Decoding Desire

Mapping the Blurry Boundaries Between Power, Intimacy, and Transactionality in Dating App Usage within the Thai Tourism Industry

"She's no hooker, but for ten dollars you can take her home."

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31 May 2024

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been an emotional rollercoaster, with moments of pure joy and moments in which I doubted everything in the entire world. Thankfully, many enthusiastic people who kept on believing in me have supported me throughout the process. First and foremost, I want to thank all participants of the study, who have co-created this research project with me. Without their collaboration, trust, and time I would not have been able to create this thesis.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Gemma for her guidance throughout the whole period, her thought-provoking remarks, enthusiasm, and general support for my ideas have contributed greatly to the way in which many chaotic concepts of this study were at last neatly cultivated into this final result.

I want to thank my partner for listening to my countless rants, outbursts, and epiphanies, and for being a 'rots in de branding', passionately from miles away, during the fieldwork. Additionally, I am grateful of Charlie, my dear friend, who visited me in Thailand, helping me out finding participants, getting their lashes done at massage salons, providing me with a reason to engage with the employees, which has led to valuable insights for my study.

Finally, I want to thank my parents for their endless support and trust in my capabilities. Without the many different ways in which they have supported me during the fieldwork period, and more broadly throughout the years, I would not have arrived at the point I am now.

Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of dating applications on transactional sex dynamics between tourists and locals in Thailand. In order to do so, three months of fieldwork have been conducted in Thailand, during which individuals involved in digitally-mediated intimate interactions were interviewed and observed. Through the employment of mixed qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations, and Netnography, their motivations, experiences, and meaning-making processes were mapped. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the living realities of these individuals were explored and related to broader systematic axes of power. Building onto a conceptual framework drawing from feminist studies, post- and decolonial studies, and critical tourism studies, the research concluded that the various intersecting dynamics involved in the sexual interactions between locals and tourists are increasingly reshaped by dating applications. While adding some benefits to their users, these digital platforms significantly blur the boundaries of the transactional spectrum involved in these interactions. Sexual interactions are now accessible to anyone carrying a digital device, despite the same underlying power dynamics complicating these interactions.

Keywords: Dating applications, digitalisation, transactional sex, tourism, power dynamics

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I. A Word on Digitalisation and Transactional Sex in Thailand

Today, in this era of frenetically changing environments, increasing globalisation, and digitalisation, the dynamics and understandings of desire, sexuality, and intimacy have undergone profound transformations; blurring the boundaries between tourism, intimacy, and transactionality. This thesis, titled "Decoding Desire", sets out to unravel the intricate social tapestry that entangles these realms, divulging the emergent definitions reshaped by globalisation and digitalised media in an interconnected world. With a backdrop of a highly patriarchal and hegemonic masculine world, it is now more crucial than ever to explore feminist, decolonial, and critical tourism theories in order to understand and address the prevailing power structures entangling the realms of tourism, transactional sex, and dating. Travelling has historically been highly romanticised and fetishised, often being associated with exoticism, eroticism, and desire. As interconnectivity, global tourism, and technology-mediated communication flourish, this study emphasises the necessity of post- and decolonial lenses such as Orientalism and subalternity, while mapping cross-cultural interactions in the realm of tourism and digitally-mediated intimacy. Through the examination and interrogation of these multifaceted dimensions, this study aims to decode the blurry boundaries between desire, dating, and intimacy in a tourism industry transformed by digitalisation, ultimately paving the way for more inclusive, empowering, and equitable interactions among a variety of individual identities and communities.

While travelling to Thailand is frequently associated with white beaches and cultural sites, it has also been inextricably linked to sex tourism. The distinct connection between Thailand and sex tourism goes back to the Vietnam War which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Thailand and the US military signed a treaty allowing US soldiers to come to Thailand for "Rest and Recreation" (Rho-Ng, 2000). The US military presence and the massive scale of tourist development since then were major driving factors behind the rise in sex trade in Thailand (Brodeur et al., 2017). Indeed, the sex industry has been linked to the booming tourism business, as commercial sexual became another product of capitalism, earning foreign exchange. In this system, bodies are commodified and reduced to mere objects of desire. This commodification is starkly illustrated by the owner of a 'karaoke bar' encountered during the fieldwork period in Thailand, who spoke about one of his female employees, "she's no hooker, but for ten dollars you can take her home.". This problematic statement reveals the pervasive objectification and commodification of local women associated with the Thai tourism industry. Tourists are often socialised with the idea that

local cultures and communities are part of their 'travel experience', leading to colonial and consumerist attitudes towards locals, subsequently impacting the degree of transactionality in their interactions with these individuals.

As the tourism industry expanded, it particularly generated employment opportunities in urban areas and popular tourist destinations. This economic pull exerted significant influence on rural populations, causing a wave of internal migration from rural to urban areas (Trupp, 2016). The tourism sector is frequently associated with improved living standards, and the opportunity for employment in hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues, and other related service industries urged many to leave agricultural livelihoods behind and migrate to urban areas and tourism hotspots. The connection between tourism and sexual encounters is complex and multifaceted, as are the motivations of the individuals engaging in it. While some locals may voluntarily engage in intimate cross-cultural relationships due to romantic aspirations, or as a means of economic survival, others may be coerced or trafficked into the sex industry. The entanglement of tourism and intimacy produces challenges with regards to socioeconomic and gender inequality, exploitation, and its impact on local communities and cultural identities. Over time, the Thai government has taken some steps to regulate and address challenges posed by transactional sex in the tourism industry, but globally, regulations addressing transactional sex are frequently proven to be inadequate. The efforts made into regulating transactional sex mainly consist of criminalising it, only forcing those engaged in it to the margins of society. This subsequently pushes sex providers into ambiguous and unregulated environments and undermines their safety and rights (McBride et al., 2020). In recent discussions surrounding the topic of sex tourism, some efforts have been made to promote ethical and responsible tourism practices, improve labour conditions, enhance protection and empowerment for sex providers, and combat trafficking and exploitation (Brida et al., 2014; Villar, 2019). It however remains an ongoing and complex issue that calls for an intersectional approach that centres gendered dynamics, socioeconomic inequalities, and other involved power structures.

Thailand is globally the most popular destination for sex tourism, with the sex industry annually generating billions of dollars (Amendral, 2021). Sex tourism is a controversial and widely discussed phenomenon complicated by gendered and colonial structures (Singh & Hart, 2007). The commercial sexual exploitation of women and children in the tourism industry is inextricably linked to problematic, Orientalist narratives and sexist stereotypes. The current way in which sex work in Thailand is approached is highly insufficient, by criminalising transactional sex, sex providers are left to be regulated by

criminal circuits or ambiguous establishments. Sex, including transactional sex, in its very essence is not good or bad, and while exploitation, human trafficking, and unsafe working environments are risks associated with higher levels of transactionality, many sex workers have made informed and autonomous choices about their occupation (Davis et al., 2017; Sandy, 2007; Showden, 2011). Rather than criminalising sex work, policies should be put in place to guarantee sex provider's rights and provide safe working environments and conditions. Digital platforms such as dating applications and OnlyFans offer various benefits for sex workers to practise their occupation by providing them with greater control over their working conditions and reducing the need for intermediaries such as pimps or brothels (Bar-Johnson & Weiss, 2014).

Sex tourism is conceptualised as "travel for the specific purpose of having sex, typically with commercial sex workers, it is different from having casual sex during travel with fellow travellers or locals" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Casual sexual interactions between locals and tourists are currently not perceived as sex tourism encounters, but with the rise of dating applications, it is getting significantly easier to have intimate or sexual interactions with locals. The high availability of these interactions seems to be inherently connected to the lure of Thailand as a travel destination. This study aims to explore the overlapping continuums of transactionality and casualism in terms of digitally-mediated intimate interactions, how power dynamics shape interactions between locals and tourists, and whether or not the concept of sex tourism is transformed in the era of digitalisation. The ambiguity of the transactional aspect of sexual interactions facilitated by dating apps obscures the discussion of this phenomenon, which is why this thesis aims to decode the dynamics of dating-app facilitated encounters between locals and tourists, potentially leading to the emergence of a new form of sex tourism; digital sex tourism.

Through an exploration of the ways in which digital platforms transform the realms of intimacy, transactionality, and tourism, this study sheds light on the new opportunities and risks that dating applications offer individuals involved in transactional sex in terms of working environment, safety, and agency. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms, and particularly dating applications have a major impact on global attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy, reshaping and redefining the continuum of transactionality in sexual encounters, challenging traditional gender roles and power dynamics. While providing its users with various benefits, dating apps have also raised new issues, some major concerns being the lower threshold for young people to get involved in transactional sex. Additionally, there is a lack of safety, supervision, and verification in digital environments.

This thesis aims to map the blurry field of sex, intimacy, and tourism in Thailand, and the ways in which transactional sex is facilitated by, and redefined through the use of dating applications. Moreover, it aims to provide insights into the intersecting social, cultural, and economic factors that are entangled in these realms and contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which gendered and colonial power relations are both reproduced and challenged through digitally mediated sex and intimacy in the tourism context. The traditional sex tourism industry has been well documented and thoroughly analysed, but this new upcoming trend of 'Tinder Tourism' seems to be taking over the industry, developing into new, more digitalised ways of sex and intimacy between tourists and locals. The evolving scene of digitally mediated sex and intimacy, along with emerging terminology and the individuals involved, appears to be distinct from the traditional settings of sex tourism. This study thus aims to explore if sexual encounters between tourists and locals, facilitated by dating apps are a form of sex tourism, and map the motivations, perceptions, meaning-making, and expectations of the individuals involved. What is the lure of engaging with tourists on dating apps for locals, what are their motivations and experiences? How do tourists perceive their interactions with locals, are they seeking out genuine connections or sexual gratification? What is the role of transactionality in these encounters, do these individuals fit within the current conceptualisation of sex tourists or sex workers?

