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To cite this article: Andrea Waling, Michael Kehlher, Jennifer Power, Lucille Kerr & Adam Bourne (2023) ‘I don’t think my torso is anything to write home about’: men’s reflexive production of ‘authentic’ photos for online dating platforms, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 32:5, 471-485, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2022.2027236](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2027236)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2027236>



Published online: 20 Jan 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



'I don't think my torso is anything to write home about': men's reflexive production of 'authentic' photos for online dating platforms

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores men's use of dating apps with an emergent body image focus, addressing cisgender, heterosexual men's feelings about dating app profile pictures. Drawing from interviews with 15 cisgender, heterosexual men residing in Australia about their use of dating applications including Tinder, Hinge, and Bumble, this paper examines how cisgender, heterosexual men construct their dating app profile pictures, and the decisions they make about the content of images they use for dating profile pictures. Utilizing concepts of self-presentation, authenticity, and bodily reflexive practices, this paper argues that the men in the study are attempting to present authentic and real selves in a dating world, while being confronted by concerns regarding body image and perceptions of ideal bodies. They also demonstrate conflicting desires to appear more muscular, fit, and athletic while not presenting as vain or narcissistic. In the process of creating profiles, these men develop a sense of self drawing on understandings of masculinity and specifically notions of idealized male bodies, which simultaneously run counter to the very authentic images of the self they seek to present.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 August 2021
Accepted 21 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Bodies; masculinity; dating apps; profile pictures; heterosexual; men

Introduction

Online dating has seen a marked increase in the millennial years, becoming a common and mainstream social practice aimed at establishing both short and long-term sexual and romantic partnerships (Berkowitz, Tinkler, Peck, & Coto, 2021; Krüger & Spilde, 2020; Shield, 2019; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). Research has focused on neoliberalism and gamification of dating (Chan, 2018), violence and safety (Pym, Byron, & Albury, 2021), intimacies (Albury, McCosker, & Evers, 2021), body image and self-presentation (Strubel & Petrie, 2017), and the broader social phenomenon of hook up and casual sex cultures (Timmerman & Courtois, 2018). In the online dating format, self-presentation is important. An online dater has to 'market' themselves to secure a potential date (Chan, 2018; Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Oakes, Johnson and Parry, 2020). Profile pictures are central in this process, with varying levels of significance depending on the dating app. Tinder and Grindr, for example, are image-based with limited text, while other apps such as okCupid allow for long passages of text in the dating profile. There are variations in how much an individual presents their 'ideal self' relative to their 'authentic self'. However, representations must not be too distant from the 'truth', as online dating may be the first step to having a face-to-face meeting (Ellison et al., 2012).

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The practice of falsifying an identity to lure someone into a romantic relationship to achieve financial or identity theft is also not uncommon on online dating platforms (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2010). Individuals can easily falsify a dating profile and associated profile imagery, giving rise to concerns as to whether profiles are in fact genuine representations of an individual (Duguay, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2010). Photographs are easy to manipulate with photo-editing tools and mobile apps (such as Snapchat®). People may curate a particular image or version of themselves in their online dating profiles, but this is not necessarily an untruth. The 'selfie' (a photo one has taken of oneself usually with a webcam or mobile phone, and often uploaded to social media) is one such way people present themselves – it is through this that people create an idealized, carefully curated version of themselves (Albury, 2015; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Impression management is a key component of this practice. People upload images with an awareness of how others are likely to perceive them (Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015) in an environment where profile images are a representation of a person's body, identity and personality (Haywood, 2018; Strano, 2008). Given the centrality of the profile picture to the online dating experience, it is not uncommon for photos to be constructed or manipulated in ways that others may consider to be inaccurate or inauthentic representations (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Sedgewick, Flath, & Elias, 2017). In recognition of concerns about this, dating apps such as Tinder rely on cross-engagement with public-facing social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook to create a more 'authentic' and 'legitimate' dating environment, since Facebook is regarded as a more truthful representation of a person (Duguay, 2017).

Research and theory on dating app profile pictures that look beyond psychological accounts of body image and self-esteem concerns have focused primarily on young cisgender, heterosexual and queer women and trans and gender diverse heterosexual and people (Duguay, Burgess, & Suzor, 2018) or cisgender men who have sex with men (Miller, 2018). Cisgender refers to a person who describes their gender in a way that corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth. Miller (2018) and Rodriguez, Huemmer, and Blumell (2016) note how gay and bisexual men's dating apps privilege particular representations of masculinity that come through not only the body itself, but also, the language used to describe the body, both in profile descriptions, and in what others desire. Barrett (2020) explores how queer men using dating apps like Grindr experience issues such as transphobia and trans men exclusion, racism, HIV stigma, and fat-phobia among other concerns. Experiences of racism has also been noted in queer women's experiences of dating apps (Li & Chen, 2021). Oakes et al. (2020) note how queer men use strategies of 'selling one's self' and 'the buying of others' in their selection and production of dating profile images.

