The Imperative of Images: Construction of *Affinities* through the Use of Digital Media*

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Abstract

Based upon ethnographic research conducted in relationship sites and applications used by people seeking affective/sexual relationships, the present article analyzes how digital media has been incorporated into the daily lives of heterosexual women aged 35-48, understood to be "independent" and "middle class" and residing in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Autonomy, liberty and affinity are recurrent terms in the narratives of these women, leading us to questions regarding what is involved in their choice of partners whose affinities are described in terms of their similarities with the women's levels of social and cultural capital. These affinities are initially perceived through the digital circulation of photos, which are read not only according to the physical appearance of their subjects, but also according to their surroundings – objects and landscapes – which provoke the imagination with regards to the subjects' "lifestyles". Looking at the play of these new dynamics, I seek to understand how differences (in terms of class, generation, race/color, localization, etc.) operate in women's selection of partners.

Key Words: Digital Media, Autonomy, Differences, Body, Technology.

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> When I leave home without my cell phone, even if it's only to go to the bakery 100 meters away from my house, I feel naked. It's as if I have lost something, a piece of information, a contact... something that could change my life.... My cellphone is part of me (Roberta, 43).[1]

The above excerpt from an interview I conducted in late 2013 offers clues as to the ideas discussed in the text below, whose central questions are related to the reconfiguration of social relationships mediated by technology. Based on ethnographic research conducted over four years on social networking sites and applications used by people to search out affective/sexual partnerships, I analyze how digital media has become embedded in the daily lives of people, trying to follow the times we live in, where the acceleration of time and the reconfiguration of notions of space afforded by the internet have significantly increased due to mobile digital technologies, enhancing interpersonal relationships.

The internet[2] allowed for the creation of horizontal communication networks whose growth has accelerated even further with mobile digital media, which add mobility to connectivity. These networks are marked by intertextuality, where live content is broadcast by various media that also produce feedback (McLuhan, 1995). It is thus not surprising that my informant, cited above, associates nudity with the absence of her cell phone, nor that this same idea has been literally appropriated in an advertisement for a car aired in late 2014. In the first scene of

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[1] Brown hair, medium height, small and dark eyes: an event promoter. After her seperation in 2010, she moved into an apartment next to the building where she originally lived (in Pinheiros, a middle class neighborhood in São Paulo). According to her, this was in order to facilitate her children's (at the time 10 and 12 years old) comings and goings from their father's house. The names of the women that appear throughout this text are made up.

[2] According to estimates made by Nielsen IBOPE, more than 129,000,000 people have internet access in Brazil. This is an increwase of 14% over the last set of statistics, collected in the second trimester of 2013. [http://www.investimentosenoticias.com.br – accessed in September 2014].

this ad, a fully-dressed man appears to be looking for his car keys. When he leaves his house, he's totally naked. He gets into the car, does a double take, goes back into the house and picks up his phone. In the final scene, he appears fully dressed once again, in a suit and tie.

Ethnographic explorations of the relationships and everyday processes that form these digital networks is different from research into traditional, well-established fields of investigation. It requires the monitoring of flows that begin on-line, but which also "open up the possibility of obtaining a reflexive understanding of what it means to be part of internet" (Hine, 2000:10). The narratives collected during this research affirm that the online sphere opens up a world of possibilities that were previously unimaginable.

The internet's properties are not inherent, as Miller & Slater have shown (2004). The creation of profiles on sites, social networks and applications is not something that can be thought of as a move away from "reality". Rather, it's part of the strategic manipulation inherent in the creation of the self (Bayman, 2010), which means that it becomes "embodied" in many different ways (Piglet and Gomes, 2012). In this sense, far from being the expression of a dichotomy between the real and the virtual (often thought of as separately constructed realms), certain of the more socially acceptable bodily and psychological aspects are perhaps better understood as existing in an online/offline continuum (Zhao et al, 2008; Beleli, 2012).