The new and unfamiliar dynamics of digitally mediated intimacy underscore the importance of exploring this upcoming phenomenon, in order to understand its unique features and implications. Moreover, in order to move towards more ethical tourism practices, it is crucial to understand how digitalisation, in particular dating applications, have an impact on the development of sexual interactions within tourism. Sex tourism is generally perceived as a negative practice, contributing to "global exploitation, and gendered and economic inequalities" (Miller, 2012). This is largely caused by the combination of unethical practices, and insufficient, outdated, or stigmatising approaches towards transactional sex. In order to create a safe and respectful environment for all the participants involved in transactional sex, an improved, inclusive, and sustainable approach is essential.

Despite efforts by the international community, non-governmental organisations, and local governments to address sex tourism in Thailand, the negative consequences continue to grow, impacting global inequalities, women's rights, and exploitation of sex workers. A comprehensive understanding and analysis of the development and processes underlying the transactional sex and tourism industry, and how this is reshaped in an era of increasing connectivity and digitalisation is needed. In order to analyse the impact of digitalisation,

particularly through the use of online dating applications on transactional sex in the Thai tourism industry, the following research question is explored: How has the emergence of dating apps altered the traditional patterns of engagement in transactional sex among locals and tourists in Thailand? This research question will be answered by the use of various sub-questions that interrogate the various intertwined axes of power that shape the tourism industry and reproduce global inequalities and oppression. These sub-questions focus on the experiences, narratives, and negotiations of tourists and locals engaging in transactional sex, and in which ways their usage of dating applications facilitate this phenomenon. Additionally, it sheds light on how dating applications reshape the nature of the transactional arrangement and how that in turn affects agency, power dynamics, and risks.

While there is an extensive body of literature and documentation of the traditional sex industry in Thailand, a focus on the emerging impact of digitalisation on cross-cultural sexual and intimate encounters between locals and tourists is lacking. The existing academic discourse on this topic appears to be divided into a generalising victim-agent binary (Choi-Fitzpatrick & Watkins-Smith, 2021) that is insufficient in understanding the diverse and intersecting personal experiences of those involved in cross-cultural sex and intimacy. Thai locals engaged in transactional sex are generally portrayed as the victimised Other, reinforcing racist and sexist perceptions of Thai women as sexually available, submissive, and without agency, reproducing Orientalist stereotypes. While a number of sex workers are forced to work in challenging and grim conditions, this study argues that it is essential to avoid a narrative that solely perceives sex workers as victims. Such victimisation undermines agency as well as it diminishes sex workers' capacity to make informed choices about engaging in sex work (Goldenberg et al., 2021). This narrative of victimisation stems from a framework of hegemonic masculinity, a sociocultural paradigm that reinforces traditional gender roles and hierarchical power dynamics. In this framework, sex providers, specifically women, are perceived as passive bodies, unable to autonomously make decisions regarding their engagement in transactional sex. Sex seekers, which are largely male (Sanders, 2013), are seen as dominant and in control whereas sex providers are perceived as subordinate. Additionally, the hegemonic masculine framework tends to objectify women, and particularly their bodies, as mere sex objects solely serving the sexual desire of men. In this context, the agency and autonomy of sex workers are reduced and disregarded due to them being perceived through a male gaze of fulfilling the desires of others. In this way, sex work is stigmatised as morally disgraceful, further reinforcing the victimisation narrative, which casts sex workers as victims stuck in harsh livelihoods rather than empowered agents who have

made informed career choices. By disrespecting and devaluing transactional sex, individuals engaged in it are silenced and left with no room for their perspectives to be heard. Embracing a sex-positive approach is essential as it seeks to empower those providing sex and enables them to exercise more control over their environments and negotiate boundaries that are acceptable for them.

By shifting the focus to the empowerment of sex providers, and steering away from either criminalisation or victimisation, this study contributes to a more respectable and dignified societal perception of transactional sex and an improved social status for those engaged in it. Digitalisation has led to improved working conditions for sex providers, for the reason that through social media platforms such as OnlyFans, or dating apps such as Tinder, sex workers can work on a freelance basis without the intervention of a pimp, brothel, or other oppressing actors, which allows them to independently negotiate their prices, boundaries, and working conditions. However, it also raises novel challenges and risks, such as inaccurate self-representation of clients through online platforms, and less regulation with regards to age, secure working environments, and other factors impacting personal security.

The digital dimension of sexual interactions in tourism and its effect on the local community poses new challenges, risks, advantages, and disadvantages to agency, stereotypes, frames of oppression, and inequalities. This thesis thus aims to analyse the implications of digitalisation, in particular dating applications, on the intricate dynamics of intimacy, tourism, and transactionality and how this subsequently affects the living realities of those engaged in it. The study sets off with the provision of an exhaustive conceptual framework that draws from various relevant areas of research, divided into three general themes. Starting with the exploration of concepts revolving around the development of sexuality in an increasingly digitalised world. The second theme discusses concepts analysing the behaviour, experiences, and perceptions of tourists while travelling, such as the ‘tourist gaze’ and other contributions from the field of critical tourism studies. Moving on to gender and feminist scholarship, centering intersectionality as an essential analytical lens to examine systems of privilege and oppression. This theme additionally draws from post- and decolonial theory, building upon key themes such as Orientalism, colourism, and coloniality, which have and are still shaping power dynamics in the realms of tourism and intimacy. The conceptual framework is followed by a chapter concerning the methods and research approach of this study. This section explains the methods, data analysis, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and limitations of this study. Chapter five, six, seven contain the presentation and analysis of all data. This study has been carried out over the course of several months, from which three

months of fieldwork were conducted in Thailand. Through interviews, observations, and countless discussions with locals and tourists, an image was provided of the current dynamics of digitally mediated encounters between these two groups of people. In these three chapters, the personal narratives and living realities of both locals and tourists will be presented. These chapters present the 'local narrative', the 'tourist experience', and the finally the systemic power dynamics entrenched in these interactions. These chapters are structured as a dialogue between the living realities of those involved and the academic concepts provided in the conceptual framework. Finally, the final chapter serves as a conclusion and discussion of all of the above, answering the research question, and reflecting back on the research process.

By mapping the currently ambiguous phenomenon of intimate encounters between tourists and locals, facilitated by dating applications, this study aims to shed a light on prevailing power dynamics entrenched in this field. It intends to reveal the ways in which locals engage with tourists through the use of digital platforms, showcasing how they exercise agency, and navigate Orientalist and colonial dynamics. Digitalisation has a major impact on the field of sex tourism, shaping and facilitating new ways and challenges of transactional sex arrangements. The existing academic discourse is criticised for capturing the complex and gendered dynamics of transactional sex in a derogative, one-dimensional way, not taking into account the complex living experiences of sex workers, and intersecting forms of oppression and inequality that limit their empowerment (Choi-Fitzpatrick & Watkins-Smith, 2021). This study aims to address this gap in the current literature by providing a nuanced analysis of the dynamics of transactional sex and intimacy in the Thai tourism industry and particularly the role of dating applications in facilitating and transforming it.

Through the exploration of experiences and perspectives of the variety of individuals engaged in this phenomenon, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape transactional sex practices in the context of tourism. The study challenges and interrogates perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours that reinforce the negative consequences associated with transactional sex, such as exploitation, marginalisation, and oppressive mechanisms. Moreover, until recently, academic literature has largely neglected the impact of digital platforms, such as dating applications, on sexual interactions in tourism contexts. By providing an intersectional lens, this study interrogates the entrenched gendered and colonial systems of oppression, decoding the entangled dynamics of transactional sex and digitalisation in the Thai tourism context.

II. Conceptual Framework

In order to navigate through the intertwined axes of power that shape and define the complex realms of dating, sexuality, and intimacy in the tourism industry this thesis will draw upon several academic concepts and theories in the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies, post-colonial studies, and critical tourism studies. This section will provide an elaborate discussion of these concepts and how they relate. The conceptual framework is grouped into three central themes, each exploring relevant and interrelated concepts: *Sexuality in A Digital World, Engagement and Considerations Through the Tourist's Gaze,* and *Intersectionality and the Dynamics of Power.*

Sexuality in An Increasingly Digital World

This theme revolves around the notion that in today's frenetic, and ever-evolving world, the process of digitalisation and its technological impact have become increasingly significant in reshaping and redefining various aspects of human society. By conceptualising technological transformations, the pervasive integration and impact of digital technologies on human society and behaviour, particularly on sexuality and dating behaviour, will be illustrated. By approaching sexuality in the increasingly digitalising world from a sex positive approach this section aims to explore and illuminate the transformative effects of digital technologies on social structures and sexuality. Moreover, this section discusses the multifaceted ways in which digital platforms influence and reshape intimate interactions in sex tourism.

Digitalisation and mediated intimacy

The concept of digitalisation encompasses the integration and proliferation of digital technologies in various aspects of human society, including communication, social interactions, and economic activities. Within the context of this study, digitalisation refers to the profound influence and transformation brought about by the emergence of online dating apps, such as Tinder, on the practices and dynamics of intimacy, dating, sexuality, and sex work within the tourism industry (Marston et al., 2020).