Few studies have focused on cisgender, heterosexual men's production of, or use of, dating app profile pictures. Some studies have shown that cisgender, heterosexual men are aware of the complex and contradictory ways in which their images are read by others and work to manage this. Ward (2017) writing from a media and communications studies perspective, explored profile dating pictures in some detail, arguing that some cisgender, heterosexual men wanted their photos to be idealized versions of their (masculine) self to secure the best chance of meeting a romantic partner, and yet authentic enough to be regarded as realistic and not disingenuous. The mechanisms by which cisgender, heterosexual men produce profile images are not accounted for, and there is an overall assumption that all cisgender, heterosexual men will actively choose images that present powerful representations of traditional masculinity with little self-reflection regarding these choices (Hess & Flores, 2018). However, Haywood's (2018) work explores the production of cisgender, heterosexual young men's Tinder profile photos in more detail, arguing that their production and selection of self-images highlight a 'reflexive reflexivity' (155), the practice of individuals not only reflecting on developing their profile, but also what they do in respect of how they then evaluate their reflexive capacities. Haywood's (2018) participants engaged this in their attempt to balance

the desire to present an aggressive masculine self with a self that is 'a "decent lad" and "genuine lad"', while "not being a dick", and ensuring 'that I am not an idiot or a dozer' (153). This desire comes from within themselves, and from broader cultural perceptions. As Tanner, Maher, and Fraser (2013) note, images of muscularity or those which suggest high investment in appearance and grooming may be read as vain and be negatively regarded. This runs contradictory to assumptions that cisgender, heterosexual men will present idealized versions of masculinity centred on fitness, athleticism, and muscular physiques.

We ask, how do cisgender, heterosexual men make sense of their production, selecting, and posting of photos in dating apps? We also seek to understand how their broader considerations about their bodies and bodily reflexive practices align with their photo choices, as well as how they determine which image/s denote/s a real or authentic self, particularly as it applies to perceptions of masculinity. We explore these questions by investigating what cisgender, heterosexual men consider when they take dating app profile pictures, and moreover, the decisions they make when uploading specific photos to their dating profiles. To do this, we first draw from theories of self-presentation (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959) and authenticity in online dating (Duguay, 2016, 2017), and bodily reflexive practices (Connell, 1995).

Authenticity and identity

Scholars have long considered issues of 'authenticity' and representation of the self, particularly in the digital context (Duguay, 2016). Vannini and Williams (2009) argue that 'authenticity' is a social construct in and of itself but positioned as objective and truthful. When it comes to gender and sexuality, ideas about what is 'real' and what are 'fake' may be socially constructed but end up becoming accepted as truth about what is, and what is not, authentic.

Duguay (2017) notes that a number of studies exploring digital self-presentation draw from the work of Goffman (1959), particularly that concerning 'on-stage' and 'off-stage' performances of identity when thinking through this question of authenticity (Duguay, 2016; Gaden & Dumitricia, 2015; Hogan, 2010). In these cases, digital representations of the self are seen as contemporary manifestations of the 'on-stage' persona that is carefully curated for different audiences (Gaden & Dumitricia, 2015) and may be in conflict or inconsistent with the experience of the 'off-stage' self. However, as Duguay (2017) contends, this application of Goffman's (1959) work is unable to account for the interpersonal and material elements necessary to achieve a coherent sense of their own authentic self, or what she notes, the *stuff* (emphasis added) of authenticity (353). This *stuff* is composed of varied things that might come together in different ways, such as how app settings and interfaces lend themselves to providing additional elements of authenticity to a dating profile app. As Duguay (2017) outlines, Giddens (1991) saw identity development as a continually reflexive project in which people gain a sense of who they are – their authentic self – in relation to everyday action and habits, the opportunities, and choices they have access to, and the material realities of their life. An authentic identity is contextualized in a historic and material reality, but it is not static – it is created and recreated through reflexive action and thus is fluid, ever-changing (Duguay, 2017). Engaging in the creation of a dating profile is part of the reflective presentation of self.

