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Unveiling romance in categories: exploring compatibility in Tinder conversations

Abstract: This article uses membership categorization analysis to investigate the discursive practices of unacquainted, matched Tinder users in chat conversations, in the process of developing a potential romantic relationship. Drawing on data from 157 Spanish Tinder conversations, we examine the identification work performed by the matched Tinder users to get acquainted and explore their compatibility. The analysis shows that in order to identify their matches and explore their compatibility, the Tinder users ask questions that invite their recipients to categorize themselves with respect to various membership categorization devices or categories, and the responses reveal the specific categories from these devices with which the recipients identify. Co-membership in the invoked categories is typically positively received by both parties and is understood to signal compatibility. Progress in the process of exploration is conducive to relational intimacy and is also understood to signal progress in the development of a potential romantic relationship. We conclude by observing that relationships are ongoing everyday accomplishments formed on the basis of much categorization work. The data are in Spanish and Italian with English translations.

Keywords: membership categorization analysis; conversation analysis; Tinder; romantic relationship; intimacy

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1 Introduction

Although social interaction plays a crucial role in the initiation and formation of romantic relationships, previous research on intimate relationships has not thoroughly examined the dynamics of such relationships in interpersonal communication. Studies in positivist social psychology (Adams and Gillath 2024; Cameron et al. 2013) have mainly relied on experimental methods or theoretical frameworks to understand the process of how personal relationships form and evolve progressively. Existing theories and models in this tradition elaborate the process whereby potential romantic partners explore their compatibility and are attracted to each other. For example, Byrne (1971), in his "attraction paradigm", argues that attraction to another person is influenced by perceived similarity. According to this theory, individuals tend to be more attracted to others whom they perceive as similar like themselves in various aspects.

Perceived similarity can manifest in different forms, such as shared attitudes, values, interests, and demographic characteristics like age, education, socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity. When individuals perceive another person as similar like themselves, they are more likely to feel a sense of familiarity, connection, and comfort, which can foster attraction. This tendency of individuals to form romantic relationships with others who have similar characteristics, known as homogamy in the literature (Murstein 1970), has been amply studied in social psychological research. This research has focused on, for example, educational assortative marriage (Kalmijn 1998; Mare 1991; Schwartz and Mare 2005), the "marriage market" and social boundaries (like race and ethnicity) that shape partner preferences (Blossfeld and Timm 2003; Qian and Lichter 2007), or interdating and socioeconomic inequality (Blackwell et al. 2010).

The current study uses membership categorization analysis (MCA) to investigate the categorization practices of unacquainted, matched Tinder users in chat conversations, in the process of developing a potential romantic relationship. Rooted in the traditions of ethnomethodology and MCA, this study takes a discursive approach to relationships, focusing on how they are dynamically accomplished in interaction. While we engage with literature from social psychology to highlight its traditional focus on relationships, we critically contrast this with the MCA perspective, which emphasizes the situated and interactional nature of relationship formation. Specifically, we examine the identification work performed by matched Tinder users to get acquainted and explore their compatibility.

In the following section, we selectively review relevant studies on homogamy in online dating from a positivist perspective and outline the MCA approach to romantic relationships. In Section 3, the data and methods are described. In Section 4,

we analyze the identification work performed by matched Tinder users in initial and later stages of their conversations to explore their compatibility, and how interactions are managed once membership in critical incompatible categories is discovered. In Section 5, we discuss our findings and conclude by suggesting that relationships are routine accomplishments sustained on a great deal of categorization.

2 Literature review

2.1 Homogamy in online dating from a positivist perspective

Research in social psychology has explored the formation of relationships and homogamy in online dating contexts. The focus of this research has primarily been on partner preferences and mate selection. For example, Hitsch et al. (2010) study users' self-reported preferences for various attributes, such as age, education, race, and income, and examine how these preferences influence the likelihood of initiating contact and receiving responses from potential partners. Their findings suggested a preference for homogamous relationships. In this line of research, it has also been observed that mate preferences, self-presentation, and self-disclosure influence the likelihood of forming homogamous relationships (Bruch and Newman 2018; Gibbs et al. 2006).

Other studies pay special attention to the social dynamics and network structures that might facilitate or hinder the formation of homogamous relationships (Fiore et al. 2010; Lewis and Lundquist 2008; Wang et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2019). In another line of research, Toma et al. (2008) examine how deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles might influence partner selection and lead to potential mismatches between users with varying characteristics. In the particular context of the dating app Tinder, Sumter et al. (2017) explore the motivations of emerging adults for using this app. Through quantitative analysis of survey responses, they have identified the role of perceived compatibility and shared interests in users' motivations for using Tinder.

2.2 The MCA approach to romantic relationships

In positivist social psychology, relationships are understood to be things that we 'have', frequently portrayed as fixed, concrete entities. Their states are often considered independent variables that influence communication patterns and outcomes (Mandelbaum 2003: 207). Further, "this approach to relationships treats them

as social structural entities that 'exist' outside of discourse, taking 'spouse' or 'supervisor,' for instance, to be social categories, from which ways of talking follow" (Mandelbaum 2003: 208). Within ethnomethodological approaches to relationships, instead of considering relationships as possessions, we shift our perspective to view them as ongoing accomplishments that we create and sustain through continuous interactions (Conroy 1999; Mandelbaum 1987, 2003). Relationships are understood as assemblages of interpersonal interactions, where relational talk forms the fundamental building blocks, rather than being a mere outcome of pre-existing social structures or roles (Mandelbaum 2003). In such an approach, showing the dynamics of a relationship often involves analyzing how partners collaboratively engage in specific actions geared towards "performing intimacy" or, as our analyses show, "doing compatibility."

