration of ethnographic approaches (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016; Page et al. 2014; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Many scholars in Critical Discourse Studies have also embraced the benefits of ethnographic approaches to allow for increased focus on context and situated communicative practices, with recent affirmation in the field of ethnography to consider the

significance of power (Krzyzanowski 2017). In addition, research in language and sexuality has shown that combining ethnographic methods with critical discourse studies is more conducive to “uncover the way that normativity shapes the discursive construction of sexuality” (Motschenbacher 2017: 399). Mortensen (2015) has examined opportunities and challenges of applying ethnographic approaches to the study of language, sexuality, and online dating. In research on storytelling in social media contexts, Page (2012) has demonstrated the value of taking a blended approach: supplementing textual analysis with ethnography to gain participant perspectives. Varis (2020) argues that “it is precisely ethnography that is well-equipped for advancing our understanding of language use, communication and social relationships and digital contexts” (187) because it is interested in “finding out what new technologies and media mean for ordinary people and their (linguistic) practices” (185).

Digital ethnography methods are increasingly being proposed to counter and complement quantitative approaches that focus on what Møller and Robards (2019) call the *found* digital traces of big data sets by placing “user’s action, experience and meaning making as central to productive research inquiry” (96). Pink (2009) argues for a reflexive approach that relies on the senses of both researchers and participants who co-produce knowledge because it “is open to multiple ways of knowing and to the exploration of and reflection on new routes to knowledge” (8). Similar to the “adaptive ethnography” approach of Hine (2000) that stresses flexibility for researchers working across digital platforms and physical environments, Pink’s (2009) sensory ethnography shifts from classical approaches and promotes developing and adapting ethnographic techniques “in context and appropriate to the needs and possibilities afforded by specific research projects” (8). Georgakopoulou and Spilioti (2016) suggest that digital ethnography research, with its focus on digital environments as multilayered spaces with blurred boundaries between private, public,

interpersonal, and institutional is emerging as a leading area of methodological innovation. Flexible approaches that encourage an iterative process that is reflexive and adaptable are increasingly important for digital discourse research.

Through employing dialogic action interviews (discussed in more detail later) that aim to foster transformation, I bring together digital discourse studies and ethnographic approaches, which rely upon principles of flexibility, induction, and an emergent process, to facilitate reflective research practices and to provide a more robust understanding of language and sociality in the context of digital dating. Roulston (2010) suggests that when researchers engage in reflective interviewing practices, which include consideration of interview theory, mindfulness about subject positions of researcher and participants, and examinations of interview interactions, they are better situated to present important findings on social problems. Dialogic and transformative conceptions of interviewing have been proposed for researchers aiming to challenge participants to see a situation or the world in a different way (Denzin 2001; Kvale 1999; Wolgemuth and Donohue 2006). By facilitating transformation for interlocutors, dialogic transformative approaches, in which “the researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understandings of participants” (Roulston 2010: 65) contribute to social justice work and to improving the lives of participants. Moreover, as Brinkmann (2007) points out, active interviews can serve as a methodological tool to develop knowledge, not just convey experience, through an interactional and interpretive process.

2. Case Study: Connecting Digitally through Online Dating

When I designed the connecting digitally study, I wanted to push beyond a mere interpretation of what I was seeing on dating sites and talk to people about their experiences. To triangulate the analysis of textual and visual data, I decided to conduct interviews and observations of participants engaging in online dating practices. As I became immersed in working with and developing new methods, I discovered problems—which led to

opportunities and epiphanies—leading me to adopt a reflective research process. While reflective research is best applied to all points of the process, including project design, participant recruiting, data collection, and data analysis, in this section I focus on working with participants through interviews and observations to gain insight into their digital practices.

I spent two years analyzing dating platforms and user profiles, as well as conducting extensive interviews with 114 adults who were actively using, or had used, dating platforms. Participants ranged from eighteen to seventy years old and reported a diverse level of experience with platforms and time engaged in digital dating activities; some merely dabbled whereas others reported years of experience.