This identity project is compounded with online daters' concerns that digital dating cultures encourage increasingly manipulated and fabricated images, making it impossible to judge what is authentic (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Ellison et al., 2012; Gibbs et al., 2010; Ward, 2017). In online dating, it is the image or representation of what a person may be like, which precedes any potential reality of that person, or may even determine the perception of their selves. This 'reality' is constituted through varied mediated relations and identity projects that draw from a range of sociocultural and lifestyle choices factors, and individuals may draw upon these resources to curate

an online dating profile that speaks to some form of preconstructed 'authenticity' (Duguay, 2017). While all selves can be said to be socially produced, this perception may not be an accurate interpretation.

Considering the concerns of authenticity of profiles reported in research on online dating (Gibbs et al., 2010; Ward, 2017), this has implications for thinking about how cisgender, heterosexual men might grapple with this question of the authentic, considering that it is the simulation of their self that may ultimately determine the reality of the potential for a date or relationship (or lack thereof). In thinking about this question of the *stuff* and authenticity (Duguay, 2017) we turn to a consideration of men's bodies, masculinity, and body reflexive practices.

Men's bodies and body reflexive practices

Bodies as emblematic of forms of masculinity are part of the broader research landscape which requires investigating bodily practices and the connections to the sociology of the body as meaningfully situated and contextually important (Bordo, 1999; Connell, 1995, 2001; Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005; Hakim, 2018, 2020; Norman, 2011; Swenson & Allen, 2019; Wagner, 2016). Connell (1995, p. 45) theorized the signification of bodies and gender arguing that 'true masculinity' is believed to proceed from men's bodies or express a natural belief about men's bodies. Bodies thus are constituted as situationally meaningful through social relationships. As Connell explains, body reflexive practices are formed by structures. For example, Hakim's (2018, 2020) work highlights the fit, athletic and muscular male body as a response to austerity in the UK. Hakim (2020) contends that increased precarity in the employment and labour sectors, alongside the individualizing expectations of neoliberalism, means that straight and queer men are now also expected to engage in similar practices to demonstrate their self-worth (see also Oakes et al., 2020). Bodily practices can be understood as responses to a situation that invites or disallows possibilities.

In the case of dating apps, bodies remain central in the conversation, and that such bodies function as forms of capital (Chan, 2018; Hakim, 2018, 2020; Oakes et al., 2020). Generally, it is assumed that cisgender, heterosexual men produce images that will correspond with traditional ideals of masculinity (Hess & Flores, 2018) in order to be valuable on the dating market (Chan, 2018; Haywood, 2018; Oakes et al., 2020). Such ideals include highly muscular physiques, and engaging in traditional displays of masculinity (see Connell, 1995). However, the assumption that masculinity is the only discourse framing cisgender, heterosexual men's production of profile pictures for dating apps assumes that masculinity is the only thing that cisgender, heterosexual men believe women desire, and thus should present. This would include presenting a body that is athletic, muscular, and conventionally masculine. Psychological research suggests that men may feel compelled to achieve a muscular body to attract women (Frederick & Haselton, 2007). However, a recent qualitative focus group study exploring 24 Australian women's perceptions of men's sexualized bodies found that the majority of women are not looking for these qualities when seeking relationships or sexual encounters with men, finding that muscularity or related images (such as, fitness photos) suggest narcissism, vanity, and poor relationship material (Waling, Duncan, Angelides, & Dowsett, 2020a).

Additionally, masculinity has been publicly scrutinized and positioned as problematic in the last decade, and men may be increasingly aware of this in their own projects of masculinity (Waling, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Yet, masculinity, and ideals around what constitutes a proper masculine physique remain, particularly in studies on young cisgender, heterosexual men and boys, and sports, fitness, and social media cultures (Burns & Kehler, 2014; Drummond, 2020; Drummond & Drummond, 2015; Kehler & Atkinson, 2010). The emergence of concepts like 'toxic masculinity' contribute to a broader discourse that assumes men's subject positions and how they might engage with these ideals (see Waling, 2019b for a critique of this concept; Haywood, 2020 for a critique on masculinity as discourse).

Cisgender, heterosexual men may be grappling with a series of varying and contradictory expectations and possibilities in presenting their selves in online dating profile images that attempt to demonstrate desirable forms of masculinity, alongside presenting their real or authentic selves when seeking emotional or sexual connections. To understand these potential and varying expectations around vulnerability and authenticity, we conducted interviews with 15 cisgender, heterosexual young men who are using, or have used, dating apps. Below, we provide an account of our methodology and method.

