



# Dating in captivity: creativity, digital affordance, and the organization of interaction in online dating during quarantine

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## Abstract

Unprecedented times compel new ways to explore relationships. Using interviews with dating app users quarantined in American cities at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, I show the impacts of digital mediation on the highly scripted interactional patterns in dating. Drawing from the literature on creative action, temporality, digital affordance, and the materiality of cultural objects, I examine how actors access the creative opportunities in digitally mediated interaction. I find that dating partners creatively mobilized the affordances of digital technologies to approximate a dating script in organizing online interactions, which simultaneously allowed them to formulate relational narratives with varying deviation from the scripted temporal structure. I identify three aspects of digital affordances offering creative opportunities: *the dissolution of spatial-temporal boundaries, the production and circulation of digital objects, and the connection between contexts*. Taking advantage of an extraordinary moment of cultural and interactional rupture that necessitated digital solutions to connect, this article demonstrates how digital technologies unsettle culturally institutionalized interactional patterns and the formation of meaningful relationships.

**Keywords** Affordance · Anticipation · Creative action · Digital technology · Interaction · Relational narrative

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## Introduction

When Covid-19 gripped the United States, quarantine orders followed, emptying erstwhile bustling streets in most metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, activities on dating apps surged, setting new records in the volume of swipes and messages across major platforms (Match Group, 2021; Bumble, 2021). Perhaps an aberrational interlude in hindsight, at the time it was a prolonged period of disorientation and isolation, as evidenced by the repeated extensions of quarantine orders, along with other much-contested emergency responses (Wagner-Pacifici, 2021). Connected through apps yet confined at home, how did individuals translate dating, a social practice in which physical proximity is both a means and an end, from bars, restaurants, and movie theaters to digital interfaces? Confronted by the uncertain future of quarantine, how did the full-on migration of dating online, from the initiation of contact to the cultivation of intimacy, impact the development of dating relationships?

From mid-April to early June of 2020, I interviewed via video chats or phone calls 52 singles living in American cities who used dating apps during quarantine. I draw from their experiences to identify creative actions that emerged at the juncture of dating and a phase of drastic change—or rupture (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017)—amid a historical pandemic. In particular, I analyze how the participants employed digital technologies to organize online interactions while constructing relational narratives with dating partners with whom they shared little or no time together in person. While conventional dating remains rigidly scripted despite misgivings (Lamont, 2020), I show that online dating could be creatively reconfigured to generate different forms of fun and intimacy, even when social life appeared at its most impoverished.

By showing how creative actions draw from the affordances of digital technologies in interaction, this article contributes to the interactionist literature as well as the research on materiality in cultural sociology. Sociologists have paid increasing attention to the implications of proliferating digital technologies for interaction, including the challenges posed to the basic assumptions of interactionist theory (Brubaker, 2022; Knorr Cetina, 2009; Schwarz, 2021). At the same time, cultural sociology has seen reemerging interest in the mediation of materiality in the meaning-making processes (McDonnell, 2010, 2023). Synthesizing literature across diverse fields on digital affordance (Burchell, 2017; Schwarz, 2021; van Doorn, 2011), a somewhat capacious concept referring to the multiplicity of potential use and interpretation of a particular technology (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Hutchby, 2001), I identify three aspects of digital affordance offering opportunities for creativity in dating: *the dissolution of spatial-temporal boundaries, the production and circulation of digital objects, and the connection between contexts*. I illustrate how dating partners changed the material organization of interaction around these three aspects, which allowed them to customize relational narratives previously tightly bound to dating scripts. I also show the constraints on their customization in digitally mediated interaction. In doing so, I go beyond examining the distinction of digitally mediated interaction (Brubaker, 2022; Schwarz, 2021) to attend to the creative opportunities emerging from the digital reconfiguration of culturally institutionalized interactional patterns. And I extend the scholarly discussion on materiality to the digital space (McDonnell,

2023), presenting concrete, digitally mediated pathways through which materiality and cognition interact (Griswold et al., 2013).

Additionally, by using an analytical approach juxtaposing creative action and the coordination of futures to capture solutions to dating during quarantine, this article shows the benefits of deepening the pragmatist engagement in interactionist theory. Building on the interactionist concern with anticipation between situations (Fine & Tavory, 2019; Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013), I identify the coordination of the anticipated next moments, the relational narratives, and quarantine as a necessary component of meaning-making between dating partners in interaction. Adopting a pragmatist theory of action, which defines creative action as the adaptation of habitual responses to challenges in indeterminate situations (Dalton, 2004; Joas, 1996; Strand & Lizardo, 2015), I attend to cultural objects whose uses or interpretations draw together seemingly incompatible contexts (McDonnell et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2019). I find that in order to manage the disjuncture between dating and quarantine, rather than abandoning or adhering to dating scripts, the participants partially modeled their interactions after a script, which approximated, altered, or emancipated dating from the scripted temporal structure for relationship development. Specifying how creative actions emerge thus reveals mechanisms (Gross, 2009) through which dissonance between anticipations is managed and updated (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). At the same time, the relationship between interacting actors is highlighted as a catalyst and constraint on creativity, a dimension of social context underexplored by pragmatist sociologists (Brett, 2022; Leschziner & Green, 2013).

Based on the analysis, I argue that during quarantine, dating partners creatively mobilize digital affordances in interaction to approximate a pervading dating script in metropolitan American. This, in turn, allowed them to formulate relational narratives with varying deviation from the script. As much of social life has either migrated online or is in the midst of doing so, the findings of the study will prompt new lines of inquiry to investigate how social ties are reformulated and reorganized via digital mediation, including—perhaps especially—when catastrophic events descend.

## Dating in the digital era

Considered an “American institution,” dating is a social practice conducted by two romantically interested individuals to “get to know each other better” (Bailey, 1989; Eaton & Rose, 2011). As ambiguous as it can be, dating is a highly scripted process. It consists of stock activities in public, such as dining, drinking, and other forms of entertainment, interspersed with intimate bodily contacts such as hand holding, kissing, and sex (Lamont, 2020). During these interactions, couples tend to step into differentiated roles in coordination with each other, regardless of their sexual orientation (Lamont, 2020; Lever et al., 2015; McFarland et al., 2013). Moreover, typical situations are expected to take place in rigid sequence and at an appropriate tempo, eliciting considerable attention to the timing of interactions (Brown & Patrick, 2018; Zerubavel, 1985). In fact, dating in American cities is particularly drawn out and reflexive; individuals monitor and strategize over relational progression (Krause & Kowalski, 2013). Adhering to scripts characterized by dating rituals and temporal

structures, they evaluate the embodied experiences of interaction at each step to update relational anticipation.

The popularization of online dating has transformed how a dating relationship is commonly initiated in the US. Replacing friends and family as the main way through which couples meet, online dating allows access to a large quantity of potential partners without meeting face-to-face (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Dating apps, which provide easy setup of photo-centered profiles and instant access to the profiles of other users in proximity, are the most popular type of platforms in online dating (Vogels & McClain, 2023). With design features prioritizing accessibility, convenience, and physicality, dating apps have been associated with more immediate yet ephemeral relationships (David & Cambre, 2016). Many users view dating apps as empowering, facilitative of vetting multiple candidates in a lengthened pre-committal phase of relationships (Fisher & Garcia, 2019; Hobbs et al., 2017). Others express ambivalence, simultaneously drawn by the expediency of forming relationships and concerned with the authenticity and durability of the connections (Dalessandro, 2018). Despite mixed experiences, every single person has to grapple with dating app use as a norm, along with the efficiency-driven rationality of dating powered by the apps.

New norms notwithstanding, dating app users remain under the sway of old-time dating conventions. For example, Licoppe (2020) compares post-match conversations on Grindr and Tinder, both known for expediting casual sex. Licoppe demonstrates that in the presence of similar contextual cues, gay Grindr users resist the norm of “getting-to-know-you” chats by rushing to proposals of sex through impersonal and laconic exchanges. By contrast, straight Tinder users—including those intent on hookups—are compelled by heterosexual dating scripts to engage in elaborate buildup through topically rich conversations prior to meetup. Rather than doing away with dating conventions, the normalization of dating apps demands negotiation with both long-standing dating rituals and the perceived proper use of the technology.

