

## **Em busca do match: dinâmicas interacionais no Tinder em contexto pandêmico**

### **Looking for the “match”: interactional dynamics in Tinder during the pandemic context**

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**Resumo:** Neste artigo, discutimos sobre as alterações nas formas de relacionamento mediadas pelo Tinder, tendo como objetivo compreender as implicações do contexto pandêmico de covid-19 nas interações. Para isso, nossas reflexões avançam em torno de dois eixos centrais: (1) os enredamentos das textualidades, as relações temporais e a contextualização; (2) os processos de plataformação e de mediação. Metodologicamente, ancoramos nossas análises com base em uma interpretação sistemática à luz da rede textual mobilizada. De tal forma que conseguimos apreender como as dinâmicas da plataforma e como a pandemia potencializaram modificações nos relacionamentos interpessoais.

**Palavras-chave:** *Tinder; pandemia; plataformação; mediação; textualidades.*

**Abstract:** In this article, we discuss the changes in the forms of relationship mediated by Tinder, aiming to understand the implications of the pandemic context of covid-19 in interactions. For this, our reflections move around two central axes: (1) the entanglement of textualities, temporal relations and context; (2) platformisation and mediatization processes. Methodologically, we anchor our analyzes based on a systematic interpretation in the light of the mobilized textual net. In such a way that we were able to understand how the dynamics of the platform and how the pandemic potentiated changes in interpersonal relationships.

**Keywords:** *Tinder; pandemic; platformisation; mediatization; textualities*

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## Introduction

The dissemination of apps for smartphones and other gadgets designed for different purposes, from new and precarious work forms to choosing what to eat and how to commute, and even establishing contact with people in opposite geolocations, changes substantially how we constitute ourselves as subjects and how we relate to the world. We also observe such changes in bonds of affection created by apps that constitute devices of specific subjectivization (DELEUZE, 1996; BRAGA, 2020), enunciation, and visibility. After all, various apps available on Google Play Store and Apple App Store aim to turn their interfaces into bridges for subjects with similar goals to meet and flirt (FERNANDES; PRIMO, 2020; PRIMO, 2020). Even if constituting their own space with well-delimited use rules, these apps, and the relationship dynamics they enable, are not a world apart, isolated from other forms of association.

In this sense, this article proposes to reflect on some changes implemented by Tinder since the onset of the public health emergency. As known, in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of Covid-19, caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), was a pandemic. Hence, diverse health organisms established physical distancing protocols attempting to control the virus' spread so that the contact between subjects abruptly suffered a series of reconfigurations in everyday life. Consequently, social isolation measures also affected app relationship configurations, including those intended to make people "meet." Here, we intend to discuss changes in the proposition of Tinder-mediated relationships in the first seven months of the pandemic (therefore, between March and August 2020), observing modifications in the platform, its autoreferential discourses, and other textual relationship dynamics. To do so, we explore changes in the app's interaction propositions, interpreting them and engaging with signification forms and social processes implicated in platformization (MINTZ, 2019; D'ANDRÉA, 2020).

## **Tinder’s textual entanglements in the pandemic: the new meanings of ‘match’**

“Dating, making friends, relationships, and much more. Come meet new people!”<sup>3</sup> Tinder’s welcome sentence on app stores establishes a kind of antechamber for users to envision the possibilities offered by the company. Firmly based on providing new interactions, the app also works as a meaning production machine: for seeing and being seen. In this sense, there is an invitation for different people to produce an identity based on choices of profile information, integration with other platforms, geolocation possibilities, and relationship filtering based on specific interests. It is considered that the app’s look suggests how its users should use it, for what purposes, and by whom. However, its use can be increased for other purposes or even diverted to unforeseen appropriations (LIGHT et al., 2018). Hence, actions, experiences, and meanings are also established based on each user’s agency but mediated by the platform, which involves a series of algorithmic mechanisms, advertising schemes, the release of features, privacy policy, and terms of use.