Methodology

This work is framed by an *interpretivist paradigm* which ‘focuses primarily on recognising and narrating the meaning of human experiences and actions’ (Levers, 2013) with a consideration that such experiences are subjective and in which there may be multiple realities. In this paper we focus on cisgender, heterosexual men’s production of, or rationale in choosing, public-facing images for dating profiles. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to gain a better understanding of the processes that cisgender, heterosexual men engage with in their choosing of profile dating pictures (Morse & Field, 1996). Semi-structured interviews were employed, framed by an emotional reflexive approach (Holmes, 2010) and *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) approach (Willig, 2013). Emotional reflexivity focuses on the embodied, cognitive and emotional processes in which individuals make sense of their lives and choices (Holmes, 2010). IPA is a methodological framework where researchers aim to understand participants and their perspectives with reference to their physical and cultural realities (Smith, 1996). This involves paying close attention to histories and narratives, affect and feelings, senses, and language as they seek to make sense of their personal lived experience (Willig, 2013).

Methods

Ethical approval for this study was provided by La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC18477). Participants provided informed written consent to participate in this study and to allow their deidentified data to appear in publications. As the study was about understanding how cisgender, heterosexual men make sense of, and engage with, dating apps and production of both non-sexually explicit and sexually explicit imagery, we did not engage in participation observation of dating apps nor analyse participant dating profiles. Covert participant observation of dating apps also involves many ethical concerns, particularly because participants have not consented to having their profiles studied (Shield, 2019).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews by the lead author were conducted with 15 cisgender, heterosexual young men residing in Australia between the ages of 18 and 30 during the months of January and March 2019. As this study was framed by an IPA approach, 15 interviews was an appropriate number for in-depth analysis of the data (see Smith, 1996; Yardley, 2000). Participant eligibility was determined by their age (18–30), country of residence (Australia), and whether they had been using a dating app in the last two years to seek out romantic and/or sexual encounters. Facebook advertising was used, which linked participants to a recruitment website that outlined details of the study, and a contact option. Participants who were deemed eligible to participate were offered a choice of either a video chat or audio chat interview, phone interview, or IM messaging interview. While not the focus of this paper, we note that these different method options were chosen to provide men opportunity to use a method that best suited them, particularly as methods such as IM messaging allow for anonymity, and can be an empowering and comfortable for participants who may be able to

think over their responses more easily (see Pearce, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, & Duda, 2019). Using instant messaging for interviewing participants about online dating may be especially appropriate and relevant, as instant messaging is commonly used during online dating (Malta, 2012). Additionally, it has been noted that IM messaging does not yield less rich data than audio and video or face-to-face options (Shapka, Domene, Khan, & Yang, 2016).

Participants were asked a series of questions about their use of dating apps, reflections on choices around profile dating pictures and body image, reflections on contemporary dating practices, and their engagement in the sending of sexually explicit imagery. In this paper, we focus specifically on their use of dating apps and their production of profile imagery. Elsewhere we have focused on sexting and production of sexually explicit imagery (Waling, Kerr, Bourne, Power, & Kehler, 2020b). Audio-based interviews were professionally transcribed while IM messaging provides an instant transcript upon completion, and participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts, to which all declined. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes to an hour and a half. A \$50 gift voucher was provided as remuneration for participant time.

Participants

15 cisgender, heterosexual men between the ages of 18 and 30 chose to take part in this exploratory research study.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant characteristics. Most identified as Anglo-Celtic Australian ($n = 9$). Half were between the age of 25 and 30, while the other half were between 18 and 25. The majority of the sample had a undergraduate university degree ($n = 11$), and had been using dating apps for more than a year ($n = 11$). All participants noted Tinder as the primary dating app they used currently or had used in the past two years from the point of data collection, followed by Bumble ($n = 6$). These are two common general dating apps used in Australia. In Australia, the use of dating apps is one of many ways in which individuals may seek out romantic companionship and sexual encounters. Others include meeting people through work, friends or family, through hobbies, or at events, including social events. Eight participants identified as being currently single, and most identified as seeking or preferring monogamous relationships ($n = 13$) rather than polyamorous ($n = 2$). Nearly half resided in urban areas of Victoria, the second most populous state of Australia ($n = 7$).

Analysis

Data analysis occurred in a series of steps using an IPA framework (Smith, 1996). Once transcripts were available, they were checked and verified by the lead author by listening back to the audio recordings and ensuring they matched the transcripts. They were then loaded into NVivo for coding organization. In the first phase the transcripts were read repeatedly, with notes made regarding what was being said. These notes were the basis for top-level descriptive codes to which the data were initially assigned using a codebook. Transcripts were then coded a second time by hand by exploring first-found coding in more depth and detail to explore the emergence of latent and salient themes. These were then clustered where appropriate to establish superordinate themes. All authors engaged in ongoing communication to discuss the findings.