As relationships further, various digital technologies other than dating apps are enlisted in enacting the stage processes of dating. Instant messaging is commonly used to get to know each other better and to flirt during the early stage, which facilitates the involvement of friends in gauging the relational potential (Schwarz, 2011). Going “Facebook official” affirms relational progression, and the choice of doing so by updating relationship status or by including partners in profiles is linked with differential relationship satisfaction (Papp et al., 2012). While Facebook is often reserved for the public declaration of relationship milestones, Snapchat is tapped to mark “small moments”, owing to its feature of ephemeral display and the exclusion of ambient audiences (Bayer et al., 2016). The attunement to timing informs and is expressed through how specific technology is used in relationship development.

The use of technology is finely differentiated not only to drive relationships forward but also to form everyday routines within relationships. Couples distribute interactions over various modes of communication, from simple check-ins via texts to intensive informational exchanges over voice or video messages (Cui, 2016; Licoppe, 2004). They use digital cameras in sex to enrich the experiences with the pleasure of being watched and the knowledge of self, partners and the relationships (Schwarz, 2010). During long separation, they inhabit an alternative form of co-presence and intimacy by leaving cameras “always-on” (Miller & Sinanan, 2014).

Attending to nuanced relational demands through the use of technology, they imbue the day-to-days of a relationship with affect and meanings.

In early 2020, the issuance of quarantine orders set off an indefinite period of drastic change, disrupting dating while intensifying the motivations to date. On one hand, quarantine regulations made it impossible to carry out the conventional scripts that relied on physical contact. On the other hand, quarantine charged dating with urgency as an outlet for boredom and loneliness. This tension emerged from the conjuncture of the individual project of relationship construction and a phase of “rupture” in the midst of a historical pandemic—an inchoate period preceding any claims or forms of the event taking hold, where “passivity and waiting vie with precipitating activity” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017, p. 56). This makes quarantine a rare opportunity to study creative actions challenging long-established interactional patterns, with digital technologies and without the usual material forms and temporal structures (Wagner-Pacifici, 2021). Studying online dating during quarantine thereby allows me to explore the following questions: how do individuals engaging in dating move highly-scripted interactions into the digital space? How do they maintain and intensify dating relationships, developed exclusively or almost exclusively with digital mediation, in the face of the uncertain horizon of the pandemic?

## Creative action and the coordination of futures

To develop an analytical approach studying how dating partners come up with creative solutions to these problems, I first draw from the more recent development in the interactionist literature (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013; Tavory & Fine, 2020) to identify a key condition for interactions to proceed, if not succeed.

Interaction entails the coordination of different futures for each individual actor and between interacting actors (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013; Tavory & Fine, 2020). To keep interaction ongoing, actors do not need perfect alignment in future orientations, which vary in temporal scales and are anticipated with different levels of reflexivity, but have to manage the disjuncture (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). In dating, actors orient themselves and each other to at least the following types of futures (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013): protentions, the “feel” for the immediate next moment, constantly recalibrated through intuition rather than deliberation, universal to all actions and interactions; relational narratives, the anticipated trajectories for relationship development reflexively thought out in narrative forms, which are bounded by cultural frameworks but allow ambiguities as well as creativities; and temporal landscapes, the overarching societal-level conditions experienced as naturalized and taken-for-granted. When the temporal landscape was business-as-usual before the pandemic, thanks to the dating scripts, most people found relational narratives rather predictable; interactions were largely organized around stock activities and relationships progressed or wound down along relational stages. Moreover, protentions and relational narratives appear to work in complicity in the scripts; anticipated relational trajectories inform protentions, and protentions in interaction fit into specific relational narratives (Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Fine, 2020). Yet quarantine, in its rupture of the

temporal landscape, unwound such complicity by removing the full feasibility of the scripts.

Indeed, even in pre-pandemic times, dates could go off script, and dating relationships could become difficult to put a finger on. At the same time, the intensification of relationships does not necessitate smooth interactions and could be triggered by misalignment in interaction (Tavory & Fine, 2020). Besides, intensification is not the only goal for relationship management in interaction; actors sometimes intentionally maintain contradictory future possibilities (Tavory, 2009), disentangle different life projects to let dating go at its own pace (Brown & Patrick, 2018), or foreclose certain relational trajectories (Hart, 2021). However, in contrast to these unintended or volitional deviations from the scripts, what is different here is that quarantine as an underlying condition made following the scripts as usual impossible. It was imperative for dating partners to deviate from the scripts in interaction, and the actions they took to do so had to account for the coordination of protentions, relational narratives, and the prospect of quarantine.

Deepening the pragmatist engagement in interactionist theory, I then draw from the pragmatist studies on social action to identify the requirements for creative actions that can pull off such deviation. Viewed from a pragmatist perspective, creative action arises as the adaptation of habitual action to deal with challenges in specific situations. Challenges generative of creative actions range widely, from “interrupted contexts” where ingrained practices are unable to proceed (Joas, 1996, pp. 128–129) to the efforts to perfect routines or the impulses to try something new while carrying out familiar tasks (Dalton, 2004). Accordingly, creative action emerges as new possibilities are revealed through the search for the familiar lines of actions in indeterminate situations. This could involve highly conscious attempts to restore beliefs in the form of embodied capacities nurtured through habituation (Strand & Lizardo, 2015). This could also transpire as spontaneous moves off established scripts, driven more by automatic cognition than deliberation (Brett, 2022; Leschziner & Green, 2013). While quarantine makes unprecedented “shattering of contexts,” some common dating practices, such as browsing photos on dating apps and texting, remain available. With varying accessibility to habitual practices, I expect actors to enact creative actions with varying intentionalities and in different manners.

If habits are the prototypes for acts of creativity, what distinguishes the latter from the former? As McDonnell et al. (2017) argue, creative actions entail transposing into the situation cultural objects from other contexts as solutions or mobilizing cultural objects available in the situation to meet challenges beyond the scope of their routinely associated contexts. As cultural objects acquire new meanings, actors continue to inhabit the situation by enveloping it with refreshed moods (Silver, 2011; Taylor et al., 2019). Creative actions then present novel or more ways for the actors to relate to the situation, renewed with “lines of salience” soliciting particular responses (Dalton, 2004; Silver, 2011). As such, creative actions are integral to the cognitive and emotional experiences of resonance, where cultural objects, people, and the situation are redefined through collective problem-solving (McDonnell et al., 2017). The products of creative actions attain meaningfulness to the actors more than just their practical significance (Dalton, 2004). To pinpoint creative actions in online dating during quar-

antine, I will thereby focus on the objects, discourses, and practices inciting interpretations that might appear incongruous with the interaction context in a certain light.

## Interaction, digital technology, and affordance

But how exactly do actors enact creative actions online? What interactional resources are available? How do the opportunities for new meanings and refreshed moods arise? Given the indispensable presence of digital technologies in organizing the interactions and the crucial role of cultural objects in creative action, I turn to the literature on the digital transformation of interaction as well as the recent studies in cultural sociology on the materiality of cultural objects. The two bodies of literature foreground the same concept: affordance.

Originated by ecological psychologist J. J. Gibson, the concept of affordance has been adopted by social scientists in diverse fields to refer to the multiplicity of potential use and interpretation of a cultural object (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; McDonnell, 2023). The affordance of a cultural object results from the interactions between the actor and the object in particular settings, shaped by the physical and cognitive capacities of the actors as well as the material and symbolic components of the object-settings. Cultural sociologists use the concept to emphasize that the material component of the object-settings is no less significant than its symbolic dimension in shaping the opportunities of interpretations; material from the perspective of perceptibility rather than of a physically tangible form (Hutchby, 2001; McDonnell, 2010). The material configuration of the object-settings shapes how actors corporeally engage the object, which activates sensory experiences that mediate their access to the multivocality of the cultural object (Griswold et al., 2013; McDonnell, 2023).

