

4 Dating Culture and Narrativization

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Abstract

This chapter shows not only the narrativization inherent in ethnography, but also more specifically the way intimacies and personal life are subjects understood through the format of storytelling. Dating apps acted as a tangible nucleus around which research participants could anchor their stories, not only in that they provided a steady stream of potential partners, but also in their affordances as hosting profiles, conversations, images, and videos which could be distributed and assessed. Every moment of an intimate interaction was ready to be shared via a screenshot, a ready-made archive of a relationship narrative. Dating apps were popular among research participants not only for their role as a tool to facilitate encounters, but also in their role as a catalyst for stories.

I met Brigitte in a small café in Neukölln, one of central Berlin's most affordable neighbourhoods. Brigitte contacted me through a newsletter advert I had placed seeking research participants to interview, and we arranged to meet one evening after work. It quickly became apparent that the café was too loud to record our conversation, and so Brigitte kindly invited me to her apartment, which was just around the corner. The apartment was a typical Berlin *Altbau*; spacious, with wooden floors and high ceilings. A bike leaned against a wall and articles of everyday life lined the hallway: coats, shoes, and the cardboard carcasses of online shopping. We settled around Brigitte's kitchen table, a signed interview consent form, a notepad, and the red light of my voice recorder between us. Objects that locked us into the role of interviewer and interviewee. Objects that added a formal layer unaccustomed to existing between two people sharing a drink and a conversation across a kitchen table on a Friday evening. Brigitte was 31, worked as a care worker and had moved to Berlin from Cologne in 2016. We spent the next hour talking in

detail about her use of dating apps, going through the semi-structured interview points I had listed as questions to be addressed. After the hour passed, I turned off the voice recorder, packed my materials into my bag and began to layer up in anticipation of the biting December air that would await me outside.

While I was putting on my coat in Brigitte's hallway, we continued to talk about her dating experiences. However, now the formality of the conversation conjured up by the interview paraphernalia was replaced by a more convivial atmosphere; we were speaking to each other rather than for the anonymous listener signified by my voice recorder (Baldauf, 2007). Brigitte began to share some of her most amusing dating anecdotes, stories that she was fond of and thought I would find interesting, or rather funny, not as a researcher, but as a young person familiar with dating culture in Berlin. She told me of a man who had turned up to a date after consuming LSD, and the surreal afternoon she spent in a park with him, and the story of the handsome Spaniard she felt was "out of her league", but who invited her out for dinner nonetheless. Some of these stories she had touched upon in our interview, some she had missed out altogether, but none had been relayed to me in such colourful, humorous, and indeed intimate, detail as they were now, in her hallway. As we talked, and traded dating stories, she took from her pocket a piece of paper. Brigitte had made a list of all her dating app dates for our meeting, annotated with hearts and kisses to signal partners she particularly liked. Names on a neatly folded piece of paper that held uniquely intimate meanings for her, each of which marked an entry point to a story in itself and a part of her identity, her biography.

<Figure 2 here>

Figure 2: A list of Brigitte's dating app dates.

It became clear swiftly during my fieldwork that dating in Berlin, whether through a dating app or via other means, is a practice steeped in stories: encounters shared with friends and acquaintances, narratives that embed themselves in one's sense of self and one's understanding of Berlin's dating culture. Indeed, stories and storytelling weave themselves into one's understanding of self more broadly, as Brooks (1996) writes, "our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live [...] oriented toward the significant chapterization of our existence" (19). To live is to be a part of a self-defined narrative. Similarly, Ricoeur (1984) highlights the interrelated nature of narrative and "temporal experience" (3), where existence in time is often formed, described, and conveyed as a narrative. As such, it can come as no surprise that the understanding of the most intimate elements of one's life conforms to a similar framework. While the specificities of the narratives surrounding dating within Berlin, which I will address later on in this chapter, are distinct and coded as belonging to a particular cultural environment, the link between narrativization and dating culture in the West is not one fundamentally unique to this city. The confluence between practices of intimacy – specifically the idea of love – and narrativization has a long history, Giddens (1992) noting, for example, that from the eighteenth century "romantic love introduced the idea of a narrative into an individual's life" (39). Dating, as a ritual, is tied up in emotional practices that enmesh stories, images, and metaphors (Illouz, 1997). Thompson (1989) notes in her study of dating and intimate relations among teenage girls that her research participants showed themselves to be adept storytellers, curating narratives that were passed around

friendship circles, constructed and reconstructed in the process of shaping identities.

Indeed, as Shumway (2003) writes, “it is no coincidence that the name romance means, in addition to a kind of love, a kind of story” (14).

Storytelling Practices Within Dating Culture

When discussing dating and dating apps with people I met in Berlin throughout my fieldwork, stories became a form of social currency, traded in conversation. The ritualistic nature of dating and the meanings of the various dating apps were highly narrativized. As addressed in Chapter 2, research participants emplaced narratives, and projected desires, onto specific apps, casting these as imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). Each app was seen to require participation in a certain brand of intimacy, produced in the interactions between dating app users. For example, *Tinder* was often cast as particularly sexual, while *OkCupid* was seen, as explained by one research participant, Eva, 23, to be suited to “an encounter that is somehow more profound”. As I explain in that chapter, these categorisations were highly unstable and varied based on personal experiences, cultural environment, as well as sexual orientation. While *Tinder* was often characterised as a platform geared towards one night stands among men searching for women and women searching for men, on the contrary, among men searching for men *Tinder* was perceived as a platform for finding a long-term partner. The chapter illustrated how dating apps were coded to signal various intentions and desires, even when these jarred with users’ personal experiences. The imagined communities that made up the polymedia environment of dating apps were highly narrativized (Madianou and Miller, 2012), and users felt their presence on a specific platform was tied to a certain sense of identity in terms of how they defined their

intimate encounters and desires. The technology of dating apps was highly socialised (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985), coded to symbolise different dating practices and rituals. An understanding of dating and dating apps was shaped symbiotically through users' own experiences and practices, as well as those shared in conversation with others. Dating apps are versatile tools; however, as Cardoso-González (2019) writes, "it is the users who will create their narrative" (107). The significance of these narratives in Berlin's dating culture emerged repeatedly as a key element in the dating practices of dating app users. While, of course, the primary motivation for a date remained the intimate connection to a potential partner – whether this came in the form of companionship, love, sex, or some other form of interaction – the stories such encounters facilitated were a significant facet of the socialities surrounding a date. Dates were discussed prior to a date, after a date, and sometimes even during a date. Unlike the stigmatisation and secrecy associated with early online dating in the form of dating websites (Albright and Simmens, 2014), dating apps – as media embedded in the everyday lives of users in Berlin through their smartphones – were talked about consistently and openly among friends.

Mario, 26, and Anita, 25, both told me that dates were a frequent topic of conversation among their social circles. Mario felt that "in my circle it's definitely widely discussed, and I really got pleasure also in like talking about my dates". Similarly, Anita told me "I tell my dating stories a lot and I like to talk about what I have experienced, whether it was funny, or not bad, or really lovely, but I also like to hear other people's stories". Indeed, throughout the 13 months I spent in Berlin, whichever part of the city I was in, and whoever I was with, when I mentioned that I was writing a book on dating apps everyone wanted to tell me a story. Relationships, particularly those of a romantic or sexual nature, and the intimacies

enacted between people, are a universal conversation topic, easily narrativized as a form of identity (Riessman, 1989, 1990; Swidler, 2003). Rebhun (2007) notes in her ethnography of intimacy and economic practices in Northeast Brazil that romance provided an endless topic of fascination – people constantly wanted to engage in conversations about love. In a similar sense, whether I was talking to a friend’s work colleagues in a smoky blue-collar *Kneipe* where ordering a beer in English would be met with hostile glances, or people queuing for hours outside the notoriously hedonistic KitKatClub, or the middle-aged receptionist at the rusty twenty-euro-a-month gym on Alexanderplatz, or a couple sharing a table with me at a café in Mitte, while not everyone had used a dating app, everyone had a narrative of an intimate encounter to pass on.

To home in specifically on my core research participants, the understanding of dating culture in Berlin was cast as deeply entwined with dating apps. Sandro, 26, worked for an algorithm watchdog and was fascinated by dating apps even before he first installed them on his phone. He told me he started using dating apps because he wanted to experience “the DNA of my generation, or rather the love lives of my generation, because everyone at some point has a bad *Tinder* date, and somehow it already belongs to cultural heritage to have one of those and to have a story like that to tell”. Similarly, Corinna, 25, explained that “I sometimes have the feeling that it has almost become like a lifestyle thing, especially having bad dates, because those are the stories you really want to hear”. For both Corinna and Sandro, using dating apps was enmeshed in storytelling; rather than simply constituting a by-product of the search for a potential partner, dating was considered as a creation of narrative in itself, a participation in a particular milieu of culture. In this sense, it is clear that experiences and storytelling practices are easily tied together (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008),

particularly when taking into account that intimacy is a practice which lends itself to narrativization and performance (Simoni, 2015). Thus, in this context, it is pertinent to ask how the affordances of dating apps play into these narrativizations, and how they inflect these practices beyond creating the trope of a bad *Tinder* date as a rite of passage in Berlin's dating culture. I align myself with what Gubrium and Holstein (2008) term the "second narrative turn" in that I seek to focus on "the communicative conditions and resources surrounding how narratives are assembled, conveyed, and received in everyday life" (247), where the focus is as much on storytelling practices as it is on the stories themselves.