In line with this concept of relationships as practical accomplishments, Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005) employ MCA to examine existing relationships and demonstrate how they are enacted in ordinary interactions. In particular, they show how interactants continually sustain and update their relationships with each other "through talking and acting in ways that are recognizably bound with relationship categories" (p. 153).

In studies of first encounters, Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) show that unacquainted pairs (which were sociology college students) made use of "pre-topical sequences" to generate topical talk and "do acquaintedness." The initial question in such sequences would invite recipients to categorize themselves in relation to membership categorization devices (MCDs) like year in school, academic major, local residence, and sociology class. They conclude by noting that exhibiting co-membership (i.e., similarity) and co-participation do not predict progress in the conversation, but rather create a conducive environment for such conversation to occur in a patterned manner. Exhibiting co-membership, therefore, sets the stage for further talk, but it does not predict its occurrence. In the same vein, Svennevig (1999, 2014) reveals that unacquainted people use the "self-presentational sequence" (comprising a request for self-presentation, the self-presentation, and a response to the self-presentation) in initial interactions to get acquainted and (eventually) develop a relationship. Again, the request for self-presentation would invite the recipient to categorize themselves according to various MCDs.

MCA has also been used to explore initial encounters between potential romantic partners in speed dating interactions. Korobov (2011) shows that mate-preference expressions are categorically gendered and are anticipated during initial interactions between potential romantic partners, implying the normative character of gendering these preferences. Additionally, conventional mate preferences seldom foster reciprocal affiliation, while mate preferences expressed in resistance to gender norms tend to serve as a precursor for alignment and

affiliation. Furthermore, Korobov and Laplante (2013) examine how individuals utilize improprieties during speed-dating interactions to foster affiliation and intimacy. Specifically, two types of improprieties – negative category attributions of non-present individuals and insults directed at the present interlocutor – constitute significant actions contributing to reciprocal affiliation. Interestingly, improprieties, rather than being antagonistic, serve to foster intimacy due to their potential to be challenging.

In an entirely different context, Andréasson and Evaldsson (2023) also employ MCA to investigate how preteen children utilize relationship categories in their ordinary conversations to navigate and determine what qualifies as appropriate in terms of romantic feelings within their peer group. They reveal how claims of "liking someone" and "being together" (indicating a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship) are met with resistance and dissent from their peers.

3 Data and method

In this study, we gathered a dataset comprising 157 conversations from ten heterosexual users residing in Spain. The users ranged in age from 19 to 61, with four women and six men. The participants provided us with screenshots of their chat conversations on Tinder with their matched users. To maintain privacy and to comply with our ethical standards, the participants removed any identifying information before sharing these conversations with us. All procedures were approved by our university's Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was given by the participants. The conversations varied in length, ranging from a few brief exchanges taking place over a few minutes to extensive interactions spanning days or weeks.

Tinder is a mobile dating application that helps users connect with potential matches based on their preferences and geographical location. When a user signs up, they create a profile by adding photos, a bio, and optional details about their interests, job, and education. They also specify their preferences for potential matches, such as age range and gender. The app then uses this information to suggest profiles of potential matches within a certain geographical radius, which the user can adjust. Users indicate their interest in these profiles by swiping right for "like" or left for "not interested". This process is anonymous; users are only notified when both parties have mutually swiped right, resulting in a "match". Once matched, users can chat through the app's messaging system, potentially leading to sharing contact details, meeting in person, or moving the interaction beyond the app.

We employ the ethnomethodological frameworks of CA in digitally mediated contexts (Giles et al. 2015; Jucker 2021) and, primarily, MCA (Sacks 1972, 1992). MCA focuses on the everyday use of common-sense knowledge, especially how people categorize each other and themselves in social interactions (Fitzgerald and Housley 2015). The framework of MCA encompasses some key concepts. The first key concept is that of membership category, understood as a type of reference form used to describe persons. Examples of membership categories include for instance "politician", "doctor", "friend", etc. At the same time, each membership category is to be seen as a part of a collection or membership categorization device (MCD) like "family", which comprises categories like "mother", "father", "sister", "brother", etc. A particular type of MCD is the standardized relational pair (SRP), formed by paired categories that have a conventional or logical relationship. Examples include "husband-wife", "teacher-student", "parent-child", or, as we shall see below, "match-match".

Membership categories entail certain activities and predicates. Category-bound activities are the behaviors or actions that are commonsensically associated with or expected from members of a particular category (Watson 1978). Category-tied predicates are properties, characteristics or features that are attributed to members of a category. Two rules guide the application of membership categories, the "economy rule" and the "consistency rule," which function to facilitate understanding of categories in discourse. The economy rule implies that a single category suffices to describe a person and the consistency rule posits that if one person is categorized from an MCD, then a next person may be categorized from the same collection.

