Chapter 4
'Swiping Right'—The Ethics of Using Tinder as a Recruitment Tool in the Field

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Abstract This article delves into the risks and pitfalls of using dating apps as participant recruitment tools in the field. To source people who worked in Kazakhstan's oil industry for my Ph.D. research in 2018, I made use of various popular social media apps such as Facebook and LinkedIn as well as the dating app Tinder. In an effort to "normalise" heterodox recruiting methods, in this essay, I seek to openly discuss how Tinder helped me recruit women working in the oil sector who, under less informal circumstances, would not have agreed to talk to me for my research.

Keywords Kazakhstan · Oil · Labour · Tinder · Fieldwork

Introduction

When I carried out fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in Kazakhstan, I knew I had to navigate a half-familiar environment. I had spent a year in Almaty to complete a double-degree master's programme just four years earlier and had been following current affairs and maintained friendships and contacts in the country since then. Yet, my research scope had expanded geographically and narrowed disciplinarily, which meant that my existing contacts only represented, at best, a gateway to the sources I would need for the qualitative aspect of my research.

In Kazakhstan, I knew I would be facing obstacles typical of an authoritarian country. In the context of doing fieldwork, Menga linked the authoritarian setting with Bentham's panopticon, an "effective system of surveillance, based on the principle that power should be visible but also unverifiable" (Menga, 2020, 345. See also Hervouet, 2019, 95). Within the context of an authoritarian country, which roots its GDP growth in hydrocarbon exports, my research on labour, trade unions and precarity could be identified as a hostile topic by both oil companies and the authorities. In 2011, special forces shot at striking oil workers in the town square

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of Zhanaozen, killing at least 17. Oil enterprises, especially transnational companies (TNCs), often discourage trade union membership upon hiring their employees (Sorbello, 2021). Talking to workers in the oil sector, in certain contexts, could have put them at risk and could have created problems for me as well. Giulio Regeni, a former Ph.D. candidate at the University of Cambridge who was researching labour issues in Egypt was killed by the country's security services in January 2016, just months before I started my Ph.D. journey at the University of Glasgow and exactly two years before my fieldwork kicked off. Regeni's murder had prompted universities to be stricter, more focussed on reducing risks (Menga, 2020, 347). As such, the University of Glasgow emphasised the need for an air-tight ethics foundation for my own field research on labour issues in Kazakhstan.

My previous connections were the starting point for my research, the way I set in motion the so-called "snowball effect". Out of 115 interviews that contributed to my work (more on how I counted them below), 100 were the result of domino effects, with sources advising me to contact someone and giving me their number. Some were impromptu attempts to speak to someone at a conference or in a business centre. Several came through cold-contacting people on social media, mostly LinkedIn and Facebook (the expert and professional community I targeted was still using Facebook in 2018).

The following section of the article explores the ethical questions that arose from recruiting via social media platforms. In the third section, I address my experience of using Tinder as a recruiting tool for sources and how I navigated my positionality as well as mitigated ethical pitfalls in the process.

Social Media Recruiting and Ethics

The objective of lengthy academic ethics processes is to ensure that the universities are protected from any responsibility. At the University of Glasgow, the ethics board wanted me to establish clear paths to obtain consent and to ensure my own safety. The university also wanted me to take measures to establish clear communication with my sources and make sure they understood the purpose of our meetings. Aware of the risks, especially concerning local sources, I took the liberty of reversing the above-mentioned objectives: my foremost goal was to protect the people I spoke to, recognizing that complete protection is unattainable. Second, I worried about my own security; third, I worried about the university's reputation. I implemented this strategy when recruiting sources in person and online, a process that proved difficult despite my previous study experience in Kazakhstan.

Bureaucratic barriers and gatekeepers with little knowledge of the implications of academic research can represent an insurmountable obstacle to reaching certain individuals (e.g. HR managers at oil companies or trade union leaders) in the country. In an effort to establish trust, it was often better to contact interviewees via Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn after having sent them a detailed email, which seldom reached their inboxes. The context of doing fieldwork is important and such barriers

to recruitment were an issue that I had to raise with the University's ethics committee, which had no clear-cut guidelines on social media recruiting at the time.

Social media has become an increasingly important tool of recruitment for research due to the amount of information that public and private individuals voluntarily disclose on various platforms (Condie et al., 2018). Despite growing popularity among academics, according to Gelinas et al. (2017, 3) "there is no specific regulatory guidance and few resources to guide institutional review boards" and ethics committees. Importantly, on the other side of the coin, none of the social media apps that I used had regulations against the use of their platforms for research purposes.

These platforms are useful for building personal and professional networks with other users, even as the social media company sells advertisements and re-sells personal data for a profit (Zuboff, 2019). This—minus the personal data part—is essentially the same role that academic or industrial conferences play in the life of a researcher or a businessperson. Social networking whether for private or professional reason can happen during a coffee break or through the screen of a handheld device.