However, it should be clarified that this type of media flirtation is not exclusive to the digital environment. On balance, if we briefly look back, we notice that the offer of encounters in romantic love-based relationships has permeated even television programs in Brazil over the last few decades. The old MTV Brasil channel presented shows whose purpose was to match couples, like “Fica Comigo” (2000-2003), “Beija Sapó” (2005-2007), “A Fila Anda” (2006-2008), and “LUV” (2011-2012). We also observe the insertion of television formats into entertainment shows, such as “Rola ou Enrola” (since 2011) and “Xaveco” (from 1997 to 2004 and back in 2019) on SBT and “Vai dar Namoro (since 2005) on Record TV. To participate, candidates had to send letters to the television channels describing what they intended by joining the show

3 The excerpt is available in the app’s description on the Google Play store. Available at: [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tinder&hl=pt\\_BR&gl=US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tinder&hl=pt_BR&gl=US). Accessed on October 15, 2020.

or segment. Today, with the internet, requests are received online. In these examples, it is essential to note that meetings or dates on television had the presence of spectators as a fundamental “third element” of the relationship in so far as interactions were shown to an audience who desired this kind of spectacle mediated by sociotechnical apparatus. On Tinder, the relationship does not necessarily involve a “spectator,” and dates can also happen in “secret” or “confidentially,” allowing other forms of flirting and relationships.

A long path preceded smartphone apps as these examples of television shows, which emerged in the 1980s, attest or the classified ads in print newspapers that have, for decades, presented people looking for love, dates, marriage, and other relationships in square-shaped notices amidst products and services for sale. If, as Leal (2018) points out, textualities are communication processes in which texts manifest themselves in historically situated socio-discursive practices, we see that Tinder is constituted from a long tangle of platform structures and subjects’ agencies. For textualities to emerge, users must establish bonds between themselves and the platform. In the app, texts are fluid and dynamic spaces. However, this implies that textual networks are volatile in culture’s time, history, and spaces, resulting from power relations. Above all, they necessarily involve the agency of human and non-human factors, be they mechanical or other kinds of organisms.

In this sense, we can consider Tinder and the Covid-19 contagion crisis as contexts for instituting interactions. These are not simply scenarios but *constitutive exteriorities* (RIBEIRO et al., 2017) amidst a polyphonic and dialogic reality, which stimulate interactions in different temporalities and online spaces whose logics are related to prescriptions and rules that are part of the internet. In this way, all textualities that emerge on these platforms and in these contexts constitute a feedback process in which one shapes the other, turning into “something that not only permeates discourses but gives them life, that dynamizes their materiality, that makes them precisely a practice.” (RIBEIRO et al., 2017, p. 3).

Thus, reflecting on Tinder and its logic for establishing bonds in a specific temporality is a meaningful gesture. As we explained, starting any form of bonding on the platform changes according to the goal or success of getting a “match.” The platform’s logic is to make such meetings last longer, thus allowing the user to spend more time using the app and “collecting” matches. On Tinder, even if the intention is to start and maintain an app-mediated relationship, a relevant aspect is that meetings can also take place offline, outside this virtual environment. If physical meetings are unrecommended by health authorities and start to be perceived as a public health threat, what happens then? At the start of the pandemic, Tinder’s official blog posted a message positioning the platform as space for staying together despite the distance: “And while it is not a moment to be meeting matches in person, we recognize that Tinder - a platform that is about connection - can play an important role as people navigate the uncertainty that COVID-19 has introduced into our everyday lives.”<sup>4</sup> Since that emergency, the app has moved its platform structures to continue recruiting users.

We understand a specific form of categorizing certain mediators within the internet by platform. That is, “(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalized interactions among end-users and complementors, organized through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization, and circulation of data” (POELL et al., 2020, p. 4). D’Andréa (2020) carefully works a set of concepts and methods in Platform Studies, encompassing broad perspectives for different areas. The researcher ponders that “[...] platforms are not mere intermediaries in which society makes itself visible and through which social interactions can be studied but environments that condition the emergence of a social.” (D’ANDRÉA, 2020, p. 19). Hence, Facebook, Uber, and Netflix institute specific social arrangements and are the result of the diverse and often contradictory superimposed agencies they accommodate. Similarly, Tinder conditions