My interaction with financially independent women, both single and divorced/separated, some with children, highlights some extremely opportune questions.[3] The vast majority if these women

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[3] The analysis of this research presented here relies upon on/offline interactions with 23 women between the ages of 35 and 49, living alone in rented or owned apartments in the city of São Paulo or adjacent cities (but who frequent the capital for professional and/or leisure activities. All made it through college with family help, except for one who was born *in a poor family* and lived until age 20 in Freguesia do O (a neighborhood she considers to be lower class) – the only self-declared "dark" (*morena*) woman in the research group, a term which typically refers to racial admixture in Brazil.

claim to be *well-situated in life.* They emphasize their need for travel both within and outside of Brazil and their desire to live in *interesting* neighborhoods "...with many bars, restaurants and services, full of beautiful people..." which they consider to be middle or upper middle class. The mention of distinct class indicators is part of an imaginary with regards to access to certain consumer goods, including technology itself, but they mainly refer to the fact that these women can *afford a certain style of life,* which had earlier in their lives been possible only through aid from their families. What distinguishes the current moment in their lives is the autonomy they have to decide where they will travel or live, but also their ability to escape the curious and anxious prying into their *intimate lives*.

Observing that these lives are lived in an on/off line continuum, I ask to what extent technological mediations have reconfigured these women's social relationships. Unlike in other fields, the narrators involved in this research do not want to be identified as members of a cohesive group: to the contrary! But it is precisely the *secret* of their online searches for affective relationships that unites them. Autonomy, freedom and intimacy – recurring themes in the narratives I have collected – lead to questions about gender shifts and how these are articulated with racial, "class", and location differences (Piscitelli, 2008; Brah, 2006). These lnkages, which also create imaginaries regarding "lifestyles", is critical in these women's selection of partners, whose compatibility was before suggested by social networking sites' algorithms and is now is individually produced through the use of apps, a fact that suggests greater autonomy for the women involved.

Incorporated Technologies

The proliferation of "relationship" sites[4] (which run the gamut from sites geared to people seeking friendship to those

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[4] In April 2013 relationship sites had over 6.6 million visitors in Brazil, represneting a 14% increase over the previous month [http://www.ibope.com.br/].

focusing on sexual encounters), particularly among people aged 30-50, has taken advantage of a strategy used by several different types of media, juxtaposing emotions with the products on display and seeking to establish a certain degree of intimacy with consumers. This market is, of course, highly segmented by gender, sexuality, age and – most recently – religion.[5]

If having access to a *fully connected room of one's own* (Zafra, 2010) has permitted women's access to networks of information and association, it has also repeatedly provoked these subjects' actions, Women are increasingly paying attention to the computers, tablets and mobile technologies that have accelerated this process. Having a next-generation mobile phone not only inserts the subject into imaginaries of modernity, but also endows them with a certain power over information, including situating them as content producers, enabling the expansion of the circulation of many different moralities. The cellphone – often tied to or even confused with the body – is not just a technology, but part of the body itself. Its absence can be understood as loss in this process.

This merging of body and technology revolutionized ideas about the body, which appears to be ever less bounded by one's skin and "senses", including the voice and one's way of speech.[6] The voice is something that is often overlooked before the imperative of images, but its tones and intonations can be decisive in the decision to forge or forgo a relationship. Also potentially

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[5] The list is immense, and includes sites geared towards civil servants, differentiating between federal, state and municipal levels, suggesting an interest in "equal" partnerships (I discuss this point below). Even *Par Perfeito*, linked to the US group Match.com – a well known site for heterosexual encounters in Brazil – created two new segments in 2011, *G Encontros* and *Amor Divino* (Divine Love) – both presented as *Par Perfeito's* subsidiaries – in order to meet the demands of publics looking for same sex and evangelical partners, respectively. Regarding *Divino Amor*, see Sacramento (2013).

[6] Slurred "r's" and "s's" – the pattern reproduced by *Rede Globo*, still Brazil's largest telecommunications network – as well as representations of the city of Rio de Janeiro (and, in particular, the neighborhoods of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon) are represented as a "post card of Brazil", particularly in Brazil's *telenovelas*, and are highly valued in many scenarios.

decisive are subjects' clothing and the scenarios that surround them in a photo. To feel naked without a cell phone indicates the fact that the object is a garment and, as such, is part of a body that moves and moves through the world. Access to mobility/ movement, without restrictions in terms of place or time, is something that is compatible with professional, household or even leisure activities. In this sense, the cell phone subsumes functionality to emotions, helpfully provoked or reinforced by sounds and vibrations.

Incorporated into the body, technology is not seen as something external, an object whose use can improve the lives of persons or help them undertake their projects. Understanding this connection and its consequences forces us to go beyond the objects' utility (Miller, 2010). We must see how these hybrids (bodies/cellphones) are immersed in the production of agency.[7] I understand "agency", following Saba Mahamood (2006), as a set of capabilities inherent in the subject, and not "the residue of an untamed self, existing before the operations of power, but, in itself, the product of these operations."