Online dating apps have transformed the way in which individuals engage with potential partners or clients, expanding the possibilities of connection beyond conventional offline methods. Digitalisation has created new ways for interacting and engaging with others, facilitating matchmaking through digital platforms more efficiently (Pajnik et al., 2015). Through the creation of user profiles, users search for potential matches based on

various criteria such as age, gender, and distance, the application then allows users to initiate contact based on mutual interests or physical attraction. In the context of tourism, the digitalisation of dating practices has introduced a new dimension to interactions between locals and tourists. Online dating applications provide an accessible and easily operated platform for navigating casual interactions, long-term relationships, and transactional sex encounters. The digitalisation of dating reshapes and redefines boundaries and possibilities of intimate relationships within the tourism industry, enabling new forms of interactions, negotiations, and transactions. Moreover, online platforms and dating apps have introduced new means for individuals engaged in sex work, allowing them to advertise their services, connect with potential clients, and negotiate transactions. The digital landscape has facilitated the visibility and accessibility of sex work and other manifestations of transactional sex, transforming traditional practices and features of the industry and challenging and reinforcing power inequalities (Bar-Johnson and Weiss, 2014).

Digitalisation has not only reshaped the means of interaction but also understandings of intimacy, dating, and sexuality (Singla & Varma, 2018). Through online dating applications, individuals are allowed to explore their desires, seek connections, and engage in consensual sexual encounters. The digitalisation of intimacy has expanded the possibilities for diverse experiences, but has also raised questions about the nature of these interactions and the implications for agency, empowerment, and risks within the context of transactional sex and dating.

More concretely, digitalisation has transformed the way sex tourism operates by providing online platforms that facilitate communication between locals and tourists. Dating applications, social media, and online forums enable tourists to connect locals, cultivating a digital atmosphere for transactional sexual encounters. This transformation has fueled a debate about the implications of digital platforms on the organisation, visibility, and accessibility of sex work within digital societies (Katz, 2023; Siegel et al., 2023). Moreover, digital platforms have increased the access to commercial sex, as well as increased the visibility of sex workers (Pajnik et al., 2015). Online advertising and social media presence allow locals engaged in transactional sex to reach a broader audience of potential clients, blurring the boundaries between virtual and physical interactions and challenging traditional understandings and definitions of sex work. This heightened visibility and accessibility has major implications for issues of safety, exploitation, and regulation of sex work. Online platforms alter the negotiation of services, prices, and boundaries, and digital interactions have a high potential to impact the power dynamics within these exchanges. Examining these

transformations is highly relevant in order to better understand the blurry boundaries that characterise the realms of tourism, dating, and sex work and pave the way to more inclusive and equitable transactions between a diverse set of individuals. Not only has digitalisation altered the experiences and negotiations of tourists and locals engaged on digital platforms, but it has also affected local communities. The expanded accessibility and visibility of sex tourism through digital platforms have also affected cultural dynamics and perceptions of sexuality, intimacy, and sex work within destination communities (Bar-Johnson & Weiss, 2014). Understanding this impact provides a comprehensive portrait of how digitalisation affects the broader social and cultural context of sex tourism destinations.

The proliferation of popular online dating apps, such as Tinder or Bumble, have profoundly transformed and reshaped the realms of intimacy, dating, and sexuality in the ongoing development of societies. The concept of mediated intimacy, coined by Barker et al. (2018), is highly relevant as a conceptual lens to navigate how online dating apps redefine and reshape understandings of intimacy, influence sexual dynamics, and shape the experiences of individuals engaged in sex work, dating, and transactional sex. Mediated intimacy refers to the ways in which technology mediates and facilitates intimate connections between individuals. Online dating applications act as intermediaries, enabling individuals to explore and initiate interactions with others based on physical attraction, or shared interests. These platforms create new spaces and modes of interaction, transcending geographical boundaries and enabling connections that may not have otherwise been feasible (Munoz, 2022).

Mediated intimacy plays a significant role in the navigation of sexual encounters and the negotiation of relationships (Siegel et al., 2023). In the context of tourism, dating apps, like Tinder, offer a digital space for locals and tourists to engage in a wide range of intimate interactions, from casual encounters to longer-term relationships or optionally sex work. These applications offer a novel level of convenience and accessibility, enabling users to connect and engage with others efficiently. Notably, popular dating apps initially not designed for sex work have become a new avenue for sex workers to offer their services, blurring the line between casual and exchange sex encounters. Siegel et al. (2023) found that a growing population of men engaging in transactional sex do not identify as sex workers.

Moreover, preceding studies show that there are distinct differences between the demographics, work conditions, and experiences of sex workers advertising their services online and sex workers based in physical structures like specialised bars, clubs, and brothels. Bar-Johnson and Weiss (2014) argue that sex workers who offer their services digitally tend

to be younger and higher educated, often utilising online platforms to independently advertise their services and connect with clients. In contrast, sex workers who offer their services in brothels or specialised bars tend to be older, with lower levels of education, and more-reliant on the establishment they work for to facilitate client interactions. Digital sex workers generally have more autonomy and control over their work, including negotiating rates, services, and establishing boundaries. Additionally, sex workers engaged in online environments commonly had more non-local clients, which provides a sense of detachment from their immediate surroundings (Bar-Johnson and Weiss, 2014; Pajnik et al., 2015). Sex workers active in physical establishments were often shown to have little agency and autonomy over rates, client selection, and setting boundaries.

Engagement in online dating apps often involves curated self-presentation, leading individuals to construct idealised versions of themselves or selectively share certain aspects of their lives (Anzani et al., 2018). This curated presentation can shape perceptions of intimacy and influence power dynamics within relationships, potentially reinforcing existing gendered norms and societal expectations. Moreover, the transactional nature of the tourism industry, in which sexuality and eroticism is highly prevalent, raises further complexities with regards to mediated intimacy. Online dating apps serve as platforms through which locals and tourists engage in intimate encounters, potentially blurring the boundaries between casual dating and sex work. The digital space offers new means for negotiating transactional relationships, introducing potential shifts in power dynamics, agency, and risk management for both locals and tourists. By engaging with the concepts of digitalisation and mediated intimacy, this study seeks to emphasise the transformative effects of online dating apps on intimate relationships, while critically examining the broader implications for individuals engaged in sexual encounters within the Thai tourism industry.

Agency and empowerment

In the context of this study, it is vital to establish clear and concrete understandings of two crucial concepts playing a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of sex tourism facilitated by dating apps, and more broadly sexuality; agency and empowerment.

On a very basic level, agency revolves around the innate capacity of individuals to make autonomous choices and act upon their own volition and is “associated with a highly individuated selfhood” (Baker, 2010, p.190). In the context of sex and intimacy, agency extends beyond sheer decision-making; it incorporates the capability to exercise autonomy over one’s own body, desires, and the conditions under which intimate interactions take place

(Watenabe, 2018). It is important to realise that agency can be conceptualised in various and diverse ways, as there is no monolithic or singular experience or conception of agency. As Ozkazanc-Pan (2018) suggests that the mainstream academic conceptualisation of agency is significantly influenced by Western philosophies and derives from a predominantly individualistic approach to autonomy and rational choice. Agency is impacted by the personal and intersecting characteristics of individuals, the social environment in which they exist, and the unique contextual circumstances that frame their interactions. Hence, this approach facilitates a more nuanced and inclusive examination of autonomy as it is encountered and articulated by individuals within the tangible reality of their living-world.

Tourists exercise agency by seeking intimate encounters or relationships with locals through the use of dating apps. They do this through their choices regarding whom they connect with, the type of experiences they seek, and the negotiations of boundaries and consent. Most popular dating applications, such as Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble, all have a similar interface, allowing their users to swipe left or right on the profiles which are presented to them. Based on pictures and some general information such as gender, sexuality, lifestyle, a short biography, prompts and interests, and the type of encounters they are looking for users can swipe right in order to like someone or swipe left in order to dislike someone. If both users swiped right on each other, a connection is made, and the users are able to communicate with each other through text messaging or video-calling.

Empowerment broadly revolves around the processes through which individuals gain control over their participation in societies (Dandona, 2015). Meaning that in the context of this study individuals get, through the acquisition of agency, the intrinsic ability to navigate through the continuously changing landscape of dating-app facilitated sexual encounters on their own terms. Empowerment is centred around the process in which locals engaged in sexual encounters with tourists have control over their participation in these interactions. It differs from agency in the way that empowerment involves the capability to set informed and healthy boundaries, negotiate terms and conditions, and make considered choices that prioritise personal health, well-being, and align with the individuals' desires and goals in life. Because these concepts are considerably personal, complex, and diverse, differing per individual based on their unique and intersectional circumstances, motivations, and experiences they form an integral aspect to the analysis of how tourists and locals engage in sex and intimacy through dating apps.

Even though dating applications might increase agency with regards to dating and intimacy to their users, it may not always improve empowerment. Many studies report

negative consequences caused by dating apps on sexual behaviour of users, such as higher rates sexual risk behaviour, like unprotected sex (Sawyer et al., 2017), the commodification of intimacy, leading to a preference of casual sex over long-term relationships and decreased self-worth due to a highly appearance-focussed environment (Worthington, 2019), increased impulsivity and disinhibition with regards to the behaviour towards other users met through dating apps (Jung et al., 2019), and finally Stoicescu (2020) argues that dating applications "contribute to the standardisation and even McDonaldization of romance, in which fast love and intimacy are pursued and consumed in an accelerated fashion" (p. 1).

