

Our App Crashed: Expressions of Desire in the Context of Social Media Dating Applications

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Our App Crashed: Expressions of Desire in the Context of Social Media Dating Applications

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Abstract

This research project focuses on desire, a topic that many scholars have discussed and debated over the ages. In particular, it explores contemporary modes of expressing desire; namely, through online dating. The motivation for the research arose when I found myself newly single in my mid-thirties and forced to enter the world of online dating. It revealed to me a new social landscape and way of communicating with others. I discovered quickly the power of the 'mediated text' message and the nuances that arise through this form of communication. Hence, my visual research responds to the research question 'how is desire modified and expressed in mediated texts sent via online dating applications?'

Using an action-research method, I researched online dating and critically reflected upon my own online dating experiences and those of others, whom I interviewed and corresponded with, to create the visual research of this DVA project. I found that the participants (and I) tended to place too much emotional significance on received mediated text conversations, leading to the intensification of romantic and emotional attitudes towards new connections. I also researched the statistical information about online dating in Australia, which revealed the disadvantage that women aged over 34 years face in finding a long-term partner. Combined, the research and interviews provided a condensed snapshot view of Brisbane's current trends in modern dating practices, which in turn informed and inspired my work in the studio.

This exegesis traces historical and contemporary theoretical thought about desire and online dating, including psychoanalytical and psychological perspectives. It also includes a comparative contextual analysis of other artists' work in relation to my work. French artist Sophie Calle and British artist Tracey Emin are discussed for their artworks that revolve around personal relationships, particularly rejection and heartache; Specific artworks of American artists R. Luke DuBois and Sean Fader are analysed in relation to online dating concepts; and Australian artists Kristin McIver and Emily Floyd were considered for their use of text in their installations. These six artists together informed my art practice and guided me to express desire in my work to reflect on online dating experiences.

The visual research of this DVA is manifested in three bodies of work that are discussed and detailed in this exegesis. They progress from works on paper to neon sign installation through to a multi-media installation composed of sculptural letters, sound, video projections and pin point lighting. As I will

discuss, the aim for the final work was to create a contemplative environment that focuses on the conditions of online dating to provide insight into the risks of disappointment and desires of women looking for love and commitment online. As such, my work aligns with the concerns of much contemporary art being made today, since it evokes current experiences of our media-sated world, blurs the boundaries between art and everyday life, and uses contemporary technologies and mediums to visually express its concepts.

Overall, the aim for my final exhibition outcome is to raise awareness of the romantic ideals embedded within the online dating arena—which is an everyday occurrence for many—while remaining ‘detached’ from the online dating experience. The implications of searching for love and commitment online highlighted the need for a new courtly code in the context of dating online. It appears that returning to more traditional relationship values of the past could forge new opportunities in the future. However, it seems more women are torn between liberating their romantic and sexual desires and the persistent dream of a relationship commitment. Online dating has created new sociological structures in the way we desire, flirt, have sex, and fall in and out of love. It has all become easier and faster in online dating communities, and are consequently are now more evident in contemporary life.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) _____

Julie Anne Rees

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*Desire's abstract nature is part of its power;
its elusive quality is what draws us in and
invites us to 'make sense' of its energy.*
—Kristyn Gorton (2008, 1)

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Desire

The concept of desire has long been a topic of curiosity and inquiry. British linguistics scholar Alice Deignan argues “[romantic]desire can initiate the most conservative and cautious person to [take] risk[s]; it causes new beginnings, new memories, and new stories” (1997, 35). In other words, desire is capable of initiating action. However, acting on an arising romantic desire could lead to disappointing consequences. This introduction outlines the starting points of this research project, which stemmed from a change of direction in my life that motivated me to explore experiences of desire in the everyday contemporary context of online dating. Specifically, this chapter introduces the motivation for the project, gives a brief definition of online dating and ‘mediated text’, and outlines the theories and methodologies that were incorporated in the research process. It concludes with an outline of the chapter structure of the exegesis.

In this exegesis, I trace the theoretical thoughts about desire and online dating that have underpinned my practice-led research. I draw upon psychoanalytical and psychological theoretical perspectives to demonstrate how ‘desire’ expressed through language can initiate action and shape an individual’s experience. Extending these theoretical starting points, the studio practice highlights the conditions of online dating to provide an insight into the risks of disappointment and desires of heterosexual women looking for love and commitment online. The final exhibition provides a contemplative environment in which to consider these aspects while being diverted away from the everyday connectivity of instant messaging devices.

Over time, desire has been variously defined as an emotion, an affect, a drive, and as the essence of human subjectivity. Primarily, though, it has been discussed in relation to lack. The authors I make use of to discuss the psychoanalytic understandings of desire as lack are Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud ([1913] 1990), French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) and French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan ([1979] 1994). To discuss contemporary criticism of desire, I draw upon Belgian psychologist Paul

Verhaeghe (1999), American philosopher Lauren Berlant (1998, 2000), Australian literary academic Geoff Boucher (2005), American psychologist William Irvine (2006), and American film and theatre scholar Kristyn Gorton (2008), who link desire to acquisition and materialism. In the context of this exegesis, the following definition of desire offered by Sartre is used: “desire is not only longing ... which directs itself through the body toward a certain object, but *trouble*” (1956, 387, my emphasis).

I was drawn to exploring notions of desire in my art practice after my long-term relationship ended in 2011. Finding myself single in my mid-thirties, and wanting to be in a committed relationship, I reluctantly entered Brisbane’s online dating scene. To my surprise, I found that using a mobile phone to seek out a relationship is considered standard practice. Free dating applications, such as PlentyofFish.com (POF),¹ are designed to introduce strangers who are specifically looking for a romantic partner or connection (fig.1).

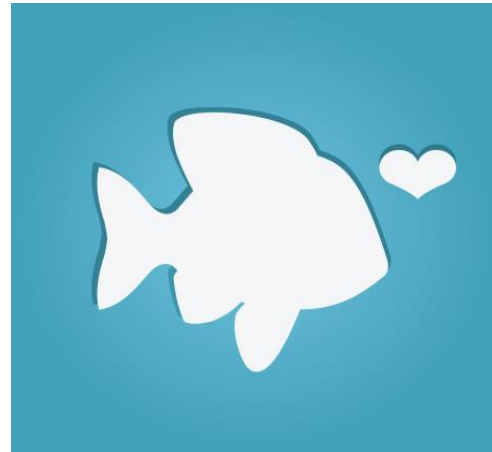


Figure 1 – POF, Mobile Application Logo

1.2 Online Dating and ‘Mediated Text’

In this exegesis, I explore the arena of online dating through the views of Israeli philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze’ve (2004), American sociologist Deborah Chambers (2013), and French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2012). I draw upon Ben-Ze’ve to highlight the impact of romantic love and sexual desires in online dating, while Chambers explains how new technological sociological structures have contributed to the reconfiguration of ideas about relationships and intimacy. Kaufmann is relevant in this context because he demonstrates the inherent problems that many heterosexual women face when it comes to navigating romantic and sexual relationships.

Social interactions in online dating are mediated through text by using the short message service (SMS) provided through 140 characters or less. For the purpose of this exegesis, I refer to this as ‘mediated text’. In the world of online dating, mediated text is an important aspect, as it is the only means to make

¹ Plentyoffish.com (POF) is a search-based site, where users can employ different search categories when seeking a potential mate, such as age range, height, occupation, ethnicity, and postal code. For the purpose of this exegesis, I have used Plentyoffish.com (POF) as a sample of the online dating community.

intimate connections with other potential dating application users. Since dating website users cannot sense each other's physical reactions, they rely upon this written source. This mediated text can be carefully constructed to sound flirty, fun, and casual. However, the same method can be used to end newly formed relationships if feelings are not reciprocated. Thus, the mediated text exchanged between members shapes their experience and determines their level of involvement in a specific online dating community.

In December 2011, I joined POF in the hope of finding a long-term partner. In the third week, user 'Jason123' sent me the following mediated text: "Oh, there you are. My app crashed before I went away ... it finally works. I went through 100 pages to find you again, how are you?" (10 January 2012). These words marked a new direction in my art practice, instigating a series of three large works on paper titled *Alluring* (2012), which will be discussed in Chapter 5, and inspiring the title of this research project: 'Our App Crashed'.

My inbox filled with messages, which was initially exciting. However, a significant number of them were sexual propositions from men in their early twenties. Discordantly, it was addictive, nauseating, and eye opening, which caused uncertainties about finding a long-term partner who was also seeking love and commitment like me. Curious to know whether other women my age who were seeking love and commitment were having similar experiences, I began talking to active members on POF, which revealed some interesting and alarming information about Brisbane's post-modern dating practices. Consequently, this affected the course of my research project, providing an alternative channel through which to articulate 'desire' in a way that is more relevant to contemporary circumstances and my direct experiences. Therefore, the works visually respond to the research question 'how is desire modified and expressed in mediated texts sent via online dating applications?'

By considering contemporary expressions of desire and the platform of online dating, this work aligns with much contemporary art, which is, by definition "the art of today" (Art21 2015). In particular, contemporary artists are recognised for their ability to "give voice to the varied and changing cultural landscape of identity, values, and beliefs" that exists in our "globally influenced, culturally diverse, and technologically advancing world" (Art21 2015). The nature of contemporary art has been discussed at length (see Doherty 2004; Stallabrass 2006; Smith 2009; Frost 2013; Art21 2015), and it is well recognised for its ability to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life; its use of contemporary technologies; and its multimedia form (Art21 2015). As will be seen in the following chapters, my work

meets all of these criteria. Moreover, my artworks speak of the contemporary moment, a particular time when images, words, and information have reached a frenetic pace, and life is simultaneously fractured and interconnected. As respected art historian Terry Smith insightfully writes:

we are all willy-nilly immersed in an infoscape—or better, a spectacle, an image economy or a regime of representation—capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of information and any image anywhere. ... the concept of the ‘contemporary’, far from being singular and simple ... signifies multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately and at once, with others, and without them. (2009, p.6)

This quote resonates with my work, which refers to the image-laden, mediated communication realm of online dating—a paradoxically alienating and connecting sphere.

1.3 Methodology

This research project was conducted using action research, which is

simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 162)

Thus, I reflected on the different methods of research I used as I went along and used these to inform my studio work. As well as undertaking a literature review of secondary sources, I used qualitative research in the form of ethnographic interviews, and a sociological methodology using qualitative data applications. The theoretical views of desire from those authors mentioned above were also supplemented by a comparative contextual analysis of visual artists, whose works will be discussed. They include French artist Sophie Calle, British artist Tracey Emin, American artists R. Luke DuBois and Sean Fader, and Australian artists Kristin McIver and Emily Floyd.

This process was used to develop the practice-led research that manifested in images and installations that address the concerns about desire in the context of online dating. In particular, action research was used to introduce questions about women’s concepts of desire in a contemporary setting, helping me to understand the risks of disappointment in online dating, and enabling future reflections about personal and social change. The ethnographical approach captured the social meaning of the ordinary activities of women (research participants) dating online; this method endorsed a subjective understanding of the social impact of online dating in Brisbane.

The research draws upon published statistical research (Arndt 2012; Recognition 2013; McCrindle n.d.) to provide an overview of online dating trends and the dating landscape within Australia, whereas the qualitative design emphasised the social phenomena. Not only does this research provide an analysis of the debates surrounding the key issues of desire and online dating, but it also draws on modern dating practices, focusing on the Brisbane context. Having direct communication with research participants established common narratives and experiences of Brisbane women dating online.

In this exegesis, which is an extrapolation of the research project, I critically analyse the conceptual underpinning of my work, studio methodologies, and the significance of language, narrative devices, and various inter-media processes involved in my current art practice. Additionally, I consider the use of text, light, sound, and video as instrumental, highlighting the concept of desire through the representations of dating accounts. Reporting on the conditions of online dating through installation gives an insight into the risks and desires of women looking for love and commitment online. I can reflect on this now as I have retreated from the world of online dating.