Subjects today are unquestionably immersed in, and constituted by, a range of fragmented images whose meanings are not necessarily closely reflected upon, but which demand immediate responses. The internet has accelerated this movement, insofar as when we are navigating a website or an application, we are continuously "on standby" (Santaella, 2004:33). Digitalized information has become part of ou professional experience, as well as our affective and sexual relationships. Thus, the body/technology interface (Bruno, 2013) is part of the making and remaking of bodies (Haraway, 2009) and also of subjectivities, in a back-and-forth play of meanings that blurs the boundaries between the natural and artificial, external and internal, public and private. As is the case with the body, subjectivity is being created in this interface, expanding the visibility that which could earlier only be understood through intimacy. As Bruno (2013:125) points

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[7] I thank Bruna Bummachar for her discussions regarding this point.

out: "Part of sociability on the internet involves the voluntary exposure of personal data, narratives, and different registers of everyday life. "

The circulation of the subjects of this study through different social networking sites is undertood as a strategy which also expands their social contacts. Some women, however, perceive differences between the men they contact, described a *kind of man* who frequents relationship sites and who is generally negatively classified as having a low level of formal education. From 2013 on, these women began to speculate about Tinder – a smartphone app that allows one to select people based on their photos and location, as well as other information that might be available. One of the points my informants highlight as central to the Tinder experience is precisely its geolocation feature, which not only enables meetings to occur more quickly, but is also a distinguishing factor in that it triggers imaginaries regarding the places where potential partners circulate.

On *Tinder*, people have access only to those others who suit them, so rejection does not occur in explicit terms. To "combine" means that one has been selected by someone one has also selected. The *match* (a term used by the application itself) is announced by a sound emitted by the cellphone, generating anxiety and the desire to immediately view the message, as one runs the risk of "losing a contact, that could change [one's] life...".

Tinder became a fever among my interviewees. Most learned about the application from adds on their cellphones. Suspicious, they sought out information on other media – articles published on the UOL website, in newspapers and entertainment magazines, through the references of friends. These consolidated the perceptions of some of my interviewees, who began to appreciate *Tinder's* agility and geolocation feature. The success of this application as another relationship search engine accelerated the competition for users' attention. Recently, *Par Perfeito* – a well-known Brazilian social networking site – tried to discredit the app on their website's entrance page: "*Tinder*? You deserve more.

Find the ideal person anytime, anywhere with *Par Perfeito*"[8].
Ashley Madison, known as the site of "cheaters" (Pelúcio, in this
dossier), also created ads that tried to set them apart from other
sites, with the slogan that they "guarantee discretion" regardless of
their users' marital status.

    Tinder does not promise users that they will find the "ideal
person". They invest on being "a fun way to connect with new and
interesting people close to you... a new way to express yourself
and share with your friends".[9] Unlike dating sites, the app's
advertising suggests the possibility of expanding one's network of
friends, an idea that my interviewees looked upon with frank
skepticism.: "I have friends on facebook, here I look for a
boyfriend, OK?" These women made clear distinctions between
their performances on social networking sites and relationship
applications. If *Facebook* stimulates "recognition, belonging and
the desire for popularity" (Stassun, 2014:222), for my informants,
the network is also a means for *monitoring* potential partners.

    The playful nature of different forms of sociability pointed
out by Simmel (2006) appears in the animated on/offline
"conversations" narrated here. Even when women have a clear
objective of finding a partner, the social means of doing so are
nonetheless also thought of as entertainment and fun (Baym,
2010:59). Limitations are set on the need to make this search
anonymously, however, restricting the *world of possibilities*
opened by these interactions.

"My secret search"

    Contact with the women who participated in this research –
initially made through *Par Perfeito* – was marked by their
suspicion regarding the possible exposure of their lives beyond the

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[8] [www.parperfeito.com – accessed on 12/12/2014].

[9] [http://tecnologia.umcomo.com.br/articulo/como-funciona-o-tinder-
12900.html#ixzz3RXdcZx3E – accessed in September 2014].

site. This shows a certain belief regarding their control over their presentation of themselves or over who has access to these presentations. Expansion of this network of informants occurred snowball fashion through my first interviewees' indications. They vouched for me to their friends, assuring the women that they would not be individually. Other women were brought into the project through my own network of friends.[10] The initial mistrust of many of the women was also overcome by anxious curiosity regarding the results of my research, which was occasionally thought of as something that would help them realize their mistakes and successes in consolidating relationships.