For my research participants, digital media was seamlessly integrated into every element of their daily lived experiences and formed a key facet in their understanding and presentation of self (Goffman, 1956). Regarding social media in particular, Elwell (2014) notes that this domain of communication and interaction is firmly incorporated into narrativizations.

Drawing on work that highlights the fluid link between narrative and identity (Goffman, 1956; Gubrium and Holstein, 2008; Nelson, 2001; Ricoeur, 2014; Schechtman, 1996; Taylor, 1989), where identities are often cast as "complex narrative constructions" (Nelson, 2001; 20), and aligning herself particularly with Meyers' (2004) malleable notion of identity narrativization as occurring across multiple modes and dynamics of interaction which "need not cohere as a single plotline" (161), Elwell writes that "narrative in all its possibilities – from the visual to the linguistic and from the dislocated memory to the vaguest ambition – describes the way the complex story of selfhood is relayed and understood" (242). Elwell builds on this framework to suggest that the ubiquitous fusion between the offline and the online in everyday life produces a transmedia narrativization of self, a "browsable story-world"; one where across multiple platforms "every status update, text message, and

Google search represents a dispersed micro-story in the complex story-world of the transmediated self” (244). In this sense, Elwell’s theorisation aligns itself with the idea of digital media being an integral, omnipresent component of everyday life, rather than a separate virtual realm (Bareither, 2019; Miller et al., 2016), and Goffman’s (1956) presentation of self as a performance spread across multiple spheres. Elwell provides a useful approach to addressing the way particular experiences are inflected by media, and her notion of a “browsable story-world” can be applied in a practical sense to the daily exchanges of dating app users in Berlin. As Duguay notes, dating apps, through their repetitive use become “part of one’s biographical narrative” (360), thus constituting a component of Elwell’s “browsable story world”. Yet, such an understanding of these platforms also proves particularly fruitful when cast against the way dating culture in Berlin is enmeshed in storytelling practices and the sharing of anecdotes, or rather how the reading of user profiles by other users, and the symbolically coded desires associated with each platform, impacted the storytelling practices in user’s social circles. Dating apps provided a canvas against which to curate, to present, to archive, and to read one’s romantic interactions. They were embedded into pre-existing practices of storytelling, integrated as part of Berlin’s dating culture, offering a new set of affordances in the way intimate encounters were distributed, reconfigured, and shared with friends.

Dating apps provided a tangible nucleus for research participants, around which dating stories could be built and explored. Unlike the dispersed and mercurial nature in which intimate connections were formed outside of dating apps – for example, in Berlin one may find potential partners through friends of friends, at house parties, at work, in clubs, or in any other miscellaneous number of ways – these platforms offered a clear and structured

central point of connections. In this sense, dating apps can be cast almost as an anthology from which to select love stories, a more organised and structured medium for narrativization of intimate connections. I use the word tangible to describe the role of dating apps in the production and sharing of these narrativizations, since profiles on dating apps offer users a clearly packaged “micro-story” – to use Elwell’s (2014) terminology – of their potential partner, which they can share with friends immediately from the point of their initial match. The purpose and context of the interaction between potential partners is explicitly laid out within the framework of the app as a service for facilitating dates, and due to the tangible material of this relationship present on the user’s device – messages, images, videos, etc. – it is easily shared within and among social circles. The user’s device and the dating app installed upon it create an archive of the relationship narrative, so to speak (Robards et al. 2018). As such, among the dating app users I encountered in Berlin, practices of storytelling in dating culture often accompanied interactions between potential partners far in advance of a date, via the affordances of the dating apps utilised by users.

A phenomenon which was not pervasive yet emerged among some research participants was the practice of swiping together. Florentina, 26, and Brigitte, 31, while using dating apps mostly in private, on occasion would group around a single device with their friends and swipe through profiles. Brigitte told me “I do actually like to do that with some of my girlfriends – if we’re sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine, we might say go on, let’s have a look together, we give each other advice and say why don’t you write this to that guy [...] oh he looks cute”. This practice broadens Thompson’s (1989) notion that dating stories are collected, reconfigured, and passed around, since dating apps allow users to open up even the initial encounter with a romantic partner as a moment to be shared – live, so to speak –

with one's social circle. Dating apps in this sense offer the possibility for a real-time integration of this trading of stories into dating rituals. While users swiping through profiles together was an infrequent practice, rather than physically occupying the same space and observing profiles on a single device, dating app users would frequently share their experiences and encounters with friends through screenshots, captured on their smartphones and transmitted via messaging services such as *WhatsApp*. The habit of sharing initial encounters on dating apps with friends via messaging services was extremely common, and indeed one I noted as much in interviews as I did in my own interactions with friends who used dating apps. These interactions were almost always framed around screenshots, as a tangible catalyst for a story and portal allowing for a shared perspective on a user's experiences.

Screenshots

The practice of screenshotting was universal among the dating app users I encountered in Berlin, not solely in their use of dating apps, but also more broadly in the way they interacted with their smartphones. A screenshot can be created on any smartphone and captures the contents of the screen at the moment of its creation, storing this as an image on the user's device. For example, one may take a screenshot of a tweet and send this to friends rather than sharing the tweet's URL, or one may screenshot a conversation and pass this on, rather than copying the text. Jaynes (2020) writes that screenshots have a "'social' life" beyond their mere "technological function", casting them as "powerful communicative tools" in their role within friendship groups (1378). As evidenced in my fieldwork,

screenshots were integrated as a key component into the way dating stories were relayed among dating app users in Berlin.

After a date, Mehdi, 28, would usually call his best friend and tell him about his experiences; this debrief was a key part of his post-date routine, whether he was using a dating app or not. However, when using dating apps, he would often also share his experiences with his best friend via screenshots prior to an in-person date, “when I have a nice match, I just send him a screenshot like eh look how she’s hot or something like this. Like a normal thing”. Indeed, remarks of this kind, commenting on the appearance of potential dates, were common across genders, where screenshots of profiles were often passed between friends to share a “hot” or “cute” date. This process was aided by the visual dominance of dating apps and their heavily image-based profiles (Cardoso-González, 2019; Chan, 2017), which lend themselves to the practice of screenshotting. Research participants would also take screenshots of profiles deemed to be humorous or unusual that were encountered but not matched with. There are also public social media accounts with huge followings dedicated to sharing humorous exchanges on dating apps, for example @beam_me_up_softboi and @tindernightmares on *Instagram*, highlighting how normalised this sharing of screenshots has become.

Indeed, the awareness of the widespread practice of screenshotting dating app chats and profiles did cause a minority of users, primarily men – who, as previously discussed, were commonly expected to initiate a conversation – to feel anxiety at the possibility of being ridiculed. Mehdi highlighted this anxiety by contrasting his feelings when sending a message

to a match on a dating app with approaching a woman at a bar or in a club to ask for her number.

[When asking someone for their number at a club] you know also if it's not gonna work, fuck it, it's not gonna be. That person's not gonna stay in your contacts in your phone or take a screenshot [...] so I do feel it's quite more secure [...] When you have to do it on Tinder or Bumble or whatever you're gonna say a sentence, if it's not gonna work, like I don't know, I would think screenshots can be taken, the person can like keep you in her contacts, whatever, this thing you know. It's just less effort or more straightforward [in-person].

Mehdi, 28.

Mehdi highlights the complexities associated with communication via digital media, the often-porous boundaries between the private and the public, as well as the archival nature of dating apps, which act as huge deposits of personal data. Taking these elements into account, he feels making contact with a potential partner in a bar or club is a lot more “straightforward”. Mehdi’s experience again evidences the limited significance of app’s matchmaking mechanisms, as highlighted in Chapter 2, since a match on a dating app is not seen to show substantial mutual interest between users until a ritual of transition occurs to another form of social media. As such, for men, sending a first message to a user one has matched with is often likely to be met with rejection, even though the app’s design suggests a match means two users are interested in one another. In fact, to further emphasise this, Mehdi feels “more secure” signalling interest to a stranger in a bar than a match on a dating app. If it does not work out, there is no record of the interaction and the level of

embarrassment is minor compared to the potential of an advance being shared with the potential partner's friends via screenshot.

One cannot understate the significance of this shareability, particularly when aligning these practices more broadly with pre-existing scholarship on dating app courtship rituals. Miller (2016) argues that dating apps remove the fear of rejection and potential for embarrassment inherent in signalling interest to a potential partner and therefore offer a less daunting form of initiating romantic communication. However, Mehdi's experiences with screenshotting challenge Miller's assumptions, and instead show that the complexities of courtship are not only present when communication takes place via digital media, but also that some elements are heightened. The potential for a conversation to be screenshotted and the continuous archiving of data on dating apps mean that Mehdi feels an in-person approach is far less prone to resulting in embarrassment or an unsettling rejection. However, this particular fear of being the subject of an embarrassing screenshot was not widespread, and Mehdi was one of only a few users I encountered during my time in Berlin who explicitly referenced these feelings. For the majority of dating app users, the practice of screenshotting on smartphones had become such a mundane and customarily anticipated activity that it was almost expected one's communication with others could always be the subject of unintended eyes. Concerns around privacy did not feature prominently among research participants, since most had grown up communicating via a vast assortment of digital platforms, accepted that their words and actions were constantly archived, and did not really know any other way of life. Indeed, while screenshotting ordained that there was invariably the risk of ridicule of research participants' messages, users would largely be oblivious to this since screenshots would be shared between friends

of potential partners on dating apps whom they did not have any ties to and would in nearly all cases never encounter.