1.4 The Studio Work

During my candidature, I completed three bodies of artwork: *Alluring* (2012), *Expressions of Desire* (2014), and *Kissing Toads* (2014–15). As this exegesis will outline, they progressively worked through the material and conceptual concerns of the project. The research project explores ways in which online dating participants express desire through mediated text. In doing so, it aims to reflect on how desire can initiate action through language, and shape an individual's experience. The research project also aims to highlight the conditions of online dating, providing an insight into the risks and desires of women looking for love and commitment on the internet, and questions the source of romantic ideals. My ultimate aim was to create an installation evocative of, but removed from, the fast-paced environment of online dating. In this 'slow' reflective space, viewers are able to consider the consequences of desire and the lived experience of women who have participated in online dating.

Each of the works use text messages (mediated texts), and are reflective of common experiences of online dating. Using my own and others' experiences, the work exposes the perils of online dating for Brisbane women in their thirties. According to psychologist Andee Jones, dating site structures encourage the idealisation of a mate and the rejection of those who do not fit the ideal romantic image

(Jones 2010, 19).² As a result, online dating encourages intense, short-lived encounters. At first, each new connection seems to promise a fairytale ending; however, because of the implicitly anonymous nature of online dating, most connections will inevitably end, often quite quickly. The narrative of the final installation (*Kissing Toads*) is a fabricated sequence of mediated texts (based on real texts) from an online lover, which reveals the initial contact to the end of a brief romance. The work offers the audience a glimpse into the private world of an online dater who experiences the effects of a romance gone sour.

During the research, I examined the relationship between visual art and the written language of text messaging interactions. Written language in art is powerful as it reaches across aesthetic boundaries to strike significant chords that go beyond a trans-generational and transnational popularity. Words, as a verbal-visual hybrid, are well positioned to reveal online text-based romantic interactions. Desire is the underlying theme and emphasises the role that idealism and infatuation might play in online dating.

Three significant issues are considered in this research project. Firstly, how 'desire' can initiate and affect online dating decisions through language. Secondly, how current attitudes towards love and commitment affect online dating relationships. Thirdly, how contemporary art practices convey concepts of 'desire' through using either text or text-based communication as a core material. These issues reinforce how expressions of desire exchanged in online dating can produce real-world change in relationships between participants. As Australian theorist, Rosi Braidotti asserts: "it is our desire that draws us into action, whether or not we know the consequences of these decisions" (2006, 4).

To discover how desire communicated in language can influence online dating decisions, I explored ways in which POF users express desire through mediated text. To understand current circumstances and attitudes towards commitment and intimate relationships within the Brisbane context, I corresponded with and interviewed women who were also registered with POF. Through this, I gained an insight into dating narratives, views, and realities of women, which informed and inspired my work in the studio. This process and results of these interviews will be detailed at length in Chapter 2.

² An 'ideal' image here means: existing as a mental image or in fancy or imagination only; lacking practicality.

1.5 Chapter Structure

Having introduced the themes and methodology used for this research project, I will now outline the chapter structure of the remainder of this exegesis. Chapter 2 gives a background to the study of online dating in Australia, providing quantitative and qualitative data. The former is in the form of statistics provided through reports, newspaper articles, census data, etc. The latter is drawn from responses from the three female POF users I interviewed. Their experiences offer an insight into online dating for Brisbane women in their mid-thirties.

Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework of this exegesis, and focuses on five key areas: psychoanalysis and desire; contemporary theories of desire; desire in online dating; online dating; and a discussion of a mediated communication theory called Social Information Processing (SIP) theory in the context of online dating. I refer to SIP to understand the social implications of using communication technologies. The views of American authors Joseph Walther (1992) and Robert Tokunaga (2009) are used to unpack these ideas.

Chapter 4 is a comparative study of selected artists who also express desire or use text in their work: Sophie Calle, Tracey Emin, R. Luke DuBois, Sean Fader, Kristin McIver, and Emily Floyd. In particular, DuBois and Fader explicitly reference online dating in their work. I trace the similarities and dissimilarities between these six artists' conceptual and material concerns and my own, noting how they helped inform the final work of this research project.

Having provided the context for the studio work, Chapter 5 describes the three main bodies of work completed during my candidature, *Alluring* (2012), *Expressions of Desire* (2014), and *Kissing Toads* (2014–15). It demonstrates how I interpreted expressions of desire in each of them and outlines the methodologies used for each project. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the process and outcomes of my DVA research.

Chapter 2: Background to the Study

(Quantitative and Qualitative Data)

2.1 Australia's Dating Scene

The prevalence of online dating in Australia is escalating, with more singles looking outside their network of colleagues, friends, and family to pursue a romantic partner. Recent statistics reveal that 51 percent of Australian singles have tried online dating or are willing to try it (Dating Site Reviews 2013). Many online dating sites exist, and cater to individual inclinations, such as fetishes, role-play, or same-sex relations. However, for this exegesis, I will focus on a heterosexual woman looking for 'Mr. Right'. According to Kaufmann, "online dating is alluring because the possibilities seem endless" (2012, 9) in the sense that we can flirt online, exchange signs of affection, have friendly chats, or talk about love. We can establish fleeting friendships, develop long-distance relationships or have one-night stands. However, Kaufmann suggests that when one person declares their love for the other, the dream may prove to be an illusion. While there are countless 'how-to' books about online dating, very little academic research and visual art practices have been undertaken on the impact of online dating, particularly on women in their mid-thirties.

Australian social researcher Mark McCrindle has sensationally declared "Australia is in a man drought" (2014), providing online dating data and census analysis verifying how difficult it can be, statistically, for a woman in her mid-thirties to find a partner. Similarly, Bettina Arndt (2012) writes:

Almost one in three women aged 30 to 34 and a quarter of late-30s women do not have a partner, according to the 2006 census statistics. And this is a growing problem. The number of partnerless women in their 30s has almost doubled since 1986.

Furthermore, Chief Economist at Pitney Bowes Software, Bob Schwartz asserts, "Marriage data shows women are settling at a younger age, and men aged thirty-five and over are choosing to marry or live with women aged thirty and under" (Recognition 2013). As a result, many women in their mid-thirties are missing out on their fairy-tale ending.

In Brisbane, the single market is dominated by women aged thirty-five to forty-four, with an excess of 5,000 more women than men in the same age group. However, men aged twenty to twenty-nine out-

number women by 12,700 of similar age (Recognition 2013). These statistics impact on online dating in Brisbane, as most POF male users fall into this lower-aged category. As a result, the statistics suggest that women aged thirty-five and over will most likely be contacted by men in this age group who see no rush to seek love and long-term commitment.

While dating online is easy, it is full of hidden traps that can make finding love more difficult. The reasons for joining a dating site differ from person to person; however, users' expectations are required to fit one of two categories—'serious' (seeking a long-term relationship) or 'fun' (seeking a short-term relationship)—which involve different behaviours. On the one hand, Kaufmann (2012) suggests, "serious dating takes the form of a process of bargaining and encourages people to pretend to be someone they are not (Kaufmann 2012). On the other hand, 'fun', in Kaufmann's opinion, incites users to express secret desires and feelings rather than coldly evaluate the ideal product. Users are free to express emotions, which can take them much further than they expect—or nowhere at all.

2.2 Interviews with Female POF Users

For this research, I chose to focus on female POF users living in Brisbane, aged thirty-five to thirty-seven, since this reflected my own demographic. I found it easy to find such women; the average Australian online user is female, in her early-to-mid-thirties, and in a work environment that is not conducive to developing meaningful romantic relationships (Dating Site Reviews 2013). For this project, I interviewed and corresponded with three female POF users over March and April 2014; as this sample is small, it could only provide a snapshot of women's dating experiences in this context. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement (Appendix 1). However, for the purpose of this exegesis, the participants' names have been replaced with fictional usernames 'Ready4u', 'Cheekygirl', and 'Bunnybo'. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed for commonalities. I will discuss the findings of the interviews here, providing direct quotes from the interviews and text messages received from the participants. As will be relayed in Chapter 5, these interactions also informed my studio work, *Expressions of Desire* (2014) and *Kissing Toads* (2014–15); in particular, audio from the interviews featured in the latter work.

The interviews uncovered some interesting and alarming post-modern dating practices while in search for love and commitment online. Thirty-six-year-old Bunnybo selected her dating intentions as 'casual dating/no commitment' even though she was seeking a long-term commitment. This is because

Bunnybo believes “most men do not want a commitment, and the only chance a woman has of meeting a man online is to pretend she is looking for a good time” (interview with the author, 29 April 2014). Although Bunnybo was acting under false pretences in an attempt to attain her ideal, she acknowledged that her approach has many hazards.

During an interview with Bunnybo and Cheekygirl, an interesting situation unfolded. They each received a mediated text from the same man five minutes apart. On their accord, both women decided to contact the POF user in order to compare the mediated text received. In both cases, a 'meet up' was suggested, along with compliments and sexual innuendos, although the messages did vary in construction. This incident revealed a 'sleazy' side to online dating. Bunnybo and Cheekygirl admitted to feeling very uncomfortable and blocked the user immediately after the interview. The event also highlighted the potentially deceptive nature of online dating and confirmed to both participants that they needed to exercise more caution in the future.

Because of this deceptive nature, it is hard to distinguish genuine users from those who are merely looking for short-term, physical interactions. Kaufmann asserts, “The new dating set-up means... It is near impossible to make a clear distinction between serious dating and purely sexual encounters” (2012, 13). From my own and other women’s experience, I believe that POF is not for the faint-hearted; male users often use crude and misogynistic language, although most are honest about their intentions. In an interview, Bunnybo reported:

Since joining POF, I have been flooded with messages from men in their early to mid-twenties. I receive countless requests for no-strings-attached hook-ups. I just want to meet someone who genuinely wants a relationship or wants to work towards one. (Interview with the author, 20 April 2014)

While the stereotypical view is that men are interested in casual sex and women are interested in long-term relationships, Kaufmann reports that, recently, women are being tempted by the idea of a one-night stand (Kaufmann 2012). Although many women are looking for love with physical companionship, more women in Brisbane are opting to form casual relationships out of fear of not finding a suitable partner for a long-term committed relationship. For example, Bunnybo and Ready4u affirmed they have formed ‘no strings attached’ relationships since joining POF because of being afraid of not finding a suitable partner (group interview with the author, 29 April 2014). According to Irvine, “when our desires

come into conflict, our emotions can give rise to desire that our intellect finds objectionable [for example, wanting love, but settling for sex]" (Irvine 2006, 283). Ready4u revealed to me:

I am looking for a long-term relationship, but the man I am seeing is only interested in casual sex. I cannot stop thinking about him. I know I should stop seeing him, but my desire to be with him overrides all logic. I am scared to finish the relationship just in case there is no one else. (Text message to the author, 26 April 2014)

Ready4u described her relationship as 'friends with benefits'. According to Kaufmann, "A friend with benefits is part of a closed system that does not overlap with other social circles in which both users move" (2012, 115). The individual is a cross between a friend and a lover, but the defining characteristic is that they are not the only one available. Bunnybo admitted, "The man I am seeing is not for me; either he is not the one or it is not the right time" (interview with the author, 29 April 2014). This type of relationship is difficult to resolve as combining affection with a refusal to commit contrasts with the romantic ideals at the heart of some women's desires.

Both Bunnybo and Ready4u feel that they are not in a position to be selective. In her controversial book, *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough* (2010), American author Lori Gottlieb advises "thirty-something women, should look for 'Mr. Good Enough' before they have even less choice" (Gottlieb 2010, 54). By contrast, Cheekygirl asserted, "you need to have standards, otherwise you will end up having a string of affairs that never last" (interview with the author, 29 April 2014). Gottlieb further notes "our generation of women were constantly told to have high self-esteem, but it seems women are at risk of ego-tripping themselves out of romantic connections" (Gottlieb 2010, 35). At the time of our interview, Cheekygirl had been on POF for three months and believed she had made a mistake by not looking for a spouse when she was in her twenties. However, she added, "I am not settling for casual sex; I want the whole package and if I have to wait, I will" (interview with the author, 29 April 2014). Gottlieb (2010) argues, "part of the problem is the individual's expectations, and most are not willing to compromise on their list of traits their ideal partner must have" (Gottlieb 2010, 34). However, it is not that women like Cheekygirl are not willing to settle; statistically, it may prove more difficult to find a partner seeking long-term love and commitment on POF as most male users are aged between twenty and twenty-nine years old.