Findings

Below we explore how cisgender, heterosexual men make sense of the process in which they take, or choose, photos for their dating app profile pictures. These include processes of 1) settings, selfies and 'doing' shots; 2) feelings of discomfort, and self-doubt in presenting the body, and 3) negotiating tensions of authenticity and vanity when seeking sexual, romantic, and/or emotional connections.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics (N = 15).

Demographic characteristic	N	%*
Age		
18–21	5	33%
22–25	3	20%
26–30	7	47%
Dating apps used*		
Tinder	15	100%
Bumble	6	40%
Hinge	3	20%
okCupid	3	20%
Feeld	2	13%
Blender	1	7%
Change	1	7%
Coffee meets Bagel	1	7%
Education Attained		
Secondary School	1	7%
TAFE Diploma	1	7%
Bachelor's Degree	11	73%
Master's Degree	1	7%
Doctor of Philosophy	1	7%
Ethnicity***		
Anglo-Celtic Australian	9	60%
North African and Middle Eastern	1	7%
North-East Asian	2	13%
South Eastern European	2	13%
Southern and Central Asian	1	7%
Length of time		
Less than a year	4	27%
1 year	3	20%
2 years	3	20%
3 years	2	13%
4+ years	3	20%
Relationship status****		
Single	8	53%
Partnered	5	33%
Casually dating	2	13%
Relationship style		
Monogamous	13	87%
Polyamorous	2	13%
Residential location*****		
Urban	14	93%
Regional	1	7%
State or Territory		
Australian Capital Territory	1	7%
New South Wales	2	13%
Queensland	5	33%
Victoria	7	47%

*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

**As some participants used more than one dating app, percentages do not add up to 100%.

***Ethnicity is reported following the *Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups 1249.0* (2019), developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

****Some participants identified as polyamorous, and thus may be in relationships while also using dating apps. Others had used the apps in the last two years (as per the study's eligibility criteria), but had stopped when entering an exclusive relationship.

*****Urban is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as having a population of 100,000 or more people.

Settings, selfies and 'doing' shots

Awareness of the body as visual currency was evident in participant's narratives about the ways they evaluated, manipulated or adorned their bodies for photos. Participants were conscious of the way they wanted people to read their bodies and the visual cues (such as interests, hobbies, or lifestyle indicators) that would indicate authenticity. Participants attended to how they looked with a view to appearing authentic, which involved ensuring that they did not look like they had 'tried' with their

photographs (Ward, 2017). Nevertheless, they were keenly aware of how their images could be read within the culture of internet dating. This was achieved through being strategic about what settings they located their images in, and ensuring that they had photographs that represented them as actively 'doing' something:

Most of the photos that I have are incidental or like a friend's been taking it at the time, so there's very little preparation that goes into that. When I do, or when I did take photos, the preparation that would go into that would be setting up the thing, setting up myself like grooming whatnot, I don't know maybe wearing a nice shirt that's ironed or something like that. (Kirk, 24, casually dating)

So it was a photo of me like out in that, and I'm all wet and soaked through and all that sort of stuff, but I'm just wearing decent clothes and it's a nice photo. And then the other ones are at like, as I've gone out to a concert and things like that and I'm just sort of dressed nice and presentable. (Nick, 25, single)

The tension for some participants was navigating what they saw as strategic placement, working to their strengths to show the best of themselves and the desire to be 'accepted as myself, rejected as myself, [rather] than accepted as some manipulated thingy' (Miguel, 26, single). Participants also noted the importance of active shots in which they are seen doing things. Such strategies often involved picking photos that demonstrated activity of some kind, such as playing a sport, or illustrating an interest in hobbies or other pursuits. This would then demonstrate aspects of their personalities beyond what they may look like to give a sense to a romantic prospect as to who they are as a person. For example, Jacob (29, single), notes he has a few images of him 'doing interesting things like hiking or things like that' and Miguel who explains that 'there was one [photo] where after winning a trivia night there's a photo of me holding the prize, you know, so I like the message of that one'. In these cases, Jacob chooses a photograph to illustrate an athletic aspect of his self, while Miguel chooses an image which illustrates an intellectual aspect of the self.

Active shots were a way to avoid the perceived narcissistic nature of selfies, which were seen about being invested in looks only rather than the whole person. Kirk, for example, describes bathroom selfies as distasteful:

the worst thing for me is like a bathroom selfie . . . I want it to be tasteful because we're very visual in terms of how we use, or have the social media set up is very visual, most people would just see it for a few seconds and then swipe on, and that's all you really have to grab somebody.