Since I was active on several dating platforms myself when I began the study, I needed to consider how to disclose my positionality as a researcher. My existence as a user of digital dating technologies required me to engage in ethical decision-making about how to navigate the online dating world while also researching it. Similar to other researchers of online dating (Jørgensen 2016; Mortensen 2015), how and when I disclosed my researcher status shifted throughout the process. Initially, in the spirit of full transparency, I included a statement on my dating profiles that I researched online dating. However, after discovering that other users could misinterpret my statement as a call for participants rather than an ethical disclosure statement, I revised my profile to include a general statement that I did internet research. After further reflection about my goals and the norms of online dating profiles, I decided to disclose my research agenda to other users I matched with during the messaging phase. Choosing to describe my research agenda on my profiles had the potential to negatively impact my own chances of success with online dating since it is not a norm to describe one's job explicitly within the written portion of a profile, especially on apps with a 500-character limit (like Tinder and Bumble). When taking a break from dating, I updated

profiles to say I was on temporary hiatus or disabled apps so as not to appear available to other users. As a participant observer in the online dating world, employing a principle of care—as many ethnographers do (Boellstorff et al. 2012)—provided me with the ethical foundation to remain alert and to navigate complex interpersonal situations as they arose.

2.1 Reflective Interviewing

Though I did not design the study with an intention of integrating reflective practices for interviewing, the discovery of Roulston's (2010) framework midway through the project encouraged me to rethink this aspect. I intended to utilize the same set of semi-structured interview questions for the study's entirety to obtain thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of online dating desires, preferences, and practices, but after a few interviews realized I needed to refine my questions. In line with estimates for qualitative interview data saturation (Guest et al. 2006), I conducted twelve interviews thinking that would be the one checkpoint for reflection and revision of interview prompts. Aligned with Roulston's (2010) reflective interviewing methods, which suggests that researchers should pay attention to emergent phenomena and adjust interviewing practices when necessary, I shifted to an iterative and responsive style, revising as needed. After embracing reflective interviewing, I kept track of new questions that emerged while interviewing and allowed myself to adjust interview questions and protocols whenever it felt right—not just at a rigid predetermined point in the process.

As participants shared details about their intimate lives, I became aware of the value of engaging spontaneously instead of “sticking to the script” in the service of chasing after a positivist belief in a single objective reality as proof of methodological rigor. I discovered that I could help participants improve their odds of finding connection by sharing research findings and giving tips about aspects of digital dating, which became an unexpectedly rich

opportunity to give back to the community. With this epiphany, I added a step to my interview protocol, telling participants that I would share what I knew after they answered questions (so as not to influence the data). While traditional forms of qualitative research suggest that researchers maintain distance and merely observe, contemporary scholarship makes space for intervention, especially when intervention benefits community members (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Since I had shared knowledge and experience with online dating, it made sense to share my subject position as a fellow online dater. I experimented with when and how to share my insider status during interviews and noted that participants responded favorably when I signaled shared understanding of digital dating. In addition to building rapport, sharing as a move of transparency also aligned with my sense of ethics. When participants shared strategies or profiles that were likely to negatively impact their success, I felt a responsibility to share the information. For example, some people like to include photos of their children on their profiles while others automatically swipeⁱ left—rejecting daters who do. When participants include “kid pix” in their profile, I share my findings that many consider posting photos of children on dating sites to be inappropriate. While people tend to appreciate the transparency and demonstrated dedication to parenting, the argument is that children, who do not have the ability to consent, are exposed to undue risks when their photos are shared on dating sites, which are deemed to be adult spaces—often likened to a bar. I take the opportunity to help participants find more productive ways to communicate their status as a parent on their profile.