Transactional sex

Sex is inherently an exchange of sexual services between two, or more, individuals. Transactional sex entails a range of sexual interactions in which an exchange of capital, services, or other benefits is added to the primary exchange of sexual services. In the context of this study, transactional sex can better be understood through the lens of a spectrum of transactionality. By visualising transactionality as a spectrum, the range of degrees and types of exchanges that can occur within sexual interactions is included. On one end of the spectrum, there are explicit transactions, such as those between sex workers and their clients, in which case a monetary transaction takes place in exchange of sexual services. On the other end, there are more ambiguous and subtle exchanges, such as where the transaction may involve non-monetary benefits such as gifts, favours, or social capital.

If unequal power dynamics are involved in sexual interactions, transactionality tends to increase due to a variety of factors. Individuals in positions of power or privilege often have greater access to resources, which they can offer in exchange for sexual interactions. This creates a dynamic in which the less privileged individual may engage in transactional sex as a means of accessing these resources. Additionally, the inherent power imbalances in these interactions potentially make transactional sex a beneficial option for individuals seeking to improve their socio-economic status or opportunities. Finally, cultural and social expectations may play a role in the level of transactionality. In some cultural or societal contexts, there may be a provider-caregiver dynamic that involves a degree of transactionality. For instance, if men are expected to provide or cover expenses for women, they may expect sexual services in return as a way to compensate. This perpetuates a transactional cycle in which one individual provides and the other reciprocates through sexual service.

A sex positive approach

Attitudes towards sex and intimacy are constantly being re-evaluated, influenced by a variety of factors, including the emergence of digital platforms. A current phenomenon rising in popularity is ‘sex positivity’, which promotes positive and affirming attitudes towards sexual expression, and sexuality in the broadest sense. Contrarily, sex negativity is still a widespread issue; sexual values in many societies are centred around the sexual objectification, devaluation, repression, and victimisation of especially women and non-normative groups of people (Prause & Williams, 2020). Sex positivity advocates for the acknowledgement and celebration of diverse sexual identities, orientations, desires, and practices and seeks to challenge societal taboos, stigmatisation, and shame surrounding sexuality.

A positive and open-minded attitude towards sexuality includes the encouragement of open and honest conversations about sex and intimacy. Important aspects of sex positivity include consent and agency, body positivity, the destigmatisation of sex work, and the celebration of sexual expression and freedom (Williams et al., 2013). By emphasising the importance of enthusiastic consent and individual agency in sexual relationships, individuals are encouraged to make informed choices about their own bodies and desires, while respecting the autonomy and boundaries of others, leading to increased sex positivity. This attitude extends to the formation of ethical transactional relationships, in which all actors involved are empowered to negotiate their desires and limits freely.

Moreover, sex positive attitudes challenge the stigmatisation of sex work and advocates for the recognition of sex workers’ rights and agency (Williams et al., 2013). This is crucial in order to support and protect the wellbeing of individuals engaged in the sex industry and decrease exploitation, criminalisation, and sex trafficking. Moreover, it is important to note that sex positivity does not advocate for reckless or harmful behaviour but rather emphasises the importance of consensual and informed sexual experiences. Sex positivity does not pressure individuals to be sexually active but instead aims to create a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere for those who choose to explore their sexuality or engage in sex work. By advocating for open and non-judgmental discussions about sex, societal stigmas and sex-negativity are challenged. In the Thai tourism industry, dating apps have become spaces where various kinds of individuals and marginalised groups can present themselves authentically without facing the same level of societal shame or prejudice they might encounter in more traditional physical environments. Through advocating sex

positivity, the industry can work towards reducing stigmatisation and facilitating respectful interactions between sex workers and clients.

Engagement and Considerations Through the Tourist's Gaze

Historically, sexual encounters have been a driving force behind travel, contributing to the establishment and sustainment of a colonial and gendered system characterised by three key principles elucidated by James et al. (2019, p. 50):

> 1) The presence of Western male tourist socialised with a sense of entitlement to sexual access to women, particularly those of colour, who are portrayed as overtly willing and sexually available;
> 2) The existence of poverty-stricken countries where engage in sex work as a means of economic survival;
> 3) The reinforcement and facilitation of Western men, to travel to specific destinations to purchase sexual services, by political and economic institutions.

The aim of these three principles is not to oversimplify all sexual encounters during tourism as 'sex tourism', nor does it imply that every local woman engaging in some form of sexual activity during tourism is coerced or exploited, or does so solely for economic reasons (James et al., 2019). The connections between sex and tourism are intricate and multifaceted (Boone, 2014), and characterised by fluid gendered, racial, and economic dynamics that are diverse within and across different circumstances (James et al., 2019). However, this study adopts the argument that significant disparities exist "between men and women who participate in both commercial and non-commercial sexual practices during tourism, and these differences are unequal in terms of power" (James et al., 2019, p. 50).

Throughout the process of this study, in which fieldwork was conducted in Thailand, a highly observable pattern emerged, shedding light on the widespread lack of awareness among tourists with regards to global inequalities, White privilege, and gendered power dynamics. The addition of the concept of "tourist gaze" and "social or sexual capital" to this thesis aims to elucidate the manner in which tourists consider and engage with local environments through their subjective cultural lenses and ethical frameworks, often without an apprehensive grasp or understanding of the 'glocal' power dynamics at play. Understanding the implications of the tourist gaze is crucial for exploring the ethical

considerations associated with tourist engagement. The framework will delve into how tourists, despite their intentions, may unknowingly contribute to the reinforcement of global inequalities, racial dynamics, and gendered power structures. Moreover, it interrogates how these ethical concerns intersect with the dynamics of digitally facilitated transactional sex, building onto the concrete implications of colonialism and Orientalism.

Tourist gaze

The revisited concept of 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1992) which was initially coined by John Urry in 1990 offers a convenient tool for understanding the way in which tourists experience and interact with their surroundings while travelling. The tourist gaze is strongly related to processes of exoticisation and Othering, desire and fantasy, the consumptive gaze, and cultural appropriation (Qian et al., 2012). A lack of cognizance among global tourists leads to a vicious circle of global inequality, White privilege, and gendered power dynamics. While engaging in conversations with tourists during the fieldwork in Thailand, it became evident that many visitors viewed Thai locals as equals. However, this perceived equality can be problematic while coexisting with an inherent absence of knowledge of local socioeconomic and political complexities and a lack of acknowledgment regarding their own privileged position in the broader global context. This phenomenon reflects a broader issue within the tourism industry, where travellers may unintentionally perpetuate power imbalances due to their limited understanding of the socioeconomic and political nuances in the places that are visited. This is where the concept of 'tourist gaze' comes into play, explaining how tourists observe and interact with the local environment through their own cultural lenses and often fail to grasp the intricate power dynamics involved. Not surprisingly, there is a large distinction between the tourist gaze of regional tourists and international tourists (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018).

Social and sexual capital

Social capital, as originally coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1980) refers to the resources and privileges individuals gain from their social network, connections, and group memberships. Sexual capital, conceptualises the social value that individuals acquire from their perceived sexual attractiveness and desirability. Different circumstances and contexts impact the degrees of sexual capital that social actors possess that increases or decreases their sexual desirability in social settings (Green, 2022). Factors that construct an individual's sexual capital include physical attractiveness and social, cultural, and economic capital. Moreover,

the interplay between these various forms of capital, such as economic capital, social capital, and sexual capital create an order of desirability. This social hierarchy of desirability is entrenched in broader systems of oppression such as colourism, Orientalism, and capitalism. Indeed, the desirability and privilege that individuals acquire as a result of their attractiveness and social status leads to global sexual hierarchies, perpetuating social inequality.

When assessing global sexual hierarchies, it becomes evident that individuals are "organised into sexually racist hierarchies that situate whites as the most desirable and Blacks as the least desirable" (Smith et al., 2018). Sexual racism greatly influences intimate interactions and reinforces social inequalities, "ranging from being cast aside in intimate marketplaces to sexual violence" (Peck et al., 2021, p. 306).

Intersectionality and the Dynamics of Power

Sex, intimacy, and dating in a cross-cultural context are multifaceted phenomena and cannot be analysed as isolated concepts, but should rather be understood as a multidimensional mechanism. The various experiences of individuals engaged in sex and intimacy between locals and tourists are shaped by an interplay of many characteristics such as gender, race, class, culture, and socio-economic status. This section discusses the theme of intersectionality and the dynamics of power, aiming to unravel the intricate and entangled features of sexual interactions in the tourism context. By exploring central concepts such as intersectionality and Orientalism, and broader theoretical frameworks of third-wave feminism and post-colonialism this section gains deeper insights into how historical and gendered power imbalances, inequalities, and complexities have a large impact on lived experiences and the reality of things. This thematic exploration serves as a fundament in the overarching conceptual framework, guiding the analysis of the redefinition and transformation of contemporary sex tourism dynamics by a new generation of locals and travellers in the digital age.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) recognizes that individuals have multiple, intersecting identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, that shape experiences of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality accentuates that identities are not isolated experiences, but rather intersecting and interacting in complex ways, shaping an individual's experiences of discrimination, inequality, and privilege.

Crenshaw (1989) draws from her personal experiences as a Black woman, experiencing discrimination and oppression not only because of her race, but also because of her gender. The diverse combination of identities may result in unique experiences of oppression that differ from those of a Black man or a White woman.

The essence of this concept lies in its ability to recognise that systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, queerphobia, classism, and ableism, are interconnected and reinforce one another. Meaning that an individual's experiences of oppression cannot be fully understood by looking at a single identity marker or form of oppression in isolation. Indeed, the concept of intersectionality brings attention to the ways in which individuals with multiple marginalised identities may face unique and complicated forms of discrimination and oppression, leading to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of social inequality. Women at travel destinations, particularly those in the Global South, who engage in transactional sex as a means of survival may experience discrimination not only based on their gender but also their socioeconomic status, race, and nationality. The intersection of these identities may result in experiences of exploitation and oppression that differ from those of men or individuals from more privileged backgrounds. In the context of this research, intersectionality provides a comprehensive framework to understand the complexities and nuances of diverse experiences of locals and tourists engaged in sex tourism.