While Kirk refers to the 'grab' in terms of grabbing the attention of others through an attention-grabbing image, in selfie culture this 'grab' is crucial to which steps follow be they pursuit or rejection. The impact of the selfie culture (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015) and the preparation or arguably lack of preparation according to some participants, is evident when Nick remarks on 'in the moment' selfies as opposed to other types of selfies he has taken. He remarks, 'I'm not good with any of, I'm not good with angles and all that sort of stuff, so a lot of the time when I do take a selfie I kind of just don't feel good about it afterwards'. Here, Nick reflects on an insecurity about taking time to do a selfie, recognizing the level of hidden skill necessary to achieve what he feels is an adequate photo, and the resulting feeling of disappointment afterwards. By this, the level of skill required to achieve something that appears 'effortless' and yet takes time, practice, and potentially additional resources such as professional cameras and lighting equipment.

Harry (20, single) was similar, arguing that selfies were 'just too "try hard", I don't know, I put so little effort into my photos'. He further remarks that he just uses photos 'that look nice, me when I'm out' and tries 'to show personality' in his photos. The men in our study are in fact seeking, and moreover provoking what Senft and Baym (2015) describe as 'court[ing] viewer interaction' (1594). Images are posted to invite a particular response, and there is a calculated

risk in the process of taking posturing selfies and posting images on dating sites. Even before the image is posted online the participant registers his own sense of self and what the image may convey.

Discomfort and self-doubt

Gill et al. (2005) explain that 'the male (body) has become an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look' (39). Bodily surveillance and the ability to gaze upon their bodies as well as other men's bodies has implications (Norman, 2011; Wagner, 2016). Jack (26, casually dating) for example does not post torso images of himself because of how he evaluates his own body:

I think it's – well first of all I don't think my torso is anything to write home about, so I don't think I'd put that on there for the reason that it's not like it's kind of get anyone all riled up and excited.

This was echoed by others:

I don't think like my body is, like my best part, like my torso is my best part of my body, or something like that. So I don't think it's something I can show off. (Lyle, 20, partnered)

I don't have the most athletic body either, or should I say I don't have like a body builder kind of body right now, so that's also maybe what is detracting from me doing such a thing. But also clothing the body you choose right, so like I can dress in clothes which I think represent me better than just my body. (Kirk)

The culture of online dating and the conscious decisions these men made about which images to post and what images expressed or conveyed was regularly and consistently connected to how they were able to gaze upon their own bodies. Both Gill et al. (2005) and Norman (2011) argue that 'representational forms' such as dating platforms have increased the discursive repertoire available to men. The historical shift away from cisgender, heterosexual men averting their eyes from looking upon the male body to a concerted and intentional gaze upon men's bodies is striking. Brody (30, single) explains

I think perhaps maybe I'm a bit body conscious, I think, or it's probably a split between. Like, I think it's I see those [torso shots] and I think they're a bit stupid, and then also I think I'm probably body conscious [...] Like, I don't really mind being shirtless in front of someone, but I don't know if I want, like, a picture that's of me shirtless you know. Especially out of context, like it's like yeah okay it's a picture of me and my mates at the beach, but I guess I'm a bit conscious to having it so on display and so public ... I'm not unfit but I wouldn't say that I look fit, so I'd say that you know it would kind of be like the reaction that I guess I would think that the reaction would be like, why is this guy showing off his dad bod or like, his average body? It's sort of like, you know, there's not really a reason to be shirtless, it's not really much to show off.

In this case, Brody anticipates the reaction he would get. He self-evaluates, imposing external expectations on his body. He decides his body is unworthy on the basis of what he understands about men's bodies and the calculated social exchange or benefit for showing his torso. While he admittedly thinks torso shots are a 'bit stupid', he also acknowledges his own level of body discomfort. Further, he highlights the need for context, that the torso image needs to be within a context of appropriate activity, such as attending the beach, rather than just a photo of the torso. Again, these men evaluated the dating environment and the utility of particular images as well as the meaning associated with posting certain kinds of images, dressed, undressed, and not posting others. His assessment of his body is related to fitness and the devaluing of bodies that are 'average' in a culture that heralds lean muscular bodies.