Fantasy plays a vital role in the development of desires. In the context of online dating, fantasies are encouraged owing to the limited information available to online partners. According to Ben-Ze'Ve,

Online relationships can increase the emotional intensity by referring to an imaginary world that is better than the actual one. We ignore various aspects of reality and focus on the exciting ones. The more we believe the situation to be real, the more intense is the emotion. (2004, 142)

Bunnybo acknowledged the role that fantasy plays in her search for a partner online, stating:

My desire for the ideal of love drives all my online dating decisions. Desiring someone feels blissful until you start to twig he is not everything you have cracked them up to be. If only I could predict the future, I could have avoided a couple of disastrous online relationships. (text message to the author, 20 April 2014)

Bunnybo is just one of many women whose unfulfilled ideals of love are causing dating disappointments.

Jones suggests that,

Everyone looking for love [online] tries to shoehorn each promising new contact into ...their ideal lover. In the absence of the real body, voice, body language, and habits of the other person, the longer the mental shoehorning goes on, the more is invested in the fantasy, the higher the potential let down...(2010, 25)

Jones's quote resonated with both Bunnybo and Ready4u, who both affirmed, "this shoehorning regularly happens" (group interview with the author, 29 April 2014). Falling in love quickly may cause problems and dysfunctionality in a world where most men are clear about wanting no emotional involvement.

Ready4u recounted one experience by stating, "the most recent experience of this shoehorning was when I connected with a twenty-six-year-old; I fell head over heels on our first meet up" (interview with author, 26 April 2014). The following is a detailed 'mediated text' transcript between the two of them. For the purpose of this exegesis, I will refer to him as 'Chosen26'. The transcript starts the day after their first 'meet up'.

Chosen26: How was your day? You sexy thing :D (16 March 2014, 7:37pm)

Ready4u: Hot & sweaty: D How was yours? (16 March 2014, 7:38pm)

Chosen26: Just got home from the Gold Coast, I had a good day. I thought it was me what made you hot & sweaty hehe: D (16 March 2014, 7:56pm)

Ready4u: Haha the thought of you gets me going and those bloody 'come fuck me' eyes (16 March 2014, 7:58pm)

Chosen26: I'm free and your free lets sort something out tomorrow (16 March 2014, 8:17pm)

Ready4u: Sounds good I should be back by 10am (16 March 2014, 8:17pm)

Chosen26: I'll see you tomorrow sexy (16 March 2014, 8:21pm)

Chosen26: On my way beautiful (17 March 2014, 12:11pm)

Ready4u: Hey, u could come back over later tonight if u like hehe (17 March 4:19pm)

Chosen26: Sorry beautiful, not tonight, have fun at boxing (17 March 4:21pm)

Ready4u: Thanks (17 March 2014, 4:22pm)

Ready4u: Morning hot stuff what's your plans for today (19 March 2014, 8:27am)

Chosen26: On my way to Bribie Island (19 March 2014, 8:37am)

Ready4u: Lucky u, do you wanna try catch up this arvo (19 March 2014, 8:38am)

Chosen26: I'm meeting someone this arvo but I can get back to you if that's ok? (19 March 2014, 8:45am)

Ready4u: No worries (19 March 2014, 8:45am)

Chosen26: Morning, I'm just watching movies. Did you get up too much yesterday (20 March 2014, 10:10am)

Ready4u: Just uni stuff, it interrupts my social life lol, what u up to tonight? (20 March 2014, 10:28am)

Chosen26: No plan tonight, I'm going for rock climb tomorrow morning (20 March 2014, 10:38am)

Ready4u: Do u like Pete Murray (20 March 2014, 10:41am)

Chosen26: Yeah it's good mellow music (20 March 2014, 10:46am)

Ready4u: Wanna come see him tonight? (20 March 2014, 10:48am)

Chosen26: Yes, it should be good. Where & what time? (20 March 2014, 10:56am)

Ready4u: Be at mine 7:30pm (20 March 2014, 11:04am)

Chosen26: Ok (20 March 2014, 11:05am)

Ready4u: U on your way (20 March 2014, 7:16pm)

Chosen26: About 10 mins away (20 March 2014, 7:20pm)

Ready4u: Sweet (20 March 2014, 7:24pm)

Unfortunately, when Ready4u met with Chosen26 on the night of 20 March, he ended their four-day affair. Ready4u commented, "I thought we had a connection. I made him into my ideal partner; I was shocked when he told me he did not want to see me anymore" (interview with the author, 26 April 2014). Kaufmann speculates, "some women find it hard to divorce sex from love—and therefore feeling" (2012, 151). When meeting someone through online dating, one needs to establish initial boundaries as to whether it is a real date or a sex date. According to Kaufman, if it is the latter, it must not go further,

otherwise individuals risk being disappointed and will find it hard to reconcile the romance being over later. The mediated text transcript is a good example of a short-lived romance and an exemplar of what thirty-odd-year-old women may experience through sites such as POF.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into online dating through statistical information and the relayed experiences and views of the research participants. In gathering this research, I was able to reflect on how desire can initiate action through language, and shape an individual's experience. In addition to this, it highlighted the conditions of online dating for women seeking love and commitment. Throughout this exegesis, I have listed a number of ways desire has been theorised. However, I draw particular attention to the definition of desire as "not only longing ... which directs itself through the body toward a certain object, but *trouble*" (Sartre 1956, 387, my emphasis). In order to fully explore Brisbane's online dating culture through contemporary texts, I now turn to the theoretical framework of this exegesis to provide an overview of the discourse of desire as the context for this research project.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theories on Desire

A universal condition, desire has been investigated across many genres, including literature, film, fine art, video, and photography. As well as being based on my own and others' personal experiences, this studio research draws from a number of theoretical sources on desire and online dating. It is also informed by visual art practices that refer to online dating or use text as a prominent feature. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section discusses psychoanalytic concepts of desire. The second section focuses on contemporary theories of desire relating to acquisition and materialism. Drawing on these models was significant since online dating applications are structured on a consumer market model. To discuss these theories of desire, I draw upon Verhaeghe (1999), Berlant (1998), and Irvine (2006). The third section discusses how no one model offers a complete theorisation of desire in the context of online dating. The authors I draw on are Ben-Ze've (2004) and Mortensen (2015). As there is very little academic research available on online dating, the fourth section makes use of more culturally normative writings of online dating because it aligns with my own and others' personal experiences. These authors include Ben-Ze've (2004), Chambers (2013) and Kaufmann (2012). The fifth section discusses the role of Social Information Processing (SIP) in relation to online dating, and uses literature from Walter (1992) and Tokunaga (2009).

From a theoretical point of view, the key issues inherent in my research are addressed from sociological, psychological, and psychoanalytic approaches. While the theoretical development of desire dates back to antiquity, the more popular psychoanalytic interpretations are derived from the writings of Freud, Sartre, and Lacan. These classic studies formed the foundation upon which my theoretical framework and studio research investigations were built. In her writing, Deignan (1997) outlines ways in which desire is used to explain life-altering situations and to catalogue its consequences and manifestations. Additionally, Irvine's book *On Desire* (2006) gives insight into the workings of desire and the connections between desire formation and desire fulfilment. Meanwhile, Gorton's *Theorising Desire* (2008) considers what desire does rather than what it is and argues movement is central to the concept of desire and its radical potential to transform those affected by it. Mortensen (2015) studies how homosociality ties into heterosexual desire in an online dating context.

3.2 Psychoanalysis and Desire

According to Gorton, Sigmund Freud's Oedipal complex is the cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory and as such, functions as the primary narrative for our understanding of the concept of desire (Gorton 2008). In his book *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1990), Freud defined desire in terms of movement, emphasising the connections between desire and drive in addition to a lack (Gorton 2008). This model was developed by his followers, including the notable French psychoanalyst Lacan. For Lacan, desire was also something that could never be filled or "sated" (Mundy 2001, 27). In her book *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (2001), British theorist Jennifer Mundy asserts that, for Lacan, desire is intertwined with social structures and strictures woven into a fantasy version of reality and the unconscious is the discourse of the other (Mundy 2001). In other words, even our unconscious desires are organised by a linguistic system that Lacan terms as the 'symbolic order'. In a sense, desire is never properly our own; it is created by fantasies that are interwoven with cultural ideologies.

In constructing our fantasy-version of reality, we situate the relation between the object of desire and ourselves. Boucher refers to Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who stated "through fantasy we learn how to desire" (Žižek cited in Boucher 2005, 16). In terms of fantasy, our desires, by definition, do not correspond to anything in the real. Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the 'object petit a') is a way for us to establish coordinates for our desire. Additionally, Boucher notes:

It is this 'lack of' that is at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist so that, ultimately, desire is interested, not in fully attaining the object of desire, but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Since 'desire' is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its impossibility. (2005, 153)

This notion of impossibility is embedded in Sartre's work on desire. He uses the analogy between troubled water and the desiring consciousness as troubled: desire stirs things up from below, muddying the surface, clouding our perspective. Sartre also prompts us to consider desire as something that affects not only the body, but also consciousness. Moreover, Sartre mentions, this 'troubled water' preserves its fluidity and viscosity characteristics. In this way, Sartre highlights the physical transformations of desire's effects. Similarly, Gorton (2008) points out,

Most of us will know that when we are 'in love' we see, feel, taste, smell, and experience things differently. Our bodies feel different to us; we can literally feel the effect desire has on us (2008, 10).

Therefore, the theorists above understand the way desire positions, anchors or fixes the individual in the world and its relations to the other. Moreover, Sartre acknowledges that desires pull us towards an impossible transcendence; this impossibility creates a lack and, at the same time, a pull. The context of online dating is an ideal platform for the dance of fulfilment and denial encapsulated in psychoanalytic concepts of desire. Dating site structures encourage the notion of desire as lack because of the limited information available on online dating sites, reinforced by the anonymity of interactions between users.

3.3 Contemporary Theories of Desire

Recent work on desire has engaged those concerned with acquisition, materialism, emotion, and affect and is useful when examining desire through the arena of online dating. In *On Desire*, Irvine suggests the “social and economic development of recent decades makes this a perfect time to re-examine desire” (2006, 5). He offers an insight into how desire works, the role it plays in human life, and the connection between desire formation and its fulfilment. Most people spend their days pursuing worldly success. Irvine indicates “individuals imagine that on gaining this success, they will also gain satisfaction with their accomplishments, relationships, possessions, and most importantly, with their lives” (2006, 5). However, individuals mistakenly think that the best way to achieve success is to change their environment—their house, their clothes, their car, their job, their spouse, or their lover. Instead, Irvine proposes, “to attain lasting happiness is not to change the world around us but to change ourselves” (2006, 8). In terms of online dating, desire encourages a fantasy-driven idea that meeting someone will lead to happiness and fulfilment in intimate relationships although this view usually fails to deliver.

Lauren Berlant’s (1998) work on intimacy suggests “people consent to trust their desire for ‘a life’ to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed by these frames will turn out beautifully” (281). However, this view within the intimate sphere represses the unavoidable troubles, disruptions, and distractions of romance, particularly in the online dating arena. Additionally, Berlant argues “no one knows how to do intimacy; ... everyone feels expert about it (at least other people’s disasters); and that mass fascination with the ... incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence at the scene of desire somehow escalates the demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be

fulfilled in everyone's everyday life" (Berlant 1998, 282). The promise of happiness and its associated disappointment is pivotal to Verhaeghe's (1999) work; he suggests that people think that

Every desire can be stilled with an object that is for sale: all you have to do is make a decision and carry it out. This is the new alienating myth that seeps in everywhere nowadays—buy the right stuff, and pleasure follows. (Verhaeghe 1999, 134)

Drawing a parallel between the above notion and online dating, a new relationship formed online can be seen like an investment: you put time, energy, and sometimes money into the relationship, hoping that you will be repaid—with profit. For this reason, online dating evokes a shopping experience for partner selection by structuring the search for partners with a consumer market model while still promoting traditional ideals of intimacy.

When reflecting on the notion of desire in the context of online dating, it is more useful to acknowledge the points of convergence and departure between contemporary and psychoanalytic theories to consider how each paradigm handles the concept of desire. I assert that no one paradigm is capable of offering a complete theorisation of desire; instead, I rely on a blend of models to comprehend desire in connection to online dating.