In digitally mediated interaction, digital affordances become resources for the material configuration of the object-settings. The meanings of technologies involved, negotiated and renegotiated through the organization of interaction, are also constitutive of the meaningful relationships forming between interacting actors (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Nagy & Neff, 2015). For dating partners during quarantine, this means that their room for creative actions is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the affordances of the specific digital technologies engaged in interaction. Among the literature on digital technologies, affordance has become something of a blanket term and gathered many definitional variations (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). I am less interested in defining the term myself than looking at the substantial aspects of digitally mediated interaction raised by scholars invoking the term in order to locate the opportunities for creative actions. The following three aspects of digital affordances, or three parameters specific to digitally mediated interaction, appear promising: the dissolution of the spatial-temporal boundaries of interaction, the production and circulation of digital objects, and the connection of contexts.

Obviating co-presence as the primary condition of interaction, digital technologies reconfigure the spatial-temporal organization of interaction. Without inhabiting the same physical settings, interacting actors coordinate in time only, with no ready demarcation between interactional front and back stages (Knorr Cetina, 2009). Their coordination is sustained through the perceived synchronization of mutual attention



that is often partial and intermittent, making a continuum of asynchronicity in interaction (Brubaker, 2020; Schwarz, 2021). They reflexively approach the choice of the mode of communication, differentiating communicative technologies in terms of the degree of mutuality of engagement required (Burchell, 2017). I will show later in the paper how actors tap into this aspect of digital affordances on the spatial-temporal organization of interaction to approximate or alter the scripted temporal structure of dating in coordination with quarantine.

The dissolution of the spatial-temporal boundaries of interactions facilitates and is facilitated by the production and circulation of digital objects. Due to the self-documenting characteristic of digitally mediated interaction, interacting actors are essentially producing data objects, easy to be shared and consumed far into the future (Schwarz, 2011, 2021). Moreover, since coordination is often asynchronous, interactions may happen during the course of other interactions, resulting in a web of unfolding situations (Schwarz, 2021). The circulation of the digital objects is further expanded, heightening the future orientations of actors and augmenting the potential audiences of the interactions or the consumers of the digital objects (Schwarz, 2021). Although interaction in dating has always been productive of cultural objects (e.g. photos and love letters), digital technologies enables effortless production and circulation of digital objects in diverse formats (Brubaker, 2020; Schrock, 2015)—think of how selfies, screenshots, and Tiktok videos are made and spread around.

Finally, and related to the last aspect of affordances, it is precisely through the production and circulation of digital objects that actors could connect different contexts in interaction in new ways. Without clear spatial-temporal boundaries to bracket situations, interaction context is at least partially “synthetic,” constituted by “a patchwork of parallel, itemized flows” of digitized information (Knorr Cetina, 2009). Interacting actors coordinate in assembling the context and keeping the information relevant and lively (Knorr Cetina, 2009). The information comprises digital objects in many forms: texts, images, GIFs, videos..., an expanding variety of expressive opportunities enriching the context and modulating the emotional register (Brubaker, 2022). Actors sometimes participate in producing digital objects through embodied performances, weaving into the context themes concerning gender, sexuality, and embodiment; for example, by using cameras, couples imported into sex scripts from pornography (Schwarz, 2010; van Doorn, 2011). In fact, even physical location can activate an extra layer of contextual meanings. Thanks to location-sensitive mobile technologies (e.g. dating apps), actors can experience the physical surroundings of themselves or fellow users through “digitally induced sensitivity to proximal entities,” such as the display of physical distance between users, or a “screen-based dynamic representations of the environment,” such as a map of open restaurants in a target neighborhood (Licoppe, 2016). As such, interaction contexts are interactively connected with the corporeal engagement with technologies. On social media platforms, in particular, since contents and functionalities are personalizable, extendable to other platforms, and adaptive to user activities thanks to underlying algorithms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), the digital environments are particularly responsive to user engagement, rendering interaction contexts more dynamic.



## Data and method

The data of the study comes from semi-structured interviews with 52 participants conducted from mid-April to early June of 2020. 42 participants were interviewed during the first and strictest quarantine in their respective cities; 10 when quarantine measures were at least partially lifted, though three of them remained in self-imposed full quarantine. Following the participants' preferences, 48 of the interviews were conducted via one of two popular video applications, FaceTime and Skype; four through voice-based phone calls.

The interview methodology, conducted in an “in-depth, interpretive, and conversational” manner, could reveal the multiple components of meaning-making processes with different levels of consciousness driving specific lines of actions (Pugh, 2013). Moreover, in-depth interviewing through video or audio was one of the few methods accessible, safe, and socially appropriate to collect data on an intimate domain of personal life under highly restrictive circumstances. Additionally, online interviews allow relatively rapid data collection particularly useful for a time-sensitive project capitalizing on the shared uncertain horizon of the pandemic.

My inclusion criteria consisted of being aged 21 and older, being single, currently living in an American city, and using or having used dating apps during quarantine. I made a poster in PDF format as part of my recruitment message, taking care to include the icons of dating apps targeting diverse demographics. I recruited the participants first through my own network and later by direct-messaging users active in dating-related discussions on Twitter and Reddit. I also used snowball sampling by asking participants to introduce me to their eligible friends.

Instead of seeking a statistically representative sample, I viewed each additional interview as a case with variation along a significant axis of comparison in light of existing cases (Small, 2009). Since the study was originally conceived as one on temporalities, the key axes of comparison under consideration were the present stage of dating, relational anticipation, and modes of communication. As the data collection progressed, creative actions emerged as an unexpectedly salient theme that drew much sense-making from the participants and stirred up much emotional resonance shared by the participants and me. I thereby attended to variations around additional dimensions, such as the enactment of dating rituals, and added more cases until the findings became predictable. Throughout the process, I paid particular attention to prompting the participants to elaborate on how interactions unfolded, especially regarding technological use. In this way, I hope to check biases common in interviews and gather data on more concrete actions, rather than spurious commitment to motivations (Small & Cook, 2021; Tavory, 2020).

The final sample of participants exhibits a wide-ranging yet concentrated distribution over a number of demographic characteristics. 31 participants identified as female, 20 male, and one transgender nonbinary. 42 participants identified as heterosexual, with six gays, two lesbians, one bisexual, and one pansexual comprising the rest. Although their age ranged from 21 to 74, the overwhelming majority were in their 20s (54%) and 30s (38%). 30 participants are White, 11 Asian, five Black, five Hispanic, and one Middle Eastern. The place of residency covered 15 states, with the highest concentration in Los Angeles (27%), New York City (22%), the Bay Area

(12%), and Chicago (10%)—all among the cities hit the hardest by the initial wave of infections, resulting in some of the strictest quarantine measures nationwide. Counting the four who expected to obtain undergraduate degrees within a few months, all participants are college-educated. Except for three whose jobs were categorized as “essential,” all worked or studied at home during quarantine, though three were laid off due to the pandemic.

The interview guide covered the following topics: pre-pandemic dating, experiences with dating apps, dating during quarantine, and expectations of dating beyond quarantine. Depending on how each conversation developed, the topics were discussed in different orders. Interviews lasted from 25 to 90 min. In all but two cases, the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants on condition of anonymity. I wrote memos immediately after each interview and transcribed all interviews verbatim. I referred to the participants by their pseudonyms and altered some other personal information to protect anonymity.

I followed abductive analysis in processing the data, an approach foregrounding “surprising research evidence” to generate novel framings of data and to update existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). My initial coding relied on the recurrent themes identified during data collection, using the stage of dating as a primary orienting principle of explanation. Since then, I have revisited the data multiple times. In the end, I focused the analysis on accounting for the deviation of actions from the dating script followed by most participants in pre-pandemic times. I sought to make clear how the participants drew on the material and symbolic resources in digitally mediated interactions to act creatively. I also took seriously the imagined futures explicitly or implicitly attached to the actions. I therefore based the formulation of the main analytical categories and their linkages on the juxtaposition of the digital manipulation of interaction contexts and the different relational anticipations.

Indeed, one may question on several grounds the focus of the paper on online interactions between dating partners. One could say that the patterns of interaction identified existed only in an exceptional and transitory time; that it was unclear to what extent the creative actions affected later relationship development; that the consideration or discussion over their possibilities of meeting offline shall be relevant to the organization of online interactions.