In spite of considering themselves to be free and independent, women's circulation through space considered to be *pick-up spots* was rarely individual. As one woman said, "I always had to frequent these with someone else, a male or female friend... so that I wouldn't be seen as desperate or hunting" (Sara, 36[11]). The fear of being seen as *desperate* – an adjective repeatedly attributed by the media to women over 30 who are still *on the market* – is the reason given for *secrecy*.[12] To go out in a group is understood by these women as fun. Their preparations with regards to what clothes to wear and which places to go already creates illusions/emotions/expectations about meeting certain kinds of potential partners. But the women also affirm that the group is

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[10] Aside from interviewing these women, I interacted with them in many in different ways – through MSN, Facebook and, less systematically, accompanying them to the places which they preferred for "flirting". Interviews were conducted in restaurants or bars, although two women also invited me to come to their homes.

[11] Nurse at a well-known public hospital in São Paulo, she has big black eyes, short, motionless hair. Sara began searching on the internet after ending a five year long relationship with a younger colleague at work. The couple never lived together and did not have children.

[12] As Gonçalves (2007:1) points out, "the idea of needing a partner… amply divulged by the media, is centered on notions of heterosexual union and the "family", in which being – but above all remaining – "single" is understood as an idea out of place".

an alibi: "I feel uncomfortable sitting alone in a bar. It is clear to everyone that I'm hunting" (Marcela, 39[13]).

This discomfort refers to the social positions that are understood as "appropriate" for women – the expectation that a man will choose them. Here, we can clearly see that the highly valued autonomy and liberty, so often remarked upon in my informant's narratives, has clear limitations. What is expected of a woman appears as a ghost, guiding their actions, what Mahood (2006) calls "normative freedom." It is precisely in order to circumvent these ghosts that women make use of technology: the internet and digital mobility allows them to short-circuit these regulations. Visibility is not "negotiated" in this case (Miskolci, in this dossier), nor is it politically desired. Through the use of technology, group formation and community recognition is not only avoided, but peremptorily denied.[14] For these women, making one's own on-line searching a *secret* hides a woman's *failure* in establishing affective and loving relationships via the *normal* paths. It also camouflages their own sexual interest, especially in those cases where there is only sexual interest. This, according to them, is necessary in order to meet the demands of potential partners for a certain kind of femininity as a pre-condition to consolidating a relationship.

If one seeks a lasting relationship, sexual intercourse after the first face-to-face meeting is supposedly something that shouldn't be done. Some women stipulate a number of encounters before they are willing to have sex – not before the third meeting, for example. These are often in line with adevice gleaned from the self-help books (Alves, 2005) that, most of the time, inform the

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[13] A lawyer, resident of Moema (an upper middle class neighborhood in São Paulo), Marcela has shoulder length hair that is slightly curly, expressive brown eyes and wide hips. As she herself says, "I'm the hot type of girl". She has been separated for eight years after a childless marriage. The decision for separation was mutual. During this period, she had several "short relationships that did not last a year".

[14] During my research, some of the women consolidated relationships with men they met on sites or through aps. On these occasions, they constructed other narratives regarding the initial encounter in order to maintain secret their on-line activities.

various media productions regarding this topic. These *rules* are circumvented all the time, but the strategies, which include making online searching for partners a *secret*, constitute subjectivities in the project of making oneself visible (Bruno, 2013), where "confessional practices... available to those who want to snoop" (Sibilia, 2008:19) are meticulously calculated.

Desires and emotions are continuously mobilized in this field, apparently contradicting the notion that relationships are the fruit of reason and calculation in. According to Campbell (2006:49), "Modern consumerism is... more concerned with satiating desires than in satisfying needs ... It has more to do with emotions and feelings (desires) than with reason and calculation". This dichotomy implodes when we realize that desires and emotions are also shot through with a certain calculation regarding who may or may not be an ideal partner. The discovery of affinities with a desired other speaks volumes about how subjects perceive themselves and potential partners through objects embedded in different modulations of identity. Bauman (2007) is correct in asserting that identity is defined by the reaction to products rather than by the products themselves. However, this reaction – which refers to what the author calls an "emotional state" – does not develop from an "I" which is separate from life in society. Mediations are also constantly informing us and others "about us" (Woodward, 2000). Here, the innocent presumptions of a "technological neutrality" fades away in the face of how information is actually organized, given its direct link to the organization of thought regarding social and symbolic needs. Understanding the on/off-line continuum as part of larger "moral regions" (Perlongher, 2008) helps us to understand how *affinities* are produced and aggregated into codes of conduct that define the positions of certain subjects according to their sex, gender, race/ color, sexuality, nationality and etc.