3.4 Desire in Online Dating

Drawing from personal experience and that of the research participants, I think that feelings of desire can be magnified due to the 'lack' of information and anonymous nature of online dating. Since online dating is constructed under a consumer market model, Mortensen points out, "desire [in online dating] carries a strong physical focus, partly produced by the participant's attention to bodily detail and partly through the dating site's visual design" (2015, 1). The dating site structure can encourage individuals to withhold vital information about personality traits and dating intentions, making it difficult for the dating user to detect inauthenticity. As a result of this, Ben-Ze'Ve suggests, "many hopes and desires that online dating generate are not fulfilled—thereby causing frequent and profound disappointments" (2004, 36). The frustrations experienced by this project's research participants (discussed in the previous chapter) mostly derived from trusting their desires for intimacy, which often led to experiences of disappointment. Online dating can ignite contradictory desires within oneself between wanting intimacy and love and commitment. These polarising energies get played out in the intimate zone of online dating, generating disappointment for these women.

3.5 Online Dating

In *Love Online* (2012), Kaufmann demonstrates the inherent problems that many women face when navigating romantic and sexual relationships online. He proposes that online dating is a “consumerist illusion, which would have us believe that we can choose a man (or a woman) in the same way we choose a yoghurt in the hypermarket” (Kaufmann 2012, 6). Furthermore, Kaufmann (2012) suggests, it is as easy to fall in love online as it is in real life, and most people usually fall in love with an image. Online, the idea of someone is determined by the way we look in a photograph. However, nothing could be more deceptive than a fleeting impression that is triggered by social stereotypes. Research participant Cheekygirl reported,

I had arranged to meet someone even though my photo had not been validated. Fortunately, I checked my messages just before I left to meet him. It said ‘Hey I am sorry I am cancelling tonight, I saw your photo, and you are not my type. I wanted to be honest. Good luck in the future.’ At least he spared me the embarrassment. (Interview with author, 29 April 2014)

Even though Cheekygirl felt hurt, not everyone is fortunate enough to have these views expressed prior to meeting and further investment.

In her book on online relationships, Chambers (2013) explains how new technological, sociological structures have helped reconfigure ideas about relationships and intimacy. Chambers points out three key trends that characterise the reconfigurations in mediated intimacies. Firstly, the self-governing and optional nature of interpersonal relationships—the choice of romance exemplifies individual agency and choice. Secondly, the desire for informal, non-hierarchical sets of relationships offers individuals the potential to reinvent narratives of self. Thirdly, the reframing of intimacy opens up debates about personal relationships, allowing an exploration of changing practices of intimacy online. According to Chambers (2013), online dating sites mediate conceptualisations and practices of intimacy. The notion of ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ idealised in the concept of romance corresponds with the media characteristics of technical affordances, conceived as choices associated with the technological potential and attributes of online dating sites. Therefore, the affordances of online dating that create personalised networked publics entail choices (Chambers 2013). Thus, the qualities of romance—conviviality, equality, choice, and mutual disclosure—have been reconfigured through online dating discourses to validate personal life and mediated self-identity.

Ben-Ze've, an authority on the impact of online dating on romantic love and sexual desire, explicitly compares the online arenas to their counterparts in offline circumstances. Ben-Ze've states that dating online has

Modified present social, romantic practices relating to courtship, casual sex, committed romantic relationships and romantic exclusivity. Therefore, we can expect further relaxation of social and moral norms; this process should not be considered a threat, as it is not online changes that endanger romantic relations, but our ability to adapt. (2004, 247)

Chambers confirms, "Nowadays, online daters are inclined to identify with more liberal social attitudes; they see themselves as people who like to try new things" (2013, 133). As a result, online dating enables one to have more sex, better sex, and different sex. Since many moral and practical constraints are lifted online, individuals can quickly make sexual contacts with anyone they want. The research participants in this DVA project identify with this liberal social attitude, especially towards sex.

While one-night-stands and casual sex might seem more acceptable in online dating, it must be noted that the quality of an established online relationship is determined by the communication of meditated text between users. Ben-Ze've further discusses,

In both offline and online romantic relationships, understanding your prospective suitor's mind is complex and involves much more than merely reading faces or messages; it involves paying attention to many subtle cues. (2004, 31)

The kinds of words chosen, the speed of the response, and the length and frequency of mediated texts are all cues to the member's perception of the type and quality of the relationship. However, 'reading between the lines' and focusing on the nature of the connectivity rather than the content is what is important for individuals searching for love and commitment online.

3.6 The Role of Social Information Processing Theory in Online Dating

At the early stages of online dating, there is often a limited range of non-verbal cues. Joseph Walther (1992) developed the theory of Social Information Processing theory (SIP) to understand the mediated nature of online communication formats without non-verbal cues. While his theory applies to a range of online communication, I am only using it in relation to the mediated communication sent via online dating applications.

The development of mediated text relationships is forecasted on the passage of sufficient time and message exchanges. It requires users to adapt to other communicative cues—language and textual display—to develop meaningful relationships in online dating. Walther argues, “It is the length of time that determines whether 'mediated text' communication can achieve a level of intimacy” (1992, 68). Walther’s (1992) research discovered that communicating through mediated formats takes at least four times longer than communicating face-to-face. When contrasting ten minutes of face-to-face conversation with forty minutes of mediated conversation, Walther (1992) found no differences between the two forms. This suggests that users could adapt to this restricted medium and use it effectively to establish close relationships contingent upon a positive first impression. Once the online relationship has developed, it may prove to share the same interpersonal dimensions and qualities as face-to-face relationships. However, Walter proposes, “it is not the quantity of social information communicated online, but the rate at which the information builds [that is important]” (1992, 70).

Anticipating future communication is a way of extending the length of time of the relationship as this provides the prospect of further interaction and encourages the mediated text users to develop a relationship. Mediated text communication could help to accelerate online relationships that would not have formed in the real world due to intergroup diversities, geographic challenges or differences in age.

SIP is a hopeful viewpoint with which to comprehend and dissect online interactions; nevertheless, the theory is not without its criticisms. Tokunaga argues that while SIP, for the most part, holds true, the argument relies on “Individuals...using similar information giving and seeking strategies to supplement the scarcity of social cues and accordingly facilitate relationship development” (2010, 139).

Tokunaga considers the negative aspect of mediated technologies and suggests that mediated formats elevate the risk of misunderstandings. In online relationships, misunderstandings commonly occur from the divergent communication rules and norms by which communication partners abide. Tokunaga advocates, “even if individuals are proficient in communicating, the limited social cues in comparison to face-to-face communications may further provoke misinterpretations, making it difficult to advance a relationship” (2010, 134). Therefore, it depends on whether the two members can successfully overcome uncertainty and mistrust in order to develop a meaningful relationship over time. The evidence suggests that online dating users need to rely on nonverbal cues and adapt to new sociological structures created by mediated platforms in order to establish and maintain relationships.

3.7 Conclusion

My investigation into psychoanalytic theories of desire, psychological, and sociological theories of online dating, and Social Information Processing theory provided depth to my studio research practice by conveying an insight into desire's effects in online dating circumstances. Interestingly, this is contrasted with the individual being expected to self-monitor and self-discipline romantic desires and not allowing these desires to compromise his or her well-being.

Throughout this chapter, desire has been referenced in different ways. Freud defined desire in terms of movement, and also conceived of it as a lack. Lacan believed desire could never be filled or 'sated' and Sartre described desire as trouble. The concepts of desire contained in this literature review have aided my ideas about the expressions of desire in the context of online dating. These expressions, conveyed through mediated text, are intertwined with social structures and strictures, weaving our fantasy versions of reality, therefore, resisting interpretations and final closure. I will now move on to a comparative contextual analysis of several artists in order to consider the best materials and forms with which to communicate the concepts inherent in my work and to draw out comparisons between these artists' work and my own.

Chapter 4: Contextual Review of Artists

4.1 Introduction

Having established the theoretical framework, I now turn to the various artists whose material and conceptual concerns have informed this research project. I begin by discussing two seminal artists whose text-based installations communicate personal experiences of desire through words and image; namely, French artist Sophie Calle (1953–) and British artist Tracey Emin (1963–). Following this, I individually discuss four artists whose work has had specific influence on mine: American artists R. Luke DuBois (1975–) and Sean Fader (1979–), who reference online dating, and Australian artists Kristin McIver (1974–) and Emily Floyd (1972–), whose concepts take form in text-based installations. These artists have been analysed to provide a context to the conceptual and visual forms of my DVA research project, since these artists also question the experiences of ‘desire’ within text-based installations, and as such have informed my approach to expressing these notions in my visual language. In discussing their work, I have considered a number of questions. Specifically, how do these artists’ works express a particular type of emotion, such as the ‘trouble’ of desire; relate to the context of online dating; or make public commentary on romantic (private) feelings? Methodologically, do these artists participate in the research or address their individual experiences in their work? Or do they use collective or group participation in their work? How is text utilised in their work? Moreover, how does the visual form of the work contribute to communicating the artists’ ideas about the trouble of desire or online dating experiences? Finally, do these artists draw different elements together to create a multi-layered installation space?

4.2 Sophie Calle and Tracey Emin

When researching and seeking artists who use text in their work to relay authentic personal experiences to do with love, Calle and Emin are obvious choices. Their work communicates personal experiences of desire, companionship, love, disappointment, loss, and loneliness. Even though they do not reference the context of online dating specifically, they do express the key theme of desire from a personal perspective. Calle and Emin are hardly the first artists to have focused on their personal circumstances within their work. However, both have broadened the artist’s traditional position within the social arena in that their encounters convey emotional experiences in a precise and candid way to their audiences.

The interesting point to make is that these feelings are normally considered to be private feelings—but both these artists make public their emotional experiences of loss, rejection, and disappointment.

Calle's work *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) (fig. 2) responds to the pain of romance and rejection. After receiving a break-up email from her boyfriend (the last line of which was the patronising line that titles

Image removed

the work), Calle distributed it to 107 women, chosen for their profession and skill, and asked them to analyse/respond to the email according to their profession. As a consequence, a copyeditor tore the grammar and syntax apart; an etiquette consultant criticised the sender's manners; a markswomen shot the offending email. Calle gathered their responses by photographing each woman reading and responding to the

Figure 2 - Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007),
Photographs and text, variable

letter, and exhibited them along with graphics, reading materials, and video in the final installation. *Take Care of Yourself* successfully reveals as much about Calle's lost relationship as it centralises the shared experience of disappointment, loss, and longing of the women who participated in her process. This sharing is then further shared with the audience. Breaking-up via electronic means is considered hurtful, indirect, and inappropriate behaviour, which denies the receiver courtesy and further dialogue. Calle's artwork can be seen as an act of revenge on the break-up email's author. In this way, revenge can serve as a reminder to the audience that some individuals should not to be trifled with. Calle creates a multi-layered installation by using photographs, the participants' written responses, and film. With the incredibly diverse visual languages on display, this immersive environment assists the viewer's engagement with the issues.

For Calle, the overall viewing experience of the work is playful and absurd. Even though the break-up email encapsulates a hurtful experience, Calle is able to desensitise her pain of loss, disappointment, and rejection by sharing it with others.

Similarly, Emin uses personal life experiences as inspiration for her artworks, revealing inner hopes, desires, humiliations, failures, and the subsequent downers of desire. Emin's work *I Followed You to the*



Figure 3 – Tracey Emin, *I Followed You to the Sun* (2013),
Neon and hyper glass, 56.9 x 182.9 cm

Sun (2013) (fig. 3) is a neon light illuminating a particular emotion and feeling. Emin's title is unambiguous without cloaking the work in metaphor or symbolism. This work reveals poignant emotions of loss and regret. However, its use of past tense insinuates that this is now a love lost. With a sense of immediacy, this raw statement peels back the inessential to uncover her innermost thoughts and

feelings—much in the same way that a personal diary entry made public might. Emin's work is confessional in that she makes her private feelings about desire and loss public. The work is emblazoned in the consumer language of the very public neon sign for all to see. Emin herself has underlined the importance of words in her visual arts practice: "I do not think I am visually the best artist in the world. However, when it comes to words, I have a uniqueness that I find almost impossible in terms of art—and it is my words that make my art unique" (quoted in McGrath 2002). Through words, her work describes her lived experiences, where the feeling of desire at its heights is sensational and consuming although inevitably does not last. Unlike Calle, Emin comments about the experiences of love and loss without the use of participants. Although she creates a compelling installation, the work does not engage the audience in a bodily way.