While scholarship on the ethics of using dating apps for networking is still scant, it remains true that "regardless of the country, culture, or social network, relationships can become sexualized" (Kovàcs & Bose, 2014, 116) between researchers and sources, something I tried to avoid. Subscribing to the methodological approach of "non exceptionalism" when using different recruitment methods (Gelinas et al., 2017, 5), I applied the same academic rigour to my use of every social media platform for research purposes.

After having attended a number of industrial and academic conferences prior and during my Ph.D. fieldwork, I noticed that most of the people I wanted to interview for my research had a social media profile on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, on LinkedIn and Twitter. As a result, I started to use Facebook as a participant recruitment tool, especially during my travels to Atyrau and Uralsk, two of the regions that I had not previously visited and where I lacked local contacts. Facebook groups of people working in the oil industry, expatriate workers (expats) and locals offering apartments for rent were a bountiful pool of potential interviewees given that my target sources were varied, ranging from company managers and senior bureaucrats to line workers and trade union leaders. Some contacts kindly pointed me to the Facebook or LinkedIn profiles of their colleagues and friends, or gave me their phone number, saying: "you can reach them via WhatsApp", yet another social media link. In Kazakhstan, it was and still is quite common to obtain the work or personal mobile number of senior managers or government workers, something that could be considered cross-over between professional and personal life in other countries. As Brasher (2020, 8) writes, "the control we have over the way our personal and professional identity as researchers is represented is much more in flux and subject to the rapidly changing technological landscape than it was just ten or twenty years ago". Using contacts obtained through social media and the sharing of personal information and contacts had the advantage of establishing an immediate and less austere link, but entailed the drawback of blurring the line between personal and professional spaces.

I only had one local phone number during my 10-month field trip to Kazakhstan. I still retained my UK phone number for my WhatsApp, which appeared to be a guarantee of legitimacy when I gave it to my contacts: "Oh, is this your Scottish number?" they would ask. Again, Brasher (2020, 11) argues that "researchers always bring with them into the field a multiplicity of identities that cleave along various and conflicting lines of power and privilege". In my case, I was sometimes assigned expert and authoritative status on my research topic and other times questioned or challenged as an outsider. Having only one smartphone with a working SIM card also meant that my personal and professional lives often intersected. Friends, family and relationships were in the same apps on my phone as my sources, an issue seldom talked about in academia. At some point, for personal reasons, I downloaded for the first time the Tinder application.

The Ethics and Practice of "Swiping Right"

My use of social media to gather source contacts had been successful in the first two months, during which time I was also—on a personal level—signed up to the dating app Tinder. Compared to other social media apps, Tinder was fairly new in 2018 in Kazakhstan when I used it for source recruitment. As a rather conservative dating environment (Dall'Agnola & Thibault, 2021), Kazakhstan had never experienced the presence of other dating apps or websites before, and the general approach to the Tinder app was one of "social discovery", rather than outright dating. The use of this app was not widespread in Kazakhstan. It was mostly used in Almaty, the city-headquarter for my fieldwork, and a little in Astana, the capital.

At the time, one could only sign up for Tinder by linking their Facebook profile, which I had done. The company managing the app used this authentication factor as a rudimentary attempt to avoid bots and to obtain basic personal data. The app, in fact, scraped the user's Facebook profile, including age, "likes", education and, crucially for my purposes, workplace and job position. At first, I leafed through the app trying to understand its spirit, discovering that Tinder users in Kazakhstan tried to find a wide range of connections, from life partners to one-night stands, from language buddies to company for a hike. I went on a few dates, saw theatre performances, improved my non-academic Russian and made new connections in Almaty, my first destination during my Ph.D. field trip.

The app geolocates your position, thus making it easier to see which other users are "nearby" which at most means within a 100-km radius. When, during my first month, I visited the Mangistau region to the west, I noticed that, among the few people who had uploaded their profile on the app, several displayed workplaces related to the oil sector. Working in the oil sector was and is still seen as an element of pride, this is perhaps why women chose to show it in their profiles. Tinder became useful in more remote locations such as Mangistau or Kyzylorda or Atyrau, where my original network was smaller. In addition, in these remote locations, it was more likely to find sources who worked in the oil sector because the local economy depended largely

on extractive industry. Since the app displayed users' workplaces, I decided to then change my use of the app. I started trying to "match" with women working in the oil industry. In cases where they also "swiped right" on my profile, I was able to message them and explain the purpose of my desired meeting with them. In plain language, in English or Russian, I would describe at length my work in Kazakhstan, the nature of my research, and my need for an informal, anonymous conversation about the industry. Several app users that I "matched" with either did not respond to my request or declined the offer, possibly because an academic conversation over an afternoon tea was not what they were looking for while swiping profiles through Tinder, especially after having matched with me, a white male in his thirties.