Liza, 29, and Sylvia, 28, frequently shared their encounters on dating apps with friends, including messages they received and profiles they encountered. While aligned with the broader storytelling practices in Berlin, where one's dating life was discussed during in-person conversations, screenshots added a certain additional intimacy to these exchanges when mediated by smartphones. A screenshot is a translucent gateway, or glimpse at a portal, into the creator's life at the time of creation. In capturing the contents of their smartphones – which in themselves are intimate devices (Goggin, 2011) – the creator lets the viewer into this sphere via the first-person perspective of their device, encompassing battery life, clock, mobile network, etc. The viewer of the screenshot is granted access to this personal perspective and an added sense of the creator's experience at that moment in time. It is a practice which lends itself perfectly to storytelling, and, as such, screenshotting profiles and sharing these with friends was firmly integrated into dating app utilisations, allowing participation in one's personal experiences, and visually presenting these. Indeed, during the early stages of my fieldwork, a friend sent me a profile of someone claiming to conduct research on dating apps that a friend of his had sent him alongside a joke about how people on *Tinder* were getting ever more creative in trying to secure dates. This profile was in fact my research profile through which I sought to source research participants. The profile had travelled in screenshot form as a curiosity, through story sharing practices of dating app users, into my own social circles, before finding its way back to me, illustrating the way encounters on dating apps are made mobile in their repurposing and

reconfiguration as narratives to be shared through the linked social network of smartphone communication platforms.

Dating apps and screenshotting made the search for a potential partner an inherently shareable practice within friendship circles, centred around the affordances of a smartphone to immediately capture and distribute personal experiences, and the broader narratives associated with these. While, during my fieldwork, I noted that curiosity about who one was dating was prevalent no matter whether one used dating apps or not, dating apps offered distinct, visual micro-stories to easily distribute and assess. They enabled and streamlined existing desires of storytelling in dating rituals. For Sally, 27, conversations and stories about dating at times pivoted around smartphones as devices to anchor experiences.

Oh, I think every once in a while, you'll like look through someone's matches and chat about it. Um, I mean, I think it's like, you know, you spend a lot of time talking about your, like relationships, like platonic and otherwise, with your friends. And I think if people are mostly meeting with people through dating apps, you end up talking about dating apps a lot. But less, less so about like the experience of using the dating app and more being like, oh, can I see pictures of them? What did they say in their profile? What have you been chatting about? Things that like, I would maybe also say like if someone said they met a guy at a party, I'd be like, what have you been talking about? Can I see pictures of them blah, blah, blah, blah. So not necessarily that different...

Sally, 27.

Sally notes how she and her friends “spend a lot of time talking” about relationships, again evidencing the significance of sharing stories in terms of self-building and maintaining social ties (Riessman, 1989). Technologies are woven into these practices, with dating apps allowing for easy distribution – and assessment – of the profiles of potential romantic partners among friends. Sally feels that the act of using dating apps is less significant in these narrativizations than the affordances dating apps offer in terms of facilitating the storytelling itself, most prominently the micro-stories of other users that they contain. Since so many of Sally’s friends use dating apps to arrange dates, they play a prominent role as media in discussions surrounding personal relationships, but she feels the main impact of this lies in their allowing friends to “see” dates. Yet, as Sally herself notes, this is not necessarily an aspect unique to dating apps but rather more broadly applicable to dating culture among young people in Berlin, whether they use dating apps or not. The ubiquity of smartphones and social media means that the practice of sharing profiles of romantic partners is common, even when a connection is not initiated via a dating app, since it is expected that a romantic partner is active on at least one social media platform. In Sally’s example, dating someone one has met at a party will likely entail having access to at least one of a potential variety of social media profiles, which can be shared with friends in much the same way as a dating app profile. Indeed, even if one only has access to a potential partner’s phone number and communicates via *WhatsApp*, the *WhatsApp* profile will often feature an image of the contact which one can show to friends. Alternatively, an *Instagram* account can offer an even more extensive visual – and textual – overview of a potential partner and be passed around in a similar manner to a dating app profile. In both cases, the curated online activity of a date, easily accessible via ubiquitously present smartphones, becomes a tangible facet of storytelling practices.

Yet, dating apps allow users to share more holistically their initial encounter with a potential partner than, for example, a *Facebook* profile of a man or woman one has met at a bar, since a user can distribute every facet of the interaction on the app via screenshots – including first conversations and impressions, as every moment of the initial interaction is archived in the app. Furthermore, returning to the notion that one performs and perceives different presentations of self in different contexts of everyday life (Goffman, 1956), having access to a dating app profile of a potential partner, and the romantic or sexual context this connotes, provides particularly enticing material to assess and discuss among friends, albeit as noted in Chapter 2 it is non-dating app media such as *WhatsApp* which is seen to furnish the most intimate connections between partners.

“That's Not How You Imagine Meeting Your Partner”: Story Hierarchies

Technologically speaking, regarding practices of sharing stories and experiences of dates, dating apps provide access to a colossal, and immediately accessible, pool of potential connections. Due to the vast number of users one can match with on a dating app at any time of day, anywhere in the city, the turnover of initial encounters and stories can be exponentially increased if one so chooses. While research participants did not attest to dating apps making it “easier” to find love or indeed a “good” date, they did mostly agree that dating apps allowed one to have a far greater number of dates if one wished to do so, since initial connections are formed at a greater frequency and with greater ease than when choosing to date via other methods. As such, dating apps place their users in a position of agency with an overview of a vast selection of potential encounters and the ability to curate

multiple intimate narratives in their selection of which partners to match with and which stories to pursue, with the context of an intimate encounter already set. Indeed, during my fieldwork, two of my research participants started podcasts to share their dating app experiences, since they felt they had accumulated so many dating stories that they could easily serialise and broadcast these, as Sylvia, 28, noted “things just keep coming up”.

Yet, among dating app users, the perceived ease with which dates could be arranged, and the uniform method of matchmaking employed through the dating app infrastructure, created a form of hierarchy in terms of dating narratives. Fred, 26, felt that a date arranged through an encounter outside of a dating app made for a better story. He told me “I think this feeling of meeting someone by accident and falling in love with someone on the first sight and you know, not knowing that you found that person is seen as something still more romantic and desirable than actually looking for someone on the internet”. Fred mirrors the viewpoints put forth by many of the dating app users I encountered in Berlin, where ideas of what constituted a desirable dating narrative often referenced the “traditional” or the “cinematic”, evidencing the idea of romance being enmeshed with a compelling narrative, anchored in a certain cultural understanding of what is seen to be romantic (Illouz, 1997; Swidler, 2003). When elaborating on these “traditional”, “cinematic”, or “romantic” ways of meeting a date, research participants would often refer to an element of “fate”, presented in the form of chance encounters which were seen to be more desirable and as holding more value as romantic stories.

Abbott (2002) argues that there are “masterplots”, narratives which are near universal within a culture, “stories that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connect vitally

with our deepest values, wishes, and fears” (42), which have an impact on the way people ruminate on and experience their lives. In contemporary Western culture, one of the most prominent of these masterplots is the romance plot, which “has become one of the primary ways in which people narrativize their lives” (Portolan and McAlister, 2021; 2). Romance plots feature prominently – or as sub-plots – across a wide spectrum of media, from films, novels, and music to everything in between, and, while flexible in terms of their specificities, usually operate around clear ubiquitously recognisable milestones such as meeting a partner, falling in love, having sex, and so forth (Portolan and McAlister, 2021). Shumway (2003) argues that the fictional narratives of romance woven into media go some way to defining how people think about and indeed experience romance. Indeed, this was repeatedly evidenced by my research participants, who articulated their relationship to dating apps and dating in general against a framework of the previously mentioned categories of the “traditional” or “cinematic” way of meeting a partner “fatefully”. Portolan and McAlister (2021) in their study of young dating app users in Australia note a similar tension between the narratives dating apps provide their users and the narratives users wish to participate in, “they felt that love and relationships should form in ‘organic’ ways, and that dating apps were the opposite – rigidly pre-meditated” (11). Similarly to my own research participants, the participants in this Australian study often referenced the “meet-cute” in cinema, the first organic, fateful, encounter between two characters who become romantically involved. These accidental meetings contrast with the active searching associated with dating apps. As such dating app dates were seen to be less desirable in terms of their narrative role in users’ lives. Of particular interest here is the way my research participants, as a generation whose dating rituals actively incorporated dating apps to a large extent, referred to ideals from an earlier cultural paradigm. In this sense, dating app

users compared their own emergent behaviour against the cultural narratives they experienced and accepted as dominant (Williams, 1977). One can speculate that as romantic rituals involving dating apps become increasingly widespread, these will filter into media narratives and romance masterplots, reconfigure the accepted ideals of that which is cast as a “meet-cute” and be absorbed into the dominant cultural paradigm.