Ultimately, MCA seeks to understand how these categories and inferences are used in everyday social interaction, highlighting how our social identification and social structures are reflected and shaped in these interactions (Hester and Eglin 1997). The context-dependent and fluid nature of these categories, often changing in the course of interaction, also stand as a pivotal aspect in MCA (Stokoe 2012). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full review of the methodological approach of MCA. For more details see Fitzgerald and Housley (2015); Roca-Cuberes and Ventura (2016), and Okazawa (2022).

MCA is particularly appropriate for analyzing relationship development, as it centers on how speakers engage in interaction and form relationships within specific relational categories like "friend," "daughter," or, in the context of this study, "potential romantic partner." At the same time, MCA is also appropriate because its conceptual tools serve to examine the identification processes employed by matched Tinder users to explore their compatibility. Likewise, MCA is particularly apt for analyzing online interactions as it uncovers how individuals construct identities and relationships through language and categorization. MCA allows for a detailed

examination of how people position themselves and others within various social categories, showing the dynamics of online communication by revealing how users navigate identity and relational categories in digital contexts (Andersen and Rathje 2019; Jacknick and Avni 2017).

4 Analysis

Tinder chats have properties seen in other forms of text-based digital communication. For example, completed responses are received as turns, which, unlike spoken conversation, are invisible during their creation (Hutchby and Tanna 2008). These "turns" can be completed actions such as questions or answers, or fragmented, with messages often divided into smaller parts. While users may sometimes use ellipticals (…) to denote this practice, it is not always the case. Moreover, as typical in text-based digital communication, turns are frequently sent as "package texts" (Hutchby and Tanna 2008), encompassing multiple actions like asking questions, responding to questions, or making inquiries. At the time of data collection, Tinder did not support the inclusion of GIFs, URLs, or audio or video recordings in the messaging affordance. Consequently, users' communication tools were limited to text (including punctuation) and emojis.

4.1 Initial exploration of compatibility

This section examines the initial identification work performed by the matched Tinder users to get acquainted and explore their mutual compatibility. In this initial exploration, as we shall see below, the users tend to probe their putative co-membership (i.e., compatibility) in non-relational categories or MCDs like "occupation", "location", "hobbies", or "sports". As demonstrated in a previous study (Roca-Cuberes et al. 2023a), the primary interactional device employed by matched users to get to know each other and explore compatibility is the "elicited self-disclosure sequence" (ESDS), which comprises five moves: (1) one party (elicitor) asks a question to elicit a disclosure from recipient; (2) the recipient produces a prompted disclosure; (3) the recipient reciprocates a similar question; (4) the elicitor reciprocates similar information; and (5) selected disclosures are, eventually, positively assessed by either interlocutor to display affiliation.

Consider extract (1) below which presents the beginning of the conversation between MP19 and FI19 following their match.

(1) (T01H19-conv15) (Names and other potentially identifying particulars have been anonymized in all extracts; each numbered line corresponds to a message; numbers in the third column mark the moves of the ESDS; we include the original Spanish or Italian text alongside an English translation)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

1	MP19		*Holaaaaaa*
			Hellooooo
2	FI19		*Hey*
3	MP19		*Que taaaaal :))*
			How's it going :))
4	FI19		*Muy bien*
			Great
5			*Pero aburrida*
			But bored
6			*Tu?*
			You?
7	MP19		*Hahahahahahahah normal*
			Hahahahahahahah sure
8			*Bieeen aquí haciendo clases online*
			Fiiine here doing online classes
9	FI19		*Same*
10			*Y encima no me entero de nada*
			And on top of that I don't understand anything
11	MP19		*Hahahahahahaa*
12			*K estudias?*
		ESDS1.1	What do you study?
13	FI19		*Ciencias políticas*
		ESDS1.2	Political science
14			*Tu*?
		ESDS1.3	You?
15	MP19		*Música y bellas artes*
		ESDS1.4	Music and fine arts
16			*Un poco random hahahaha*
		ESDS1.5	A bit random hahahaha
17	FI19		*Bua pero es brutal*
		ESDS1.5	Wow but that's amazing
18	MP19		*Yaaaa*
			Yeahhh

19			*Si te gusta la verdad es k si*
			If you like it indeed it is
20			*Tu k música escuchas?*
		ESDS2.1	What music do you listen to?
21	FI19		*Casi de todo*
		ESDS2.2	Almost everything
			[November 17th, 11:01]
22	MP19		*a esta guai*
		ESDS2.5	Oh that's cool
23	FI19		*Sisi desde música de los 70–80 hasta trap de ahora*
			Yeah yeah from music of the 70–80 to current trap music
24			*Y tu que*
		ESDS2.3	What about you
25	MP19		*Yo también mucha variedaaad*
		ESDS2.4	Me too a lot of varieeety
26			*Ahora escucho más rap*
		ESDS2.4	Now I listen to more rap
27			*Pero antes escuchaba más rock*
		ESDS2.4	But before I listened to more rock & roll

Here we see the employment of two ESDSs (messages 12–17, 20–27). As we may appreciate, the questions invite the recipients to categorize themselves with respect to various MCDs or categories, and the responses reveal the specific categories from these MCDs with which the recipients identify. Instead of the sequential structure, the focus of our analysis is on the use of membership categories by the matched Tinder users to accomplish acquaintedness and scrutinize their affinity.