Together, Calle and Emin construct small fragments and traces of modern life and emotions within their practice, commenting on a diversity of personal and social accounts. Interestingly, Calle and Emin draw on both textual and visual methods of signification, compelling the audience to alternate between reading and viewing modes. Both artists reveal their private feeling of troubled desires. One point of difference is that Calle uses participants in her work, whereas Emin does not. Nevertheless, both Calle and Emin convey important views of women's experiences.

4.3 Expressions of Desire: Artistic Commentary on Online Dating

With more people becoming familiar with social media applications, artists are beginning to make work in response to the online environment. Indeed, social media has featured as a medium or subject matter

in various recent exhibitions, among them *Decode: Digital Design Sensations* (2009) at the V&A Museum in London, *Twitter/Art + Social Media* (2010) at Diane Farris Gallery in Vancouver, *Social Media* (2011) at Outpost in Brooklyn, and *The Participants* (2013) at Denny Gallery in New York City. Within this context, artists specifically investigating online dating as a medium or subject matter are limited. However, the topic of online dating has been explored in the work of artist, composer, and performer R. Luke DuBois as well as in the work of photographer Sean Fader.

4.3.1 R. Luke DuBois

Image removed

DuBois's work *A More Perfect Union* (2011) (fig. 4) examines American self-identity by using online dating as a medium. DuBois joined twenty-one dating sites as alternatively a straight man, gay man, straight woman, and a gay

Figure 4 - R. Luke DuBois, *A More Perfect Union* (2011) Los Angeles (Acting) viewpoint, Pigment-ink on photo rag, 46 x 61cm

woman, gaining access to over 19 million profiles. He collected the data and organised the material according to the same categories as the US Census (gender, marital status, ethnicity, income, living conditions, and employment industry). DuBois sorted all the dating profiles by postcode and subjected all the words to statistical analysis, creating a romantic atlas of the country by using key-words from dating profiles in lieu of the city and town names. There are 20,000 unique words in the atlas, although, some words are banal; for example, New York is 'Now' and Washington DC is 'Interesting'.

DuBois explains "It is not something I want people to read literally; I do not want people to look at the map and to want to know what their home town word is" (Moon 2011). DuBois would rather the audience think about what those words reveal overall about an area, and what they express to people in terms of how they describe themselves and how they choose their vocabulary. DuBois notes "Online

dating is very complex, and the words people use are important as you have to be able to write about yourself too for the express purpose of people liking you” (Moon 2011). While the US Census is an interesting body of data and useful for many things, for DuBois, it does not give an accurate presentation of who Americans are; it does not say anything about the personality of Americans or with whom they want to fall in love. *A More Perfect Union* takes a whimsical but serious approach to creating maps. The work is a thoughtful piece about how individuals accumulate a vocabulary for describing themselves. DuBois’s approach is sociological in its investigation. It questions the bureaucratic analysis of citizens—and instead uses online dating sites to create an emotional account. This is different from both Emin and Calle who are quite psychological in their approach and focused on their (women’s) feelings.

By DuBois transposing the words of personal profiles for cities onto the familiar form of a map, he presents a voyeuristic geography of American desires. DuBois uses modern software techniques to change the context in which we see data, presenting it in a fresh, sometimes jarring, perspective. He asks how data can have an emotional impact at a time when we are surrounded by so much of it that we are practically desensitised. Although the artist was an active participant in his work, he did not use his real identity to collect the data. While he has incorporated notions of collective ideas of desire, his work does not shed light on the participants’ experiences. DuBois’s approach simplistically displays a word to stand in for the geopsychological. The work can be considered inauthentic because DuBois pretended to be different identities. In contrast to Calle and Emin, DuBois work deals with desire in a superficial way, furthermore, the work itself does not remark on any authentic feelings.

4.3.2 Sean Fader

Photographer Sean Fader explores the complexities of online representations, mixed desires, and the occasional breaches of truth in his photographic series ‘Sup?’ (2010–11) (fig.5).

Image removed

Figure 5 – Sean Fader, 20twenty22. *Dlist.com* July 23 (2010), on photo rag, variable

Since he uses text-based communications, his work is of particular interest to me. Like DuBois, Fader joined many different online dating sites, sixteen in total. While DuBois's work focuses more on the temporal, verbal, and visual structures of cultural ephemera, Fader's work focuses on his personal desires and expectations. Like Calle and Emin, his experiences of desire are central to his artwork. He enmeshed himself in his artwork by messaging attractive men he found online and being overt about his intentions. He asked men if they were interested in going out on a date with him, and whether they would participate in a photography project he was conducting. In this way, he was direct and honest in his approach, and, to some degree, the work is a genuine record of his experiences with online dating. If a participant agreed, the two would meet at the person's apartment, where, upon arrival, Fader would set up lights, rearrange furniture, and rummage through closets looking for the right clothing for the shot. He would then take a photograph of his date. The two would then go out, and upon their return Fader and his date would then collaborate on a second portrait that showed another—perhaps a more realistic—side of the person. His before-and-after-date portraits provide a commentary on first appearances, dating awkwardness, and the more relaxed post-date perspective. The photographs include the date/s on which the portrait was taken. As well as the screen name of his dating partner, their real name, city they came from, and along with bits of communications that were significant to their relationship, appear. In figure 5, the four 'mediated text' presented in Fader's work read as follows:

20twenty22: "Straight acting" is a code for "self-hatred." Educate yourselves.
You are a stellar guy Sean Fader. See you soon :).
You are a stellar guy, and you bring out the best in me. It is so good to have you around.
Ok, so I assume you got my text message. This is my last one. You can text me and tell me I can expect a phone call from you today or never call me again. The choice is yours.

These mediated texts give the impression that Fader had no interest in continuing the relationship and, therefore, does not reference loss or disappointment in love like Calle and Emin.

Although it started out as fun, Fader said combining his personal life and his art into one project began to take a toll. He states

When it all clicked, it was the highest of highs but when the date was awkward, when the photographs were bad, and I felt bad about myself—everything was about an exterior approval—when someone rejects you, it can be ego-bruising, and when you are supposed to be making work and when you fail at that too ... it deeply changed me. (quoted in Rosenberg 2014)

Originally, the goal of the project was to find someone who would make him stop the series, although later he decided to stop the project at the one-year mark. Of the one hundred dates he had in a year, only twenty-seven people consented to participate in the project. For Fader, “the work is the ‘other’, I had to live [through the dates] to get the ‘other’.” He says, “Some of the works I am proudest of [are] because I did whatever it took to make that happen, and that included a lot of personal sacrifices” (quoted in Rosenberg 2014). Life and art, public and private, and maker and subject all become entwined in Fader’s work. Fader’s project altered his life and social world by living out his desires; he does not apologise for its ethical ambiguities or his bittersweet pleasures. In some way, Fader used his art to justify his desires. However, the work does not reveal anything about his or the participants’ experiences as it is more-or-less a documentation of Fader’s online dating history. Therefore, the audience does not learn about the conditions of the online dating environment. The artist has taken himself through a process that may have been revealing for him and the participants however, it does not deal with how the audience experiences desire. Therefore, the personal does not transcend to the universal or collective experience of desire for the audience as it does with Calle and Emin. Fader’s work is based on his personal desires in online dating, which is what drives the process and the participants who appear in the work.

4.4 Text Installation Artists

While there are many artists expressing their concepts in text-as-image (such as Emin) as well as text-with-image (such as Calle), artists who incorporate commentary of online dating communities with text-based installation works are scarce. In this section, I discuss Australian text-based installation artists Kristin Mclver and Emily Floyd. The core interest in discussing these artists’ works is to analyse text-based installations as a visual form that may be appropriate to expressions of desire in online dating. My interest in text-based installation emerged as I developed a position that text was central to online dating. However, I wanted to create a reflective installation that the body physically negotiates and interacts with. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the three studio projects progressed to become more physically engaging and interactive.

4.4.1 Kristin Mclver

Kristin Mclver uses language as a material to challenge the relationship between technologies and the way that viewers interact with advertising. In her neon light work *Thought Piece* (2013) (fig.6), she

explores concepts of desire and aspiration established in our hyper-consumer culture with the aim of breaking down the illusions of commodity aesthetics. According to Australian arts reviewer Marguerite Brown, Mclver explores

Image removed

How social media has both redefined the way we connect and reshape our identity. It provides us unlimited access to information and freedom to connect. However, in the view of Mclver, this state of freedom comes at a price; social media opens up disturbing new channels for advertising, surveillance, data collection and trading. Our 'status updates' translate into profit for the corporations who systematically collate our digital desires and sell them back to us. (Brown 2013)

Figure 6 – Kristin Mclver, *Thought Piece* (2013), neon and mixed media, variable

While this work refers to the domain of social media, it has interesting correlations with online dating because social media texts are not only essentially consumerist, but they are also seemingly intimate because they arrive via our mobile phones as if they are sent privately to us. This relationship between consumerism, the public domain of social media, and the seemingly private space of the phone is connected to some of the sensibilities of shopping for 'Mr. Right' and the language of text messages as a powerful tool to encourage individual desires.

Thought Piece borrows text from the seemingly harmless status prompts of applications such as Facebook and Pinterest. Mclver challenges the notion of desire by exposing the false realities imposed by urban advertising. This work expressively confronts the viewer, raising questions about the types of language used in social media applications. Mclver explains why she uses messages through text by asserting "language is just one of many signs that we use to communicate a given message and advertisers use this to great effect to initiate an emotional response in consumers" (Fluorodigital 2014). Although Mclver's work refers to mediated text, it does not have a direct link to online dating; however, I am interested in her use of neon lights. Some of the connotations of neon lights are as signage promoting consumer transactions, and it has a resonance with the illuminated text of our mobile devices. Her work demonstrates the impact of the digital age, where our devices are continuously

connected to create an information loop. In the information economy, we feed the market and it feeds us.

McIver uses language to challenge the collapse of public and private spaces, and the relationships between consumerism and the public domain of social media. Receiving messages of this nature via a mobile device can seem private and encourage an emotional response, but in the realm of social media, these seemingly private responses become public quite quickly.

4.4.2 Emily Floyd

Image removed

Figure 7 – Emily Floyd, *It's because I Talk too much that I do nothing* (2002), MDF letters and shapes, variable

when viewed together, read auto-biographically. In her work, *It's Because I Talk Too Much That I Do Nothing* (2002) (fig. 7), sentences are taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and transformed into an installation. The text excerpts snake across the floor, which are accompanied by piles of black letters and a scaled-down model of the architectural onion domes associated with historical Russian cathedrals. By approaching language as a material—something that can be manipulated, arranged and re-arranged, deconstructed and reconstructed—Floyd aims to expose contradictions in discourse itself. Floyd's text resonates with her intellectual and artistic development and the cultural landscape they inhabit. Floyd highlights 'reading' as a circular hermeneutic process.³

Emily Floyd also uses text in her artworks. In particular, I am interested in her early work in which she used laser-cut MDF letters to express ideas around identity and place, which offer new ways of thinking about issues in the context of globalisation and post-colonialism. Floyd fabricates letters into excerpts of novels and essays, which,

³ Hermeneutics is the theory of text interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts. The terms "hermeneutics" and "exegesis" are sometimes used interchangeably.

Viewers are directed toward the process of engaging with constructed components of her work, where meaning remains open-ended and phenomenological.⁴

4.5 Discussion of These Artists' Work in Relation to My Practice

Each of the artists discussed above share certain concerns or approaches—whether conceptual or material—with my own work. Here I will briefly eke out some of the similarities and differences between theirs and my practice (a detailed account of my methodologies and description of the final pieces will appear in the following chapter). Both Calle and Fader include their research participants in some way in their final artwork, much like I do. Calle chose women based on their ability and profession and welcomed them to respond to the break-up email according to their professional vocabulary. Calle's work exhibited these women's engagement with her email through photography, film, and their written responses, making public her emotional experience of rejection and a failed relationship. By contrast, Fader used research participants based on his personal desire for sexual interactions. He invited attractive men he found online to feature in his work. Although they have different methodological approaches, these artists' personal accounts are made public either by themselves or through participants. Similarly to my work, Emin uses personal life experiences as a source of inspiration to express loss and rejection. Additionally, her neon work, much like mine, peels back the inessential to uncover inner-most thoughts and feeling. However, her work uncovers her feelings whereas my work primarily exposes participants' feelings.