However, during my fieldwork, research participants were still very much absorbed in ideals of nostalgic romance narratives which they did not see as being commonplace on dating app dates. Both Sally and Laima highlighted what they believed to be the crux of this hierarchy in dating stories and romantic encounters.

I think there's also this other aspect of it, where it's like, it's almost like there's this like coolness to it, where it's like this sort of, like effortless like I'm just sort of drifting through life and like, I run into this person. Like I think there's this kind of like fate element to it, where it's like, these people happened into each other without even like looking for each other. And like, that proves somehow that like they're even more like meant to be together. Like I think it's a very cinematic, you know, view of, of romance, and maybe more what's, what was ingrained in us like growing up is like, that's how you meet people and like, that's how you meet your life partners it's like, when you, when you least expect it that's when you find love as opposed to like, when you're desperately looking for it that's when you find it.

Sally, 27.

When I was growing up, that's not how you imagine meeting your partner right [on a dating app]? You always thought I will go to the supermarket and I will grab this milk and he will

also grab the same milk package like they show in the movies or you know I will spill coffee on him by accident. This is what you see. These stories. Like you never saw pushing one button.

Laima, 28.

Both Sally and Laima feel that the position of actively seeking a potential partner casts encounters on a dating app as less “romantic”, since there is a clear structure to these meetings; they do not develop “fatefully”, or indeed “cinematically”, to correspond to the idea that a first meeting should offer an interesting and unique narrative to relay. Romance is often portrayed as something to be read, viewed, and performed, rather than simply felt (Scheer, 2012). Dating apps do not fit into Laima and Sally’s perceived notions of romance in the way they feel it has been established in cultural narratives, and as such these encounters on dating apps hold less value as stories. More specifically, they hold less value since the idea of “looking” for romance or “pushing one button” jars with the narrative ideal that a connection emerges organically out of the unpredictability of everyday life, rather than selecting a partner from a database of algorithm-curated users. The myriad number of ways in which an initial intimate connection can develop is uniformly and rigidly locked on a dating app. Indeed, this links back to the practices outlined in Chapter 2 where I illustrated that users seek to distance themselves from the matchmaking framework of dating apps by supplanting it with their own set of rituals revolving around transitioning away from the app to a communication service such as *WhatsApp*, in the process seeking to highlight their agency in choosing a partner, as opposed to the algorithmic infrastructure of the app. Susan, 28, told me that when meeting outside of a dating app “you have a story to tell, but on *Tinder* not really, you just matched on *Tinder*, you went on a date, you clicked and then

you started dating. That's almost the same for everyone". In this sense, research participants often felt that dating apps limited the narrative of the initial encounter. While, of course, each date was different, each person was unique, and encounters formed expansive and compelling material for conversations with friends, in terms of notions of romance, these narratives were not deemed to be as prestigious as meeting someone outside of a dating app.

As aforementioned, a recurring theme in the discourse surrounding the hierarchy of narratives between dating app dates and non-dating app dates, in terms of their status as being more or less romantic, was the way the role of dating apps – as algorithmic matchmaking technology – jarred with the ideal of a fateful meeting. Florian, 25, who used *Tinder* and *OkCupid*, told me that dating apps are "not particularly romantic. You can have romantic moments, but the premise of these apps makes the connections very exchangeable". The "premise" of the technology is seen to inhibit the fateful element of what is seen to be romantic by Florian – the fact that connections are laid out and pre-selected establishes a formulaic framework which jars with the ideal of a chance encounter with a partner. As addressed in detail in Chapter 2 the agency of the app in selecting one's partner through its algorithmic curation of users, while a practical necessity designed to aid users' searches, adds an unappealing dynamic in terms of the creation of a romantic narrative and users' feelings of being in control of their "love life". The notions of choice and fate are closely entwined in what research participants felt made for an appealing love story and dating apps problematised these ideal positions. Corinna, 25, who met her boyfriend on *Bumble*, was particularly aware of this dynamic.

I did wish a little that it had been a classic meeting, we crossed paths playing sport, or I don't know, what does classic even mean, but just not through an app [...] when people ask how we met I always have that moment where I wish we had a better story, but the story we have is still nice, and I try to dress it up, to almost push aside the fact that it was through a dating app. No, it's true, I think about what happens when we get married and someone tells a story of how we met and they're like, well... she installed an app. I do have that longing for something, I'm not sure what to call it, something more traditional. It's just not super romantic since it's an algorithm that brought us together somehow.

Corinna, 25.

For Corinna, romance is equated with the idea of a fateful meeting, a nostalgic longing that pre-dates dating apps. Again, the idea of the algorithm facilitating her partnership is seen as limiting the romance and desirability of her story. The ordered and quantifiable nature of the technology at the heart of her initial meeting with her boyfriend is an element of her narrative she seeks to “dress up”, in much the same way as dating app users seek to supplant the uniform matchmaking framework of each app with their own courtship rituals, or rituals of transition, as I have termed these in Chapter 2. While dating apps provided material and affordances for practices of storytelling, when aligned with ideals of romance, their status within narratives was not seen to be desirable.

In Chapter 2 I highlighted how dating app users spoke of a binary between encounters arranged via a dating app as opposed to “real life”, when in truth such binaries – the real and the virtual – do not exist (Boellstorff, 2012). In that chapter, I noted that users' mentions of “real life” were often used to imply a differentiation between varying spheres

of intimacy on their smartphones, but also as a reference to perceived traditional, or “offline”, forms of courtship, for example asking someone for their phone number at a bar. A similar dynamic in terms of the notion of “real life” also emerged in assigning value to dating narratives. Karsten, 24, told me “no, I would definitely not call it [meeting someone on a dating app] romantic. Romantic is getting to know people in reality and meeting them in real life, more or less, without having met through a dating app”. For Karsten, the initiation of a connection through a dating app is seen to bar it from the idea of romance he associates with “real life”. Nena, 24, who I chatted to on *OkCupid*, made a similar distinction, “I met my ex-boyfriend because we had exchanged looks on the train and he just gave me a note with his number, and we dated for four years – so that was very romantic and wouldn’t be the same if we had liked each other online”. Nena and Karsten both create a false dichotomy between the online and the real and incorporate this into their understanding of romantic narrativizations. This is, of course, a completely paradoxical understanding when taking into account that their daily interactions with friends, family, and indeed partners they had met in “real life”, were mediated via technology and online media. Tellingly, Nena feels that her ex-boyfriend giving her his number in a train carriage before later messaging via *WhatsApp* is not an online activity in the same sense as utilising a dating app. The recurrence of such understandings of romance among research participants suggests that dating app users had clear, pre-defined notions of which narrativizations of intimate encounters constituted romantic value and which did not.

Indeed, as I explain in Chapter 2, dating app companies showed an awareness of these narrativizations, seeking through their marketing to integrate dating apps into the category of “real life” referenced by users, albeit not successfully. Dating apps were termed in many

ways, coded to symbolise different desires and motivations, yet across all research participants, they were seldom narrativized as being romantic. They occupied a position whereby they facilitated storytelling practices and allowed the initiation of a vast quantity of intimate encounters for users, yet in terms of their status within these narratives, they were not regarded as part of the culturally transmitted categorisations of romance.

Narrativizations of Berlin

As I illustrated in Chapter 3, the city, and the conception and understanding of city spaces, has a significant impact on dating rituals and practices in terms of where and how meetings occur and the way dating apps are experienced via the geolocational capacities of users' devices. Yet, Berlin is more than simply a series of spaces, or a mapped area of land for dating app users to explore and navigate. Berlin, is built upon a collective imagination; it is a global metropole written not only through personal experiences, travels, and interactions, but also via a mythology layered through popular media, through art, films, and books, through landmarks and architecture, sculpting a stable narrativized persona across space and time (Çınar and Bender, 2017). The urban environment is imprinted with meaning. Before I moved to Berlin to carry out my fieldwork, I already had a conception of what this city meant, an understanding of it as an imagined environment (Donald, 1999). This understanding came from my own experiences of living there as a child, as well as stories passed down from my parents who both left home at the age of eighteen and moved to West Berlin in the 1970s, but also broader influences: media portrayals, texts about the city, conversations with friends, the intangible fabric that makes a space a place (Bender, 2010). Prominent within the way I felt Berlin to be coded was its reputation as a particularly liberal

haven of hedonism, a modern city with a progressive, historically inherited bravura of excess encapsulated in the famous quote of its erstwhile mayor Klaus Wowereit, who labelled it as “poor but sexy” – a city seared by desire.

During my fieldwork I found that research participants, and the personal connections I formed, similarly spoke of Berlin as an imagined environment, casting it as a city woven in a particular brand of intimacy which characterised a certain type of dating culture. Kirk, 28, who had moved to Berlin from Scotland and used *Bumble* and *Tinder* before meeting his current partner through work, felt that in Berlin there is a “reputation of, this mythology of, you know, being care and fancy free, and you know, being with whoever you want at whatever time and you know, experimenting with new kinds of relationship forms, new types of openness”. For Kirk, Berlin had its own dating culture, a coding of intimacy tied specifically to the imaginaries spun around the city. In a practical sense, this manifested in him and his current partner considering opening up their relationship to the potential of other partners: “there's more room for sort of experimentation here”. Albeit Kirk later confided that while such ideas were exciting, and certainly felt natural within the city, moving away from monogamy in a relationship takes considerably more time and effort than not doing so, and in the end, partly due to “laziness”, his relationship with his partner remained unchanged.