Before initiating a conversation, the matched Tinder users already possess some minimal knowledge about each other's categorial incumbencies, which informs their process of identification when they start interacting via chat. In their profiles, Tinder users self-categorize themselves from a whole variety of MCDs like gender, age, and sexual orientation (these three must be entered to create a profile and, therefore, generate an expectation of reciprocity in potential matches), plus others like location (estimated by the Tinder algorithm and shown as distance between users), and optionally, hobbies, sports, or occupation. The photos in those profiles might also serve the same purpose of identification since they are typically conceived to index membership within those or other MCDs.

MP19, for example, is shown in his profile as being "male" (inferred from his male first name), "aged 19", being at a certain distance from another user's "location", and having an interest in the "hobbies" or "sports" of "skating", "music", and "surf". Further, Tinder notifies matched users before their eventual interaction that they

are already members of the standard relational pair: match-match. As a SRP, they have certain moral obligations toward each other, the most important of which is starting a conversation. This is exactly what happens with MP19's greeting in message 1 ("Hellooooo"), which opens their conversation, and is responded to with another greeting by FI19 with "Hey" (message 2).

After the greeting exchange, MP19 utters the conventional conversation opener "how's it going" (message 3) to which FI19 reveals that she's doing "Great" (message 4), "But bored" (message 5). After this she reciprocates with a similar question ("You? ", message 6), which is responded to by MP19 with "Fiiine here doing online classes" (message 8). With this, he reveals his membership in the category "student" from the device "occupation". By replying "Same" (message 9), FI19 discloses that she is also a "student", hence projecting co-membership in the category "student".

After realizing that they are co-members of the category "student", they go on to explore whether they also share membership in the more specific category of "university student" and eventually discover that they are also co-members of this category as well: FI19 studies "Political science" (message 13) and MP19 "Music and fine arts" (message 15). This last message is then assessed by FI19 with "Wow but that's amazing" to build affiliation and relational intimacy. MP19, being a member of the category "music and fine arts student", is understood to have an interest and expertise in "music", and seems to want to discover with his follow-up message, "What music do you listen to?" (message 20), i.e., whether FI19 shares similar tastes in music. FI19's answer in message 23 conveys an eclectic taste in music, which is also shared and corroborated by MP19 with his "Me too a lot of varieeety" (message 25). Their tastes in music are category-bound to "eclectic music listener" of which, again, they are co-members.

4.2 Further exploration of compatibility

This section looks into the identification work performed by the matched Tinder users in later stages in their conversations to further explore their mutual compatibility. As we shall see below, after having discovered their co-membership in non-relational categories, their exploration of compatibility now progresses by probing their positioning and possible alignment in relational categories like "single" or "partner".

Extract (2) reproduces a fragment of a very long, on and off, conversation between MP61 and FI50. Before this fragment, they have both been chatting for five days and have exchanged approximately 240 messages. In those five days, they have been performing much identification work and have explored and discovered their co-membership in a whole variety of categories or MCDs: they are both "single", "separated", "parents" of a single child (and both children are female of a similar

age), "employed", practice regularly diverse "sports", and enjoy similar "hobbies" like socializing or watching TV.

(2)   (T03H61-Conv1)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

1   MP61   *Y ya vida medio normal*
             And now back to an almost normal life
2   FI50   *Exacto… medio*
             Exactly… almost
3   MP61   *Llevas tiempo soltera*?
             Have you been single for a while?
4   *sin pareja*
             without a partner
5   FI50   *7 meses*
             7 months
6   *Y tu*?
             And you?
7   MP61   *Separada*
             Separated
8   *Del padre de tu hija?*
             From your daughter's father?
9   *Uissss yo me separe hace 10 años*
             Oooops I separated 10 years ago
10 FI50   *Si*
             Yes
11 MP61   *Y sin pareja estable dos años*
             And without a stable partner for two years
12 FI50   *Y no has tenido pareja*
             And you haven't had a partner
13   *Ah ok*
             Oh ok
14   *No te convence ninguna?*
             Not convinced by any of them?
15 MP61   *Fácil no es, no me enamoro de una escoba con faldas*
             It's not easy, I don't fall in love with a broom in a skirt
16 FI50   *Mejor*
             That's better
17 MP61   *Tienes que tener primero una atracción física*
             There should be a physical attraction first

18		*Es esencial*
		That's essential
19	FI50	*Es tan bonito lo que dices en tu perfil!!!!!!*
		It's so nice what you say in your profile!!!!!!
20	MP61	*Y luego la personalidad, forma de ser y pensar la que termina enamorando*
21		And then the personality, way of being and thinking that ends up making you fall in love
22		*Uisssss gracias*
		Ohhhh Thank you
23	FI50	*Eso debería ser siempre*
		That's how it should always be
24	MP61	*Nunca me he enamorado de alguien por se una persona estupenda, siempre ha sido un flechazo*
		I have never fallen in love with someone because they are a great person, it has always been a crush
25		*Alguien que te hace vibrar*
		Someone who makes you feel that spark
26	FI50	*Anda*
		Wow
27	MP61	*Pero siempre con la persona adecuada*
		But always with the right person
28	FI50	*Eso es muy bonito*
		That's very nice