DuBois's work aligns with some of the aims of my research in that he successfully demonstrates the role language plays in dating profiles to connect with others. The work helps the audience to understand desire in everyday terms by using descriptive language that online daters use to attract potential connections. DuBois's work positions the concept of desire as a force that renders the world as different and more emotionally intense than the statistical data provided by the Census. However, while DuBois's work focuses on a wider community and the use of everyday language, the work does not explore individual experiences within the community or the types of mediated text used to start, maintain, or end relationships. Instead, his work focuses more on the temporal, verbal, and visual structures of cultural ephemera. DuBois's work is the opposite of Calle's and Emin's work because of his inauthentic engagement with the participants.

⁴ Phenomenology seeks to understand experience, arguing that there is not "one reality" to how events are experienced (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 27).

Both DuBois and Fader express concepts of desire in online dating. DuBois expresses the desires of a nation by taking a reductive quasi-scientific approach, whereas Fader's work is more focused on his private desires by immersing himself as an active participant researcher. Although their interpretations of desire are quite different, both practitioners engage in real life circumstances, Fader as himself and DuBois masquerading as multiple identities. Both their works guided me to uncover visual expressions of desires in my own work by locating a gap between the self in relation to online dating experiences and the collective suggested in DuBois's approach. Arguably, it is not possible to summarise the experiences or feelings of online daters into one word. However, sharing experiences in an online dating context and the confessional expressions of women's feelings about the trouble of desire (experienced in Calle's and Emin's works) became central to my own research project on desire in online dating. As will be seen in Chapter 5, a relationship can be drawn between Calle's break-up email and the online dating break-up mediated text in my final work, *Kissing Toads*. Even though McIver's and Floyd's works do not convey concepts that relate to desire and online dating, some of their visual elements—especially their use of text—drew me to their work. Furthermore, McIver's use of neon lights to refer to consumerist impulses helped me to conceive of using it in relation to online dating. It seemed a key form with which to investigate the risks of disappointment and desire. While adopting sculptural letters like Floyd, I wanted to use fixed words in an installation context that was removed from the free flow of mediated text one experiences while dating online. I wanted to do this to create a reflective environment where the letters are still but still resonate with signage and consumerism. The unfolding phenomenological journey in McIver's and Floyd's installations, where the viewer must negotiate the work bodily, was also another key interest for me.

To conclude, in this chapter I have discussed Sophie Calle and Tracey Emin as key artists who communicate personal experiences of desire through words and images. I also examined R. Luke DuBois, Sean Fader, Kristin McIver and Emily Floyd who variously reference online dating communities and/or use text in their installations. These four artists were analysed to provide insights into the conceptual and visual forms of my studio research practice. A visual similarity exists between their works and my own in that I also use neon lights and sculptural letters standing on the floor. This will be addressed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Studio Work

*Soft key strokes, he logs on to my dot com...I close my eyes
as he gives me his hard drive...pain megabytes...
I pull away. More key strokes...he re-enters me...I close my eyes
as I try to come to terms with what was inside of me.
Heart racing, body squirming...sweet pain...
he uploads...I download...I'm hooked.
—Claudia Versailles (2013, 9-10)*

5.1 Introduction to the Studio Work

In this chapter, I discuss the three significant projects I produced during my candidature: *Alluring* (2012), *Expressions of Desire* (2014), and *Kissing Toads* (2014–15). I discuss the key ideas and evolution of these works in the context of my own and others' experiences as online dating participants. As will be seen, the conceptual and material aims of these works progressed and developed as the project continued, which is reflective of the action research process I undertook (Dick 2002).

The first work, *Alluring*, is a series of three works on paper. It is based on my reservations about online dating and the metamorphosis that occurs between two online daters. The second work is a set of two neon lights titled *Expressions of Desire*, which exposes the rejection and compulsions of text-based communications in online dating. Finally, the third piece is a text-based, sound-and-video installation piece called *Kissing Toads*, which highlights the conditions of online dating, providing insights into the risks of disappointment and desires of heterosexual women looking for love and commitment.

5.2 Project 1 — Alluring

Alluring (2012), first exhibited at Brunswick Street Gallery in Fitzroy, Melbourne, is a series of three large works on paper that were inspired by mediated texts I received in the first four weeks of being a member of Plentyoffish.com (POF). I was inundated with messages from (supposedly) single men. Some examples of these messages are as follows: "Maybe your amazing and my fabulous should get together sometime"; "Hi...is this beauty reserved for some lucky guy or do I have a chance to get a conversation?"; "Would you go with a younger guy?"; and "Hey I've decided to make you my new text

buddy...congrats.” Initially exciting, my world opened up with an array of possibilities; all I had to do was respond via text to generate romantic opportunities.

I made *Alluring* in response to this experience. My aim was to document the initial phase of making virtual contact with a dating user via a mobile device. I wanted to use contemporary portraits to depict how users communicate and arrange to meet offline. The overall purpose of making this series was to

raise awareness about how relationships can be formed through mobile devices. In doing this, the project shows the procedure of choosing individuals to connect with based on profile images. Another significant factor was to use the shape of an iPhone 4S and snippets of mediated text to establish how individuals connect and make the transition to offline. Combining mediated text with profile images shows how individuals connect with others via visual and verbal means.

5.2.1 Description

Alluring #1 (2012) (fig.8) is a self-image. I was interested in how the mediated text exchanged in online dating could influence and shape romantic choices. The work itself is in the shape of the iPhone 4S, featuring my original dating profile picture. The highlighted text messages at the base of the work are from a dating user’s attempt to organise a face-to-face meeting. This work signifies my reservations about accepting an invitation to meet a complete stranger. However, it is only when online daters meet that they can find out if they have anything in



Figure 8 – Julie Rees, *Alluring #1* (2012), mixed media, 243 x 185cm

common and if they seek the same thing. They see each other in a new light and will have to come to terms with the fact that this may or may not be the person they were chatting with online.



Figure 9 – Julie Rees, *Alluring #2* (2012), mixed media, 243 x 185cm

I genuinely thought a connection with ‘MLC789’ had no future because he was around ten years my junior. Kaufmann suggests, “A date brings together two people who are different from whom they were online. They are not more ‘real’ or more ‘authentic’, but they are different” (2012, 28). I took a risk and accepted MLC789’s invitation to meet, which led to the next image within the series, *Alluring #2* (2012) (fig.9). Similar to Fader, I asked my date if I could take a portrait of him, visualising my expectations as judged by his online profile. As in Fader’s work, *Alluring #2* features the text-based communication between MLC789 and me. Words are a powerful vehicle for communicating romantic or sexual desires. According to Deignan, “desire in language produces text ... designed to bring about real-world change in the relationship between participants” (1997, 3). Consequently, users become storytellers and editors, punctuating texts with nuanced responses that aim to minimise or amplify ambiguity.

Surprisingly, I continued seeing MLC789 and within three weeks, it seemed I had ‘fallen in love’. According to Irvine,

Falling in love is one of a number of life-affecting desires that people experience. We do not reason our way into love, and we typically cannot reason our way out, when we are in love, our intellectual weapons stop working. (2006, 12)

My desire came seemingly out of nowhere, and I experienced what Freud ([1900] 1990, 287) coined “intrusive thoughts”. Freud explained that when under the effects of desire, we constantly think about the object of our desire and a loss of our thought processes occur. Deignan postulates “desire is often talked about as if it were a separate being from the person who is experiencing it, an invader, which

moves into the body of the experienter, one, which he or she is almost powerless to resist” (1997, 25).

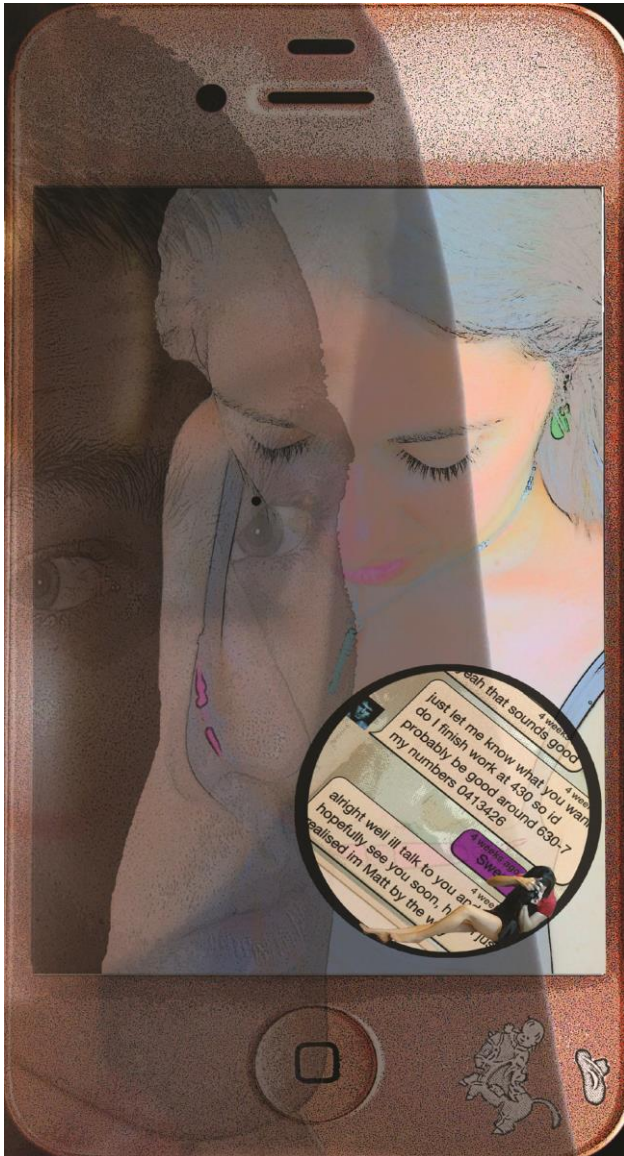


Figure 10 – Julie Rees, *Alluring #3* (2012), mixed media, 243 x 183cm

Deignan’s statement encapsulates my experience with desire. Kaufmann also suggests,

A woman cannot introduce a man in her life and expect everything to remain the same. A man will turn everything upside down, and she will never be the same again and nor will he. Both identities will undergo a metamorphosis, which is both irresistibly attractive and terrifying. Once together in a physical sense, changes will occur. If the ‘love machine’ gets under way, it will no longer be easy to stop. Relationships that begin like this can quickly become very intense, it may last, or it may not. We do not know if it will be purely sexual, or something more. (2012, 6)

The idea of the changes two lovers make to each other’s life once desire has intervened led to the final image for the series, *Alluring #3* (2012) (fig.10). The work is a self-portrait overlaid with my date’s portrait, representing the metamorphosis of our lives intertwining. Again, snippets of text exchanged in the process appear, creating a contemporary portrait of the search for love online.

5.2.2 Methodologies

The methodologies used for this project emerged from personal experience. Using portraiture was a way to document my experience of desire toward an unlikely connection. This experience raised a line of questioning about the effects of desire and the notion of ‘falling in love’ with someone without knowing the individual. In terms of studio methodologies, this series underwent a sequence of multi-layered methods to produce the final images. I used traditional drawing methods, still photography, and computer-generated elements to create the final products.

Choosing Fader as one of my contextual review artists helped me to consider ways in which desire is acted upon and the subsequent consequences of dating online. *Alluring* (2012) shares similarities with Fader's body of work in that they are both contemporary portraits that use real mediated text. However, this is where the similarities end, as we have used completely different approaches. Unlike Fader, my work responds to meeting one connection as opposed to contacting a number of people to be part of a planned project. Fader's work photographically features a stream of romantic connections formulated while dating online, which suggests that his search online focused more on short-term physical interactions than a search for love and commitment.