My positionality could have played a deceptive role in the relationship that the use of the app created between me and my potential local sources. My public profile on Tinder did not openly disclose what I was looking for while using the app. Other users could not guess, just by leafing through my pictures, whether I was looking for a date or a language buddy. All that users could infer was that I was a 33-year-old white male, whose name was Paolo, and who spoke English, Russian, Italian and Spanish. In the application's settings, I chose to be visible only to women within a 100-km range of my geolocation. For some of the local women, meeting a foreign man is seen as a potential for social mobility, given that, particularly in resource-rich countries, foreign men, especially from the west, are usually richer than local men. Under these circumstances, according to previous research (Killick, 1995), the potential to start a relationship and eventually marry a foreign man could be another incentive for women to accept a meeting with a white heterosexual non-local male researcher. By being honest that I was not romantically available, I tried to navigate women's potential romantic expectations towards me.

My choice to only match with women on Tinder was intentional and mainly served to protect myself from physical harm, as widespread homophobia is still present in Kazakhstan (Dall'Agnola, 2020). Any hint that I was interested in meeting with another man could have attracted the unwanted attention of homophobic men who use the app to harass and out gay men (Dall'Agnola, 2023). Moreover, I had previously witnessed and reported incidents of hostility and aggression towards non-heterosexual men (Sorbello, 2014).

The choice to only look for women when using the Tinder app also helped me balance the gender makeup of the roster of my interviewees. Given that the oil sector is a male-dominated industry, finding women eager to share their views with me was a challenge, especially via traditional channels. Through Tinder, I found a dozen sources (out of more than 100 that I interviewed for my research), which only marginally helped with the gender balance, which was ultimately split 66:34 in favour of men. Tinder also allowed me to reach a wider range of job positions and seniority, something that would have hardly been possible during the traditional drop-in at an oil company or manpower agency due to the massive employment of women in secretarial or junior roles (Sorbello, 2023).

Aware of the ethical pitfalls of using a dating app for academic research (Condie et al., 2017), I went to great lengths to reduce risks and incomprehension for my sources once a woman working in the oil sector "matched" with me on Tinder by

both explaining in writing and in person that the encounter would be of a strictly professional nature. To avoid any further misunderstandings, I also organised the meetings in public spaces, such as cafes, and during daylight hours. This was done in an effort to also minimise the potential feeling of threat or ambiguity. In fact, "meeting a respondent in a public place implies that neither they nor we are uncomfortable about being seen together. This fits with our general commitment to being open about what we do" (Glasius et al., 2018, 66).

While my transparency with regard to the nature of my research helped me gain the trust of some respondents, a number of women I met through Tinder initially considered me "odd", because I used the app outside of its socially understood end goal. Local women in Kazakhstan "swiping right" on the profile of an Italian man in his thirties did not expect to match with a Ph.D. researcher interested in an interview. Several women said they would only be interested in meeting "with the goal of establishing a long-term, serious relationship", while others just sent a message with the amount they expected to receive from me as a payment to spend the night with them. Navigating through useless interactions became easy once I chose to use Tinder only for source recruitment, turning down any interaction that would not lead to an interview or could be considered awkward. Once trust was established, the interviews followed the regular pattern, and were only occasionally followed by additional questions online. Only on one occasion, with the purpose of introducing me to a new contact, did I meet one of the interviewees recruited via the Tinder app a second time.

Conclusion

A sizable number of the people I reached out to during my fieldwork either refused to meet or did not respond to my message. Of the dozen people that I ended up meeting via Tinder in public cafes during the day, all contributed with either valuable insight or pointed me in the direction of their colleagues. All of them were associated with the corporate dimension of the oil sector, and were thus more accustomed to speaking professionally to foreigners. Around a dozen, or 10 per cent of the interviews for my Ph.D. research were conducted this way, and I was able to obtain another handful of interviews via a snowball effect from those.

I found that being transparent and open about the purpose of the meeting was a successful strategy to navigate my female respondents' expectations towards me in the field. My interviewees always knew that our meeting was strictly professional. I also went to great lengths to anonymise my sources, to avoid misunderstandings and to make sure that our conversation would not jeopardise their job status or, worse, their well-being. Because I dealt with quite sensitive topics that at times had sparked the interest of the security services in Kazakhstan—such as the Zhanaozen events of 2011, during which members of the foreign press were detained and several local journalists and human rights advocates were arrested (Rittmann, 2021)—I decided to leave no trace of my presence behind and to avoid pressuring people to meet. This

meant that I had to forgo several potential interviewees. I am in no position to regret that, however, because I firmly abided by the principle of "do no harm", while still being conscious that "it can be hard to accept that your presence in the field may cause harm despite your best intentions as a researcher" (Brasher, 2020, 10).

As I have tried to show in this essay, the use of "unconventional apps", such as Tinder, for recruiting sources for research is a possibility that can and should be exploited in contexts where informal contacts are more customary. As I argue in my Ph.D. dissertation (Sorbello, 2021), the use of social media, messaging apps and social discovery apps should be openly embraced and used ethically and professionally, rather than dismissed because of a lack of specific regulation of these tools at the institutional ethics committee level. The limited ethical literature has been slow to catch up with the various methods of recruitment that researchers can employ in different contexts. In 2018, I found it useful to exploit the characteristics of the Tinder app for my research. While those could now be obsolete or of little use to other researchers, this essay aims to encourage a widening of the horizons of virtual recruiting tools, while maintaining ethical integrity.

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