MP61 and FI50 have been talking about the ongoing Covid-19 lockdown (at the time of data collection) and potential post-lockdown life (messages 1 and 2), after which MP61 shifts topics and launches an ESDS with the question "Have you been single for a while?" (message 3) as the first move in the sequence, which is further developed with "without a partner" (message 4). Like in extract (1), the question invites the recipient to self-categorize with respect to a category or MCD. In this case, the target category is "single" and MP61 wants to find out how long FI50 has been a member of this category. Answers to this question would be inferentially-rich in that, for example, if FI50 made herself an incumbent of a category like "long-term single", that could pose an issue of incompatibility. Predicates like "difficulty in initiating and maintaining a relationship", "lack of interest in relationships", or "loneliness", may be category-bound to "long-term single" and could hinder relationship development.

However, FI50 reveals that she has been without a partner for "7 months" (message 5), a *reasonable* period that makes her a member of the category

"temporarily single". MP61, after being asked, then replies that he "separated 10 years ago" (message 9) and has been "without a stable partner for two years" (message 11). This would make him a member of the category "long-term single" and potentially associate him with the previously mentioned predicates. FI50 probes further with "And you haven't had a partner" (message 12) and "Not convinced by any of them?" (message 14) to ascertain whether the same predicates may apply to MP61.

MP61's response in message 15 ("It's not easy, I don't fall in love with a broom in a skirt") is noteworthy since it comprises a distinct (in this context) positive predicate associated with the category "long-term single": that of "being selective". In doing this, he is not only furnishing a good reason for being a "long-term single", but he also distances or differentiates himself from possible "typical male" predicates like "being unselective". This differentiation, as Edley and Wetherell (1997) and Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) illustrate, implies rejecting category membership by exhibiting how one does not hold the typical features of a category.

In this particular case, differentiation serves MP61 to position himself as resistant to normative "typical male" behavior. Moreover, as Korobov (2011) suggests, the idiosyncrasy attained through resistance to category-bound behavior may also be a prominent approach for creating commonality or intimacy. In effect, FI50's positive assessment ("That's better", message 16) of MP61's statement in message 15 conveys reciprocal resistance to category conformity and thereby functions to foster alignment, affiliation and intimacy. Subsequently, MP61 details the predicates a woman should possess for him to fall in love (17, 20, 24, 25, 27), which FI50 positively assesses and endorses (messages 19, 23, 26, 28), fostering further affiliation.

The combination of MP61's perceptions and FI50's positive assessments operates to intersubjectively align their perspectives so as to make both users co-members in the category of "people who understand the kinds of traits that someone should have to make you fall in love with them". It also works to corroborate that they are both candidates to be members of the SRP "romantic partner" – "romantic partner" and in the process they have displayed significant progress in accomplishing commonality, intimacy and compatibility.

In extract (3), following their 'match', FP45 and MI44 engage in an uninterrupted conversation for about 10 min before the start of extract. MI44, an Italian citizen and resident, is communicating in Italian, a language FP45, a Spanish resident in Spain, has a significant command of due to her previous time in Italy. They are shown to be 900 km apart by Tinder. After initial greetings, their conversation has covered the challenges of distance, the choice of language for communication, and MI44's job. After this, FP45 shifts topic and asks MI44 "What are you doing on tinder?" (message 1).

(3)   (T06F45-Conv1)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

1	FP45	*Cosa fai su tinder?*
		What are you doing on tinder?
2	MI44	*Nulla in particolare, conosco nuove persone*
		Nothing in particular, I meet new people
3		*Tu?*
		You?
4	FP45	*Cercando la favola*
		Looking for the fairy tale
5	MI44	*Cioè il principe azzurro?*
		Is that the prince charming?
6	FP45	*Si*
		Yes
7		*Ancora ci credo, dopo tutto*
		I still believe in it, after all
8	MI44	*Beh, sei una visionaria!*
		Well, you're a visionary!
9	FP45	*Per che?*
		Why?
10	MI44	*Purtroppo pensavo di essere il principe azzurro almeno 5/6 volte nella mia vita… poi invece mi sono reso conto che ormai al giorno d'oggi è tutto cambiato*
		Unfortunately, I thought I was the prince charming at least 5/6 times in my life … then instead I realized that nowadays everything has changed
11	FP45	*Per che é tutto cambiato?*
		Why did everything change?
12	MI44	*Perché adesso é tutto più veloce, più frivolo, privo di sentimenti*
		Because now everything is faster, more frivolous, devoid of feelings
13		*Si scopa e basta*
		You just fuck and that's it
14		*Scusami l'espressione!*
		Excuse the expression!
15	FP45	*Non la penso cosi*
		I don't think so
16		*Quando vedo un tipo che soltanto vuole questo, ciao*
		When I see a guy who only wants this, bye
17		*Mi piaceno le istorie belle*
		I like beautiful stories

18		*Dei nonni, forza per questo sono single*
		Like our grandparents, probably that's why I'm single
19		*L'uomo che corteggia a la donna é per me la cosa più basica*
		The man who courts the woman is for me the most basic thing
20	MI44	*Sono d'accordo*
		I agree
21	FP45	*Sono molto antica per questo*
		I'm very old-fashioned for this
22	MI44	*Ma sai non é facile spiegare certe cose in chat*
		But you know it's not easy to explain certain things in a chat
23		*Sei bella!*
		You're beautiful!
24	FP45	*Grazie*
		Thanks
25		*Sono una ragazza normale*
		I'm a normal girl
26		*Non posso vedere più foto tue?*
		Can't I see more pictures of you?