Another unexpected result of conducting interviews was the transformative nature of the experience. Since the original semi-structured interview format with follow-up probes often elicited storied responses about heartache and frustrations of dating, it was common for participants to say they found that talking about their experiences was therapeutic. During a joint interview with a non-monogamous couple, one of my research participants who goes by

the pseudonym Whiskey had an epiphany while sharing and said, “we have never vocalized this before. It’s the cheapest therapy we have ever had, so thank you.” As a result of the interview, the couple came to a new understanding of each other’s differing perspectives on exploring sexual adventures with people inside their networks.

With freshly gained insights about the value of taking a transformative approach, I revised my interview protocol to be more flexible, using both semi-structured and unstructured interview formats, allowing time and space to address the unexpected when it surfaced. Roulston (2010) suggests that a transformative conception of interviewing includes intentionality on the part of the researcher to create change; draws on critical, emancipatory, and psychotherapeutic perspectives; fosters social change for social justice; and challenges understandings for both the researcher and participant through the dialog. Originally, I informed my participants that the interview process would take forty-five to sixty minutes. When I realized that interviewing provided an opportunity for transformation and intervention, I updated consent forms to reflect a 60 to 120-minute process and I oriented participants to the option of a shorter or longer interview, depending on how the process felt for them. By making the interview parameters flexible, I was able to be responsive to participants’ level of engagement and help those who wanted it.

2.2 Dialogic Action Interviews

As I moved from interviewing to observing digital daters in action, I aimed to better understand how users evaluate other profiles and confirm whether participants are critically aware of how they assess others. My initial assumption was that daters who swiped quickly were making split decisions based on the visual, assessing attractiveness through photos, and not considering the linguistic elements found through reading profiles. I learned that the evaluation process was often more complex, with daters relying on a combination of visual

and linguistic communication cues based on heuristic filtering strategies they had developed. Participants with considerable experience using dating platforms tended to have well-developed and refined filtering strategies and move through profiles quickly due to acquired knowledge as online dating experts.

As I set out to conduct observations, I grappled with methods and terminology for defining the process. Was I using ethnographic observation to understand the culture of a virtual world (Boellstorff et al. 2012)? Was I interested in understanding the user experience (Nemeth 2004; User Experience Professionals' Association 2012)? Was I doing a walkthrough of a platform (Light et al. 2018)? Were we doing a media go-along together (Jørgensen 2016)? Or was I merely extending the interview? The answer was yes to all, but not in the same ways or to meet the same goals. Rather, I was creating a flexible, hybridized tool that employs interviewing, observation, and analysis of profiles and platform interfaces.

Instead of focusing on the method of data collection, I looked at my research questions and reflected on my goals. My questions included the following: How do people decide who to date and/or hookup with when using platforms? What textual and visual cues do people use to make decisions? How do platform interface and design influence decision-making? With these questions as a guide, I concluded that by previewing a profile or observing a swiping session with a participant, I was extending the interview process to gain insights into practices and preferences. I developed the concept of *dialogic action interviews* to describe the process of using conversational interviewing in connection with participant action on a platform to prompt metacognition and critical awareness about online dating practices and decision-making. Because user activity and screen views serve as indicators of engagement on digital platforms, this sort of interviewing facilitates action through the material practice of logging on and viewing screens, be it the participant's own profile or those of previous matches.

Creating the dialogic action interview process required a bit of trial and error. With the first attempts to observe digital daters in action, I simply asked participants to take me through a typical swiping session while describing what they were thinking as they went along. I learned that such instructions were inadequate to get at assessment strategies as participants used few words to describe their thinking when moving quickly through profiles. During the first observation with a participant whose pseudonym is French Country, I observed that his use of language was minimal, as he swiped through profiles quickly on his phone while saying, “yes, no, no, no, left, left, ooh, he’s hot, give him some fire!” while spontaneously clicking on the flame emoji. Early observations taught me that without explicit guidelines, participants interpreted instructions to think aloud as merely expressing final decisions rather than describing the criteria that helped them come to a decision.