My rationale for studying online dating during quarantine, however, is precisely that the exceptional circumstances prompts actors to think and act differently in dating, a scripted process relying heavily on physical co-presence. Whether the creative actions identified only existed in a transitory time or whether the actions had long-lasting impacts on the relationships does not make the actions less creative. It also does not make it less suitable for studying how the actions draw from digital affordances. Moreover, as I would show in the empirical section, many participants engaged in online dating with the presumption of a transitory quarantine; in some cases such presumption was relevant to online interactions and in others it mattered little. For the cases of the former kind, the factors identified by the participants as determining whether, when, and how they met dating partners offline were external to interaction contexts: attitudes toward Covid, changes in quarantine mandates, health conditions, living with elderly parents, unexpected relocation, sudden impulses, etc. Consequently, at least based on the data, other than keeping the interactions online

for some time, the possibilities of meeting in person had limited impacts on the organization of everyday interaction during quarantine.

Certainly the design of the study also prevented me from answering definitively to what extent online interaction drove or would drive actions. I understand interview accounts as neither justifications nor motivations but interpretive linkages connecting the past or present to potential futures; by taking note of the experiences of self, the interpretations of actions set up situations enabling or constraining further lines of actions (Tavory, 2020; Winchester & Green, 2019). But the questions related to the potential long-term effects of dating during quarantine, such as how dating post-pandemic was changed or whether creative actions contributed to lasting relationships, are outside the scope of the paper. They shall be addressed by future research.

## Findings

Speaking about pre-pandemic dating processes, the overwhelming majority of the participants offered narratives showing strikingly similar patterns. Pablo, a business consultant in his early thirties, provided a particularly elaborate account exemplifying the patterns:

There is a process...if you've gone through the phases a few times—No, too many times—it begins to feel too similar...There are these clear stages where you keep like, you *flow*...you know like you first match, talk for a bit, and then you talk for a bit, and then the next thing is that you talk about meeting, and then meet, and if it goes well, then you um you know you talk about meeting again. And you meet again. And if it goes well, then you kiss. And maybe it does not happen, and then you meet again, you kiss, and you sleep together. And then either it ends. Or you try for a little bit. And then it ends....

Consistent with the dating literature (Krause & Kowalski, 2013; Lamont, 2020), the participants followed a script in pre-pandemic dating: an ordered sequence of relational stages started with dating app engagement and punctuated by increasingly intimate physical interactions. Individual preferences indeed vary; some preferred chatting on the apps for a little longer or shorter before meeting offline, while others commenced sexual activities after having gone on more or fewer dates. But the degree of physical closeness was almost unanimously taken as an essential indicator of the quality and the potential of the relationships. Additionally, though not every participant sounded as weary as Pablo, most found the processes predictable and repetitive, suggesting the conventionalization of the routine enactment of the dating script.

Nonetheless, during quarantine, this script was no longer taken for granted. Next, I show how participants and their dating partners reconfigured dating by creatively engaging digital technologies while remaining physically apart. Specifically, I focus on three directions into which they developed relationships from the stage of texting only; the directions vary by the extent to which they sought to approximate the dating script. Meanwhile, I identify three types of creative action they enacted

during interaction to take the relationships into different directions: reassembling in-person dating rituals, importing practices from other areas of life, and exporting dating routines to the context of digital transportation; not tied to any specific direction, each a mechanism through which habits and conventions are converted into creative actions. Engaging digital affordances, these creative actions intensified, moderated, or suspended the formation of relational anticipations out of situational intimacies in coordination with quarantine.

### **Making the first video chat a first date**

During quarantine, two people got connected through a dating app and started texting just as before. But then what? Having exhausted the part of the dating script directly replicable, many participants and their dating partners nevertheless sought to move their nascent relationships to a new relational stage. Approximating a first date in the script, they turned to video chat, an accessible mode of communication resembling in-person dating in its synchronous visual and audio access. In fact, 30 out of the 52 participants tried video chat for dating at least once during quarantine. To ease the transition, they enacted creative actions restoring typical elements of a first date or importing activities uncommon for a first date. With the affordances of video-chatting at home, their creative actions helped align relational narratives with the script.

Simulating the familiar scene of “meeting for a drink,” some participants coordinated with their dating partner in holding a drink in hand during their first video chats. With drinks visible on both sides of the screen, they reported finding the chats more “date-ish” than usual, as they often experienced video chats as too focused or too purposeful due to the lack of distractions. An embodied performance engaging props easily accessible at home, drinking adjusted the context of a video chat, which boasts relatively bounded spatial-temporal boundaries for interaction yet lacking in its symbolic association with dating.

Other common dating rituals carried on include grooming and getting dressed up. Although doing so might seem at first glance barely noticeable, let alone impactful, for video chats, freshening oneself up behind the cameras can sometimes unexpectedly refresh the mood of the interactions. Wendy, a data analyst in her mid-twenties, fondly recalled an exchange at the beginning of her first video chat with a Tinder connection who she had never met:

I did my first-date shirt, because I got my shirt I wear for my first dates, so I put on my first-date shirt...Hahaha I know! Even the dude too was like, “oh I showered before this, but I was talking to my friend like ‘this is so silly why would I—like I don’t need to shower!’” hahaha “like you can’t smell me.” I was like “thanks I appreciated your showering.”

By performing rituals associated with the excitement and nerves of meeting someone new somewhere nice, even before turning on their cameras, Wendy and her date oriented the video chat to a context that seemed so out of context, conferring on the chat the embodied anticipation of a first date. Meanwhile, regardless of how cute her first-date shirt looked and how fresh her date’s post-shower body smelled, they were

circumscribed by digital affordances in accessing the sensory effects of the other's actions. Instead, anticipating the legibility of their actions as both standard dating moves and special efforts with questionable efficacy under quarantine, they verbally threw into comic relief the incongruity between the performance of dating rituals and quarantine. In this way, they successfully coordinated in extending their relational narratives with something of a first date, while turning the disjuncture between the script and the temporal landscape into a point of resonance.

Rather than simply taking a page from the dating script, some participants imported novel activities to facilitate progression from the texting-only relational stage. Pablo, the business consultant who articulated the template of pre-pandemic dating, felt “weirded out” when a woman from Hinge asked him to FaceTime. Like many other participants, he had long reserved video chat for family members or established partners—a common relational ordering of media of communication (Burchell, 2017). Perhaps having sensed his hesitance, the woman did not insist but instead initiated a dance duel over TikTok:

She was very like clearly a very outgoing person, like very funny...She sent me a video and I was like “fuck it, I’m just gonna do one of these.” So I danced on my own here [in my home] hahaha. And like I sent her a video. It was fun. And we um FaceTimed.

Sending the video without prompt, the woman instigated the intensification of the relationship. An asynchronous mode of communication, exchanging Tiktok videos entailed much lower commitment to performance time than FaceTime, leaving Pablo more room to formulate responses. At the same time, contrasting texting, videos afforded a vivid display of dancing, an embodied act evocative of having fun care-free in public, tempting Pablo with a less formal mode of dating and a more joyful quarantine existence. Effective through both its content and form, her creative action of importing dancing into dating prompted Pablo to assent to the proposed change in their interactional pattern by reciprocating with his own dance video and then getting on board with their first video chat. They realigned in developing their relational narratives.

Rather than resorting to an intermediary form of digital mediation, other participants transitioned their dating relationships into the phase of video-chatting by making novel uses of the affordances of videotelephony. Alison, a tech entrepreneur in her early thirties, enjoyed an unusual first date with a man from Hinge on Zoom:

Oh my god you are gonna think I’m such a weirdo...Long story short, he was having a costume Zoom party with his friends. And so we were joking about that before we had our Zoom date, and then he suggested that we do one for us...He came up with one that has this safari theme...then I made a joke about making it a BDSM theme, which he then thought was hilarious. So we made a combination safari-and-BDSM costume date...Hahaha very PG for the possible range of things but [I] have to say it’s one of the more enjoyable times that I ever had in preparing for a date!

For Alison, the fun (Fine & Corte, 2017) began earlier than the chat in homemade costumes. The idea of a “costume Zoom party,” borrowed from a real Zoom event for friends, initiated a creative collaboration that assured each other elements of surprise as well as alignment in protention for a first video chat. Specifically, framing a video chat this way mobilized a wider range of dramaturgical props available at home and demarcated a shared stage for being a “weirdo”—that is, with judgment and norms suspended. When Alison and the man turned on the cameras, they were already co-conspirators about to appreciate the product of a collusion. Their departure from the script quickened rapport-building, giving rise to a sense of ease enviable to many couples with much longer history. In this sense, they telescoped the relational progression where the comfort to be bold and naughty typically transpired more slowly.