4 Fragment of “A Message from our CEO: Connecting in the Time of COVID-19,” published on March 24, 2020, the month when the pandemic was declared. Available at: <https://www.tinderpressroom.com/Connecting-in-the-time-of-COVID-19>. Accessed on October 10, 2020.

certain social organizations and involves various agencies that shape it in a constant feedback loop. The walkthrough method indicates that in order to analyze apps, we must pay attention “to its embedded sociocultural representations as much as its technological features or data outputs, which also have social and cultural influences.” (LIGHT et al., 2018, p. 885). By applying this method, we see how technological processes configure and are configured by cultural, economic, political, and social processes involving the app. Tinder undergoes different (re) modeling processes while mediating relationships, just as the app itself modifies relationships; in other words, it is a two-way street in constant influence. Therefore, it is interesting to turn to the apprehension of layers - governance, business models, infrastructures, datafication, and algorithms - that make up the platforms and associate them with Tinder.

By this gesture, we recognize in “business models” D’ANDRÉA, 2020, p. 36) that “one of the most evident aspects of platforms’ commercial dimension is the increasing stimulus toward paid subscriptions that give access to exclusive contents without the interruption of ads and with extra features.” According to Light et al. (2018), this scheme constitutes what they call an operating model. The premise is the same on business strategies and revenue sources. In a brief example about Tinder, the researchers observe that charging for extra features, like “rewind/redo,” which lets the user go back to the profile they had passed on by tapping the screen, is a means to generate revenue for the platform. During the pandemic, Tinder made features available to give users a taste. The “passport” function, which we will explain in the next section, is a feature for subscribers but was offered to all users for a limited period.

Furthermore, Light et al. (2018) highlight that revenue generation may not be monetary but through data collection. The app collects data from the moment users register to the permissions they give, such as tracking their location. The advertising scheme also composes this complex layer. Tinder has online ads, which is an intriguing point for this discussion since, between screen swipes, there are moments

when users are invited to like or discard offers of products and services, meaning they will open the ad or not.

Amidst data collection, the datafication layer (D'ANDRÉA, 2020, p. 26), since Van Dijck's studies, considers “monitoring, prediction, and ranking processes” that connect to processing through algorithms. This layer represents a methodological challenge for analyzing apps (LIGHT et al., 2018). Big corporations behind platforms' development protect the algorithms' architecture and the means of collecting their users' information. Often, these are only revealed when organizations or some other factor pressures companies.

Turning to Tinder, the platform's *Algorithm 101* was explained, indicating that users frequently online have more opportunities to be shown on other people's screens. This scheme involves the interests signaled in the profile's construction, including age, geographic distance, gender identity, etc. According to the platform, its previous algorithm comprised a score system *Elo*, which graded each user based on how others interacted with their profile. However, as Tinder points out, such an arrangement is no longer used. This Elo configuration recalls different kinds of criticisms regarding the use of social networking apps and the popularity logic attached to such metrics as “likes,” “comments,” “reactions,” “engagements,” “flopping” – an emerging expression referring to someone's fails in platforms –, which can be damaging to subjects' health and behavior.

“Infrastructures” (D'ANDRÉA, 2020, p. 33) participate in the “articulations of communication flows and practices in digital environments.” We observe how Google, one of the infrastructure platforms that form the Big Five, participates in Tinder, allowing users to create their app registration with their Google account, speeding up the entire entrance procedure. This points to the continual effervescence of the five companies that dominate different services and the crisscrossing between platforms as well.

One point worth stressing is the “Technological architecture” (LIGHT et al., 2018) that integrates the infrastructure layer. Even

ignored elements, meaning those that go unnoticed by users, like icons, colors, fonts, screen layout, etc., are part of the composition. The allusion to flame in the iconic representation of Tinder is not unpretentious, let alone using “tinder” (combustible substance or something that incites flames) as the brand name and the word “match,” which refers both to exact counterpart and flammable material.