If the researcher wants to hear language that illuminates the assessment process and metacognition (Schon 1984, 1987), participants usually need to be guided to make that language explicit, especially if it is not part of their usual practices. I realized that the metacognitive reflection that I was asking participants to engage in resembled the type of reflection activities I teach in composition courses. Without directives, students often interpret reflective writing prompts as journaling activities encouraging them to express their feelings rather than engage in higher-level metacognitive work facilitating learning. Similarly, asking digital daters to think aloud while swiping on profiles without providing explicit instruction on what constitutes “reflection” tended to garner the same sort of short, surface-level responses that students provide when asked to reflect. In the classroom, I teach students to identify a few discrete areas of struggle and take a focused approach to improvement during our short time together. Similarly, by employing dialogic action interviews as part of a reflective research process, I was teaching participants how to critically assess their practices, make strategic adjustments aligned with their connection

goals, and develop strategies for communicating across digital dating contexts. In this way, the role of researcher is combined with that of teacher, leading to interventions that have the potential to help participants change their behavior, becoming more mindful in digital dating spaces.

After more revision to this process, I encouraged participants to swipe at their usual pace for a minute and told them to “think aloud while swiping.” After the first batch of profiles, I asked the participant to describe what they liked and disliked in the group of profiles and then I summarized the salient criteria I heard, which served as a form of member checking. Next, I asked them to slowly walk me through a few profiles, commenting on what they noticed before swiping one direction or another. Daters who were accustomed to quickly clicking on their computer or swiping on their phone had difficulty with this aspect of slowing down, sometimes accidentally selecting or rejecting the profile with their mouse or finger before I had a chance to absorb the contents. Though it is unknown whether participants will transfer thoughtful swiping practices when they “return to the wild,” these sorts of thoughtful interventions have the potential to make digital dating a less frenzied and frustrating space.

Once I had a sense of the participant’s basic criteria for selecting or rejecting a profile, I slowed down the process even more. With each new profile that appeared, I now asked participants to describe the written and visual elements they deemed important in deciding whether to select or reject. Finally, I described any remaining profile elements to them that they did not comment on to provide a clear record in the transcripts and my field notes. If, when focusing on a particular profile, the participant viewed multiple photos and/or scrolled through the bio on that profile, I included those elements in my description; if the participant only viewed the first screen, I would only describe those elements to align with user practices. I described identity labels that the user selected in the profile, such as age, height,

body type, profession, but I did not say the person's name associated with the profile so as to anonymize third-party profiles in audio recordings and transcripts. My intention for describing third-party profiles was to create a record for the transcript without collecting data about users from whom I did not gain informed consent. However, I also discovered that when participants corrected or reframed my description and/or interpretation of profile elements, the dialogic process also served as an excellent form of member checking.

With a slower pace and a more specific and explicitly worded series of reflective prompts, participants were able to identify several elements that influenced their decision and think critically about choices. After describing the profile, I asked participants to elaborate on why particular elements were viewed favorably or unfavorably. As we spent a substantial amount of time discussing each profile, participants often identified significant criteria that were not mentioned during their initial interview phase. This process was especially productive in that it confirmed or challenged the participant's perception of the criteria they used to evaluate others' profiles. If a participant said they were looking for someone with at least the same level of education during the interview and then pointed out the education level as they swiped, I confirmed that their perceptions clearly matched with their practices. More importantly, when perceptions were not aligned, I brought this insight to light to draw participants' attention to the discrepancy. If the participant did not mention the importance of certain elements (e.g., body type, education, profession, children, hobbies, religion, political leanings, drug, and alcohol use), yet they pointed to such elements during the swiping session, I would surface the observation at that time. How I addressed this issue relied largely on the level of rapport developed with participants and the nature of the element in question. I learned to tread lightly depending on the participant and the subject matter, especially when pointing out observations related to sensitive topics. I used discourse strategies to minimize face threats, such as suggesting I may have missed the cue earlier and pointing to the newly