In addition to importing novel embodied performances, some dating partners built on the synchronous audio access afforded by videotelephony to introduce new discursive formats. Sylvia, a high school teacher in her early forties, recounted receiving an email right before her first video chat on Zoom with a man from Tinder:

He sent me an agenda, for like topics we should talk about, I was like “oh?! okay!”...Do you wanna know what was on the agenda? (Interviewer: You still have it?) Yeah I saved it! ‘Cuz I thought it’s a really good idea!

Ranging from movies for guilty pleasure to deal-breakers in dating, the long agenda alternates between prompts for humorous anecdotes and demands for serious takes on relationships. Sylvia felt that they learned a lot about each other and was impressed with his explicit intentionality.

Taking a less structured yet no less effective approach, Adrian, a programmer in his early thirties, initiated a game at the beginning of his first FaceTime date with a Hinge connection: they took turns to ask each other new questions, except a “joker,” meaning one chance for each side to turn the tables and pose the question to the other. Adrian was very pleased with his idea:

[on pre-pandemic first dates] You go through all these social layers and decorum that—When you are just video chatting this person [this way], you don’t have to go through that and you just talk about whatever you [want to] talk about. It’s pretty cool.

Meeting for a first video chat could have made the common dread of first dates, such as small talk going nowhere or flirting falling flat, harder to manage. In response, the participants and their dates pre-programmed the protentions of their screen time with the format of question-and-answer games foreign to dating and familiar in larger social gatherings. By prescribing either the topics for discussion or the order of turn-taking, they allotted both parties equal footing in conversations with the assurance of the mutuality of engagement. By curating topics ample in both gravitas and levity or inserting twists and turns by way of game rules, they provoked each other with humor and bolder self-disclosure. Accordingly, Sylvia got in touch with her date’s curiosity and Adrian no longer felt compelled to tread carefully with his curiosity. Replacing implicit interest with deliberate inquiries and unsaid “social layers” with agreed-upon

game mechanics, the creative actions laid down the tracks for the smooth flow of conversations as well as the emergence of relational narratives highlighting more rapid buildup of familiarity.

The adoption of video chat spatial-temporally demarcated the situations for interaction. But some participants took the approximation of dating script further by reassembling in-person dating rituals, while others departed from the script and imported props or choreographies that made the video chat at once a date and a game. With both types of creative action, they enriched the context of video chats through embodied performances. And they executed an update in the relational stage, which, in some cases, even overshot the scripted progression when novel activities galvanized rapport-building.

### Carrying on with the stage of video chat

As the first video chat heralded a new relational stage, some participants did not dwell on it for long before meeting up offline (e.g. Alison, after one video chat) or ending the relationship (e.g. Sylvia, after two); video chat in these cases made an interim stage, a quick checkpoint before resuming the dating script. In this section, however, I focus on those who spent weeks or even months video-chatting. To sustain their dating relationships, the participants enacted a mixture of the two types of creative action as introduced above but approximated a greater variety of date venues and imported activities at once novel and private. Yet doing so did not exempt them from the perceived friction between the accumulation of shared time and intimacy and the narrative demand of the conventional dating script.

Days before quarantine, Nellie, a tech worker in her early thirties, had her first date with a man from Hinge at a local eatery. Moving from the brick-and-mortar restaurant to FaceTime, they had a string of video chats initiated by the man, who again offered to buy her dinner: “he would find out what I want for dinner and have that delivered to my apartment [through food delivery apps]...it was a nice gesture.” Will, a salesman in his early thirties, refrained from meeting his one-time coffee date from Grindr for over a month due to the latter’s daily contact with his elderly mother. He described their video dates as “quite similar” to eventual in-person dates at home: “...we’d order from the same restaurant or the same type of cuisine, like ok we are having sushi tonight or we are having Thai this time or pizza whatever.” Having connected through GROWLr (a dating app for gay men), Leo, a retail manager in his early twenties, established a daily video chat routine with a man living in a different country under quarantine. During one such chat, upon uncovering their shared interest in British comedies, they hopped on Netflix and turned on Netflix Party (now rebranded as TeleParty), a browser extension synchronizing video playback and adding real-time chats next to the video in screening.

Whether it is to wine and dine the date or to watch a movie together, these classic date scenes were set up by splicing multiple digital interfaces to constitute the spatial-temporal boundaries of the interactions. While the interactions remained anchored in synchronous video chats, the activation of portals to a wealth of on-demand movies or restaurants offering deliveries layered the video chats with circuits of digital content. Embedded in the digital map of one’s neighborhood or organized into catalogs



of colorful titles, the digital content sustained and enriched the experiences of mutual focus and made the interaction contexts more immersive.

The continuously replenished contexts entailed coordinated performances through which the classic date scenes were brought to life. In selecting, sending, receiving, and consuming virtual or material goods digitally inventoried, the dating partners were assisted by the legibility of stock dating activities to coordinate temporally as well as corporeally. Meanwhile, without the bodily orientations available to physical co-presence, their coordination drew on the functionalities specific to each digital platform: skipping seating next to each other in the theater, they watched the progress bars moving in alignment and texts of their chitchats accumulating in tandem; instead of looking into the same menus, they searched for the same cuisines after setting the search areas on food delivery apps to their respective or targeted neighborhoods. While maintaining the romantic upside of their relationships through interactions evocative of the dating script, their digitally reassembly of in-person dating rituals added more deliberation and originality to dating by the script per Pablo's account of pre-pandemic dating.

In addition to reassembling dating rituals, participants have imported practices from other contexts to sustain relationships that remained online only. Ann, a lawyer in her late twenties, saw two of her faraway Tinder connections unexpectedly grow into lasting online companions who regularly met with her via FaceTime; "we shared reading recommendations and essays and music, and I painted a portrait of one of them, like a full exchange happening." Ben, a graduate student in his mid-twenties, referred to his month-long relationship with a Hinge connection as "the closest thing that you could come to intimacy without it." They consciously diversified their activities over Zoom; "so our plan for the next one is um we are probably gonna like cook the same dish, video chat while we are doing it, and compare whose [dish] looks better at the end." Gigi, a freelance writer in her late twenties, had been having video dates with a "dude from Hinge" that often included a yoga segment, where they synced up their movements; "When you do the same postures with someone else together, it's a shared experience even if you are not in the same room. It did make us feel like we are in on something I think."

Blurring the boundaries between physical and virtual space, the participants and their dates imported into video chats personal hobbies or house chores. Alternative to activating portals to digital content, they redrew the spatial boundaries of their interactions by extending the depth of field of the screens to the interiors of their homes. With synchronous visual and audio access, they converted painting, cooking, and yoga, which often make solo activities at home, into coordinated performances. Coordinating corporeal motions with a would-be lover, with eyes trained to each other's body movement, to the point of synchronicity, evoked a sense of sensuality and togetherness (Collins, 2014) particularly engaging in a time of physical isolation. Compared to creative actions importing novel ways to dress up or to converse for a first video chat, the actions here projected a different relational stage by inviting the dating partner to share a piece of private life.

Furthermore, performing mundane routines together in the context of dating enlivened the imaginations of shared futures. Unlike the public venues where early dating was conventionally carried out, these coordinated performances were for the couples'

eyes only, tucked away in their own homes. The creative actions thus conferred on the protentions within the interactions the semblance of long-cultivated familiarity mixed with a giddy conspiracy in rehearsing a possible future together; as if “we are in on something,” as Gigi aptly put it. As such, romance, in its literal meaning a quality of excitement and mystery removed from everyday life, was spun out of the incongruity between the humdrum yet private connotations of daily routines and the sparks and suspense promised by dating. As the couples fell into step with each other in performing these activities regularly, interactions infused with romantic tensions amounted to the narratives of in-depth relationships taking roots—“a full exchange happening.”