The question in message 1 initiates an ESDS and constitutes a common discursive resource matched Tinder users employ to probe their interlocutors' relationship preferences, ascertain their affinity, and decide if pursuing the conversation further is worthwhile. When posed early in the interaction (as above), it denotes a no-nonsense approach that heavily constrains possible answers. This is because a response that projects a different kind of "relationship" than that entertained by the questioner could potentially result in the termination of the communication (see (4) below). Perhaps due to this constraint, the response MI44 provides in message 2 ("Nothing in particular, I meet new people") turns out to be so equivocal concerning his "relationship preferences". Clearly, MI44 – who is a user of a dating app, self-identified as "heterosexual" to create a profile and therefore can only be matched with "women" – cannot be on Tinder to do "Nothing in particular, I meet new people". He can only be on Tinder to meet "women" (a category from the device "gender"), "heterosexual" (from the device "sexual orientation"), in a certain "age" range, and not only members of the very generic category "people".

After his equivocal answer in message 2, MI44 reciprocates with a similar question ("You", message 3), which is responded to with "Looking for the fairy tale" (message 5) by FP45. In her reply FP45 conveys that she is seeking a traditional relationship, making herself an incumbent of the category "traditional partner" when she is in a relationship. In this traditional relationship, the man should be a "prince charming" (message 5), thereby also a "traditional partner". However, MI44

no longer seems to believe in traditional relationships because "Unfortunately, I thought I was the prince charming at least 5/6 times in my life…then instead I realized that nowadays everything has changed" (message 10). If any, there should be a single traditional relationship in a lifetime, making it incompatible with potential membership in the category "prince charming" at least 5/6 times. However, according to MI44, that is unfortunate, which suggests that he made an effort to be a "traditional partner" but struggled to find a counterpart who reciprocated the same. This is so because "nowadays everything has changed".

FP45 then asks "Why did everything change?", which MI44 answers with two messages: "Because now everything is faster, more frivolous, devoid of feelings" (message 12) and "You just fuck and that's it" (message 13). These predicates are definitely not attachable to the category "traditional partner" that FP45 is seeking. MI44 carefully distances himself from these predicates by describing them in the third person (in the original Italian), thereby making "others," and not himself, the potential incumbents of the category "people who look for fast, frivolous, and sexual relationships". FP45, in message 16 ("When I see a guy who only wants this, bye"), exhibits her incompatibility with members of the latter category. She then describes what she understands should be the typical features of a traditional relationship: it should be a beautiful story (message 17) like that of our grandparents (message 18). This is followed by what she estimates as crucial in a "traditional male partner": "The man who courts the woman is for me the most basic thing" (message 19).

Note how, unlike MP61 (in extract (2)), FP45's last messages project conformity to gender-appropriate – in this case, "typical female" – conduct. She endorses category membership by positioning herself as complying with normative category predicates. MI44's "I agree" (message 20), in turn, serves to produce affiliation, align their perspectives, convey compatibility, and project co-membership of the relational category "traditional partner". Her portrayal as a "traditional partner" is then further reinforced with her "I'm very old-fashioned for this" (message 21).

4.3 Discovering critical incompatible membership

In the process of performing the necessary identification work to explore their affinity, matched Tinder users may eventually discover potential membership in categories that one or both deem critically incompatible. Instances from our data demonstrate that membership in potentially conflicting categories (for example, smoker – non-smoker, or, as in the examples below, single – committed, adventurous person – controlling person) may result in the termination of the exploration, communication and potential relationship.

Extract (4) is a fragment of the rather short conversation between FP48 and MI48 that unfolded over a span of three days, punctuated by extended gaps between messages. Prior to the current exchange, they have discovered their co-membership in the MCD location and have been enquiring about the absence of personal photos in their profiles. FP48's profile picture features a plum and MI48's a car with an elderly man sitting on it, intended to be funny.

(4)   (T02F48-Conv13)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

		[8:08]
1	MI48	*Tu ciruela me encanta*
		I love your plum
2	FP48	*Y a mi tu coche*
		And I love your car
3		*Jejejjej*
		Hehehheh
		[8:34]
4	MI48	*Tienes compromiso, pareja??*
		Are you in a committed relationship, do you have a partner??
		[16:25]
5	FP48	*Yo no y tu??? Si no estaria aqui*
		I don't and you??? Otherwise I wouldn't be here
		[16:43]
6	MI48	*Yo si…*
		I do…
7	FP48	*Pues esta todo dicho no busco esto*
		Well it's all said I'm not looking for this
8		*Suerte*
		Good luck

As can be observed, MI48 and FP48 are complimenting each other on their respective profile photos (messages 1 and 2), which they find amusing (message 3). After a gap of about 20 min, MI48 initiates an ESDS with the question "Are you in a committed relationship, do you have a partner??" (message 4), framed as important through emphatic punctuation. This question is designed to determine the category to which FP48 belongs within the MCD "relationship status".