introduced selection criteria as personally important to the participant and thereby worthy of discussion. For example, during a swiping session with a participant who identified as Wassy Bear, height emerged as an important factor though I did not recall her mentioning it in the initial interview. While she was taking me through the profiles of a number of men, she pointed out that some were too short or tall enough, which prompted me to say, “I don’t remember you saying that height was important before, but it sounds like it is. Did I miss that before?” Over the next couple of dialogic action interviews, we discussed the importance of height from a variety of angles, including traditional gender roles, psychological factors, physical logistics, discrimination, and the statistical effect of narrowing the pool—for good and bad, leading Wassy Bear to experiment with height filters. In cases like this, dialogic action interviews provided a fruitful avenue for collaborative discovery of the selection process while also surfacing critical mismatches between some participants’ perception and practice. Participants noted that they came to a deeper understanding of their own processes through this action dialog and some reported adjusting their practices in response.

In addition to using the dialogic action interview for swiping sessions, I also employed this method to preview a participant’s profile and provide feedback about their image curation. When it comes to dating profiles, users are polarized and tend to have strong opinions about certain image types, like children, group photos, animals, sexually suggestive, or explicit photos. Therefore, when participants share profiles that include written or visual elements that may be controversial or often cited as problematic by their primary audience, I bring these issues to the surface during our discussions to help participants make informed decisions about profile curation. I view my interventions here as a service to the community I am researching.

Through dialogic action interviews, the researcher is able to see how participants have defined parameters on platforms and also to probe further about practices and perceptions

that participants may not be aware of when asked more general questions, such as “what are you looking for?” and “what draws you to certain profiles?” By guiding participants to think about and explain their own thinking behind their profile curation and selection criteria, the researcher can teach participants to gain greater awareness of their own thought processes. When researchers give participants tools for practicing higher-order reflective thinking in relation to their own digital communication practices, they are integrating a principle of care to give back to the community through teaching.

3. Practical Guidelines and Considerations

Using a reflective research process is especially valuable with online dating research, as it allows for a flexible response to unexpected intimate details about relationships, desires, and sexual practices that may become part of the data set. In this final section, I discuss practical issues related to timing, collecting data, and consent that are specific to digital dating, but may also be valuable for other types of digital discourse research.

3.1 Timing Is Everything

According to my selection criteria, participants only needed some experience with online dating to participate in the study. Because of this, the number of participants who were no longer actively online dating by the time we met shed light on the importance of timing in this research. When I designed this study, I planned to supplement interview data with observations of participants using dating platforms. The following is the statement from my informed consent form that participants were asked to sign.

If you have at least one active dating profile, I would like to look at elements of your profile during the interview. We can also integrate a “think aloud protocol” where you navigate through the online dating space, swiping, liking, passing, clicking, and/or messaging, while talking through the process.

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As I oriented participants to the process, I reminded them of the option to share profiles and/or conduct a swiping session, at which time I offered to give feedback and offer help with their profile(s) or processes, if they were interested.

While participants were more than willing to share their digital dating practices, they were not always active on apps or prepared to engage in swiping and/or messaging at the time of our meeting. Though they might have been active when scheduled the interview, people go on and off platforms regularly, deleting and/or disabling them when they need a break or once they match with someone they want to pursue exclusively. Therefore, I discovered that individuals who had agreed to participate in my research were not always able to participate in the dialogic action interview.

For participants who were actively dating, getting online at the time of the interview was not always practical, as a result of users' practices, mindsets, or concerns about surveillance. For instance, many online daters have rules about expected time between messages, thus logging on to observe dating practices can disrupt a user's normal digital turn-taking practices. Similar to the dos and don'ts of traditional dating that dictated the "appropriate" length of time between a phone call and a first date, codified and socially certified due to the popularity of self-help books like *The Rules* (Fein and Schneider 1995), rules dictating digital dating norms now focus on text turn-taking, once again popularized in print through *The New Rules* (Fein and Schneider 2013).