Third-wave feminist theory

Intersectionality is one of the major concepts within third-wave feminist theory, which emerged in the 1990s and continues to be highly relevant to the present day. Opposed to the preceding second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism expanded its focus of feminism to include a broader range of issues, such as intersectionality, cultural representation, body positivity, sex positivity, and the inclusion of marginalised groups (Gillis et al., 2004). It addressed the limitations and critiques of second-wave feminism, and particularly emphasises the diversity and complexity of women's experiences. Personal empowerment, inclusivity, and the importance of personal choice, agency, and autonomy make third-wave feminist theory considerably relevant for this study. Moreover, third-wave feminism emerged as a response to the critiques of the preceding second-wave feminism, which was argued to focus primarily on White, middle-class women and excluded the experiences and perspectives of women of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalised groups. Third-wave feminists have effectively utilised online infrastructures, social media, and digital activism to connect, mobilise, and raise awareness about feminist issues, increasing its relevance for the

digital scope of this study. Additionally, one of the primary objectives third-wave feminism advocates for, is the fundamental right for a woman to make her own choices about her body, stating it is crucial for every woman to have access to birth control and medical abortion procedures. This fundamental right for a woman to make her own choices extends to the realm of transactional sex, if her choice is autonomous and informed.

Moreover, feminist theory provides an important framework that contributes considerably to the critical analysis of power dynamics in society, specifically in relation to gender. Various fundamental concepts of feminist theory elucidate the ways in which power operates and manipulates individuals' experiences. Particularly the concepts of patriarchy, kyriarchy, and objectification offer valuable insights into the interconnected nature of power and oppression (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 1992; McCarthy & Smith, 1992). The social system in which men hold primary positions of dominance and power across spheres, including political leadership, control over property, social privilege, and moral authority is defined as patriarchy (McCarthy & Smith, 1992). Patriarchy operates to reinforce and perpetuate gender-based disparities and represents a power dynamic wherein men, as a collective, have more authority than women (Collins, 1992).

The concept of kyriarchy, coined by Schüssler (1993), is closely related to patriarchy but extends the source of power inequalities further than solely gender. Schüssler (1993) argues that power and oppression operate hierarchically along various intersecting axes, such as gender, race, and class. They identify how individuals may simultaneously occupy both privileged and marginalised identities. The various entangled experiences of oppression and power underline the importance of a nuanced approach, analysing marginalised groups further than exclusively looking at single features such as gender or race, but instead looking at the intersecting combination of these characteristics. Kyriarchy is highly relevant within the context of this study, as it facilitates a nuanced understanding of power dynamics among various individuals involved in the tourism industry. For instance, when examining the roles of Thai men, their gender may afford them a certain degree of power compared to Thai women, however, this gender-based advantage may not shield them from experiencing forms of oppression in contrast to White tourists, predominantly attributed to differences in race. Consequently, kyriarchy allows for the exploration of intersecting dimensions of power, acknowledging that individuals may simultaneously occupy positions of privilege and subjugation based on complex intersections of gender, race, and other social identities.

Finally, the process in which women, or other specific groups of individuals, are commodified and reduced to mere objects created to satisfy the desires and gratification of

others is conceptualised as objectification. This concept emphasises the ways in which certain groups who stand higher on the societal ladder benefit from the subjugation of others. Objectification is greatly fueled by media and societal norms that idealise and promote narrow and unrealistic beauty standards (Rice, 2022). Many women internalise these unrealistic beauty standards, leading to self-objectification, negative body image, and self-esteem issues. Moreover, women internalising these sexist, societal beliefs that prioritise women's physical appearance over other qualities may experience that their worth is based on their physical attractiveness. The usage of dating applications that allow their users to connect solely based on their physical appearance in pictures exacerbates this process of objectification. Algorithms that prioritise profiles based on physical attractiveness and the gamification of dating, through swiping and liking, reinforces the idea that validation and attracting attention from others is a primary goal. Consequently, the (self-)objectification of women through sexist, societal norms and dating apps reinforces power imbalances (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2020; Sion, 2019; Xu & Zheng, 2022).

Post-colonial theory

Another major fundament this theme draws from is postcolonial theory, as it provides insights into the establishment of Western hegemony and the ways in which coloniality continues to shape power relations and global structures (Tucker & Akama, 2012). Postcolonial theory emerged in the 20th century to analyse the social, cultural, economic, and political legacies of colonialism and imperialism. It emerged as a critical response to the hegemonic, Eurocentric and imperialist narratives that characterised much of the social science and humanities scholarship. Post-colonial theorists seek to deconstruct these dominant narratives and create a better understanding of the ways in which colonialism has impacted both colonisers and colonised.

Building onto this theory, Gayatri Spivak (2003) introduces the concept of subalternity to highlight the voices and experiences of those marginalised and oppressed by colonial and postcolonial power structures. Spivak (2003) critiques the ways in which those excluded from hegemonic power, which she refers to as the 'subaltern', are frequently denied their agency and how their voices are systemically silenced within the current frames of power. This lens serves as an analytical tool that centres the voices of the subaltern, and the ways in which mechanisms of subalternation operate to socially, culturally, politically, and economically marginalise the 'Other' within global hierarchical structures.

A key figure in the contribution to the development of postcolonial theory is Edward Said, who published the book “Orientalism” (1979). In this publication, he argues that the Western representation of the East is a product of the colonial relationship between the West and the East. He argues that Western representations of the East are not based on objective facts but instead socially constructed to justify Western imperialism and domination. According to Said (1979) there is “almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (p. 188), he argues that the stereotypical image of the Orient suggests not only abundancy, fertility, and fruitfulness, but also “sexual promise, untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, and deep generative energies” (p. 188).

The Far East is often associated with escapism and drenched with sexualised fantasies, such as harems, dancing girls, veiled women, and “Ladyboys”[1] (Tan, 2018). Tan (2014) argues that in contemporary society, “the perpetrator of an Orientalist gaze is often a paradigmatically Western, heterosexual and male tourist”. Additionally, Balaji and Worawongs (2010) argue that to this day Orientalist depictions in Western media serve “to further White masculine notions of Asian femininity and subservience [...] Asian women are continuously depicted as subservient sexual objects that are only present to satisfy the White male character’s sexual desire.” (p. 226). Said (1979) additionally conceptualises these imaginations of the East with the term “imaginative geographies”, by which he contends that orientalist practices establish a cognitive distinction between the familiar “ours” and unfamiliar “theirs".

By constructing a dichotomy between East and West, mental and territorial boundaries are delineated. Said (1979) argues that space is not an objective entity but rather a social construct, undergoing a poetic process, acquiring imaginative and figurative values through narratives and emotions. The Orient is portrayed as a theatrical and fantastical stage for a distant European audience, “featuring representative figures and tropes, creating stereotypical characters and a cultural repertoire of monsters, heroes, pleasures, and desires” (Haldrup & Koefoed, 2009). This staged Orient is envisioned as a confined space representing the entirety of the East, thus evolving into a stringent moral system and disciplined truth regime. Haldrup and Koefoed (2009) argue that the institutionalised Western knowledge of the East narrates a quasi-mythical representation of the Orient; a dormant

[1] In the Thai context, the term 'ladyboy' is popular in mainstream language to refer to transgender women in Thailand. It is important to note that this term may be considered pejorative and disrespectful in some contexts (Winter, 2006). However, in the Thai context the term “specifically refers to the cultural subgroup, rather than the person’s gender identity and is not seen as an offensive term” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 550).

world characterised by a potent fantasy wherein the East exists in a realm isolated from European progress. Moreover, colonialism has led to what Glenn (2008) conceptualises as a "Valorisation of Whiteness" among Asians, who see white skin as a representation of "modernity and social mobility" (p. 291). Tourists from Western countries, often perceived as representatives of Whiteness, may experience preferential treatment or hold certain advantages in their interactions with locals.

All with all, post- and decolonial theory seeks to understand the ways in which colonialism has impacted the world, and in which ways coloniality persists to shape and ground present-day institutions of power, knowledge, and society (Mpofu, 2017). It aims to challenge hegemonic, Western narratives of history, culture, society, and politics. It urges to listen to the perspectives and experiences of minorities, oppressed and marginalised groups, and allows for the recognition of the complex and multi-layered nature of non-Western societies.

The profound influence of post-colonial concepts shape contemporary sex tourism dynamics in many ways. As exemplified by Said's "Orientalism" (1979), the West has constructed and perpetuated sexualised and exoticised images of the East. This construction has led to the perception of the East, particularly South-East Asian countries, as a place of sexual promise, consumable sensuality, and unlimited desire. To this day, the Orientalist framework heavily influences how Western tourists perceive and engage with the East in the context of tourism. The dominant perpetrator of the Orientalist gaze is often Western, heterosexual, and male; it impacts their interaction with local culture, including how they engage with local individuals through dating apps. Moreover, Orientalist narratives are reinforced through the ongoing representation of Asian women as subservient sexual objects in Western media, which is exemplified in popular films including The Memoirs of a Geisha, Kill Bill, and The Last Samurai (Balaji & Worawwongs, 2010). This representation reinforces White masculine notions of Asian femininity and submissiveness, contributing to power imbalances in sex tourism encounters. Post-colonial theory challenges these dominant, Western narratives about culture, history, sexuality, and politics and calls for a revised and inclusive understanding of non-Western societies and identities.