Finally, as D’Andréa (2020, p. 42) puts it, thinking about governance is realizing how “two governance documents are present, albeit in different formats, on all platforms: the ‘terms of service’ and the ‘community guidelines.’” Users are made aware of such regulations on Tinder (Terms, Privacy Policies, and Cookies Policies) when installing the app. To create their account, they must accept and consent to these guidelines, which are also available on the platform’s website and the app’s settings. In short, rules and guidelines are intended to regulate users’ actions (LIGHT et al., 2018), meaning regulatory relations of knowledge and power permeate these platforms. Therefore, we may reflect with Deleuze (1996) on how devices are regimes of visibility and enunciation, which include dimensions of power and lines of subjectivization. This thread of arrangements makes it possible to note certain disciplinary and control processes. These relations are, thus, crossed by various devices that form an endless plurality of textualities.

Hence, we understand this effervescent movement mediated by platforms designed for people to meet or establish bonds as a phenomenon of platformization of relationships. The mobilization of these applications during the pandemic seems to have swelled and gained an immensurable volume. It is worth pointing out that the main gestural movement made in interactions on the Tinder platform, swiping left or right to choose between subjects offered on the screen, reached a record of 3 billion daily actions on March 29, 2020. From this perspective, our analysis of Tinder during the pandemic observes what resources were provided to its users, internal logic, and changes in communication.

## **Pandemic Tinder: changes in interaction structures**

We have seen that romantic relationships are surrounded by platformization processes that are socially transformed and changed by media. Firstly, like other media, the Tinder platform broadens spatial and temporal possibilities. Its specificities extend human reach. To exemplify, we can identify app settings that allow users to choose the maximum distance of their possible contacts up to a 161 km radius. In other words, the app mediates the longitudinal transit. Users can also select the “International” option to allow their profiles to be seen by people anywhere and vice-versa without the location-specific domain.

For those who want to control the distance and decide which city to find a “match,” the platform has the “Passport” navigation feature, which is included in paid subscription plans called *Plus*, *Gold*, or *Premium*. In other words, individuals would be broadening their geographic possibilities, connecting with people from even more distant places. After the pandemic outbreak, between March 26 and April 30, the app released the “passport” as a tool to make contact anywhere. The following statement was sent as an alert:

Social distancing doesn't have to mean disconnecting. And that's why we're making our Passport feature, which allows you to connect with anyone, anywhere in the world, free for all of our member through April 30. Now more than ever, having someone to talk to makes a world of difference. (*The Verge*, online, March 20, 2020)

The impossibility of physical movement imposed by Covid-19 is circumvented inside the platform through the dynamics of the function that allows users to select any location without border barriers. In such a case, we notice how relations are crossed by a media form, which continues to re-signify, constitute, and modify modes of interaction, temporalities, and spatialities. When health authorities discouraged or even prohibited physical meetings, the platform's initiative to release this tool to all users shows its attempt to continue offering a relevant service, offering other forms of affective bonds that would not necessarily unfold

in person in the same territory. The intense adaptation between social uses and platforms, typical of a media society, is noteworthy.

In an interview for the DigiLabour newsletter, Hepp (2020) states we are living in a *deep mediatization* stage “(...) in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and underlying infrastructures.” Therefore, Tinder and many other platforms in the lifestyle category in app stores and that aim to create relationships show the results of how a society initiates encounters between its subjects. It is worth briefly mentioning that Poell et al. (2020) analyze platformization processes and exemplify the data infrastructure, the market, and the governance of the Play Store and App Store, which belong, respectively, to the duopoly Google and Apple, two of the five so-called Big Five companies centralizing many activities (D’ANDRÉA, 2020; VAN DIJCK, 2019).

In the same interview, Hepp (2020) exposes the phenomenon of “platform collectivities,” which would be related to shared connections of similar interests that form a “common we,” such as music playlists on the Spotify platform that unite users. Bearing that in mind, the collectivity on Tinder seems based on users’ search for relationships, which, at first glance and in a reductive way, would be their unifying bond on the platform. However, more specifically, collectivities emerge based on mutual interests between their members, something strongly marked by the definition of preferences related to age, gender identity, location, and distance, besides personal taste information that appears in the biography of the user’s public profile. Using algorithms, this delimitation of interests makes the suggestions that appear on the screen, also called “Discovery,” show certain users and not others. Such delimitation of interests based on the abovementioned markers allows the emergence of this phenomenon of platform collectivity described by Hepp (2020). Strictly speaking, the selection of “likes” is based on subjective criteria regarding physical attributes, appearance, beauty, and mutual desires, which form and define other possible collectivities.