Another aspect of timing that emerged from attempting to observe digital daters related to "technologies of power" (Foucault 1977, 1988) and a sense of panoptic surveillance that influences participants' online activity. Since some platforms allow others to see who is online and when others have viewed their profile, willingness to conduct a swiping session

was predicated on managing visible online activity in response to the panoptic side effect of such affordances. One participant who had swiped earlier in the day before our meeting expressed concern about going online again in the same day, as indicated by a green light next to her username, suggesting that being on the app too often might send a message of desperation. Similarly, another participant wanted to show me an example of a profile they liked but they did not want to visit the page again because a visit to the profile might be interpreted as over-eager or as digital stalking. While these affordances may increase the sociality of users who want to reach out when others are online, the knowledge that one's digital activities are being counted and made visible to others also disciplines daters and erases the sense of anonymity often perceived by this context. Thus, researchers need to be mindful of how such observational activities can give off the impression of online presence for participants as well as how their presence may have ramifications for digital courtship norms, rules, and expectations.

3.2 Collecting Data and Considering Consent

In my original research design, I intended to video record participants swiping through profiles while using a thinking-aloud protocol. I anticipated that recordings would provide me with a record of the participants' profiles and those they were viewing. When I realized that video-recorded observations did not serve my goals, collecting profile-related data needed rethinking. After participants began sending screenshots of their own profiles and those of others they liked (or more commonly did not like), I needed to revisit my plan for collecting visual data and dealing with third-party data. I contacted my university's research ethics office to discuss this aspect of my research design and how best to protect research subjects at all levels. I updated my participant consent forms to address the use of images, and I cropped or blurred names on photos of users I did not get consent from, labeling them with the associated participant's pseudonym for archival purposes.

While profile photos tend to be benign, there are some I classified as sensitive data, such as sexually explicit photos or those associated with non-normative sexualities (such as swinging and polyamory). To protect participants in sexually marginalized communities, I developed methods such as blurring faces and usernames to anonymize profiles for storing such data.

Furthermore when I needed to illustrate platform interface elements, such as linking profiles for non-monogamous daters, rather than use participants' actual profiles while anonymizing participants, I instead employed a strategy derived from platform marketing materials or modified profiles. Figure 14.1 shows a comic version of a profile I altered in order to highlight how users could link to one other user through and within platform architecture; user photos were replaced with illustrations of comic characters, the hometown was transformed into a place found in cartoons, and users were de-identified by replacing original names with fictitious usernames.

When observing participants' practices in digital environments such as dating platforms, the researcher has access to view communication of other users who have not consented to participate in the study and must make decisions about how to ethically deal with this sort of data. Light et al. (2018) point out that "if the researcher is not engaging directly with users, they will not have provided informed consent for the use and display of their data" and thus "user data should be treated similar to data gathered from observation methods, for example, through anonymization" (896). I utilized a couple of strategies to ensure I had a record of relevant profile and platform design data that participants observed and discussed. When looking at profiles with a participant, I described everything I saw on the screen, both the visual and written text, apart from the user's name, and then asked the participant to describe what they saw. Through this process, I modeled the process one time and then had them follow this procedure with several other profiles. After the first profile, I

prompted participants to give the initial description to illuminate what they were noticing and described any remaining elements on the screen, both as a form of member checking and ensuring a complete textual record.

There were times when I worried that the textual description would be inadequate and anticipated the need for the visual data as reference material, especially after I had interviewed over fifty participants. In these cases, I asked to take a photo of the participant's screen and positioned the screen to collect only the necessary data. With this approach, I could better protect the anonymity of the person whose profile was being observed by excluding the username and/or face from photos or edit the photo to blur identifiable features before saving. When observation led to linked and/or shared profiles belonging to partners or potential matches practicing non-monogamy, I deemed these as potentially sensitive due to stigma often associated with non-normative sexualities, and thus did not capture this data visually; instead, I read through the profile, described photos for the transcript, and saved these records under that research participant's pseudonym for future reference. This allowed me to collect relevant profile data while depersonalizing it for those third-party users from whom I was unable to gain informed consent. Moreover, by taking the photos at the time of the interview, I did not have to follow up with participants afterward to collect additional pieces of data.