Nevertheless, as steady as the pace of video chat attained or as intense as the feelings of intimacy grew, the interactional patterns as well as the relational narratives formed around these relationships remained precarious under the pull of the pre-pandemic dating script. Having spent little to no time with their dating partners in person, the participants perceived dissonance between the absence of physical closeness and the romantic framing of their relationships. As intensifying physical intimacy defines movement from one relational stage to another in the script, they were strained in making sense of their weeks-long or even months-long relationships in reference to the script. Accordingly, before meeting up in person was explicitly discussed and planned, the question over the future possibilities of doing so hung over their interactions, threatening to unsettle the status quo.

Gus, a graduating college senior, found himself in such a state. He connected via Tinder with a healthcare worker in a different city a three hour drive away. Soon after she was quarantined for Covid infection, they started having regular video chats, where she introduced to him movies from her culture. He wondered:

You don’t know when this shit [the pandemic] is gonna end, so basically you are just holding on and hoping that maybe this [meeting in-person] would actually come to fruition. But we haven’t talked about anything like that... Maybe she is still feeling me out or—You never know people may just feel bored.

Gus was clearly taken with the woman; after I stopped recording during our interview, he awkwardly asked me, a woman originally from an Asian country just like her, if he could infer significant interest in him from her given that she had been introducing him to her culture. Yet, to him, the sure sign of his feeling being reciprocated remained the woman’s wish to meet him in person. Their creative action sustaining and deepening the relationship failed to alter his expectation of scripted relationship development. Without the assurance of coordination in following the script, he vacillated between looking to the temporal landscape for explanations and digging into the contents of their interactions for more clues of her feelings. The affordances of video-telephony reached its limit when the dating script asserted its grip through the sense of unfinished business haunting relational narratives without the transition offline.

The clash between the moralization of video chat as a responsible way to date during quarantine (Duguay et al., 2022) and the demand of the dating script for physical closeness had indeed complicated the consideration for meeting offline. But ultimately, just like in cases absent multiple video chats, whether or how the participants

in this section met in person rested more on factors external to interaction contexts. Except for two where the relationships had something of a happy ending, what did appear consistent across cases was the precarity of the interpretations of the substantial time together online. Throughout the interviews, the participants shifted between reveling in the meaningfulness of the experiences despite the script and discounting its romantic implications because of the script. For example, in recounting the first meeting in person with her virtual yoga partner of two months days before the interview— they remained six feet apart per their mutual agreement—Gigi let out a comment on their relationship in a slightly sarcastic singsong voice: “...we are still just like friends, who talk on the phone, you know.” Indeed, without physical intimacy, “just like friends” made sense for their relationship history according to the script.

Sustaining relationships online without a clear plan to meet offline inspired creative actions further expanding the affordances of video chat. Some dating partners overlaid video chat with flows of digital content, assembling classic date scenes while ensuring prolonged mutual immersion. Some extended the view of video chat deep into each other’s residence for the coordinated performance of hobbies or chores, whose import interpenetrated with the context of dating, teasing them with domestic scenes seductively intimate and potentially in store. The relational narratives woven through the interactions, however, still fell short in mitigating the disjuncture between dating and quarantine, owing to the absence of physical co-presence—an insurmountable limit of the digital affordances.

### **Inventing an asynchronous form of intimacy**

Not every participant reassembled dating rituals to approximate relational progression from texting as prescribed by the dating script. Caught between the desire to maintain some form of intimacy and the reluctance to make any form of relational commitment, a few participants and their dating partners avoided video chat and enacted dating rituals in asynchronous forms. Creatively mobilizing multimedia digital mediation to constrain the deepening of relationships, they cultivated intimacy as well as ambiguities in relational narratives in coordination with quarantine, a rupture full of uncertainties of its own.

Experienced in hookups but never in virtual forms, Sasha, a nonbinary trans freelancer in filmmaking in their mid-twenties, saw a texting relationship with a Tinder connection turn sexual during quarantine. The sexual liaisons were composed of erotically charged texts and voice messages interspersed with photos and video clips. On their choice of media, they explained:

...we brought up the idea of FaceTiming—that’s like the obvious choice right? But we kinda felt like there was too much pressure...If you are FaceTiming and suddenly you have to look into the eyes of someone that you’ve never met and say dirty words to them—you know what I mean?! So instead of FaceTime I got creative with myself. I got to use my phone to choose how I was presenting myself.

They further revealed an initially unexpected benefit of this particular form of hook-ups: the absence of physical co-presence, coupled with the full control over self-exposure, compelled detailed communications over sexual preferences and fantasies. Such communicative measures precluded the risk of unintended physical contact or bodily exposure, both of which would distress a trans individual who suffered from dysphoria.

Similarly, Beibei, a college senior in her early twenties who enjoyed casual sex prior to quarantine, refused to participate in sex on video with men from dating apps. She opted to share photos of exposed body parts polished to her satisfaction through photo-editing apps to control her image and to avoid being secretly videotaped. Moreover, to trace the potential circulation of the photos to pornographic websites, she used the same apps to mark the photos with different texts (e.g., “baby”) or symbols (e.g., a heart)—tokens of affection doubled as forensic trackers.

Avoiding video chat, the creative actions of Sasha and Beibei reassembled sexual encounters with the asynchronous exchange of digital objects. Compared to that of the interactions in the previous section, the boundaries of their encounters were sporadically distributed over time yet more tightly managed in the visual access to their bodies, with the angles, coverages, and durations solely and individually determined. Moreover, their embodied performances were interwoven with layers of digital mediation, with the representations of bodies edited by software, affective expressions notated with emojis, and sexual atmospheres constituted completely by the sensory effects derived from the digital objects. Additionally, anticipating strangers as potential audiences, they inscribed in the digital mediation precautionary measures against the unwanted consumption of their performances; for Sasha, asynchronicity against the violation of their gender identity, and for Beibei, digital signature against the prospect of privacy breach. They creatively located a middle ground between indulging in sexual encounters and “guarding” the trajectories of the interactions against unwanted outcomes (Hart, 2021).

Meanwhile, with deliberation, their creative actions constrained the relational narratives in development. Neither of them were interested in intensifying the relationships further—at least no further than the eventual end of quarantine. Beibei put the coordination of quarantine and dating in particularly sober terms:

On one hand [we] both know without saying it out loud that it’s not a long-term serious relationship. On the other hand [we] can’t do hookups. So neither physical nor emotional relationships are possible... So [we] just make do with a “thing” for now, almost like a smartphone pet.

As the asynchronous back-and-forth blurred the boundaries of situations, sexual interactions stretched over time into relationships. Yet such relationships dwelled in being primarily sexual; the digital affordances assembled, which scaffolded the continuation of the relationships, also limited the reach of communication behind the stage personas and stymied the demonstration of the mutuality of engagement. Contrasting the creative actions in the last section affording the unfiltered display of corporeal engagement, Sasha and Beibei restricted the screen presence of dating partners to a predefined narrow range of interactions à la Tamagotchi-style “smart-

phone pets.” In doing so, they encapsulated the relationships to quarantine by tying a moving expiration date to the quarantine’s eventual end.

Nevertheless, sentiments at the beginning of relationships are rarely clear-cut. Without a resolute relational narrative in mind, some participants enlisted digital means to pass on conventional romantic gestures while veiling the romantic sentiments. After HJ, an engineer in his early thirties, connected with a woman on *Coffee Meets Bagel*, they quickly found out their shared passion for *Animal Crossing (AC)*, a social simulation video game situating players in a digital town where they make friends, run businesses, and build communities. The bulk of their interactions moved there, melding with the daily operation of the virtual society. Acutely aware of the fragility of connections from dating apps, HJ considered AC an ideal environment to sustain their relationship during quarantine:

On AC...we don’t actually have a lot of one-on-one interactions. But like, when she said she liked musical instruments, I would—if I have anything music-related in my store—I’ll send it to her. And she also sent me things. It’s just... just very simple friendship – not really friendship, we think about each other, but like friends.