Different but equal

The search for *someone different* is quite marked in narratives regarding on-line activities. This is presented as a means of widening one's scope of choice, often perceived as limited or saturated in the environments where one commonly circulates. However, affinities can be curtailed by differences in gender, race/ethnicity, and age, among other factors. But location plays a particular role in this, given that it produces fantasies regarding potential partners' class. Differences in the linkages between these factors, which sometimes and sometimes subtract value from subjects are produced in what I call the "love market", in such a way that the widening of one's contacts implies greater selectivity and what determines choice follows affinities that are also produced. None of my interviewees except for Sara, for example, referred to black men as their ideal of a partner. It is important to note here that Sara is from a working class background and defines herself as "dark" (*morena*) but who has a phenotype – broad nose, wide lips and thick hair without movement – which is associated with blackness in Brazil.

Making a profile on social networking sites and applications is not limited to interacting with people. One also deals with flashing images that offer products: travel destinations, fashion, food. These suggestions for consumption (which are widely propagated by the cultural industry) are juxtaposed with standards of appearance and behavior, including scenarios that allude to romance, such as dinner by candlelight (Illouz, 1997).

These offerings, filtered by computer programs, cross reference data provided over the internet by subjects themselves through their search patterns. With mobile media, these offers can be viewed at any time, extrapolating physical and geographical boundaries. One of my interviewees was surprised to receive offers for tickets to the northeastern city of Salvador, a place she often visited, as well as offers for tour packagess abroad:

> It's as if they know that I always look for cheap flights to Salvador? Or to European cities?. [What do you think?] Oh… they have these computer programs mapping the sites

> that I frequent, but when these messages show up, I feel
> very special, as if they were concerned about my desires... I
> know that's kind of a fantasy... The same thing happens to
> me on Tinder... that bunch of men who match with me, it
> lifts tmy spirits... I select them and often they have already
> selected me (Flavia, 42[15]).

What is odd here is the "enchantment" (Turkle, 2011) of
feeling special to someone that Flavia has never met and will
probably never meet, even if the interaction is fast and at the same
time , bounded by obvious market analysis which pays attention to
her consumption patterns. Flavia realizes the illusion of this feeling
of being "special", created both by the flashing images which offer
her travel itineraries (but which also reaffirms that she is *doing well
in life)* and by the rapid and unchallenged acceptance of her
profile, which was limited to three photos taken in different
environments (at home, at a restaurant, on the beach):

> During one month on Tinder I got over 250 matchs. Few
> were usable ... [laughs], but it's very nice to know that at 42,
> you still have a lot of interested men. It may sound crazy,
> but this experience gave me more security, not only to flirt,
> but at work and fin my family, who have been after me due
> to the fact that I do not have a partner five years after my
> separation.

Flavia has maintained her *Tinder* searches and her activities
on relationship sites a secret from everyone except a few of her
closet friends. She says, however, that her co-workers and some
members of her family perceive *a different and mischievous glint* in
her eyes, suggesting that she is carrying on a secret love affair. For
Flavia, the search itself is already an end in and of itslef, "so
maybe that's the reason my eyes are brighter". The idea of being

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[15] A divorced mother of two children who live with her, she is assiduously
frequents a gym and has well-defined muscles, AND curly hair that reaches down
to her shoulders. She has caramel colored eyes and is a state public servant, living
in Perdizes, a neighborhood she considers to be upper middle class.

recognized as successful is not limited to her work and its association with economic gains: it also involves establishing lasting loving and affective partnerships. In the case of the women who participated in this research, these must obey a certain coherence between gender, sexuality and desire (Butler, 2006).

A good portion of "dating" sites allude in their ads and webpages to the search for "someone who compleats you", a "soul mate", apparently free from selfish motives, suggesting that" true love cannot paticipate in market strategies (Illouz, 2007; Zelizer, 2009 Adelman, 2011). The women I have interviewed are not so much engaged in a project of "family building" or "nesting", but are rather seeking *partnerships,* whose success implies finding someone with similar level of cultural capital. There is also a demand in these relationships, however, for emotion-laden associations and continued desire, which according my interviewees limits their choices even in the face of the apparent plenty of male profiles circulating on the internet.