During this pandemic period, Tinder created two functions related to the desire to find similitudes between subjects and their wants. The platform launched the new features in August 2020 close to Single’s Day. One tool called “interests” allows users to choose three to five pre-established categories: parties, e-sports, vegetarian, writer, world traveler, culture, military, photography, hyperactive, Apple fan, barbecue, sports, *sertanejo*, *caipirinha*, happy hour, blogs, new in town, samba, vegan, spirituality, musician, environment, gamer, skateboarder, snowboard, Netflix, tracking, sailing, tarot, tattoos, chat to avoid boredom, Disney, volunteer work, DJ, dog lover, TGIF, do it yourself, music, museum, quiz game, running, NBA, karaoke, hiking, football, golf, açai, films, podcasts, partygoer, painter, baking breads and cakes, tea, nightlife, drinks liquor, startups, student, cooking, swimming, wine, American football, composer, cat lover, surf, exhibitions, comedy, craft beer, astrology, nature, fashion, making friends, stand-up comedy, open hearted, reading, travel, street food, athlete, having a drink, yoga, walks, amateur chef, chef, singer, Big Brother Brazil, physical activity, arts, Instagram, actor/actress, introvert, musician, skiing, experimenting new things, artist, politics, foodie, gardening, vlogs, funk, camping, bored, futsal, brunch, gin and tonic, witch, cars, single parent, bars, model, cycling, dancing, outdoors, language exchange, CrossFit, picnic, coffee. We consider relevant to list the options Tinder grants users to show what the platform defines as interest criteria and how that definition relates to the discussion about creating a “collective we” based on affinities. These categories listed on the “interests” tool were available on October 12, 2020, on version 11.23.0 (11230094). It is possible to notice how the list keeps changing according to social conversations that generate themes and topics of interest for a pandemic match. Certainly, in the examined period, BBB would be a recurring theme, but it would lose strength in other moments and could be replaced by another.

The other feature, “Tell me More,” has the purpose of presenting, on the same screen where all the user’s photos are, a response to random questions suggested by the platform. More precisely, the user must



Video conferencing is another Tinder feature developed during the pandemic. The “Face to Face” feature, launched on July 8, 2020, in some locations around the world, allows users to consent to video calls with their match and deactivate it if they do not want it. The feature has rules of use, splits the screen equally between both users, and requests them to evaluate the quality of the call at the end.

In emergency times of conferences, meetings, and different sorts of encounters mediated by video call platforms, the new feature seems to be a strategy to keep users for longer periods on Tinder. However, as Žižek (2020) indicates, this is a growing phenomenon since our lives are becoming ever more digital. Such considerations resonate with Preciado’s (2020) observations that closely compile the changes on the planet that had begun much prior to the pandemic.

Today, we are going from a written society to a cyber-oral society, from an organic society to a digital society, from an industrial economy to an immaterial economy, from a disciplinary and architectural form of control to micro-poetic and media-cybernetic forms of control. In other texts, I called pharmaco-pornographic the type of management and production of the body and sexual subjectivity within this new political configuration. The contemporary body and subjectivity are no longer solely regulated by their passage through disciplinary institutions (the school, the factory, the military headquarters, the hospital, etc.), but also, and above all, by a set of biomolecular, micro-prosthetic, digital, and data transmission technologies. (PRECIADO, 2020, p. 6-7)

In line with this quote, this article’s analysis of a fragment of multiple textualities developed in relations mediated by Tinder in pandemic times indicates that the platform constitutes a form of managing bodies, regulating modes of interaction and appearance through a range of digital technologies. Tinder’s logic relies on the exposure of subjects in a kind of menu. Through selecting criteria, which resemble “ingredients,” a vast range of options of subjects is presented for “likes.” As we showed, collectivities emerge among users based on specific interests and similar searches.

It is worth considering that we are dealing with a platform with capitalist interests that surround it. This app is just one of the products of the Match Group organization, of which it is a part, but the most popular on a worldwide scale. It involves data collection at all stages of use, advertising, algorithms, and a series of elements, as we have underlined in the layers of the platform.