This viewpoint of Berlin as a hedonistic metropolis was touched upon across my research participants, all of whom showed an awareness or understanding of Berlin being narrativized as symbolising a certain way of life, whether one chose to participate in this or not. For Zara, 29, Berlin played host to limitless hedonistic possibilities. She was a regular at

Berghain, Berlin's most infamous nightclub, which, like many other clubs in Berlin, stays open across the weekend and has very little restrictions as to what one can do once inside. When we met, Zara proudly showed me the stickers used to cover phone cameras upon entry to Berghain, which she had collected on the back of her phone case, a trophy cabinet of sorts, tangible mementos of the city's iconic party scene. Zara felt that Berlin is "a bit ugly, but really interesting. Like the clubbing scene, like I said, it's really amazing. You can go out for hours, it seems to never stop [...] they used to describe Berlin as poor but sexy and now it's a little less poor and more expensive but still sexy". These descriptors, signalling a raw, lively city, accustomed to excess, were staples of the Berlin which existed in the eyes of the young people I encountered. It must be said that despite gentrification sweeping the city, this reputation was not unearned, and not simply a narrative spun around Berlin without a foundation in praxis. Jürgen, 30, felt Berlin's hedonistic reputation was more than apt.

Many people go to Berlin to be themselves, they come here to catch up on things they felt they couldn't do for many years. Everyone wants to live out their own individualism. The thing is, that is actually possible in Berlin, in every way. I have never experienced a place where drug consumption is so openly communicated, where sex parties are something that is completely normal. I mean people walks around in fetish gear, get into the train like that and go to a sex party. Where in the world does that happen? [...] What I also find cool, I mean there are so many bars and clubs here that have legitimately set up boards in toilets so that you can sensibly do cocaine. You don't even get that in London. But yeah, Berlin is really unique, also from the state side, the police don't care [...] everything to do with partying the police don't care.

For Jürgen, Berlin did not just have a reputation for free-flowing hedonism, but truly conformed to these narratives. Indeed, the unlimited opening hours and limited policing of drug consumption and sexual relations contributed to the city's fabled nightlife. It must be said that Berlin, much like any other city, has many faces and caters to many conflicting desires. Not every research participant I encountered during my fieldwork regularly attended raves or spent their weekends navigating the most notorious of nightclubs. Some chose not to participate in the city's nightlife altogether. Many did not regularly take drugs. Yet, there was certainly always an awareness of the possibilities the city offered and the perceptions this shaped. It is also important to note that the city's reputation for hedonism was significantly enmeshed in its position as a hub of queer culture; a city perceived to host progressive ideas not only around sex, but also sexuality. While this book focuses primarily on men searching for women and women searching for men on dating apps, the liberal inclusivity of its nightlife scene contributes to the imaginaries spun around Berlin. Indeed, the perceived hedonism and sex positivity associated with Berlin emerged across all research participants, no matter their sexual orientation or gender identification, and the idea of Berlin as a city where "anything goes" was felt to encompass fluid perceptions of sexuality and sexual relationships (Quest and Neild, 2018).

However, this notion of Berlin as a particularly free, inclusive, and open metropolis, also had some clear lapses when contrasted with a holistic understanding of living in Berlin, for while spheres of gender and sexuality were integrated into the imaginaries of the city, race was a category which jarred with and often seemed excluded from these narratives. As Jürgen, 30,

expanded on his aforementioned perception regarding Berlin's lax policing of nightlife, "here you can do whatever you want... as long as you don't have black hair or belong to an Arabic clan". Jürgen explicitly references the Arabic gangs and their much-publicised role as the hub of organised crime in Berlin (Reuters, 2021), but his point implicitly links to a broader reality, namely that the liberal, care-free reputation of the city and its hedonistic nightlife is bound up with assumptions of whiteness. Participation, experience, and presence within the imaginaries spun around Berlin are often cast through a lens of racial homogeneity.

Martin, 26, a black research participant, told me that the notion of Berlin as an open, liberal metropolis assumed a whiteness in its citizenship. Walking through the city he felt aware of his complexion, and in this predominantly white environment whenever he encountered a black citizen would share a nod in solidarity. Indeed, the practice of "the nod" is one Ngugi (2013) notes as a globally common signal of togetherness among black minorities in primarily white environments, of "strangers somehow unified by our blackness in whiteness" (86). Such embodied experiences of dislocation jar with the image of the city cultivated among the white majority of this ethnography. Kess, 21, another black research participant, who identified as queer, had moved to Berlin from the US and heard of its reputation for excess, and its liberal outlook, yet "didn't realise how fraught its progressive identity was until I got here".

I think Berlin is thought of as so liberal because it's where you can really let your sexual freak flag fly in ways that I haven't even seen in New York, and also partying for crazy hours at a time is also chill here – but outside of that I'm not sure how pervasively liberal this place is

and if everyone is on that wave. Like as a WOC [Woman of Colour] I feel acutely more aware of my blackness in ways that I'm not in the states [...] I totally feel that there is this pressure to be non-conformist in a way that it becomes its own kind of conformity. Everyone wants to be cool so bad. But also doesn't seem to interrogate the privileges that require that per se (white, attractive, able-bodied, enough resources to be -creative- or counter culture, etc.).

Kess, 21.

Kess highlights that Berlin's image of freedom is of course bound up in certain pre-requisites – the city's hedonistic narratives, and potentially even the requirement of participation within these, assume in many cases the position of the white, stably-resourced, able-bodied citizen. Indeed, while there was some ethnic diversity in my set of research participants, the majority were white, and therefore it is important to be aware that the narratives and ideas spun around Berlin are addressed and purveyed particularly within and towards this group of people. As such, when I write of the freedoms Berlin is cast as offering, I want to stress that these are of course not pervasive and that one's experience of living within a city is equally shaped by other factors which may offer conflicting standpoints. Race was not a key factor in my research, and while it did at times emerge in conversations it was not discussed explicitly across all my interviews with research participants and was not included as a primary investigative lens of the ethnography. This was an active decision in order to limit the scope of the book and work within its bounds. As such, I cannot provide a more holistic portrayal of the specific dating experiences of ethnic minority dating app users in Berlin, aside from a mention of racism that emerged in an interview with Anita, 25, who told me she was fetishized and exoticized due to her Asian heritage despite being German, and “had to partly hear some really, really disgusting things”. In Chapter 2 I seek to engage with race

and dating apps more directly, touching upon some of the practical dynamics of race within dating culture, where in regard to sexuality and desire race is often cast as a legitimate factor of exclusion in partner selection – fortified by the algorithms of dating apps – evidenced by Hutson et al. (2018), who write, “the intimate realm represents one of the only remaining domains in which individuals may feel entitled to express explicit preferences along lines of race” (73). Such problematic dynamics feed into the particular brand of intimacy cultivated within Berlin – or rather play into narratives that assume uniform whiteness.

Ultimately, in terms of the imagined environment of Berlin, the ethnography reflects the responses shared by participants and the image of the city which was cultivated through these. The emergence of this imagined environment is significant since it played a fundamental role in the way dating app users in Berlin perceived the existence of a specific dating culture. Indeed, regarding the culture of intimacy seen to exist within Berlin, as it was narrativized and shared through stories and experiences, Kess, while aware of the fraught nature of Berlin’s liberal reputation, also experienced its hedonistic coding, as a city where you “can really let your sexual freak flag fly”.

“Nothing Serious Can Happen”: Dating in Berlin

This understanding of Berlin as signifying and hosting a certain set of practices and narratives of intimate interactions was referenced repeatedly by dating app users and characterised a particular dating culture within the city, one which opened up its own unique set of dynamics between imagination and practical experience. As such, dating app

users were not simply very aware of the meanings and narratives spun around Berlin but also the direct consequences of these on their dating practices. For the users I encountered during my fieldwork, utilising a dating app in Berlin came with its own location specific understanding of what dating meant and the experiences one would expect to find. Jake, 27, Corinna, 25, and Laima, 28, all reiterated what they believed to be the mythology of Berlin's dating culture, a clear set of culturally specific practices and experiences applicable to intimate encounters in Berlin, whether one used a dating app or not. Their perspective mirrored the idea that intimate and emotional practices are formed socially (Abu-Lughod, 2000; Fajans, 1997; Jamieson, 1998; Rebhun, 1999). In terms of the way these practices were narrativized by my research participants, they corresponded with findings articulated in Faier's (2007) ethnography of a community of Filipinos, where identity and the understanding of self often circulated around not only intimate relations, but the "love" stories these tangibly produced in everyday life.

Everyone says Berlin is a city for singles and it's impossible to find, to get into a relationship in Berlin [...] I think it's more of a myth. And I think that because, like I obviously came here and very quickly got into relationship and have been in that relationship for almost 10 years now. So, I think that it's just kind of a myth that's so established people, whenever they go dating or trying to find a relationship, whatever, they just assume it's going to fail [...] even when I have friends who move, come to Berlin in the past few years, and I've even, I've noticed that's something I told them when they came here. You know, if they were single, like, oh, good luck, it's easier, you know, to get laid, basically, but good luck finding anything serious.

Jake, 27.