Initially, women's choices are informed by one or more photos, which can be thought of as data points whose main attribute is beauty. *Affinity* is also shaped by photos, however – particularly their backdrops, which are often blurred. Analysis of the contexts of photos gleaned from websites and apps influences women's decisions to start a longer and more in-depth conversations with potential parnters:

> I think I began to better analyze photos after [I got on] Tinder, because the websites have much more information. So we look at the picture, but are soon wondering about height, weight, religion... There are those who say they go to mass every Sunday, so I already throw them out ... Tinder is different, you have a photo as your main thing, so you become more attentive. The other day, I clicked on a guy and a match soon showed up ... He had selected me. I was happy, but when I looked at the picture more closely, I noticed that he wore several gold chains. You could not see if they had saints' symbols on them, but I became suspicious ... I do not like men who exhibit chains and I also

think it would not be right for me to be with someone who is religious. I am Catholic and I believe in God, but this going to church stuff is not for me. Another thing is that he took a picture in his kitchen ... it was very dark with a tiny little window at the bottom, and you could also see the pots on the stove ... I thought that showed a lack of care, a certain vulgarity, a sort of poverty, and it wasn't veryseductive ... if that's what he shows in the picture, imagine what he's like live [laughs] So this guy was soon discarded. He did not seem to fit into my lifestyle! (Veronica, 43 years[16]).

Home decor, forms of dress, and bodily ornamentation are read by Veronica in her search for common ground. This also suggests a self-classification on Veronica's part, as she clearly wishes to distance herself from what looks to be *poor and vulgar*. Her eye, trained by the cellphone's camera and the images circulating around the media, is a filter through which Veronica sees the Other and imagines herself. In this logic of "distinction" (Bourdieu, 2006), objects are thought of going well beyond needs or functionality. They are seen as manifestations of subjectivities that are constructed with and through them. In this sense, what is consumed is strongly present in the links established in interpersonal relationships, whose emotions are also mobilized through consumption (Illouz, 2009), or the associations between love and the market (Zellizer, 2009).

The trajectory of Branca (39[17]) is interesting in order to think about the flows across and through virtual networks and how she came to *Tinder.* Branca claims to be clear with regards to the fact that she is single – "it does not bother me. I work a lot and do not

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[16] A health professional and resident of Santa Cecília (a middle class neighborhood), she has long, straight brown hair black eyes and is of medium height. In 2012, she had been separated for two years. She has two children, one of whom lives with her.

[17] A single doctor with very white skin and light eyes who is, according to herself, a bit over her desired weight, she lives in the region of São Paulo but comes to the city often for entertainment.

have time to devote myself to a wedding ... also, I'm not sure if I want to have children ... well, now I think I have passed the age for that". She would like to have a steady partner for movies, traveling and *eating breakfast in bed on Sunday*, however. In pursuit of that goal, but also in response to family pressures (from her parents and sister who is married with children) and in combination with the disappointments she has suffered with meeting men at bars and parties, Branca signed up with a marriage agency. This seemed to her a pragmatic way of finding *someone interesting*. For Branca, *interesting* means having *affinity* with her potential partner in several areas: common interests, including political views, beauty, *sexual chemistry,* a taste for travel... all attributes certainly associated with economic, educational and cultural compatibility. Branca's experience with the agency was traumatic in many ways, but what shocked her most were the dynamics of meeting a potential mate, which consisted of quick conversations of at most 10 minutes. Furthermore, many of the candidates chosen for her were *not at all what [she] wanted.*

Note that Branca's disenchantment was not associated with her high financial investment[18] in the agency, nor did she discredit this form of searching for a mate which joins love to money. For Branca, *not at all what I wanted* is related to how the meetings with potential mates were set up and turned out:

> I was jumping from room to room, no more than 10 minutes in each, and in each there was a man who talked and talked ... always about what he did, what he liked ... there was one who didn't even ask my name, didn't want to know about me at all: he wanted to know if I fit into his life ... the horror!

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[18] She paid six R$ 1.000,00 checks for this service, which needed to be paid in full, even if she found a partner immediately. In two weeks, Branca already wanted to leave the agency, which caused long confrontations with its employees, including a psychologist who tried to convince her that the problem was her high expectations and lack of patience. The contract only ended when she froze five of the six checks.