The ambiguity of the relationship was evident, and HJ was resistant to place it on any relational stage in the dating script. Having assumed the role of a fellow inhabitant of a virtual community, he provided a paralleling script to reference his actions. This script was afforded by the video game, comprising predefined roles, the digital doubles of material goods, and seemingly organically recurring opportunities for interactions that are executed with specific steps. With a simple login and a game avatar, HJ was able to assemble the occasions, contents, and enactment of gift-giving, a dating ritual expressive of romantic interests, without either strategic planning or explicit definition of their relationship. In the meantime, consistent with his ambiguous relational anticipation, their interactions stayed multivocal. The occasions for interactions were integrated into the day-to-days through the constant accessibility of the virtual community, which was simultaneously demarcated from the real world, as reflected by the independence of its operation from the temporal landscape, namely, the murky prospect of quarantine. Accordingly, the performances of acts like gift-giving could be interpreted as both romantic gestures and game tasks. The juxtaposition of gaming and dating allowed HJ to engage in a systematic relational construction while keeping the accumulation of interactions from falling into the unequivocal relational narrative of dating.

The dating partners in this section introduced variations into their interactional patterns but maintained a strictly asynchronous mode of communication. By keeping the visual access to themselves intermittent and partial, they obstructed the interactive intensification of emotional investment. By limiting the mode of representation to premade digital objects, they prevented the embodied performances, sweet or sexual, from provoking the further mutual exposure. Creatively constraining relationship development with digital affordances, they reassembled in-person dating rituals yet shielded their relational narratives, too monothematic to last beyond quarantine or too ambiguous to formalize within quarantine, from the narrative pull of the script.

## Emancipating dating routines from the dating script

As quarantine disrupted almost all areas of life, some creative actions adapting dating routines were oriented to resuscitating the protentions of free spatial mobility and the projects hinging on such mobility. Rearranging and reinterpreting the use of dating apps, the participants exported routine app engagement to a variety of other contexts sharing the theme of digital transportation. Pairing imagination with the creative organization of interaction, they emancipated the trademark dating routines in the digital era from the pre-pandemic dating script.

Preoccupied with job-hunting, Irene, a master student in her early twenties about to graduate, had little interest in dating relationships. She nevertheless turned to dating apps soon after her city was placed under lockdown:

I was just bored, and I wanted to see people's faces I guess, people who I don't know...I feel I just lost that, that experience of just seeing strangers. I feel like I'm kinda mimicking seeing people on the street, when I scroll—swipe I guess—seeing new faces.

Swiping, a common feature among dating apps, is an effortless finger movement on the touchscreen of smartphones to the left or right, enforcing a simplification of the choice of dating partners into binary responses to visual stimuli (David & Cambre, 2016). In Irene's case, swiping was less about dating than experiencing the motion and the visual stimuli. By setting up her own profile and swiping through others', she performed a common dating practice that assembled on her smartphone screen arrays of photos of strangers. The spatial proximity of the strangers, ensured and displayed by the location-tracking function of the app, became the pivot for her reinterpretation of app engagement. The resulting protentions approximated the rhythm and vision of wading through the flows of passers-by, distant yet within reach, conjuring up a tenuous sense of closeness to fellow city dwellers. Irene appropriated dating app engagement to imagine an alternative temporal landscape.

Other participants used dating apps to remedy the interruption of projects of longer and wider reach (Mische, 2009; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Before two of her dating app connections unexpectedly developed into “full-on exchange,” Ann was looking for “temporary connections” only, which she made explicit on her Tinder profile. By the time of the interview, she had been alone in her NYC apartment for more than a month after two roommates moved back to their hometowns. While giving me a glimpse of her living room via FaceTime, she muttered, “this is my whole world.” An avid traveler, she had also been coming to terms with the increasingly likely cancellation of a trip across Europe. Under these circumstances, she turned on Tinder Passport, a paid feature of the app made free during quarantine, to browse profiles globally:

And with that I talked to a lot of different people, and I'm like bobbing around all over the world. It's a really fascinating thing too to just see like the different tropes that come up in different cities.

She was particularly interested in how people in other countries coped with strict quarantine measures; “I feel like New Yorkers and Italians are kinda commiserating.” As she tried on different location settings, she posted on Facebook the map interface of Tinder updated with a pin dropped at each additional city that she “visited,” as if sharing a travel itinerary.

Oriented less to potential romance than the exploration of the locales beyond her physical reach, Ann reenacted globetrotting on Tinder by reorganizing and reinterpreting its functionalities. Specifically, she performed traveling to specific destinations by changing the search area of the dating app, simulated sightseeing by browsing through algorithmically curated profile photos of local users, and acquainted herself with the local customs and anecdotes by striking up chats with them. She organized her Tinder connections first and foremost by geolocation rather than relational potentialities, and consistently highlighted geographically specific contents that emerged in the chats. In performing routine app engagement as sequenced traveling practices, she connected the dating app to the context of traveling.

Moreover, Ann enrolled Facebook in extending her creative course of actions beyond Tinder. She set up a new frontier for interactions where the digital documentation of her app engagement became interactional resources and her Facebook friends the audience. The documentation via web mapping substantiated the “footprint” of her digital trail with visual representations contrasting and expanding her “whole world” of a living room. Posting the analogues of travel itineraries solidified the context of traveling by securing community recognition as well as investment in project progression. Shifting between interactions across two platforms, Ann cemented the ontology of her “digital trips” materially and symbolically.

While Ann made a project of solo travel out of digital affordances, Zach, an academic in his early thirties, developed a program of group adventures. Once every week since quarantine started, he and two other friends who lived in different corners of the country gathered on Skype to go on “Tinder voyages”: they would pick a foreign city, coordinate their Tinder location settings, and then exchange experiences while browsing through the profiles of local women and chatting them up. Once, they experimented with “visiting” each other’s own city –

Like I went to Arizona, Arizona guy went to NYC, NYC guy went here. We all played Tinder in each other’s cities. Then we would ask each other like hey have you seen this, like what’s her name? Oh like we went on a date once! Oh that’s someone from my department!

Although Zach similarly repurposed dating app engagement to enact traveling, he further transposed the digital trips into the context of reunions with friends. The interstices of asynchronous interactions on Tinder allowed Zach & co. to maintain synchronous interactions mediated by Skype. And the location awareness of Tinder enabled them to inject into their congregation on Skype simulated spatial mobility, enriching the context with a sense of companionship in joint adventures. Their real-time Tinder activities served as fodder for the conviviality of the meetings, and being each other’s audiences via Skype constrained deviation from the revised use and meanings of the app engagement. In the instance of their simultaneous forays into



each other's local dating scenes, their coordinated visits, during which the common nodes in their dating networks materialized, recast chats on the app into channels into each other's life. A throwback to the origin story of Tinder (Stampler, 2014), Zach & co. turned the project of dating into a game among friends—except that the game coordinated the protentions for friends kept physically apart.

A change of scene on dating apps, however, afforded a temporary relief from not only boredom and loneliness but also precarity and stagnancy. Some participants appropriated dating routines to reclaim a sense of control over the progression of their interrupted careers. Brian, a salesman in his mid-twenties, had been strategizing over relocation since pre-pandemic; he was looking to transfer through promotion to Seattle, another location of his firm. Between swiping for dating in his current city, he changed the target location on Tinder to Seattle to inquire into the local living conditions, from neighborhoods to “the gay scene.”

In another more extreme example of life in limbo, Natasha, a Canadian in her mid-twenties who worked for an NGO in Europe, was forced to stay with her extended family in DC when a sudden international travel ban canceled the connecting flight to her hometown. Then two weeks into the stay, her work position was terminated. Stuck, unemployed, and turned off by invitations from local Hinge users to meet offline, she positioned her account in Los Angeles. She had planned to visit the city, where she dreamed of pursuing a career in art. She allowed her Hinge feeds to be populated with the profiles of LA men (“They are so pretty!”) and messages with them. Unable to pursue her aspirations, at least she could feel like “We are in LA!”

With no end in sight for quarantine, Brian and Natasha channeled their professional pursuits into dating app engagement. The apps' location services served as the interpretive linkage, concatenating interactions with different users into a unifying project of relocation. Specifically, for Brian, whose project had a clear pathway, resetting the search area of Tinder activated remote location scouting, through which he harvested practical knowledge. Natasha, by contrast, confronted by uncertainties from multiple fronts, leaned more into the sensory dimensions of app use—not to exert volition in shaping the project (Mische, 2009) but to get in touch with the imagination of carrying it out. The adaptability of Hinge interfaces to the new location setting, as shown through the photos of LA men flooding her phone screen and the notifications of messages filling her inbox, helped her perform inhabiting LA as well as her hopes and dreams. The creative use of dating apps alleviated the dissonance between career projects and quarantine.