This project set out to document the process of how individuals meet online and connect offline, how a desire can be triggered, and the metamorphosis of two lives intertwining. Even though the project documented my experience of desire, it failed to engage the viewer. I wanted to explore the experiences of other women to understand the culture of online dating. Additionally, I found that the studio methods I had used did not offer the appropriate vehicle for conveying the risks of disappointment and desires associated with online dating. For me—as for many artists—the combination of text and image was problematic, because I could only display a small snippet of mediated text and could not re-contextualise the relationship outside of its environment. Furthermore, I was also attempting to illustrate, through self- portraiture, the story of desire in online dating communities and felt that the visual choices I made fell short of conveying the emotional side of the experience. However, my aesthetic attraction to language as an art form encouraged me to redirect my focus, as demonstrated in the following project.

5.3 Project 2 – Expressions of Desire

Since mediated text is the primary source of communication in online dating, my aesthetic attraction to language led me to focus my art making in this area. The project *Expressions of Desire* (2014) was motivated by several aims. Conceptually, I aimed to demonstrate the waxing and waning effects of desire in online dating. The methodological aims were to create a set of text-based works that illuminate the rejection and compulsion experienced by women who have participated in online dating. This line of inquiry, expressed through neon lights, references the online dating culture through polarised expressions found in mediated texts.

5.3.1 Description



Figure 11 – Julie Rees, *Expressions of Desire* (I don't feel a spark) (2014), hyper-glass, neon, and acrylic, 100 x 15 cm

Expressions of Desire (2014) (figs.11 and 12) uses seductive advertising tools, emotive language, light, and hyper-gloss materials to convey real mediated texts that Ready4u and I respectively received while dating on POF. The work is a set of two neon lights displaying the words 'I don't feel a spark' and 'You are addictive'. In the former, 'I don't

feel a' is written in white neon with the word 'spark' in blue, while in the latter, 'You are' is depicted in white, with the word 'addictive' in pink. The different colour application used in this work is meant to signify the emotional fluctuations associated with online dating through mediated text.

As previously mentioned, the mediated texts sent in online relationships are often more candid than those sent in offline relationships. As a result, dating site users respond both emotionally and physically to mediated text, and it can generate emotions that can seem more real. By monumentalising private, surreptitious mediated texts, these works highlight the aspects of rejection and compulsion in online dating. They give an insight into what an active POF member will inevitably encounter while seeking a partner.



Figure 12 – Julie Rees, *Expressions of Desire* (You are addictive) (2014), hyper-glass, neon, and acrylic, 100 x 15 cm

According to Kauffmann, Online dating feels much safer on a mobile [device]... as many people prefer to meet on the net because they are afraid of rejection 'in real life'. Regrettably, this myth is inaccurate as rejection is more likely to occur via... [mobile devices]. (2012, 9)

Online dating communication often leads to undesirable emotions and thus causes the other person to feel rejected. Research participant Ready4u encountered this rejection firsthand. She was dating a man

that she met on POF for three months. One morning, she received a text from him stating, “I don’t feel a spark.” As she explained to me:

When I read the text, I felt used. I thought the relationship was going great and then, bam, it was over in one sentence. I never heard from him again; I was devastated. (Interview with the author, 29 April 2014)

When rejection occurs after face-to-face meetings, the pain can be even greater. Ready4u admitted to me that her romantic imagination got the better of her (interview with the author, 29 April 2014).

According to Ben-Ze’ve, “the prominence of imagination in the first stages of online dating can encourage individuals to ignore the real circumstances and can thereby increase disappointment when faced with reality” (2004, 23). Writing on men dating online who are looking for sex without an ongoing commitment, Kaufmann proposes:

Their vague hints that they might be... [genuinely interested] are designed to deceive, and they will be off once they got what they wanted, with no or few regrets. The women they leave behind are often bitterly disappointed. (2012, 129)

Nevertheless, Ready4u relayed to me that she remains undeterred in her search for love no matter how hurt she gets. Ben-Ze’ve (2004) advocates that people like Ready4u continue their search for love online because individuals can obliterate their pain by finding a new partner. Unfortunately, there are many deceptive daters who make many promises about love and long-term commitment and are quite happy to lie to get what they seek. The phrase ‘I don’t feel a spark’ is inspired by individuals such as the one whom Ready4u fell for, whose only interest is short-term sexual gratification. Once they have achieved their goal, it is easier for them—in the world of online dating—to confess their true feelings and abruptly end the relationship through mediated text and move onto the next online dater.

The compulsion of rapid-fire exchange of text-based messages can start or maintain newly created online relationships. According to Ben-Ze’ve,

The lack of information in online dating contributes to the intensification of positive emotions. As a result, the absence of any information encourages thoughts to intensify romantic, emotional attitudes toward one’s connection. (2004, 84)

In online dating, mutual attraction is a highly valued characteristic in a potential mate as individuals like to hear that they are desired. The neon sign ‘You are addictive’ expresses this desire foretelling an intimate connection forming well between strangers. It references a mediated text I received from

MLC789 on 14 April 2012, which caused me to experience a surge of excitement. This message increased the degree of my fantasy for true love. However, I have always been skeptical of the written word and aware that a correspondent could be concealing deceptive behaviours or aspects of the relationship. Regrettably, two weeks later, I found out he was seeing other people simultaneously. Therefore, individuals should exercise caution when exchanging text-based communication with online daters; otherwise, they might experience heartbreak along the way.

5.3.2 Methodologies

The strategies utilised for this undertaking transpired through personal experiences and ethnographic interviews conducted with the research participants (detailed in Chapter 2). Undertaking participant action research, I drew upon three women's dating practices through interviews and text-based communication to gather insights into dating narratives, views, and realities. I used in-depth interviewing techniques to discover common mediated text narratives in online dating. The two phrases were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the texts received by Ready4u and I encapsulated polarised messages. Secondly, on a formal level, both mediated texts contained fifteen letters. This assisted with the overall aesthetic of the work. Using neon lights, the works literally illuminate the waxing and waning effects of desire as expressed through mediated text. *Expressions of Desire* (2014) is characterised by a blatant contradiction between the phrases. The phrase 'You are addictive' represents an online relationship forming well, whereas 'I don't feel a spark' denotes a breakdown in an online relationship. Therefore, these two phrases exemplify the surging and plummeting experiences of desire felt through mediated text. Additionally, they allude to society's widespread desire for instant gratification and the idea of consumerism as a manifestation of desire.

Neon is a medium closely associated with popular culture and consumerism. In these works, the private nature of mediated text is juxtaposed with neon signage found in public spaces to attract attention in the sea of consumerist signs. Moreover, the works are reminiscent of online status updates on social media much like Mclver's work (see fig. 6). The neon work carries a commentary on the nature of online dating and the commercial trend of exposure of private feelings.

Even though this project achieved its stated aims, I wanted to create an alternative work that conveyed a more detailed encounter of what individuals are more likely to experience on POF while searching for love and long term commitment online. I also wanted to create a more contemplative, immersive environment for viewers. This led to the third project entitled *Kissing Toads* (2014–15).

5.4 Project 3 – Kissing Toads

This project began as a response to the complexities of defining the risks of disappointment associated with online dating for some women searching for love and a committed relationship. Its conceptual aims were to visually explore how desire is modified and expressed in mediated texts sent via online dating applications and to question the source of romantic ideals.

With this body of work, I aimed to create an installation that deviates from the fast-paced world of online dating to a slower, more reflective space to consider the consequences of desire. I incorporated the lived experiences of the women who participated in this research by using parts of the recorded interviews (audio) in the installation. Furthermore, my aim was to create a contemplative environment where one is not immediately involved in online dating—but instead reflecting on it. It is important to reflect on everyday behaviour especially in relation to desire and how it motivates those that participate in online dating. In contrast to Project 1 and 2, the installation provided a reflective environment that the body negotiates. In this way, it mirrors the online dating terrain that engages the body.

The previous two projects unsuccessfully exhibited the conditions of online dating, leading to the revision of aims for the creative output of *Kissing Toads*. Therefore, the objectives of this work were to create a contemplative environment to consider the potential consequences of desire experienced in online dating. In doing this, it demonstrates the importance desire has on one's emotional state and the way these effects act together to produce change within the subject. Using language as a core material ensures accessible communication in articulating desire that is more relevant to the contemporary context of online dating communities. In addition to this, I integrated moving images and sound within the installation space to engage the audience so as to provide an interactive experience (where the women participants' voices spoke for themselves). The cinematic element, discussed below, was positioned within the installation to question the origins of our romantic ideals and further ask questions as to whether these are outmoded. Furthermore, incorporating projections in the installation served to question the source of preconceived ideals that may consciously or unconsciously underpin any newly forged notion of romance.

5.4.1 Description



Figure 13 – Julie Rees, *Kissing Toads* (2014-15) MDF letters, sound, and video projections, variable

Kissing Toads (2014–15) (fig. 13) is a mixed-media installation that combines sculptural letters, sound, two video projections, and pin spot pointed lighting. The work includes a sequence of mediated texts that trace a brief romance from initial contact through to the end. The texts were based on actual messages received by the research participants and

myself. The installation amplifies what women are quite likely to encounter while searching for love and commitment online. The work investigates the risk of disappointment and consequences of submitting to one's immediate desires for intimate companionship. Ben-Ze've argues, "Individuals that meet online and immediately set-up a face-to-face meeting have a low success of developing a meaningful relationship" (2004, 56). In other words, rushing into an immediate introduction could jeopardise the development of a meaningful connection in the future. However, for the inexperienced, the risk of disappointment can be dismissed, with desire driving the online dater in pursuit of their romantic ideals. The narrative recounts a short-lived romance told from the perspective of an online dater. To emphasise the risk of disappointment, the work moves along a register from desire to loss. Gorton suggests, "once ... [an online dating user] loses their co-ordinates of desire, [they] must re-map and re-coordinate through loss" (2008, 123). In this way, desire is figured in terms of how it can move individuals.

Kaufmann warns us,

Many online dating users plan their dates in the same way that they plan the rest of the weekend, choosing between meeting someone 'for a drink', reading a novel or going to the movies. (2012, 96)

For this reason, online romances tend to be more spontaneous, casual, and brief. According to Ben-Ze'Ve, the problem lies with “the availability of an alternative, which has profound implications for the nature of online romantic relationships” (2004, 76). It is obvious at least to some degree, that one must be cautious with whom they communicate when searching for love and commitment online.



Figure 14 – Julie Rees, *Kissing Toads* (2014-15), detail

Kissing Toads consists of letters, audio of interview recordings, and two videos projected onto adjoining walls.⁵ The freestanding letters spell out actual mediated texts sourced from the online dating research participants. Smaller letters and numbers placed on the floor depict the date and time of the messages received (fig.14). The mediated texts state:

'Hey gorgeous nice pic lets meet for a drink (Apr 2, 7:29am)'
'You are hot (Apr 3, 6:47pm)'
'Had a good time last night (Apr 3, 8:41pm)'
'Sorry I'm busy (Apr 5, 6:33pm)'
'I can do tonight (Apr 10, 2:15pm)'
'We need to talk (Apr 10, 12:10pm)'
'I don't feel a spark (Apr 12, 6:52pm)'

The selected mediated text elements spell out seven phrases of an online dating experience. The first phrase is the initial invitation to meet the user offline. The first meeting with an online connection is similar to a new beginning; it is dramatic, exciting, and addictive. It marks a sudden break from any past online communications and gives hope that a relationship is possible.

Flirting via mediated text enables dating application users to express enjoyable and frivolous forms of communication. Therefore, the next phrase, 'You are hot', highlights the role flirting has upon the subsequent stages of online relationships. Given that mediated text lacks many types of sensory information, the online user looking for love must be sensitive to every signal conveyed by the other person to assess the accuracy of the type of relationship being pursued.

Immediately after the second phrase, the narrative moves through to the words 'Had a good time last night'. The perception of any 'meet up' will determine the level of emotional intensity. In an interview

⁵ 180 letters, painted in acrylic, and a high gloss black.

with Ready4u, she explained that after meeting a particular connection, she instantly developed strong feelings. She stated, “I had strong feelings for this one guy, the emotions were overwhelming. I did not know I could even feel that way about someone” (interview with the author, 29 April 2014). The conflict arises when one participant hopes the affair will develop into a committed romantic relationship and the other does not share the same interest.