After this trauma, Branca signed up on *Par Perfeito*, despite skeptical about social networking sites. After a month of online dialogue with several men and a few face-to-face meetings, Branca discovered a partner with whom she had *affinity.* She stayed with him for a year, but the relationship became unbearable, according to Branca, because her partner did not understand her dedication to work and also because he was *extremely controlling...* "he called me at least six times a day".

After this relationship, Branca returned to *Par Perfeito* and had experiences that did not result in continued relationships. Disenchanted, she set up a profile on *Tinder*, thinking the application would be faster means of disposing of men who did not interest her, without wasting time on long online conversations. Branca found four men in one week:

> Some things you see right away. For example, how they present themselves. I can already see if their lifestyle suits mine. Other things have to do with their smell. None of them smelled bad, but for some reason I did not like one of them because his smell reminded me of the hospital.... That won't work, I thought, smelling that all day long.... And then there's the kiss. You know, that dull kiss that's kinda soft? It can't be the guy who kisses like that. He doesn't grab me [laughs].

Closely associated with consumption, fantasies about the other's "lifestyle", thought of in relational terms, reaffirms one's own, producing *affinities.* But the decision to start a relationship also passes through some poorly analyzed arenas: *smell, how one is "grabbed", the taste of a kiss*. One of Silvia's [19] mismatches is similar to Branca's narrative. After nearly six months of interacting with a man she met on a social networking site, through long conversations online, including web cam interaction and daily phone calls, she *felt like [she] was dating*. The disaster of her first

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[19] Almost 30 years old at the time of the interview (2012), with short black hair.

in-the-flesh date was clearly marked by her "boyfriend's" body language:

> He walked looking down at the floor ... shoulders slumped, so fallen that his hands almost reached his knees ... He looked like an orangutan and that disgusted me ... And a kiss ??? No way ... The great conversations we had by phone were forgotten... He couldn't grab me ... I barely managed to finish dinner and I ended the relationship as it began, through a cellphone message ...

These narratives are extreme and unrepresentative cases from the field. Most of the cases recounted by my interviewees point to the fact that intimacy created on-line eases the bodily and sensory attributes most often felt in face-to-face meetings. But I was intrigued with the meaning of *grabbing,* sometimes associated with fantasies of a particular kind of masculinity perceived in Brazil and elsewhere as particular to Brazilian men. This is translated into *demonstrating attitude, shaking hands strongly, not hesitating...* but does not imply violence.

The selection process also involves differences that are more or less socially accepted. One of the points highlighted by my interviewees refers to cultural capital. As pointed out by Haraway (2000:65), this is not classified, but "codified" and here this encoding involves long online interactions that indicate the possible efficacy of an offline meeting:

> Some time ago I interacted with a guy I really liked. He was handsome and well dressed in his picture and he even had pictures of himself in Buenos Aires ... I thought it would work out ... After a while, we arranged a date, but I saw it was all just a façade ... It's not enough to have traveled yourself, you have to know what people do on trips. He had made a trip CVC-style[20] trip, you know? Those package trips

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[20] CVC is a tour agency that offers package tours that include a plane ticket, housing in a three star hotel, transfer between airports and planned outings. These packages are widely touted in Brazil as being the cheapest travel deals available.

> where you only see what everyone sees ... tango halls,
> leather clothes stores ... (Marcela, 39[21]).

The logic of the abundance of partners, particularly in large urban centers (Illouz, 2007), can also be cut by racial attributes. Sara - the only interviewee who calls herself "dark" and who often refers to the difficulties she had in achieving a *successful career* in a public hospital – says her upward mobility came through education, marked by her move to a middle-class neighborhood (Pinheiros) and her circulation in other environments, which allowed her access to very different kinds of people from the neighborhood in which she grew up. Unlike other narrators in this research, Sara's search on the internet involved other "secrets":

> I did everything that the site indicated, filled out the profile, put pictures up, but I soon realized my profile was not much accessed. I then decided to do a test ... I took my photo off the profile and it began to rain emails and invitations for online chats ... My color does not help me. People have a resistance to darker persons. It seems that we still have to prove that we are as good as any white person, even when it comes to dating...

In going against the site's reminders of how important it is to have picture on one's profile, as well the imperative of the image on *Tinder* (an app that many women use while still frequenting relationship sites), Sara relies on online dialogue to break the ice long before she mentions her "color". This strategy was successful with her current boyfriend (also "dark") who she "met" on *Tinder* before letting him see her image:

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[21] A lawyer living in Moema, an upper middle class neighborhood. She has very straight hair that comes down to her shoulders and dark eyes and a medium stature. After a six year long relationship, which she considered to be *lasting*, Marcela affirms that she is now a convinced bachelorette and that she doesn't think about *making a family*, something that, to her, implies having children and living in the same household.