I had a flatmate here who had a date through Tinder with a guy, a first date, and she really liked him and then I remember I told her woah hold on, this is Berlin, don't fall in love too quickly, because he'll probably be gone again really quickly. There was the foundational feeling that no one here is looking for something serious, it's like the general Berlin thing [...] but with the flatmate she actually got together with this guy and it was great and they're still together.

Corinna, 25.

Even when I started dating my current boyfriend I had some people here who were living in Berlin for 10 years already and especially guys they were telling me like, you know you're new in Berlin and you think you can create long term relationships, but like oh you silly girl like you know later you will find out that in Berlin it doesn't work like that, nothing serious can happen. I think that really more people I have approached here, that short time, like one night hook ups are easy, but long term, long term is something way, way more complicated.

Laima, 28

Laima, Jake, and Corinna, all highlight the way the imagined environment, the mythology exuded around Berlin as a hedonistic, non-committal city, informs the way dates are addressed and formulated between friends, and in relation to one's own sense of identity. Yet, this framework of dating culture, as it is shaped between the idea of the city and the individual, at times jars with the reality of the experience of dating within Berlin. All three research participants demonstrate a clear awareness of the way intimate interactions in Berlin are coded, namely that they are fleeting, sexually charged, and not long-term, yet all

three also illustrate contrasting personal experiences against this overarching narrative.

Jake, Laima, and Corinna all found stable, long-term partnerships in Berlin, indeed all three are aware that the imagined environment of Berlin and its dating culture inflects but does not determine experiences, yet they continue to pass on the same narratives of the city as being a difficult place to find relationships, even as they see such observations directly contrast with their own experiences.

The idea of Berlin, and more specifically its particular understanding of intimacy, the dating culture seen to exist within its imagined bounds, stands as a stable set of narratives, a framework against which to relay personal experience and identity. Here one can see an interplay between two concepts, firstly the notion that when one lives in a city one becomes a part of the particular imaginaries and cultural attributes seen to exist there, one becomes integrated into certain narratives, in Berlin one becomes a Berliner (King, 2007), and secondly, that, as Simoni (2015) writes, “while intimacies can signal and mediate certain forms of belonging, people’s assumptions and desires of belonging can also, in turn, affect the way intimacies are experienced and perceived” (26). The dating app users I encountered anchored their own experiences of intimacy within the perceived norms of the mythology of their city. To love, to have sex, and to date was often seen as acting through or against the perception of Berlin’s unique dating culture. There is a fascinating parallel here, for the particular imaginaries spun around Berlin in relation to one’s own identity mirror the way imagined communities and desires were seen to exist within different dating apps, as illustrated in Chapter 2. In that chapter, even while dating app users’ personal experiences varied, there was often a uniform understanding of a certain dating app symbolising a certain set of expectations and dating practices, for example *OkCupid* being a more

alternative, and indeed intellectually stimulating, platform than the lusty sphere of *Tinder*. Where matters of intimacy are concerned, whether regarding the imagined conception of Berlin, or the particularities of each dating app one utilises, there are always broad narratives against which to place and enmesh one's own experiences, in the process further contributing to the formation of the dating culture one perceives.

However, that is not to say that the understanding, or myth, of Berlin expressed by Laima, Jake, and Corinna was a complete abstraction from reality, rather it was a distillation, or indeed reduction, of the multifaceted and conflicting experiences existing within a city. In practice, among many dating app users I encountered, the particular hedonism the city encapsulated, as well as its position as a modern cosmopolis, with a vast mass of mobile strangers, often in transit towards other destinations, was seen to make for an environment which was indeed more suited to less "serious" relationships. Many of my research participants emphasised that dating in Berlin was very "casual", and indeed for those not in long-term partnerships, having many fleeting encounters or dates was seen as the norm. Alongside this, again tied to the particular sexual freedom seen to exist in the city, there was a broad acceptance, or awareness, of non-monogamous and open relationships among research participants, as Eva, 23, explained, she would see people on *OkCupid* looking for a third partner, and this type of experimental approach and reconfiguration of traditional tropes of monogamy was seen by her to be inherently aligned with the city's values: "yes, this free expression of sexuality, or also identity, I find that encapsulates Berlin". Sally, 27, took this standpoint even further, expressing that in Berlin "it really feels like non-monogamy is what's normal". In this sense, certain dynamics of openness did find practical expressions in the intimacies enacted within the city, or at least via the perception of certain

research participants, with Sally and Eva both participating in non-monogamous relationships during the time that I knew them. Again, in this way, the expression of identity is tied explicitly to the overarching narrative the city provides and the intimacies it is seen to host.

Furthermore, the idea of Berlin as a transit city, one where young people come to live out their youth and then move on, recurred across multiple research participants, both Germans and non-Germans. Unwittingly explicating the historical “rootlessness” of Berlin (Rowe, 1995), Ben, 33, who had been living in Berlin for the past 4 years and planned to stay for much longer, told me with no small hint of dramatic flair “it’s the biggest non-place on earth”, referencing the fact that he felt so many people come and go. Such perceptions of Berlin were not found across all research participants but did emerge semi-frequently. More prevalent and linked to this notion of Berlin’s population as being always in motion and never still, was the feeling that in terms of intimacies offered by Berlin, as Gael, 28, mused, the city was made for “fast dating, quick turn-around, and basically [people] just focus on them[selves]”. Martin, 26, similarly felt that “there’s a lot of pressure to feel very relaxed and very sort of blasé about dating here, when that might not be actually how we feel about it”, tying his own sense of self against a cultural whole of the perceived dating culture. This type of commentary was common, narrating the self against the idea of a stable culture seen to exist within Berlin and understanding intimacy in relation to the acceptable norms existing here (Mead, 1977). Mehdi, 28, similarly felt that there were certain norms, or even expectations, as to how dating, with its corresponding interactions and rituals, functioned, based not solely on his experiences but the way he perceived Berlin’s dating culture to exist as a whole, “here, like you always expect, I don’t know, to have sex with that person the first

night or the second date". The sexually liberated, free-flowing nature of Berlin was reflected for Mehdi directly in the way intimacies were practiced when dating. Mario, 26, made this point even more explicitly, noting that since moving to Berlin he had experimented with sex and new forms of relationships and that "the idea of Berlin definitely contributed to that", as he felt he was in a place that encouraged such behaviour. All research participants had a strong sense of what dating in Berlin meant in relation to their own experiences, but also the particular set of intimacies enacted among young people within the city more broadly, which they felt to be a part of.

A thread which wove itself through all of these dating experiences and perceptions – no matter the type of intimate interaction being sought – was the understanding that dating did not solely constitute the search for a potential partner or partners, as one might expect, but also existed as a category of leisure activity in itself. This should not come as a surprise, since historically the evolution of dating, as a cultural category originating in the US, emerged in the 1920s and 1930s when relations between potential partners moved from the home into the commercial sphere and became entwined with restaurants, cinemas, bowling alleys, and other leisure institutions (Illouz, 1997). That is not to say that for my research participants dating rituals always existed within clearly defined commercial venues, indeed as I addressed in detail in Chapter 3, the dating spaces within which potential partners met incorporated activities such as sitting in a park together. The date, irrespective of the specificities of the meeting and the possibilities of entertainment offered by its location, was cast as a form of activity of leisure in itself. Among the dating app users I encountered, it was seen as plausible for the motivation in dating to be simply to date, to participate in these rituals, rather than to date with an explicit purpose in mind, such as

finding a long-term partner or seeking sex. In conversations with my research participants, dating was not seen as a means to an end but rather an end in itself.

Kaya, 28, had a whole collection of eclectic dating stories, some of which had been instigated through dating apps, and some of which via more “cinematic” encounters, such as bumping into someone at a café or in the city streets. Kaya enjoyed dating in Berlin a great deal, for her it was something she did because she liked dating as an activity, whether these encounters turned into sex, companionship, friendship, or just an interesting story to tell her friends. Dating for Kaya was a purpose in itself.

I think yeah, I mean, I, I think that dating apps are really huge, are really a huge part of Berlin's dating culture and I think there's also this, I think what I've really found is that like, to me, at least Berliners don't seem to, like, if you're on the apps, of course, there are some people looking for, like a long-term relationship or love or staying together. But for me, I've kind of seen it as like, people are not. It's something fun to do. And it's, sorry, mainly for dating, and not monogamy.

Kaya, 28.

Kaya sees the primary purpose of dating to be to date. For her, the goal is in the experiential rather than a more strategic approach to finding a partner. In this way, Kaya mirrors precisely the cultural category Illouz (1997) feels dating to historically represent, namely that dating “shifted the focus of the romantic encounter from marriage as a permanent and unique union to the fragmented but repeatable pursuit of pleasurable experiences” (14). Dating apps play into this desire and are seen by Kaya to be “a really huge

part of Berlin's dating culture", since, as addressed earlier in this chapter, they facilitate the potential to easily access dates whenever and wherever one is in the city. Dating apps thus actualise perfectly the idea of dating as a goal in itself, since they afford users an easy portal to access the city's market of singles in their everyday lives, without having to wait for a "fateful" encounter. Yet, again, it is key not to oversimplify the influence of dating apps in terms of casting them as products that turn dating into what Heino et al. (2010) term "relationshopping", for they merely reflect the desires already associated with dating and, more specifically, dating culture in Berlin. Ultimately, it is also important to note that dating apps remain one of many social media tools for users to utilise as they navigate intimate interactions in the city, tools which are incorporated into activities and rituals that are specific to the culture within which they are embedded (Costa, 2018). Florentina, 26, told me she felt dating in Berlin was extremely "casual", and when I asked her whether she felt this was due to the recent emergence of dating apps or the culture of the city itself, she answered without hesitation, "I think Berlin. I mean the dating app models itself I think on the society and so it definitely facilitates meeting up, but yeah. I think in the end it's our mentality that makes it".