Confined to their physical residences and current stations in life, the participants adapted routine dating app engagement to construct multiple contexts other than dating. These contexts configured digital transportation by drawing from the location awareness, digital objects, and asynchronicity of interaction afforded by dating apps and other technologies. Disembedding dating routines from the dating script, the creative actions systematically infused the material reorganization of digitally mediated interactions with the imagination of protentions and projects backlogged under quarantine.

## Conclusion and discussion

Online dating during quarantine presents a bundle of problems for dating partners with little history: how to sustain interactions, how to experience fun and intimacy, how to anticipate relational trajectories—all while remaining physically apart. The dating script prevalent in pre-pandemic times, the culturally institutionalized interactional patterns, no longer afforded ready-made solutions. In this article, based on 52 interviews, I argue that dating partners creatively mobilized digital affordances to approximate the script in organizing interactions, which allowed the formulation of relational narratives with varying deviation from the script.

In order to analyze how participants solve the problems in online dating during quarantine, I draw from the interactionist literature to identify the necessary conditions for the creative organization of interaction where relationship development is part of the pretext, if not the stake. One condition is the coordination of the futures to which interacting actors are oriented (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). In this case, such futures include protentions or the anticipation of the immediate next moments, relational narratives, and the prospect of quarantine. The other is creative action, defined by pragmatists as the adaptation of habitual responses to challenges in indeterminate situations (Dalton, 2004; Joas, 1996; Strand & Lizardo, 2015). Creative action entails making meaningful yet novel association between a cultural object and an interaction context (McDonnell et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2019).

With the two conditions as the analytical categories, I identify three types of creative action in the data, each a mechanism (Gross, 2009) through which habits and conventions are converted into creative actions: (1) reassembling in-person dating rituals, (2) importing practices from other areas of life, and (3) exporting dating routines to the context of digital transportation. The first two types facilitated the incorporation of video chat into relationships that were previously sustained through texting only. Such a change in the interactional pattern approximated relational progression in the dating script defined in terms of intensified physical contact. The first type of creative action was also enacted in asynchronous forms, altering the stage-based dating process to check the escalation of relationships. The third type emancipated dating app engagement from the narrative demand of the dating script altogether. Coordinating the futures, creative actions customized relational narratives.

Furthermore, taking an affordance approach, I disaggregate each mechanism of creative action into the material and cognitive engagement with three aspects of digital affordances: the dissolution of the spatial-temporal boundaries of interaction, the production and circulation of digital objects, and the connection of contexts. I develop the analytical framework by building on the resurging scholarly attention in cultural sociology to the role of materiality in meaning-making (McDonnell, 2023). I also draw on the fast-growing literature across social sciences on digital affordances and interaction (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Schwarz, 2021), which documents the distinction of digitally mediated interaction. Synthesizing these two bodies of literature, I view the three aspects of digital affordances as opportunities for corporeal engagement and meaning-making to inform each other in new ways: the management of the spatial-temporal boundaries modulated the degree of resemblance of online interactions to in-person dating as well as the potentiality of relational escalation.

The production and circulation of digital objects constituted embodied performances recognizable as common dating practices, which at the same time assembled digital trips. The connection between contexts enabled the evocation of classic date scenes as well as the interpenetration between the dating context and the import of practices from other areas of life. The customization of relational narratives thrived on the different ways in which dating partners drew on digital affordances to approximate and deviate from the dating script, materially and symbolically.

This article uses online dating during quarantine as an empirical case to study the creative opportunities afforded by digital technologies to transform institutionalized interactional patterns. Put in the words of Fine and Tavory (2019), it joins the interactionist line of inquiry attending to “how interaction fits into and flits around obdurate structures, as well as to sense its potentialities to take new shapes.” And it extends the interactionist project by examining digitally mediated interaction. Due to the design of the study and the limit of the data, I was unable to compare the interactional patterns of dating partners across more relational stages. To better account for the interplay between digital affordances and the temporal structure of dating, future research should consider tracing the changing creative opportunities in interaction for dating partners who have hit more “relationship milestones.”

Furthermore, though outside the scope of this article, the study offered some clues to the mechanisms through which broader social categories, such as gender and sexuality, work in online interaction. For example, Sasha, self-identified as transgender nonbinary, relished the creative opportunity in asynchronous sexual encounters to express themselves without the risk of unwanted exposure. By contrast, Beibei, a straight woman, had to manage the risk of the unwanted circulation of digital objects in interactions organized in a similar manner. Moving beyond studying how the use of the same technological feature varies by certain social categories (Licoppe, 2020), future studies could examine how the opportunities and constraints for relationship-building vary by different groups in digitally mediated interaction with the same organization for the same social context. Such an approach may uncover whether and how inequality is disrupted or reproduced in the digital space (Zheng & Walsham, 2021).

Moreover, the framework consisting of the three aspects of digital affordances could be applied to the study of scripted interactional patterns in contexts beyond dating. For example, future studies could inquire into how digitally mediated interaction enables and constrains innovation in remote work: online teaching, online company meetings, online doctors’ appointments, etc. Given that different contexts demand different cultural skills and support different norms, it is unclear to what extent the three aspects of digital affordances remain viable channels for creativity. It is also worth studying if the absence of physical co-presence, the ultimate constraint for adapting dating to the digital space, affects the coordination of relational anticipation in other contexts in the same way, or whether other significant constraints emerge from the online adaptation of different interactional patterns.

In addition, the framework connects the scholarly interest in the materiality of cultural objects to the broad phenomenon of hyperconnectivity (Brubaker, 2022). Cultural objects constituted by or experienced with digital technologies are proliferating (e.g. NFTs). And the framework presents pathways through which material-

ity and cognition interact (Griswold et al., 2013) in digitally mediated interaction. Future research could focus on the digitalization of familiar cultural objects, such as gift-giving or virtual travel; the framework can help explore how, compared to their offline counterparts, the digitized objects are differentially “enrolled into programs of actions” and afford different openness in meanings (McDonnell, 2023).

At the same time, this article deepens the pragmatist engagement (Dalton, 2004; Joas, 1996) in interactionist theory by attending to the coordination of the futures to which creative actions are oriented (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Specifically, it focuses on the creative management of the dissonance between relational scripts and other future orientations in online dating. The study points to the pragmatist conception of creative action as a useful analytical category to identify the concrete mechanisms through which interacting actors coordinate futures in digitally mediated interaction (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). With the design of the study, it was difficult to assess to what extent the disjuncture between the relational narratives of interacting actors was shifted by creative actions. Future studies could devise alternative research designs to examine how and with what consequences creative actions manage the mismatch in relational anticipation in online interaction.

The article also highlights the relationship between interacting actors as a source of catalysts and constraints on creative action, which so far has escaped the pragmatist attention to the genesis of creativity (Brett, 2022; Leschziner & Green, 2013). Future analysis of the interplay between context, cognition, and action should attend to the relational narratives maintained by or tied to interaction. Future studies could also draw on social contexts other than dating where relationship development is at stake; for example, interactions between family, colleagues, or professionals and their clients.

Additionally, the study offers an analytical framework to study the mobilization of digital technologies in response to catastrophic events. In several cases participants actively strategized over the coordination of futures with digital technologies to cope with quarantine, a phase of “rupture” or “what is this thing that is happening?” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2021). Some fragmented interactions to ward off the intensification of dating prior to the eventual end of quarantine. Some sought to protect the momentum of dating from the disorienting temporalities of quarantine by merging dating and everyday routines. This study suggests that digital affordances supply alternative manners to relate “inchoate ruptures” to “conventional temporal frameworks” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2021). In recent years, there has been an alarming increase worldwide in the frequency and scale of catastrophes (Marwan, 2022), leaving not only trails of material damage but also temporal disorientation that caused inaction (Koslov, 2019). Future research should pay more attention to how individuals and groups come up with digital solutions to rehabilitate or reconfigure different areas of life when the taken-for-granted temporalities are upended.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interests** The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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