The fourth phrase, ‘Sorry I’m busy’ is a text that all the research participants experienced at some point during their online participation. During my interviews with the research participants, they all agreed that this is a euphemistic way for an individual to express their unwillingness to pursue a relationship. Although not all messages of this type are encoded with a hidden message, one should be mindful that it could be a sign of the other’s unwillingness to further the relationship.

The next mediated text, ‘I can do tonight’, was one that Bunnybo received a number of times from different people. For her, this reply demonstrates the relationship’s uncertainty. Bunnybo relayed that she believes this message translates to “I have struck out with other prospects so I might as well see you again” (text message to the author, 26 April 2014). One risk for online dating users is to take mediated text too seriously. If this occurs, it is more likely that one will be at the mercy of the new connection. Consequently, it could lead to performing and acting on a number of immediate desires and, in this case, having sexual relations with someone who does not want a commitment in an effort to attain or hold the other’s interest.

The sixth mediated text featured in *Kissing Toads* is ‘We need to talk’, and finally, the narrative ends with the words ‘I don’t feel a spark’ where the sender ends their short-lived affair. In this work, the recipient’s expectations blurred the distinction between reality and fantasy by over embellishing the other user’s virtues. For this online dater, submitting to her immediate desires for companionship led to an unexpectedly heartbreak.

The research participants acknowledged that a conflict exists between their expectations that love should happen suddenly and dramatically and the reality of loving relationships they have experienced. Bunnybo, Ready4u, and Cheekygirl concurred that romance films have unrealistically provided a set of expectations about love. Cheekygirl articulated:

When I look at the movies, I see strong men who can make decisions and take care of their women, but when I meet men in real life, they seem the opposite. Maybe one day I will meet someone strong and capable. (Interview with author, 29 April 2014)

Even though the participants have tried to dispense with these notions, they admitted that they are still quite invested in the ideals entrenched in romance. The final work presents a more layered, more immersive experience for the viewer, where a journey of the contradictions of desire is experienced and, to some degree, the source of romantic illusion is questioned (where real life and cinematic ideals collide). This positions the viewer in the environment so that they can reflect on the ideas and make up



Figure 15 – left, Dave Miller, *Our Very Own*, 1950, 8.5 second Clip
right, William Wyler, *The Best Years of our Lives* (1946)
26 second Clip

their minds. The polarised elements in mediated text foregrounded in *Expressions of Desire* were transferred to the projections used (cinematic works) in *Kissing Toads*.

The first scene is drawn from *Our Very Own* (1950), directed by Dave Miller, while the second is drawn from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), directed by William Wyler (fig.15).⁶ These clips evoke the emotional fluctuations associated with online dating.

Furthermore, the two films were chosen to

consider the polarised ideals and experiences of the online dating participants' expectations and actualities.

The scene depicted in *Our Very Own* is a representative sample of an ideal love commonly depicted in romantic films of this era. The eight-and-half-second clip displays a view of a young couple on the beach in a passionate embrace. The projection marks the influence of fantasised ideals. Although pretence and make-believe are valuable and enjoyable aspects of loving and relating, it has opposite effects when such romantic fantasies are not fulfilled. The 26-second clip from *The Best Years of Our Lives* shows a mother consoling her upset daughter. The clip is meant as a nod to the contemporary online dater's hurt feelings when their relationship unexpectedly ends.

Collectively, the projections were incorporated to amplify the conflict between fantasy-driven versions of love and the reality of the dating user's experience. By creating tension between the moving images within the work and referring to the past shows that these values are generationally implanted and

⁶ The footage used in the work are public domain movies; i.e., property to which no individual or corporation owns the copyright (Donaldson 2008, 471).

remain largely unquestioned. The films are used to underscore that contemporary online daters generally do not question what has informed their ideals. Given the dichotomous play of mixed circumstances, the films create a relay between expectation and actualities.

Kissing Toads highlights the inherent risks of searching for a partner online. Jones (2010) warns that “online dating deals in the endorphin rushes and subsequent downers similarly to clients of retail therapy. [A site such as POF] talks the talk of intimate connections but walks the walk of any other commodity market” (Jones 2010, 149). In other words, there is a wide variety of choice on the market but mostly it is just more of the same, with a high number of individuals opting for short-term sexual interactions without ongoing love and commitment. Regardless of past disappointments, online dating can be addictive. But what price do individuals pay for submitting to their short-term desires?

The overall interest in producing *Kissing Toads* was to provide the audience with a glimpse into the private world of an online dater who experiences a short-lived romance gone sour. The narrative sheds light on the everyday encounters experienced by the research participants while seeking a long-term relationship via online dating sites. The intended message of the work is expressive and less didactic about the disappointments of using such sites to find love. Drawing conclusions from the online dating research participants’ experiences, it is evident that their desires for love and commitment may be delayed or ultimately unrealised.

5.4.2 Methodologies

Kissing Toads employed mixed methods. I drew upon the recorded interviews and texted-based communication to gather insights into dating narratives and the views of the research participants. This provided a deeper awareness of the conditions of online dating that would otherwise be inaccessible, and rich and detailed narratives that helped formulate the final creative output. I used parts of the recorded interviews in the installation space in order for the audience to grasp insights into online dating without having to directly experience it. The action research evaluation focused on the specific aims and context of each project to explore what worked, how it worked, what did not work well and why.

Gathering stories from the research participants proved to be an important aspect, which assisted in the selection of the most appropriate mediated texts for the work. With over 2,500 messages to choose from, I selected the seven phrases featured in the installation for their ability to encapsulate the type of

short-lived online romance commonly experienced by the research participants. Seduction in online dating crucially involves a linguistic component, with 'chatting up' as one of its central elements. Key aspects of intimacy are worked out and established via the written word. Therefore, through a combination of freestanding sculptural letters, moving images, sound, and neon lights, the intention of *Kissing Frogs* is to create tension between fantasy-driven versions of love and the actualities of the dating user's experience. Transforming mediated text into sculptural letters became an essential process to aid the articulation of my narratives about common dating experiences generated from online dating applications. Presenting the mediated text in a sculptural form invites the viewer to interact with the text within an installation environment where the narrative becomes a phenomenological journey. The installation environment slows our thinking down, and steps aside from faster, immediate, types of communication. It allows viewers to more thoughtfully consider the consequences of online dating decisions. In a sense, the viewer can posit him/herself as the recipient of the mediated text. Providing the date and time emphasises the context of the messages rather than the virtual environment that the project critiques.

Watching public domain movies from the 1940/50s aided in sourcing the footage. I used *Adobe After Effects* as well as *Premiere Pro* software methods to edit both videos in this work. I manipulated both scenes by looping, colourising one clip in pink and the other in blue, and slowing down the speed duration. Similar to the concept of *Expressions of Desire* (2014) where mediated text is used to display the waxing and waning effects of desire, the methods for the videos were applied to communicate the emotional dramatic highs and lows experienced by the online dating research participants.

Kissing Toads aims to offer viewers a glimpse into the private world of an online dater who suffers the effects of a romance gone sour. The work acts as an example of how users interact online in today's society while illustrating the modern conditions of online dating. This work shares visual similarities with Floyd's work in that both installations use sculptural text standing upright on the floor to convey a message. However, this is where the similarity ends. Floyd's work uses text to display excerpts out of novels and essays to express her concepts, whereas my work communicates an online dater's experience of a short-lived romance. Using sculptural letters in my work allowed me to transmit text-based communication narratives linked to the research participants' experiences of disappointment in a direct way.

From the responses gathered from this study's research participants, there seemed to be three distinguishing patterns. Firstly, the participants find it difficult to discern genuine users looking for love

and commitment like themselves from those who are merely looking for short-term, sexual interactions. Secondly, there is a surplus of younger men participating in the POF community. This impacted the research participants' engagement and experiences online. Thirdly, the participants tend to place too much emotional significance on received mediated text conversations, leading to the intensification of romantic and emotional attitudes towards new connections. Consequently, their hopes and desires increased the encounters of rejection and disappointment while dating online. The results suggest that women looking for love and ongoing commitment who do not impose constraints on their hopes and desires may find themselves experiencing disappointing consequences.

This chapter discussed the three projects that form the studio work component of this DVA. The first work *Alluring* (2012) was based on my reservations about online dating and the metamorphosis that occurs between two online daters. However, I found it difficult to convey the emotional feeling of desire in mediated text through portraiture. This led to project two, entitled *Expressions of Desire* (2014). This work shows polarised experiences of online dating with the rejection and compulsion aspects of online dating illuminated by neon lights. It foretells what an active POF member will inevitably experience while seeking a partner online. However, I wanted my work to correspond with actual dating realities encountered by the research participants. The shared experience gathered from the research participants of loss and disappointment expressed in mediated text enabled me to draw surprising parallels between my experiences and the research participants, which drove me to the final project *Kissing Toads* (2014–15). Using sculptural letters, the work depicts a short-term romance gone sour, and, as the title suggests, one could 'kiss a few toads' before finding a long-term partner online. During my candidature, my research into online dating allowed me to think through the relationship between text and image, and in turn uncovered the risks of disappointment and desires of women searching for love and long-term commitment and highlighted the need for a new courtly code in the context of dating online.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

With more people becoming familiar with social media and other online applications, artists are beginning to create work in response to the online environment. My work fits into this trajectory. To visually respond to the question ‘how is desire modified and expressed in mediated texts sent via online dating applications?’, this research considered interpretations of desire from various perspectives. It drew on psychoanalytical and psychological theories on desire and used my own as well as others’ real-life experiences of online dating to form visual responses to this topic. The issues addressed in this exegesis are, firstly, how ‘desire’ through language can initiate and affect online dating decisions. Secondly, how current attitudes towards love and commitment affect online dating relationships. Thirdly, how contemporary art practices convey concepts of ‘desire’ through using either text or text-based communication as a core material. These issues reinforced how expressions of desire exchanged in online dating can produce real-world change in relationships between participants.

As indicated in the contextual review of artists, there are several artists who are working through similar themes, and I elaborated on the similarities and dissimilarities between my work and those by Calle, Emin, DuBois, Fader, Mclver, and Floyd. As contemporary artists, we all make works that respond to the current moment, blurring the boundaries between everyday life and art. The aim of my studio research made during this candidature was to highlight the conditions of online dating, and provide an insight into the risks of disappointment and desires of women looking for love and commitment online. With the final work (*Kissing Toads*), I aimed to create an installation that steps away from the fast-paced world of online dating to a slower, more reflective space in which to consider the consequences of desire. Throughout the research process, I uncovered common narratives in modern dating practices by drawing from personal and other women’s online dating experiences. This provided a condensed snapshot of Brisbane’s current trends in modern dating practices. Creating works that are significant to people’s everyday lives was a satisfying process, and I anticipate that I will continue this theme in my artistic practice.

The language of desire through meditated text is powerful, since it encourages the idealisation of a mate when searching for love online. However, as discussed, desire and fantasy-versions of reality can lead individuals to regrettable actions, and as Braidotti asserts, “it is our desire ... that draws us into action

whether or not we know the consequences of these decisions” (2006, 4). With new dating technology changing on a daily basis, the desires that we discover within us will find their way through into the contemporary technologies of tomorrow. Collecting common narratives through interviews and text-based communication exposed a development in modern dating practices in Brisbane. Personally, it highlighted the need for a new courtly code in the context of dating online. It may appear that returning to more traditional relationship values of the past could forge new opportunities in the future. However, it seems more women are torn between liberating their sexual desires and the persistent dream of a relationship commitment. Online dating has created new sociological structures in the way we desire, flirt, have sex, and fall in and out of love. It has all become easier and faster in online dating communities, and are consequently are now more evident in contemporary life.

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Appendix 1

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

This certificate generated on 04-06-2014.

This certificate confirms that protocol 'NR: Our App Crashed: expressions of desire in the context of social media dating applications' (GU Protocol Number QCA/05/14/HREC) has ethical clearance from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and has been issued with authorisation to be commenced.

The ethical clearance for this protocol runs from 14-03-2014 to 30-05-2014.

The named members of the research team for this protocol are:

APro Jay Younger

Ms Julie Rees

The research team has been sent correspondence that lists the standard conditions of ethical clearance that apply to Griffith University protocols.

The HREC is established in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct on Research Involving Humans*. The operation of this Committee is outlined in the HREC Standard Operating Procedure, which is available from www.gu.edu.au/or/ethics.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries about this matter.

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