Realigning Narratives During COVID-19

When COVID-19 struck Berlin in March 2020 and caused a lockdown for most of spring, the city, specifically its reputation for freedom, hedonism, and fleeting intimacies, was forced to adapt to a drastic new set of circumstances. As discussed during Chapters 2 and 3, COVID-19 did not put an end to dating in Berlin. Even during the strictest part of the first lockdown, which lasted until May – before regulations gradually began to ease – two people were still

allowed to meet outside. However, while from a practical perspective dating was permissible throughout the period of the pandemic that I spent in Berlin – until September 2020 – wandering through the city’s streets one could see the wounds the pandemic was inflicting on a city renowned for its reputation as a place where “anything goes”, and any desire can be fulfilled.

I lived in an apartment in Mitte, Berlin’s most central neighbourhood, on Alte Schönhauser Strasse, a street bustling with people from morning to midnight, due to its shops, cafes, and restaurants. From my window, I would usually be able to watch people queueing outside Monsieur Vuong, the neighbourhood’s most popular Vietnamese restaurant, or hear groups chatting and laughing as they sat drinking beers or playing volleyball in the small park at the end of my road. The pandemic wiped these streets clean of such sounds and sights, shutting all shops, bars, and restaurants; I would often not see or hear a single person when I looked outside. The promise of the city, and the promise of the strangers populating its streets and buildings was, if not erased, then at least exponentially limited (Simmel, 1950). The tangible energy and excitement of young people as they sat in a bar in Kreuzberg or walked through Friedrichshain on a Friday evening was replaced by an emptiness, not only of people, but also of the city as an abstract marker of a certain way of life. Riding around on my bicycle, Berlin felt like a painted canvas from which much of the colour had been harshly scraped away.

While over the summer bars, restaurants, and cafes reopened with new social distancing measures – and were well frequented – the lack of spontaneous mingling between groups and individuals, and the long-term closure of clubs as key sites of Berlin’s nightlife, certainly

limited the possibilities this Berlin offered compared to the hedonistically liberal mecca of its narrativizations. Oliver, 31, felt that Berlin was now “a party city, but without the parties”. One of the repeatedly referenced key elements of the city, its licentious, free-flowing nightlife, had been cut away. Tanya, 23, performed regularly as a drag king in various venues, and this whole element of her life was abruptly removed, the particular freedom of expression heretofore granted by the city, now barred. Yet, she remained positive, feeling that the city’s nightlife, and the exploration and experimentation of intimacies within this, a key element of its personality, could not simply be removed; it would re-emerge in one way or another, “since we have a desire for it”. Fittingly, even at a time of uncertainty – I talked to Tanya in spring when there was still no hint of a vaccine or indeed any understanding of the long-term impacts of the pandemic – Tanya still felt that the desire for a return of the city’s unchained nightlife scene would eventually be satiated by a city renowned for sparking and satisfying the desires of its citizens. Indeed, as the lockdown eased and the warmer temperatures of summer enveloped the city, outlets for these desires started to appear; illegal raves were organised at abandoned factories or in the woodland surrounding Berlin, and parks such as Neuköln’s Hasenheide became notorious spots for large gatherings on Friday and Saturday nights (Kondratenko, 2020). Although, it must be said that due to the continued global escalation of the pandemic these events were not wholly embraced as an expression of the city’s freedom, and among my research participants and friends only a small number attended. The “anything goes” attitude heretofore expressed within Berlin now had certain moral bounds which one had to transgress to participate and which were not as uniformly accepted among my research participants as before.

During this time dating apps continued to offer a more socially permissible outlet for forming new connections and experiencing intimacies with strangers. As I illustrated in Chapters 2 and 3, arranging a dating app date during the pandemic came with its own new set of risks and expectations concerning public health, ethics, and the realigned rituals of a meeting – questions of where to meet, whether to meet at all, and the guilt associated with practices such as a first kiss between potential partners became topics of debate among my research participants. In Chapter 2 I discussed in detail how dating apps sought to highlight, through marketing material and via the introduction of new video call features, that they were now responsible for facilitating the primary – and for many people the only – way to date. While some research participants simply chose to stop dating during the initial lockdown in Berlin, for others dating apps did indeed form the sole outlet of intimate, or romantic, interaction. Yet, in the interviews I carried out during this time, the hierarchy of dating narratives remained; while dating apps were now broadly accepted as the best way to date, their perception as jarring with the romantic ideal of a fateful meeting did not alter, with the notion of a video date seen to be particularly undesirable due its further differentiation from the category of “real life” in its abstraction from an in-person meeting – and indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, in most cases video dates did not emerge as a successful or enjoyable format of dating.

In terms of the perceived dating culture within Berlin, as it was expressed in narratives of personal experiences shared with friends, the pandemic did have an impact on how dating was configured and practiced. While, of course, the tropes and expectations of what dating in Berlin meant did not drastically alter overnight, the risks associated with COVID-19 – not only for the self but also the wider public – led to a re-evaluation of the type of dating

culture that could be responsibly participated in during a pandemic. The notion of dating in Berlin being particularly casual, and intimacies being fleeting and easily exchanged between partners, which was repeatedly referenced by research participants and tied to the mythology of the city, now jarred with public health recommendations and indeed the general mood among the population. The idea of casually dating multiple people and swiftly switching between partners became a topic of concern among dating app users as the lockdown was put in place in March 2020. Berlin's reputation, highlighted earlier in this chapter by Kirk, 28, as a place for "being with whoever you want at whatever time, and you know, experimenting with new kinds of relationship forms, new types of openness", was, at least for the period of the first lockdown, seen to be no longer viable, nor responsible, or, at minimum, tinged with a distinct sense of guilt.

Sylvia, 28, felt that the pandemic changed the casual nature of dating in Berlin, which had been a narrativized commonality across her dating experiences and those of her friends. She told me, "by the second date with most people I would not be, you know, trying to solidify anything or like figure out if they were, if we were exclusive", yet due to health risks "right now it's like, I just need to know that you're not exposing yourself more than I am". The openness and freedom to pursue and navigate potential partners within the city was now a notion which jarred with the reality of pandemic life. Sally, 27, had a friend who was in an open relationship and wanting to "date other people", but due to the pandemic "she feels really guilty because she's like, I don't feel like I should be, you know, sharing these germs". The idea of Berlin as a hedonistic haven, where desire would not be tinged with judgement, was altered in these moments, with guilt suddenly a prominent factor in the dating practices of my research participants. There have of course been narratives conflating –

falsely – sexually transmitted diseases and dating app use, but these primarily focus on the individual in terms of users putting themselves willingly at risk (Albury and Byron, 2016). Yet, during the lockdown in Berlin, health concerns in terms of disease transmission were no longer contained to the privacy of the individual, rather one's dating behaviours were seen as public discourse with the power to directly impact a global crisis. The idea, often referenced in relation to Berlin's dating culture, of focusing on oneself and living to fulfil one's desires, was opposed to the conditions of living within a pandemic, where the overarching narrative among friendship circles, and indeed in the country in general, was one of making sacrifices – particularly in the realm of intimacy – in order to limit the spread of the virus and save lives (Breher, 2020). The intimate experiences of my research participants, previously narrativized solely among friendship circles, were now enmeshed in broader national narratives regarding health concerns.

Prior to the pandemic, Mario, 26, told me that "I think here is the assumption, quite often, when you date someone new, they will also be seeing other people. And it's not something that should be automatically brought up". However, as the virus struck Berlin, he noted a clear shift in attitudes, reflected practically in his own relationships. He had been casually dating someone, but now "the lockdown really like made us decide to be exclusive for the time being. Yeah, that's actually probably the only reason we were exclusive because we openly say that, like, given the current situation, you will be safer just to meet between us". Since intimacies are practiced – when dating, research participants are "doing intimacy" (Jamieson, 2011; 3) – and not just felt, this new framework of public health emplaced on pre-existing ideas of what dating culture in Berlin symbolised, reconfigured the acceptable norms and rituals between dating app users and indeed their narrativization of these.

Dating, by default, was no longer seen to be inherently casual, or at least it was no longer the norm to accept it as such.

Kaya, 28, and Jake, 27, who in their intimate relationships were very much used to non-monogamy, or at least less clearly defined boundaries, both found themselves living monogamously with partners during the pandemic. Jake was in a ten-year open relationship, where him and his partner regularly dated other people, but lived together. However, due to the risk of infection Jake and his partner decided to close the relationship, at least until the first lockdown was eased. I discussed the spatial dynamics of Jake's new arrangement in detail in Chapter 4, noting that during this time the only outlet for Jake's desires was *Grindr*, where he could continue to flirt, sext, and in a sense participate in a non-monogamous lifestyle which was currently severely limited. For Jake, dating apps offered a tool to bridge the altered state of the city, and fulfil its hedonistic promises, at least to some extent. Dating apps continued to provide a network to stay in touch and exchange intimacies with the imagined community of Berlin even as the streets were emptied. Although, as I addressed in Chapter 2 for some research participants the lack of possibility of an in-person date erased the desire to use dating apps altogether, as profiles on the apps were disconnected from a physical body anchored in space, brought to life in a user's imagination by the potential of an in-person encounter. Removing the possibility of a transition from a dating app to a physical interaction erased the excitement and pleasure of utilising dating apps for many users.