### **Final considerations**

Since the pandemic emergency, Tinder implemented new features and released existing ones to all subscribers as a way of attracting users and making them stay longer on the platform. Focusing on the first seven months of the Covid-19 outbreak and grounded in a reflection about media textualities, we show interpersonal relationships mediated by the platform suffered changes through the implementation of features up to that moment restricted or inexistent and, fundamentally, by restrictive public health measures, such as social isolation, to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The discussions we resort to show the platformization of relationships expanded in this context, while new modes of interaction joined existing ones on Tinder to boost the search for “matches.” However, both axes in discussions point to considerations about market strategies carried out on the app, which took different forms to involve people and attract attention.

If we go back to Hepp’s (2020) final considerations on the interview, the researcher states that “The crises of recent years – from “fake news” to the Coronavirus and the false information about it propagated digital platforms – have shown us that these companies are much more profit-driven than they are oriented to the common good.” This statement potently resonates with the reflection on the reasons that led Tinder to make paid features, which are a source of financial revenues, freely available throughout the world. We regard this as a market and marketing strategy to attract users and capture them more intensely through possibilities for spending more time logged on the app. It is also like a game in which users can become paid subscribers if they enjoy the extra

appetizers during a gratuity period, which is a sales success for a company. Connected to the capitalist logic, we observe the “Face to Face” feature was one of the platform’s strategic moves to consolidate itself amidst the steep rise of videoconferencing communication during the pandemic. The user thus stays in the app longer, which results in economic benefits for the company. Furthermore, it is essential to consider that we are facing a platform formed by layers of governance, data, algorithms, business models, and infrastructures (D’ANDRÉA, 2020), creating a deep complexity. In pandemic times, with the considerable increase in the use of platforms, as three billion screen swipes for “like” attest, it is necessary to pay attention to uses and incorporations in each of these spaces.

We consider it is possible to read this phenomenon through the works of various authors (MATTOS; JANOTTI; JACKS, 2012) who approach the concept of mediatization insofar as “social institutions and cultural processes have changed character, function and structure in response to the omnipresence of media,” even in a pandemic context (HJARVARD, 2012, p. 54). On the other hand, platforms have also looked for ways to continue capturing the attention of users by adapting and creating alternative means of connection. This way, it is worth highlighting how platforms and relationships, less than static categories, can be observed through the lens of mediatization as articulated instances in permanent negotiation.

Hence, online platforms may be a way for us to deal with pandemic restrictions. We are social beings in constant and infinite interactions. We produce textualities and immerse ourselves in so many textual networks that continue to constitute our experiences as much as we constitute these networks. Social distancing has led to a profusion of adaptations and rearrangements of our daily lives. Regulating health bodies suggested recommendations that involve distancing, lack of in-person contact, and preventive measures to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. Having said that, we observe movements that, through platforms, outwitted the geographic distance in online ways. Hence, the context for establishing

bonds intensified the use of digital media to mediate contact. We reassert that, in a world where textualities intertwine in so many media spaces, the pandemic contributed to strengthening the platformization of the social and boosting the development of more resources in the platforms. The contexts of pandemic and platformization stimulate each other, in the sense that each one constitutes action movements in the other.

There is no way to separate texts from communication forms, complexities, and cadence with other texts. The fabric is on the loom; from the loom it goes to the hands; from the hands to the counter; from the counter to the client; from the client to the dress; from the dress to the party; from the party to the kiss, and so forth. The fabric explains itself in the weaving relationship. (ANTUNES et al., 2018, p. 43)

While the textualities of relationships mediated by Tinder may or may not extend as far as the researchers' metaphor, they have taken other paths. Flirts, conversations, and meetings changed. The pandemic may have caused changes in the forms of interaction between subjects and the world. However, this means reconfiguring, reweaving, and remodeling. There are many gaps and fissures on Tinder and in this pandemic context since we are amidst processes of platformization that involve everyday life, experiences, and the possibility and fear of death. In this article, we aimed to explore some of the changes implemented by this specific app, looking to understand possible new rationales for matches in a new and unpredictable context.

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