Dating apps and the visual landscape involved in posting images has provided a context in which men look upon their own bodies as well as the bodies of other men. The current climate and online dating culture has provided a mirror and a legitimate context for cisgender, heterosexual men to speak to and about their bodies. These men remarked, for example, that

when I look at myself in the mirror and I don't see someone who's very attractive, and I've got a bit of a belly and I'm not necessarily the most skinniest person in ways, ... when I kind of strip back to just looking at myself say in the mirror and it's just skin, I don't feel very comfortable, I don't feel like – yeah I feel like sometimes like I disgust myself with how I look ... they're going to judge me on is my appearance and I'm not tall and big and manly. (Nick)

When further asked to describe what he saw as the expectations or 'look' that prevailed for men, he explained,

When a female thinks of a guy and what's attractive [...] being broad shouldered [...] having a bit of muscle that sort of athletic sort of build [...] it's really hard to sort of, I guess, compete with that sort of look. (Nick)

The individual experience of the living body and the managing of that body is directly related to how these men read their bodies in the context of dating apps and social media platforms where their bodies, in whichever manner they choose, are on display for public consumption and evaluation. There was a recurring theme suggesting the bodies of these men were not an asset but rather a potential deficiency.

Vanity and authenticity

The participants were aware of competing discourses of authenticity and desirability as they increasingly engaged with reflections on, and of, their bodies. In this case Miguel explains

I know it's me that got the 50 matches, you know, but if you do these like manipulated photos like on Photoshop got the 50 matches you know because it's not really you.

He makes a distinction arguing for the 'real you' as opposed to 'manipulated photos'. Jacob was similar, arguing that 'there's a difference between choosing photos of yourself that are flattering with makeup on or nice clothes or whatever versus explicitly staging something that's intended to mislead'. In another conversation Kirk explains that 'I'm not totally photogenic and I definitely get the comments that I'm a lot better looking in real life, when I meet up with someone'. The contradiction between portrayals of the self-captured in photographic images and posted on dating websites is later realized when the young man hears that he is 'better looking in real life'. This is echoed by Jack

My phone has a lovely thing called a beauty filter on it, which sort of takes, smooths my skin out and like takes a little bit of the blemishes and the redness out of my face and stuff like that. But I try and not to overly use that, so I try and keep it as close to me as possible.

Jack highlights the use of 'filters' to present a nicer version of himself, but highlights that he is concerned about overuse, and that it does not accurately reflect his image. There is a clear evaluative tone to how these men make sense of and 'see' their bodies in the process of posing for photographs and using these images. There is an unmistakable desire to be seen in particular ways and contexts, while maintaining a degree of 'authenticity' in how this is achieved.

The men in our study spent a considerable amount of time thinking about their bodies and gaining understanding about their own bodies in relation to other bodies, particularly the placement and location of other men's bodies, and the participants recognized that images of muscularity and torso shots may send the 'wrong' message. Jack provides further argument and insight into how he understands the posting of particular images and importantly the posting of torso images by other men:

the photos that you choose to put up kind of say something about who you are and what you're into and what groups you belong to, and putting a selfie up or a torso shot I think kind of signals that I'd be the type of person who'd be – I don't think vain is the right word, but maybe like kind of into that kind of selfie Instagram culture, it's like really conventional, it's really like mainstream – yeah, kind of boring as well I think in my experience, it signals that you're a kind of boring person, and there's nothing else going on in your life apart from your appreciation of yourself.

Jack dismisses both selfie shots and torso images. He is unequivocal in linking the selfie culture to Instagram culture to mainstream, conventional practices of posting. His attention to the choice of pictures as a process imbued with meanings is captured when he suggests that it ultimately 'signals that you're a kind of boring person and there's nothing else going on in your life apart from the appreciation of yourself'.

Kirk also remarks on his disdain for posting images of his body, arguing that 'there's no personality that goes into that [...] there's nothing that makes you stand out'. He instead favoured more social settings so that he would 'appear as fun/friendly/sociable, and to avoid appearing as self-absorbed/gym junkie type'. The men repeatedly expressed similar arguments for not posting torso shots regarding concerns about how that may be perceived. Marshall (30, partnered) for example comments that

part of it is that isn't the kind of image I'm trying to cultivate, and I look fine but not exceptional with my shirt off.

His purpose and intent are to 'cultivate' a 'kind of image'. At the same time Marshall assesses his own naked body as 'fine but not exceptional'. He later remarks that these types of torso shots would make him appear like a 'meathead' and moreover, he comments that 'it seems like posturing' and he was 'staying away from stereotypes'. Marshall understood the tensions in a culture of online imagery and a visual culture that was underscored by prevailing notions of chiselled, sculpted bodies. In his words 'I don't have any respect for it' and so he refused to participate in 'any form of macho nonsense'. Participants were strategic and indeed thoughtfully engaged in considering how their images as representations of them will be read and interpreted.