FP48's response ("I don't and you??? Otherwise I wouldn't be here", message 5), given after about 8 h, conveys her membership in the category "single" – which might be inferred via the consistency rule – and reciprocates with a similar question, also framed as important through emphatic punctuation. In the same message, FP48

adds, "Otherwise I wouldn't be here". It is worth noting the use of "here" in the message. "Here" might be heard as a location formulation that constitutes a particular kind of category. As Schegloff (1972) has shown, place formulations can be selected from among a range of referentially adequate alternatives. Typically, place formulations are recipient designed, suggesting that in their co-selection, members perform an MCA of their recipients. This allows members to see their recipients as incumbents of a particular category and design their location formulations accordingly. "Here", a type of place reference (a "demonstrative"; see Levinson and Wilkins 2006), does not designate an identifiable location. However, being recipient designed, the formulation "here" invokes co-membership in the category "Tinder user" with MI48, hence indexing "Tinder" as the referenced location. This is unproblematically understood by MI48, as he does not initiate in the subsequent message a repair sequence to address his understanding of "here".

Overall, FP48's turn (message 5) works to claim membership in the category "single" and to signal that this membership is a necessary condition (at least for her) to be on Tinder. MI48's ensuing answer, ("I do…", message 6), denotes that he is a member of the category "committed" within the MCD "relationship status". This leads FP48 to initiate a brief disagreement sequence with "Well it's all said I'm not looking for this" (message 7), in which "this" indexes the incompatibility of the relational categories "single" and "committed". The disagreement sequence and the communication are finally ended by FP48 with her "Good luck" (message 8).

Extract (5) reproduces the entire conversation between FP22 and MI23, which proves to be rather unsuccessful. In the process of accomplishing identification, FP22 discovers they are not co-members of a category with which she identifies.

(5)   (T08F22-Conv2)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

1   MI23   *Venga va dime de qué clase de aventuras* 😣
           Come on tell me what kind of adventures 😣
           [Monday 22:07]
2   FP22   *No prefieres descubrirlo?*
           Wouldn't you prefer to find out?
           [Tuesday 0:03]
3   MI23   *Hombre está bien poner intriga a las cosas, pero nunca va mal saber por donde van los tiros* 😊
           Well, it's OK to make things intriguing, but it never hurts to know where things are headed 😊
           [Wednesday 22:39]

4   FP22   *Jajaja asi que eres de los que necesita tenerlo todo controlado*
             Hahaha so you are one of those who need to have everything under control

5   MI23   *Por supuesto, de esa manera sabré cómo actuar y que no me pilles de sorpresa* 😣
             Of course, that way I will know how to act and you won't catch me by surprise 😣

6   FP22   *Jajaja eso no me gusta mucho…*
             Hahaha I don't like that very much…

7   MI23   *Ah no*?
             Not really?

8   *No te gusta la gente preparada?*
             You don't like prepared people?

9   FP22   *Me gusta mas fluir*
             I prefer to flow

In FP22's profile, the "about me" section states, "Looking for adventurous friends", implying that to be compatible with her, potential matches should be members of a category like "adventurous person". This is the only self-description found in FP22's entire profile. MI23, in an unconventional conversation opening, enquires about "what kind of adventures" (message 1) she is looking for. After a few hours, FP22 responds with another question, "Wouldn't you prefer to find out?" (message 2).

Following another gap of approximately 2 h, MI23's "well"-prefaced response in message 3 ("Well, it's OK to make things intriguing, but it never hurts to know where things are headed 😊") is disaffiliative with FP22's prior question and engenders disagreement. Further, his answer makes him appear an incumbent of a category like "controlling person", which is then formulated in these terms in FP22's message (after about 22 h) with "Hahaha so you are one of those who need to have everything under control" (message 4).

In message 5 ("Of course, that way I will know how to act and you won't catch me by surprise 😣"), MI23 confirms that he is a member of the category "controlling person" and elucidates why: he does not like to be caught by surprise. Membership in this category is disliked by FP22, as we observe in message 6 ("Hahaha I don't like that very much…"), which is questioned by MI23 in messages 7 ("Not really?") and 8 ("You don't like prepared people?"). In the latter message, we may appreciate how MI23 claims incumbency on the category "prepared people", perhaps more agreeable than the category "controlling person". However, FP22's "I prefer to flow" in the ensuing message, which is predicated on the category "adventurous person", serves to convey her incompatibility with MI23, a member of the category "controlling person". As a result, their exploration of compatibility, as well as their communication, comes to an end.

In another conversation (extract (6)), also very brief, FP22 discovers she shares membership in the category "adventurous person" with her match.