> He was already interested in me ... We had the same tastes and travel plans ... He had left a bad marriage. Maybe if he had known my color before he met me, he wouldn't have been interested ... The internet allowed me to do this, meeting someone first and only later showing them a picture ...

The idea of *meeting someone first* recurs in the narratives I have collected. These women are hoping to develop a certain intimacy before a face-to-face meeting, so as not to waste their time with interlocutors with whom they have no affinity and also to protect themselves. But for Sara, this was also a strategy to soften her "blackness": "my experience on the sites and Tinder showed me that even dark men prefer lighter women". On the sites Sara had the option to not put up a photo. Her strategy on *Tinder* was to display her image against a backdrop, generally an outdoors landscape.

Sara also remarks that "[her] hair has caused [her] problems since a very young age", both in terms of her perception of herself and in terms of the way others view her. She was encouraged by her mother to submit to painful hair-straightening processes, which also did not seem satisfactory to her. In our last conversation (February 2012), Sara claimed to have finally found a solution: "Real Beauty" (Beleza Real)[22] – a technique that loosens the strands, leaving curly hair which can be shaken around.[23] This removal of signs and symbols perceived as "black "does not necessarily refer to a non-identity, but to other forms of identification – "curly", in terms of her hair (Cross, 2013) – which implode associations with both racialized alterity and whiteness.

This theme was the topic of many of our conversations and, at one point, I realized that *hiding* was more of a problem for me

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[22] Regarding the Beleza Real Institute, a network of beauty salons specialized in dealing with African-style hair, see Cruz, 2013.

[23] In research that I undertook ten years ago, but which is still valid today, I showed how the term "movement" and the gesture of tossing one's locks from one side to another is a central part of hair product ads (see Beleli, 2006).

than it was for Sara, who claims that life taught her to deal with the fear of her circulation in certain areas causes. She emphasizes that *to* "find someone with darker skin like mine and with hair like mine does not mean that we already have an affinity".

Some considerations

To reveal or hide suggests that the bodies made and remade by technology move between different and even *voyeuristic* pleasures – a state of affairs that, well not exclusive to online interactions, is certainly favored by them. *Affinity*, driven by the thrill of finding the right partner for various projects, also alludes to distinction, marked by different forms of travel and/or "things" that insert subjects into fantasies regarding their economic, social and cultural capital.

In this quest, the technologies incorporated into the body seem to offer greater freedom and autonomy for women, also providing for the displacement of a certain morality that has long established norms of behavior that suggest what is appropriate femininity and masculinity. Even if moral judgments are still present in these narratives, most of my interviewees claim that their *wanderings* through the digital realm have allowed them to become more flexible with regards to the norms that characterize certain contexts. The can *hunt* for example: a behavior generally naturalized as constitutive of masculinity including homoerotic masculinity (Miskolci, 2014).[24] For these women, digital media directed towards loving/emotional/sexual pursuits has allowed them to circumvent the "virility" thought of as inherent in the "hunter" role. It also has allowed them to move away from the models of femininity that are still highly valued in various media forms. The need to circumvent the "virility" still indicates limits to female liberties. However, Branca affirms that *Tinder* permits her to act like a man, quickly discarding potential partners that do not fit into her projects for relationships based on affinity.

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[24] I'd like to thank Richard Miskolci for calling mty attention to this point.

In this sense, the unquestionability of the feelings that support individual choice must be taken under suspicion. The intellectualization of the search for love, which is for my female informants most evident on sites that define affinities based on algorithms, seems to have been modified by applications like *Tinder*, in which the subjects themselves decide with whom they have more or less affinity. On these apps, an abundance of candidates results in greater selectivity, as Branca points out: "there's more where this one came from". But this "decision", often directly associated with the concept of freedom, is once again governed by rules that socially situate subjects, pushing them to use strategies that conceal, in the realm of the imperative image, marks of difference that are less socially accepted, including "color".

In the narratives regarding autonomy, the cellphone – which allows access to any people anywhere at any time – is centralized as a facilitator in various areas of life. It is also, however, embodied to such a degree that its absence causes feelings of loss. Sounds and vibrations as part of – and felt by – the body, here gain existence and provoke action.

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