Like Jake, Kaya was also confined to monogamy by the pandemic. She had been casually dating a man whom she had met on *Bumble*, and as the spring lockdown was announced

decided to move in with him for the next few months rather than being alone in her apartment. During this time Kaya still used dating apps occasionally. In moments of solitude she would “just kind of go on the app and then just swipe”. The motivation for her was less to do with meeting other partners, and more as a way to narrativize a certain sense of identity away from the monogamy her current situation implied.

I think actually, maybe it might have been, like, if I felt like things were getting a little too serious or, yeah, then I would kind of go on there [Bumble]. And because I'm also like, like I mentioned, I'm not really, like even though we're in a monogamous situation right now, I'm not quite ready to fully commit to anyone or even be in something long term I would say. So yeah, I think even for me or even for us, you can really get caught up when you live with someone and there's a lot of excitement and emotion and I kind of just wanted to combat that a little bit, so that coming out of living together didn't feel like such an emotional situation. Of course, it's ridiculous because you can't really help how you feel.

Kaya, 28.

For Kaya the purpose of using *Bumble* during the lockdown was not to date, nor to be entertained, nor to find sexual gratification, it was simply a way to control her narrative, to “combat” the monogamous situation she experienced, and as a way to perform a certain set of emotions for herself (Scheer, 2012). Dating apps stood for a certain sense of identity; they were utilised because of what they represented to Kaya rather than what they were designed to facilitate. Continuing to have dating apps installed on her phone was in a sense a way for her to retain an element of non-monogamy in a relationship which was now wholly monogamous on its surface due to her new living arrangement. *Bumble* was part of a

narrative of freedom for Kaya. For Kaya, and for Jake, dating apps provided a link to a dating culture, and certain free-flowing lifestyle, which was no longer possible to enact freely via in-person meetings or through the interactions facilitated by the city's dating spaces. I spoke to Kaya again months later, after she had moved back into her own apartment, and she and the man she had lived with were no longer dating. Her new casual partner was a man who lived down her road, whom she had also met on *Bumble*.

The temporary alterations imposed by the lockdown illustrated the norms that had existed before: the casual nature of dating culture in Berlin and the ease with which connections and intimacies could be formed within the city, especially via dating apps. As dating was restricted or at least subject to new ethical and health considerations during the pandemic, facilitating a dynamic where long-term monogamy was seen as the safest way to have intimate relations, research participants adapted their behaviours. In these moments dating apps continued to be an outlet for some users, such as Jake and Kaya, to remain in touch with a certain casual dating culture which was currently more of a promise than a reality.

Conclusion

I left Berlin in September 2020, with a hard drive full of interviews, and an NVivo database filled with transcripts, photos, website articles, and fieldnotes. The framework for my ethnography was established and the foundation of the research firmly set. What I had also accumulated across my time in Berlin were a large collection of stories people had shared with me, some committed to writing, or recorded as an audio file, some simply in my

memory, associated with a time and a place. Conversation around dating, around love, sex, and romance, was a daily topic not only for my research participants, but also my friends and acquaintances; the city was abuzz with these communications of intimacy. Dating culture in Berlin was interwoven with these storytelling practices. The way one dated and who one dated was constantly narrativized. Dating apps acted as a tangible nucleus around which my research participants could anchor their stories, not only in that they provided a steady stream of potential partners, but also in their affordances as hosting profiles, conversations, images, and videos which could be distributed and assessed. Every moment of an intimate interaction was ready to be shared via a screenshot, a ready-made archive of a relationship narrative. Dating apps and the prevalence of social media among my research participants made dating an inherently shareable activity, since much of the interaction in the courting between potential partners occurs via digital messaging platforms. In this sense, these new technologies facilitated a pre-existing desire and practice, namely the close tie between the sharing of intimate narratives and one's sense of self. As such, dating apps were popular among my set of research participants not only for their role as a tool to facilitate encounters, but also in their role as a catalyst for stories.

The empirical analysis conducted within this chapter has shown the way dating culture is practiced through storytelling and the way individuals relate to their own lives, as well as broader understandings of the city they inhabit, via the lens of narrative. Furthermore, the affordances of dating apps are shown to be embedded within these narrativizations and enable the production of imagined communities and constantly shareable social interactions. While dating apps played a prominent role in facilitating storytelling, a hierarchy of dating narratives existed among the people I encountered in Berlin, where a

“cinematic”, “traditional”, or “romantic” purity was seen to exist when an encounter was felt to be untouched by the standardising technology of dating apps, which rendered the initial connection between potential partners as a uniform affair. The element of “fate” seen to exist as part of the ideal of “real” life was threatened by the algorithmic curation inherent in dating apps. Even while dating app users consistently utilised these platforms and even found love through them, uniformly the stories created in their use were not seen to meet their romantic ideals. Much like in my discussion of dating rituals, “real life” was a binary employed by dating app users to create a hierarchy, where courting via *WhatsApp* was seen to be more prestigious than doing so via a dating app, and a meeting initiated in-person made for a more “cinematic” tale than one instigated on an app. However, while such attitudes broadly prevailed, there were hints that they were tied to a nostalgic notion of practices of intimacy which had the potential to change alongside new technologies, assimilating dominant cultural narratives (Williams, 1977). Laima, 28, mused that when she thought about the story of matching with her boyfriend on *Tinder*, a friend of hers told her “when you're gonna have kids, like let's say in 20 years, they will have their own weird things happening, going on, and your story will probably seem the most romantic they ever hear”. Indeed, taking into account the fact that in the evolution from dating websites to dating apps the notion of online dating had completely lost its stigma among my research participants in Berlin, a likely conclusion is that the elusive ideal of a romantic story could also eventually be assimilated into the realm of dating technologies over the coming decades. It is clear that even as ideas of what constitutes “real”, “cinematic”, or “romantic” are subject to change, dating and practices of intimacy are enmeshed in outwardly communicated narratives.

Dating, whether an encounter was initiated via a dating app or other means, was often cast as an activity in itself, not necessarily as a route to forming a stable partnership or other intimate interaction. Rather, many of my research participants dated in order to participate in dating culture, and while of course this would usually lead to some form of intimate encounter, whether this was sex, love, friendship, or something altogether different, these interactions were all grouped together in an imagined milieu which one could dip in and out of. Going on a first date was an event in itself, even aside from the specificities of the person one was meeting. Regarding Berlin's particular dating culture, an identical dynamic in terms of imagined communities emerged as it did in relation to the narratives spun around specific dating apps. While *Tinder*, *OkCupid*, *Bumble*, and co, were all seen to stand as markers for certain experiences, desires, and motivations against which research participants measured their own identities and biographies, so too was there an overarching narrative of Berlin's dating culture within which individual experiences were seen to exist, whether they jarred with this or conformed to these expectations.

Berlin was seen as a stable imagined environment by all my research participants, a city with a certain reputation and global standing – a metropole spun in narratives of freedom, hedonism, and an ugly, exciting, fast-paced rootlessness. Within Berlin intimacies among young people were seen to be fleeting, with dating a casual, non-committal sphere to participate in. It was against this canvas, already painted and envisioned, that research participants shared their own experiences. Unsurprisingly, the diversity of encounters, relationships, love affairs, heart breaks, and so forth, did not conform to the way dating culture as a whole was narrativized, but it did provide a point of comparison against which one's own intimacies were set. Fascinatingly, this cultural whole was often regarded as a

better measure of the intimacies within the city than one's own experiences, with even those research participants who were in stable, one might even say "traditional" long-term monogamous relationships, sharing narratives with their friends that in Berlin "nothing serious can happen". Of course, there are endless nuances in the realm of intimacy, yet it was clear throughout the ethnographic fieldwork that Berlin was seen to host a certain set of intimate practices bound together in a set of entwined narratives, which existed as a template against which to figure one's own identity – feelings and desires were cast against this and externalised.

COVID-19 visibly altered life in Berlin. The streets during the spring lockdown were swept free of people and the limitless possibilities the city had offered, through its fabled nightlife and dating spaces, were put on hold. Dating apps became an important tool during this time for people to continue to date and form intimate connections with those that were now physically out of reach. The new consciousness around public health, and questions of ethics and guilt, which infiltrated the lives of my research participants, impacted the heretofore fleeting connections and acceptance of non-monogamy within the city. Casually dating hosted new health risks, and having multiple partners was perceived to be frowned upon, not only in Berlin, but at a national, or even global level. For research participants now transitioning to monogamous relationships, or holding off on meeting potential partners altogether, dating apps offered a gateway to stay in touch with the imagined whole of Berlin's dating culture and the narratives this was seen to signify. For some, continuing to use dating apps during this time provided an outlet, a way to narrativize one's identity as belonging to the free-flowing, non-conformist nature of intimacy in Berlin, even at a time

when the reality of life in the city did not truly live up to the expectations and desires embedded within its imagined form.