III. Research Approach and Methods

As showcased in the previous section, this study draws from feminist, post- and decolonial, and critical tourism studies. The empirical section of the study is substantiated by fieldwork conducted during a three-month period in Thailand. This chapter outlines the methods and research approach adopted to map and explore the experiences of locals and tourists using dating apps in Thailand. It includes the research design and setting, the participants, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, a reflection on the researchers' positionality, and finally the limitations. During the fieldwork period, the researcher engaged in observations, conversations, and interviews with locals, tourists, and two Thai scholars doing research in the fields of gender studies and decolonial theory. In order to arrive at the aim of this study, interaction with various individuals engaged in digitally-mediated intimacy is crucial. At this moment, concrete understandings of experiences and perspectives of locals and tourists engaged in sexual encounters through the usage of dating applications seems to be lacking.

Research Design

The research was conducted through the combination of three qualitative methods; interviews, participant observations, and netnography. The triangulation of various research methods increases the methodological validity and reliability, and additionally leads to a variety and richness of data. A combination of both physical, face-to-face, interactions and digital observations and interactions allowed for an exhaustive exploration of the intersecting digital and physical realms of dating app facilitated interactions. Moreover, the interviews provided reliable, first-hand observations of the experiences of both locals and tourists allowed for more in-depth and concrete understandings of the living realities of those engaged in digitally-mediated sexual interactions. Participant observations proved to be a valuable way to immerse the researcher in the set and setting in which these interactions took place.

Setting and context

The fieldwork was conducted in various urban and touristic areas in Thailand; the largest number of research participants interviewed in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and southern tourist hotspots such as Koh Tao, Koh Phangan, and Phuket. These locations are known for their great tourist influx, providing a rich atmosphere for examining interactions between tourists

and locals. Contrary to building rapport with research participants in a single location, the decision was made to move freely across Thailand's tourist routes and visit various tourist-centric areas. The dynamics of sexual interactions between tourists and locals differ significantly per location. For instance, Pattaya is renowned for its sex tourism practices, pulling a significant amount of 'traditional sex tourists', whereas rural areas like Chiang Mai are less frequently visited by sex tourists. However, dating apps are still widely used by backpackers in these rural areas, presenting relevant opportunities for research.

The features of dating profiles on digital platforms varied significantly depending on the location. In the southern regions of Thailand, well-known for their white beaches, tropical weather, and abundance of hedonistic entertainment, user profiles offering commercial sex were considerably more prevalent on dating apps than in rural areas. The geographical disparities between these profiles also extended to the motivations, expectations, and intentions of local individuals active on these platforms. By moving through diverse environments, the research was able to capture a broader spectrum of individuals, behaviours, and interactions.

Throughout the whole fieldwork period, hostels were the main form of accommodation for the researcher. In these spaces, the interactions between local employees and tourists were observed. Additionally, hostels provided convenient access to respondents, often offering social spaces in which travellers could meet others and 'hang-out' together. It seemed that while being immersed in these spaces, respondents felt relatively secure discussing their experiences with locals through dating apps.

Sampling and participants

In order to analyse the dynamics of digitally mediated sexual encounters between locals and tourists, a part of the data is drawn from semi-structured interviews with tourists (n = 12) and locals (n = 9). All the local respondents were Thai, predominantly bisexual (55,6%), and between the ages of 18–29 (66,7%). In terms of gender, 66,7% of the locals self-identified as women, 11,1% as men, and 22,2% as other. The tourist respondents come from seven different countries, but are predominantly Dutch (45,5%), heterosexual (83,3%), and between the ages of 18–29 (75%). In terms of gender, 91,7% of the tourists interviewed identified as men and 8,3% identified as women. The other, non-Dutch tourists were from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Australia. While conducting fieldwork in Thailand, the researcher engaged with a diverse group of participants consisting of 9 locals and 11 tourists. The sampling process was designed and modified to capture a wide range of

individuals, perspectives, and experiences engaging in digitally-mediated encounters between tourists and locals.

The local participants (n = 9) were recruited through a variety of means, depending on the situational possibilities and accessibilities. Four locals were connected through the use of Tinder. A user profile was created, including pictures, some personal details, and a short bibliography stating, "dating app researcher, help me out with my research! i'll get the drinks". The application settings were set to display profiles of all genders with an age range of 18–35. While 'swiping' on Tinder, all Thai women with English biographies were swiped right[2], assuming that these individuals were more likely to be open to dating foreigners. Two other participants were scholars doing research in the field of cross-cultural dating and were contacted by emailing them on their university email-address. The other local participants were encountered in real life; at hostels, art exhibitions, on the streets, or through snowball sampling.

The tourist participants (n = 11) were largely recruited in social settings popular among backpackers and tourists. Eight tourists were encountered at hostels, bars, or other tourist venues, which allowed the researcher to observe and engage with these participants in their natural settings. Two tourists were recruited from the researcher's personal social circle, providing detailed data and insights due to pre-established rapport. The remaining tourist was a backpacker regularly purchasing sex while simultaneously using dating apps for casual encounters which was a referred by another student.

Data Collection

The qualitative methods used to collect data were semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and netnography. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth analysis of experiences, attitudes, and perspectives of different actors in the sex tourism industry, providing a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of this phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Moreover, face-to-face interviews allow the researcher to ask open-ended questions that encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives, while also providing a framework for consistency across interviews (Flick, 2014). Participant observation is a complementary method that allows researchers to gain insight into social interactions and practices from a participant's point of view. As a participant-observer of

[2] Swiping right on a profile means to like or accept someone, while swiping left rejects them. If two users have swiped right on each other's profiles, a possibility for chatting and video-calling is enabled.

tourist experiences and practices, the researcher was able to gain a comprehensive insight into the social dynamics, movements, and overall experiences of tourists. Thirdly, netnography was utilised as a means to understand and analyse the social interactions and behaviours in digital spaces. Kozinets (2015) argues that online communities have an inherent and separate set of cultures, norms, and practices that shape the behaviours, experiences, and interactions of the participants engaging on online platforms. The communication with participants was largely conducted in English, as this is a global language, commonly used among tourists and locals in Thailand. Some tourist respondents were interviewed in Dutch as it was their primary language and they preferred to converse in their mother tongue; these interactions have been translated to English in order to maintain consistency throughout the study.

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were conducted with tourists and locals active on dating applications, and consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and motivations. Semi-structured interviews draw from pre-made questions that provide a framework for consistency across interviews (Flick, 2014). The interview questions[3] were structured in a way that first introduced participants to the topic using milder questions, whereas the end of the interview contained more confronting or critical questions. Prior to starting the interview, small talk was performed in order to create a safe space and build some extent of rapport. The local respondents connected through Tinder were interviewed in public spaces, mostly bars or cafe's, in which case the researcher provided drinks. After the interviews with locals some space was provided to relax, reflect, and get to know each other better, which in some cases led to the formation of friendships.

Participant observations

Participant observation was employed as a complementary technique to gain better insight into the social interactions and dynamics in bars, hostels, and other locations where encounters between tourists and locals take place. This method involves the observation of and participation in practices that are studied (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019). Throughout the fieldwork period, hostels were the main form of accommodation, providing easy access to respondents and social spaces for observation and participation. For instance, the researcher participated in a nightly visit to Khao San Road with a group of backpackers met in a hostel

[3] Appendix B

in Bangkok. Khao San Road is arguably the most famous backpacker street of Thailand, attracting thousands of backpackers every night for a noisy, neon-illuminated night out. Through the immersion in tourist hubs like Khao San Road, the researcher can first-handedly observe the socialisation patterns, consumption habits, and leisure activities of tourists. Moreover, while socialising with tourists through the participation of activities, rapport is built which subsequently leads to more open discussions about their interactions with locals.

Netnography

Netnography involves the application of ethnographic principles and techniques to research online communities and social interactions within a digital environment. This type of qualitative research focuses on understanding cultural and social dynamics within digital communities, networks, and communication patterns. This methodological technique aims to interpret digital infrastructures by immersing the researcher in the online community and collecting data through observation and participation. Through the participation in digital infrastructures, the researcher immersed themselves in the online community, allowing for the observation of various behaviours, phenomena, themes, and patterns within the online dating atmosphere. Interacting with other users on dating applications facilitated relevant conversations, increased accessibility to the research population, and the accumulation of various interview participants.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted through the use of two interviewing and analysis techniques. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences and meaning-making. For the tourist respondents, the 'two-cop persona' introduced by Hathaway and Atkintons (2003) was commonly employed in order to build rapport and simultaneously critically engage with participants, particularly those with problematic, colonial, or privileged perspectives and behaviours. The data gathered throughout the interviews and small talk was coded and analysed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program designed to group and categorise textual data, and identify patterns, connections, and themes within it (Till & Watson, 2010). Moreover, prior to uploading all data into Atlas.ti, the interviews have been transcribed manually. The transcript was then coded which is a systematic way to analyse transcripts, notes, and memos (Till & Watson, 2010).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

In line with ethnographic research, which emphasises subjective experiences and lived realities of individuals, IPA is a valuable and relevant type of analysis in the context of this study. IPA centres deeper and more nuanced understandings of experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by individuals engaged in intimate interactions through dating applications. By encouraging open-ended dialogue between the researcher and participants during interviews, this approach allows participants to freely express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, leading to rich and detailed data generation (Eatough & Smith, 2017). By having an open attitude and dialogue, the researcher gains unique insights (Smith & Nizza, 2021) and is able to uncover nuances that may not be captured through other types of analysis. Moreover, IPA adopts a strong focus on participant meaning-making and how individuals interpret and make sense of their living-experiences. In the context of this study it is essential to understand how participants perceive their actions, experiences, motivations, and relations. These subjective experiences can provide valuable insights into the complexities of their interactions and the broader implications of tourism, intimacy, and transactionality in dating app usage in Thailand. The flexible but structured nature of this approach allowed for the exploration of newly emerging themes and patterns in the data that may challenge or transform existing frameworks. The aim of this study is to make sense of the implications arising from the emerging intersection between the digital world of dating apps and sexual encounters in the Thai tourism industry, IPA allowed for a significant openness in researching different perspectives that aligns with the aim of the study.