(6)   (T08F22-Conv19)

Male (M); Female (F); Research Participant (P); Interlocutor (I); Stated age (number)

1   MI22   ♥
                [Wednesday 17:51]
2   FP22   *Un corazon? Tan rapido?*
                A heart? So fast?
                [Wednesday 19:43]
3   MI22   *Soy un aventurero* 😎
                I'm an adventurer 😎
                [Thursday 11:31]
4   FP22   *Jajjaj me ha gustado esta*
                Hahhah I liked this one
5   *Oye tienes insta?*
                Hey do you have insta?
                [Thursday 15:11]
6   MI22   *Sii*
                Yess
7   ((Link to Instagram profile))
                [Sunday 14:26]
8   FP22   *Perfe hablamos x ahi*
                Perfect let's chat on it

In effect, MI22 invokes FP22's profile claim ("Looking for adventurous friends") to formulate his incumbency in the category "adventurous person" with his "I'm an adventurer 😎" (message 3), projecting co-membership in that category with FP22. In message 4, FP22 confirms their co-membership in the category ("Hahhah I liked this one"). She then suggests continuing the conversation on Instagram to further explore their compatibility. As we have shown in the previous analyses, progress in the conversation – and in this particular case, switching to another medium of communication (see Roca-Cuberes et al. 2023b) – amounts to progress in the exploration of compatibility and the development of relational intimacy.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Utilizing MCA, we have investigated the categorization practices of unacquainted, matched Tinder users in chat conversations, in the course of initiating and

developing a potential romantic relationship. In particular, we have examined the identification work performed by matched Tinder users to get acquainted and explore their mutual compatibility. As MCA demonstrates, the membership categorization 'apparatus' enables members to conventionally identify other people. Members rely on the routine practices of identification to establish (for practical purposes) the social make-up of their interlocutors. In the process of identifying other people, members may draw all kinds of inferences (e.g., motives, reasons, intentions, and, in our study, compatibility) through the ascription of the moral predicates attached to a given category. These two features of the membership categorization apparatus, as we have seen, significantly contribute to the process of discovering "who is this person" and "is s/he compatible" in Tinder chat conversations.

Our analysis has shown that to identify their matches and explore their compatibility, the Tinder users ask questions that invite their recipients to categorize themselves with respect to various MCDs or categories, and the responses reveal the specific categories from these MCDs with which the recipients identify. These interactions highlight a progression through layers of categorial memberships.

In the initial stages of conversations, the Tinder users typically invite categorizations related to non-relational categories in MCDs such as "occupation", "hobbies", or "tastes in music". These broad, *safe* categories are widely relatable and less risky to disclose, making them ideal for initial interactions. Such categorial exchanges serve as foundational points of connection, creating opportunities to establish common ground and advance the interaction.

As the conversation progresses, the users may invoke *riskier* MCDs like "relationship status" or enquire about "relationship preferences" to explore their positioning and possible alignment in relational categories like "single" or "partner". Self-categorizations in relation to these MCDs may be problematic and the approaches adopted may be different. Depending on the locally, collaboratively attributed value – positive or negative – to the predicates of the invited self-categorizations, the recipients may conform to or reject category membership. As demonstrated in the above analyses, the local interpretation of "typical male" and "typical female" behavior may be quite different. These categorial exchanges, particularly when involving relational or identity-sensitive categories, involve greater vulnerability and are managed cautiously. This reflects the participants' efforts to assess compatibility while mitigating potential conflict. Each category offered or discussed is evaluated for its alignment or incompatibility, creating a "wait-and-see" process through which relational potential is collaboratively assessed.

Co-membership in the invoked categories is typically positively received by both parties and is understood to signal compatibility. Progress in the process of exploring compatibility – and, consequently, in the conversation – is conducive to relational intimacy and signals advancement in the development of a potential romantic

relationship. As interactions deepen, successful exchanges often move beyond categorial memberships to focus on individualized connections; in other words, potential partners take significant steps toward *going non-categorial*. This shift involves transcending categorial memberships to emphasize unique, personal identities. For instance, transitioning the conversation to a platform like Instagram (see extract (6)) facilitates the expression of identity in less structured and more personalized ways, further advancing relational intimacy.

Membership in potentially conflicting categories (like single – committed, adventurous person – controlling person), on the other hand, may result in the termination of the exploration, communication and potential relationship. Again, the meaning attributed to these categories and whether or not they are conflicting is locally negotiated.

Overall, our analysis demonstrates that the identification work performed by the matched Tinder users serves to align their identities and leads to a reciprocity of perspectives regarding the categories and cultural knowledge to be mobilized in their conversations to accomplish (or not) "compatibility".

Our findings in this article may resonate with those of positivist social psychology. For instance, we support Byrne's (1971) theory, which suggests that individuals are generally more attracted to others they perceive as similar in shared attitudes, values, interests, and demographic characteristics like age and education. Similarly, our observations reveal homogamous preferences among the online dating users, as they engage in conversations with individuals possessing similar attributes (see Hitsch et al. 2010). Additionally, we corroborate the role of perceived compatibility in mate preferences on Tinder (see Sumter et al. 2017). However, positivist social psychology's approach to understanding the formation of (romantic) relationships as a measurable, discrete process, and therefore to reify relationships as concrete entities, might compromise the validity of its findings. As demonstrated in our findings, relationships are ongoing everyday accomplishments formed on the basis of much categorization work performed to pursue specific actions such as "doing intimacy" or "doing compatibility".

Overall, this study contributes to the expanding research on discursive constructions of identities in social media, particularly in the context of online dating. It demonstrates the dynamic nature of identities and the role of language in shaping connections within online dating platforms, contributing to the broader research on discursive constructions of intimacy and relationships in social media contexts.

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