As digital dating has become increasingly common and accessible through mobile phone technology, dating and hookup apps are constantly being introduced and redesigned to compete in the marketplace, which creates obstacles for researchers. To keep up with this changing digital environment, I supplement interviews with site visits to observe functionality and features by occasionally re-enabling and creating simple dummy accounts for myself as needed. In their proposal of a walkthrough method, Light and colleagues (2018) point out that "if a dummy account is created, others may consider this account to be real and

attempt to engage with it” (896), and thus researchers need to develop strategies for managing potential user interaction. During my own walkthroughs, I do not interact with other users on these apps unless I am dating, and I only take screenshots of the platform to have a record of the platform interfaces and any changes made to their features during the life of my project.

For digital discourse researchers, especially those exploring the rapidly shifting landscape of social and intimate life mediated through technology, the task of developing effective methods is ongoing and vital. Postill and Pink (2012) remind us that social life, the ethnographic process, and social media can be “messy” and suggest that social media ethnography, with its flexible sensibilities, suits the needs of researchers working across the messiness of the “ethnographic places” that traverse online/offline contexts. Bolander and Locher (2020) suggest that with the boundaries between physical, material, and digital spaces “users increasingly do not view or treat offline and online communication as separate” (6) and that trying to tease them apart is not only difficult but may not be meaningful. With such considerations, researchers need to seriously rethink how we define data as digital discourse methods continue to evolve and adapt to changing environments and our understanding of them.

Some students and novice researchers may believe that research follows a linear process, from the formulation of research questions to the publication of findings, seamlessly moving from one phase to the next. Despite the impression one might get when reading scholarly publications, the research process is rarely neat and orderly, especially when doing digital discourse and internet research. Methods sections for empirical research studies are usually written in past tense, suggesting that the researcher is looking back and recounting each step as it happened—in a neat and orderly fashion, rather than presenting a “highlight reel” of the successful moves in the process. By leaving out the messiness inherent in the

process, we provide a false sense of order and fail to share the problems and challenges that others can learn from. If we value deep discussion about the process as much as we do outcomes, it behooves us to demystify the process. It is my hope that by sharing some of the challenges involved in developing a reflective research process, and not merely the opportunities, other researchers may benefit and gain inspiration to experiment and adapt tools to fit unique projects and answer important questions about language, technology, and social life.

Glossary

Dialogic action interview: Interviewing technique that uses unstructured conversational interviewing with the observation of participant action on a platform to prompt metacognition and critical awareness about practices and decision-making.

Reflective interviewing: Interviewing technique that takes into consideration interview theory, mindfulness about subject positions of researcher and participants, and methodological examinations of interview interactions (Roulston 2010: 1).

Transformative interviewing: Approach to interviewing in which “the researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understandings of participants” and contributes to social justice work (Roulston 2010: 65).

Active interviewing: Approach to interviewing that can serve as a methodological tool to develop knowledge, not just convey experience, through an interactional and interpretive process (Brinkmann 2007).

Media go-along method: The researcher and participant simultaneously navigate and talk about media with sensorial access together while the researcher uses open interview questions along with thematic routing invitations to focus on specifics that surface (Jørgensen 2016: 60).

Scroll back method: Allows researchers to access complex traces of everyday lives through a person's social media history by navigating and co-analyzing with participants (Robards and Lincoln 2019).

Walkthrough method: Incorporating observation and field note generation while the researcher employs a step-by-step walkthrough technique to move through a platform interface to understand how it guides users (Light et al. 2018).

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Figure 14.1. Stylized example of linked profiles on OkCupid, 2018. Author provided [Riki Thompson].

ⁱ Even though users accessing dating sites through computers click yes or no buttons on the screen, I use the term “swiping” since it has become associated with the material practice of using one’s finger to slide a profile right or left to signal selection or rejection of another user’s profile—regardless of the type of device used.