Moreover, the methodology of IPA is based on understanding phenomena within their specific cultural, social, and political contexts. In the context of this study, where cross-culturalism, power dynamics, and gender stereotypes and roles have an important impact in shaping interactions, IPA's contextual approach ensures a deeper understanding of how these factors make an impact on individual experiences and interactions. Additionally, not only does IPA focus on sociological contexts, it also establishes major emphasis on the individual voices of research participants and tries to understand their experiences in their own terms which allows for more ethical research practices. Meaning that this approach provides the presentation of participant's voices and living experiences in a respectful, nuanced, and contextualised manner, which is essential given the sensitivity and potential vulnerabilities of the participants involved in the study. With regards to the tourist participants, a particular focus is applied to tourist behaviour to examine the relevant implications of their actions

observed during the fieldwork period. This involved observations and assessments of tourists' engagement with local culture, individuals, and services. Within this analysis, tourist behaviour, motivations, decision-making processes, and the impact of their actions on the local community are examined, critically assessing the role of tourists in sexual interactions.

IPA was performed using the interpretive model introduced by Engward and Goldspink (2020). The data analysis was performed using the following six steps,

1) The transcript was read thoroughly to familiarise with the data.
2) Detailed notes of the transcript were created, using three types of comments; descriptive comments that describe the content of what the participant is saying, linguistic comments that examine the use of language, tones, silences, and patterns of speech, and conceptual comments that interpret and consider the underlying meanings and implications. In order to systematically code the data, a code book[4] was employed.
3) Through the categorisation of notes into code groups that captured the essence of the experiences shared by the participants, themes were identified. The thematic categorisation of the data was carried out with "attentiveness to the influence of the researcher on the research process" (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 1).
4) By grouping and clustering the themes, overarching patterns and relationships were identified.
5) Each theme was described and analysed in detail, supported by quotes from the participants. Through these means, a telling narrative was constructed.
6) Finally, the themes were related to the conceptual framework provided in the previous chapter, and constructed into a dialogue with the existing body of literature, challenging some, and confirming other notions in the overarching areas of research.

Two-cop persona

Interviewing individuals engaging in criminalised, or stigmatised practices, including transactional sex, requires a sensitive approach to interviewing. Hathaway and Atkinsons (2003) introduce the concept of the "two-cop persona" interviewing method, which involves interviewing deviants using a combination of both empathetic and challenging approaches. The empathetic persona builds rapport with the interviewee, acknowledging their perspective,

[4] The code book can be found in Appendix C.

and showing understanding of their situation. This persona aligns with the main goal of conducting interviews, which is understanding the engagement and differences in commercial and noncommercial sex through the use of online dating applications, from the perspectives of the interviewees themselves. The challenging persona, on the other hand, involves asking tough questions, challenging inconsistencies, and confronting the interviewee with the potential negative consequences of their behaviour. This technique involved "steering away from [...] critical lines of inquiry to extend the occurrence of everyday confrontations and challenges to the scientific realm of data collection" (Hathaway & Atkinsons, 2003, p.172). This method proved to be highly efficient for the tourist respondents who frequently turned out to have problematic, colonial, and privileged perspectives in terms of their own behaviours and their interactions with and perceptions of locals. By employing the two-cop persona, these respondents could be questioned critically, prompting them to reflect on existing power dynamics, systems of oppression, and their own position in this, while simultaneously maintaining a non-judgemental space for them to share their intimate experiences, avoiding moralising or stigmatising language.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

The sensitive nature of the topic required careful ethical considerations to ensure participant safety and confidentiality. Moreover, Western academia has historically been controlled by White, cisheteronormative, male scholars (Jones & Calafell, 2012). This dominance underscores the need for critical examination of power dynamics, bias, and the reproduction of privilege within academic institutions (Hutchins, 2022). Engaging in participatory research methods, can contribute to the repositioning of participants as active contributors and co-researchers, fostering more diversity and equity in research.

Where possible, the participants were provided with information about the scope of the research, including its objective, methods, and conceptual frameworks. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior the commencement of any data collection activities. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that the option of withdrawing from the study was possible at any time, without any negative consequences. Additionally, through the removal of specific personal identifiers from all data, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was ensured. Moreover, the recorded interviews and transcripts were stored securely on a device only accessible by the researcher and are deleted after the completion of the study.

The creation of a digital profile on dating platforms to find respondents and observe the digital environment raised specific ethical concerns. These concerns revolved around the potential for deception and the necessity to balance the research's objectives with the participants' rights to privacy and informed consent. In order to prevent false expectations in terms of the intention of the researchers' activity on dating apps, clear statements were included in the dating profile to inform potential respondents of the research purpose, ensuring transparency and informed engagement.

The researcher was attentive to the emotional and psychological well-being of the participants, given the stigmatised, intimate, and potentially distressing nature of the contents of the conversations. Interviews were conducted in public, yet discreet places, chosen by the participants, in order to increase the convenience and safety of their participation. When necessary, participants were provided with information about local support services if they shared prior traumatic or distressing experiences in terms of their dating app interactions.

Researcher's role

As an activist scholar, the research is inherently influenced by the researchers' commitment to social justice and equality. Activist scholarship involves the use of academic research to advocate for social change and challenge existing power structures. This research approach impacts the overall process, analysis, and findings, due to a strong focus on issues of inequality and the attempt to produce knowledge that contributes to social transformation.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection. This requires a careful consideration of how the researchers' identity, being a White, queer, and non-binary scholar with a background in gender and security studies, affects the research. The researchers' gender, social class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity shape the perspectives and interactions with participants, influencing the data collected and its interpretation. This was for instance evident in the local participant sample, consisting of a relatively large number of queer participants. Considering the method in which participants were recruited, through the use of dating applications, in which participants had agency to 'swipe' left or right based on the personalia of the researcher, the researchers' identity inevitably influenced the sample.

Moreover, during the fieldwork, emotional connections were developed between the researcher and participants. As someone who experienced and encountered sexism, queerphobia, and patriarchal systems throughout their life, the researcher felt compassion towards the experiences of various of the local participants. Additionally, as a social equality

activist, emotional engagement with issues such as gender, inequality, and colonialism influenced the interactions and interpretations of the research. Some statements made by tourists, such as "I think it's not [...] a connection with the local culture when you're just shagging Thai girls" or "she's no hooker, but for ten dollars you can take her home" were particularly challenging to navigate objectively due to their sexist and colonial nature.

Observations in places like Pattaya and Phuket which felt constructed for the sole purpose of sex tourism, were at times confronting to navigate. The atmosphere, feeling like a "sex paradise" in a similar way that Las Vegas is a gambling paradise, challenged the researchers' ability to remain objective, and underscore the challenges and complexities of experiencing emotions while conducting research in such environments.

Reflections on identity

Reflecting on the researchers' identity, as a White, non-binary, and queer researcher who had never previously been to Thailand produced a range of challenges. White researchers in non-White communities must decenter Whiteness and decolonise their research practices and the overall field of Western academia (Bennett et al., 2022; Hutchins, 2022). Reflecting on the researchers' own position of privilege, they often questioned, "Who am I to say all these things about the experiences and voices of Thai women?". Understanding their own social position and engaging in ethical academic principles, such as "positionality, ownership, and answerability" (Bennett et al., 2022), was essential in order to engage in cross-cultural ethnographic research. Despite the challenges and ethical considerations that ethnographic research poses, by approaching the research process with sensitivity, reflexivity, and a commitment to empowering participants, White researchers can contribute meaningfully to academic discussions concerning non-White communities (Flavell & Cunningham, 2022).

In conclusion, drawing inspiration from Jones and Calafell (2012), the process of reflecting on one's identity as a researcher is not 'just' a box to be ticked in the overall research process, but an essential practice for promoting genuine, empathetic engagement with the communities studied. Advocating for intimate conversations over detached observations, Jones and Calafell (2012) argue that researchers must use their own embodied experiences to dig into the cultural, social, and political nuances of their research participants. The narratives of marginalised identities, whether it be based on ethnicity, sexuality, or gender, often explore how axes of power operate in day-to-day life, and "we as queer educators seek to connect across our difference through our shared experiences of Otherness" (Jones and Calafell, 2012, p. 959). By moving beyond individualised and rationalised frames

of knowledge, scholars can broaden their responsibility from "self, to others and self" (p. 976), arguing that "the development of queer consciousness moved us toward alliance, which critiques the individualism that so heavily influences and colonises the imaginary within [...] academia" (p. 976).

Limitations

While Tinder proved to be a convenient way to find respondents, language and cultural barriers posed challenges during some of the interviews. Even though the majority of the respondents spoke English, discussing sensitive and intimate topics was sometimes challenging, especially with regards to the interviews conducted in more rural areas in Thailand. The participants from these areas turned out to be more conservative with regards to their attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy and discussing these topics at times led to awkward or stiff interactions. It was more difficult to pinpoint their experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making due to the combination of language and culture barriers.