Discussion & conclusion

The findings from this study provide new insights into the ways in which the use of dating apps, and construction of profile pictures for these apps, require cisgender, heterosexual men to navigate complex and often contradictory expectations of masculinity, beauty and authenticity. There is a recurring and powerful tension evident among the participants in how they position, manoeuvre, and configure their bodies while being openly anxious about how their bodies were read by the recipient. The choosing of certain kinds of photographs to evoke certain meanings are based on preconceptions about how their image may be read and interpreted, and not based in any actual reality. Prevailing understandings about bodies as emblematic of forms of masculinity were routinely woven into conversations where the participants linked a 'lack in their bodies' or an inadequacy such as an absence of muscularity, to a greater valuing of personality and an outright dismissal of bodies as inadequate, while more authentic, truer selves can be expressed through pictures that convey personality, not appearance *per se*.

There is a contradiction here in relation to the body being the thing that demonstrates one's 'best self' (Hakim, 2020; Oakes et al., 2020) and yet at the same time, it is also seen as vain and narcissistic. These men are caught in a kind of double bind or dualism (Norman, 2011), the body is meant to represent their best self, and this is tied up in complexities around muscular/fit/'healthy' bodies being just that, yet at the same time, they are mindful, aware and uneasy that such notions ascribe to concerns of vanity and narcissism. This is in line with Haywood's (2018) study and other studies on queer men (Chan, 2018; Hakim, 2020; Oakes et al., 2020), where participants were conscious of the meanings and potential interpretations of the images used. We argue that for the men in this study, there was an active and conscious need to navigate between what they perceived as their 'authentic' self, and an underlying apprehension that their 'authentic' image would not be appealing enough in the dating market (Chan, 2018; Hakim, 2018, 2020; Oakes et al., 2020). As dating platforms ask people to effectively rate themselves through the imagined eyes of others (Krüger & Spilde, 2020), these men are conflicted about managing a 'real' self despite their awareness that the stereotypical 'hot guy' is not necessarily effective. There is a very conscious curating of imagery, but there was a resignation as to the limits of this.

Online dating is a distinct cultural practice – within this culture there is a set of normative expectations (Duguay, 2017; Ellison et al., 2012; Sedgewick et al., 2017) in which people's attractiveness and acceptability as a potential sexual or romantic partner is assessed (Duguay, 2017; Krüger & Spilde, 2020). This research contributes a more in-depth understanding regarding how cisgender, heterosexual men choose and display dating profile pictures and pays attention to concerns about body image and vulnerability, as well as how men navigate between desires to be authentic while also being marketable and desired (Chan, 2018; Hakim, 2018, 2020; Oakes et al., 2020). This does not rest on the assumption that men solely reproduce images to curate an ideal of masculinity (Haywood, 2020; Waling, 2019a, 2019b) as others have suggested (Hess & Flores, 2018). Profile images are not assessed simply on the basis of the physical appearance of the person, but on the cultural cues (Hakim, 2018, 2020) within the image. Cisgender, heterosexual men are expected to present an authentic masculine self in their images (Haywood, 2018), even though displaying traditional markers of masculinity in a profile picture (such as showing a muscly body or a naked torso) is often considered inauthentic, vain or crass. Men then continually assess and evaluate how their image will be read as both masculine and appropriate in a world where such images are increasingly under scrutiny and criticized (Waling, 2019b; Waling et al., 2020a). They also continually evaluate their own sense of 'authenticity' within the context of the complex cultural expectations of the online dating environment, and use strategies to mitigate this by selecting images that can speak to aspects of their personality.

As Duguay (2017) and others have noted, the profile picture is a particular piece of architecture. It is one image set within a platform whereby someone is encouraged to make an immediate judgment. To come back to Goffman (1959), the performance of the self (the front stage) on the profile image is static and the interaction between performer and audience is one step removed, in which it is the image that precedes reality. While human interaction is core to online social spaces, technology is a significant part of that interaction and shapes, creates and modifies the interaction (Duguay, 2017). Yet, as Duguay (2017) notes, dating technology is not necessarily equivalent with human interaction or experience, which includes human processes of emotion, insecurity and desire around wanting to be 'good enough' when engaging with dating apps. In the process of creating profiles and developing social relationships through dating apps these men develop a sense of self based on knowledge they have about what ideal male bodies should look like, and yet, simultaneously, note that such ideals can lead to misinterpretations as to who they are *as people*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project was funded by a Research Focus Area: Building Healthy Communities grant from La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia.

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Data accessibility/data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Author's contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Andrea Waling. Additional data analysis were performed by Michael Kehler, Adam Bourne, Lucille Kerr, and Jennifer Power. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Andrea Waling and Michael Kehler, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics approval

This research was conducted with the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC18477) approval as it involves human participants.

Consent to participate

Participants provided informed written consent to participate in this study.

Consent for publication

Participants provided informed written consent to allow their deidentified data to appear in publications.

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