Additionally, the relatively small sample size of twenty participants does not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the broader population. As a result, the study's findings may not be generalisable beyond the contexts and locations studied. Moreover, as described in the previous section, maintaining objectivity while simultaneously being empathetic was a continues balancing act. As an activist researcher, personal biases and perspectives inevitably influenced the research process and findings. In order to manage and reduce these biases and ensure overall credibility and validity, critical reflexivity and self-assessment were essential.

IV. Tales of Temptation: A Chronological Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the historical evolution of tourism and sexuality in Thailand. After a short introduction on the development of mass tourism in Thailand, the chapter will provide an overview of the historical evolution of sexuality and commercial sex in Thailand, touching upon historical influences, the religious influence of Buddhism on gender and sex, and finally modern and post-modern implications. This chapter serves to illustrate how commercial sex is existing in the current socio-political environment of the areas in which fieldwork was conducted. During the fieldwork period, a distinction was made between traditional forms of sex work and various other, upcoming forms of transactional sex, such as through the use of dating applications. An overview of these traditional forms of transactional sex and sex tourism, and how these phenomena manifest in Thailand is provided.

Additionally, the emergence of digital landscapes in the realm of sex work, dating, and intimate relationships and its impact on sex tourism dynamics is analysed. In this current timeframe, innovations in the field of technology and digital platforms continue to have a great impact on the day-to-day life of individuals globally. The digital fantasies of tourists, significantly influenced through wealthy and powerful industries such as the tourism industry, social media, and the porn industry, increasingly intertwine with the living realities of locals. It is essential to acknowledge the intersectional power dynamics shaping the digital and physical realms through which these individuals navigate. Frameworks provided by feminist, post- and decolonial, and critical tourism studies will be central to the analysis of these dynamics. In conclusion, the aim of this chapter is to answer the sub-question: How has the rise of dating apps altered the traditional patterns of transactional sex among locals and tourists in Thailand?

Globally, tourism has increased enormously in recent decades, commercial aviation has altered the travel industry from continental and domestic-based to a major international industry. Since 2000, the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide has more than doubled (Mishra et al., 2021). Thailand has globally become amongst the top tourist destinations due to its rich cultural heritage, landscapes, cuisine, and hospitality. The explosive growth of the tourism industry as a vigorous and thriving sector has had a considerable impact on many facets of Thai society. In 2019 the registred number of tourist arrivals in the country was 39,916,000, a 474% average growth rate compared to 1995 (World Tourism Organisation, 2022). This remarkable growth and development has

contributed greatly to the country's economic prosperity. The roots of contemporary mass tourism can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when Thailand actively started to participate in global trade and commerce (Fakfare et al., 2022). Decades later in the 1960s the tourism industry started to expand due to the broadening accessibility of commercial aviation and the emerging concept of package holidays (Chaladol, 2018). The tropical climate, rich cultural heritage, and flavourful cuisine became considerable draws for international tourists seeking unique and exotic experiences (Nuttavuthisit, 2007).

International tourism is a major driving force in Thailand's annually increasing gross domestic product (GDP), contributing approximately 11% to the country's total economic output (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic the international tourist arrivals plummeted from 40 million to 0 in 2021 (Thai Ministry of Tourism, 2023), leading to a dramatic decrease of Thailand's GDP (Biswas, 2023). This sharp decline emphasises the vulnerability of an economy heavily reliant on tourism as a primary source of income. Additionally, the explosive growth of tourism in Thailand has raised critique about its negative impact on the environment and local communities. Overcrowding in popular tourist destinations has led to environmental issues such as pollution and ecosystem stress, which encompasses the processes of unsustainable resource extraction and exploitation by large corporations for excessive consumerism (Nguyen et al., 2019). Additionally, the vast growth of tourism has also had negative implications for local communities, such as unequal and over-development, which has greatly impacted the quality of life for local residents. The tourism industry in Thailand, as well as internationally, has faced criticism for social and ethical concerns. Issues with regards to labour exploitation, specifically the exploitative nature of certain popular tourism practices such as sexual encounters, and cultural commodification are some of the major drawbacks of mass-tourism.

Although the Thai government acknowledges and promotes the potential of international tourism as an economic driver and has initiated several strategic policies and infrastructural projects, it is important to address and be aware of the disadvantages of tourism. One of the major actors of Thailand's tourism industry is the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), which plays a critical role in promoting tourism through targeted marketing campaigns, establishing tourism information centres, and facilitating industry partnerships (TAT, 2021). These policies and projects aim to further augment the country's attractiveness as a tourist destination and advance sustainable growth of the tourism industry (Chaladol, 2018). While continuing to seek the benefits of international tourism, the associated

challenges must also be navigated in order to secure a sustainable future for both the Thai people and the environment.

The Historical Evolution of Sexuality in Thailand

"*Long before the arrival of disruptive foreign males—such as the Chinese in the mid-19th century, American soldiers during the Korean and Vietnam wars and, more recently, tourists from around the world—Thais had institutionalised vice as a way of life for themselves*" (Hantrakul, 1983, p. 27).

The complex history of the sex industry in Thailand has been influenced by a multitude of factors spanning several centuries. References to human and sex trade practices date back to ancient periods such as the Sukhothai (1250-1438) and the Ayathuyyan (1351-1767) eras, underlining the persisting existence of these phenomena in Thai society (Martínez, 2016). Historically, Buddhism, a longstanding cornerstone of Thai culture, plays a great role in shaping attitudes towards sex work and gender roles. Indeed, the importance of Buddhism as part of the ideological backdrop in which Thai prostitution has thrived throughout centuries, cannot be overlooked. Ghosh (2002) illustrates that in the Sukhothai and Ayuthia periods, "the relationship between man and woman has remained similar to that of a master and a slave, [...] woman was regarded as a symbol of entertainment for men in royal court" (p. 873), these gender roles have been heavily influenced by Buddhist and Brahmanical values. While on the one hand Buddhism is known for its tolerance, loving-kindness, and karmic belief system, its impact on gender roles and sexuality is multifaceted (Kidpromma, 2022). Prostitution, together with other 'immoral vocations', is in Buddhist terminology referred to as akuśala[5], which include deeds such as soldiering and butchering that have inevitable, negative karmic consequences. Within Buddhist practice, it is acknowledged that some of these immoral vocations may be unavoidable in order to secure basic human needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and medicine (Van Esterink, 2020). Thus, some interpretations of Buddhist teachings might soften attitudes towards sex workers, acknowledging that some deeds may be unavoidable in order to obtain basic necessities. However, various scholars like Avila et al. (2017) argue that, particularly more conservative interpretations of Buddhism negatively affect the status of Thai women due to gender inequal attitudes, such as not

[5] "The opposite of kuśala. Term of moral disapproval used of wrongful or unwholesome deeds or thoughts. In particular, the term denotes the defilements (kleśas) and actions which breach the various Buddhist moral codes such as the Five Precepts (pañca-śīla)" (Keown, 2004)

directly addressing concerns regarding the sex trade industry, restricting the legitimacy of higher ordained women in Buddhism, and denying women the right to education.

Buddhism and Tradition on Sex and Gender

As the dominant religion in Thailand, Buddhism plays an important role in shaping societal attitudes and norms, including those related to gender and sexuality. Whereas Buddhist principles of non-judgment and tolerance may soften societal attitudes towards sex workers by recognising the challenges they face and the necessity of their work for basic survival (Ocha, 2023), Buddhism also has a strong patriarchal structure (Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1987) and highly emphasises moral purity (Ghosh, 2002). These intersecting factors play an important role in pushing sex into a taboo sphere.

Additionally, various studies underline the indirect impact of Buddhism on the status of Thai women, noting how religious institutions perpetuate gender inequalities and limit opportunities for women, including their access to education and socioeconomic resources (Avila et al., 2022; Kidpromma, 2017). This is further exemplified by the case of a Thai, middle-aged woman working at a massage salon in Phuket, she narrates how a traditional Buddhist upbringing in the North of Thailand has led her to leave her parents in search of better opportunities in the South:

> "I come from a place close to Chiang Mai but there is no work. My parents were very strict, I did not go to school, they wanted me to work for them in the house so I have no money. I went to Phuket to work as a massage girl, but my children are still in Chiang Mai. I work here so they can go to school. I only see them once a month if I have enough money to take a bus from Phuket to Chiang Mai, to see my family."

Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, (1987) explain that within Thai Buddhism, matrilocality traditionally is a common phenomenon. Many Buddhist communities in Thailand believe that in order to express gratitude towards the parents, sons are granted the opportunity to enter the monastic order, a practice believed to secure prosperity for their parents in subsequent lives. Subsequently, this tradition produces a gender disparity, as women are denied the possibility to join the monastic order. Instead, the primary means through which women can return gratitude is by being a lifelong caretaker of their parents. In this way, daughters are doomed to become "bonded labourers" (Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1987, p. 141) to their parents,

this intergenerational symbiotic interdependence is conceptualised as a relationship of "moral creditor-moral debtor" (p. 141).

Buddhism and feminism are entangled in a complicated push-pull movement between conservatism and modernisation efforts. On the one hand there is a loud and refreshing wave of feminist reformers within Thai Buddhism (Lai, 2017; Ocha, 2023), such as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, who has committed her life to "help women develop their own spirituality and contribute something to society" and advocates for women's significance in the religious realm of Buddhism (Achakulwisut, 2001). However, the vigorous patriarchal tradition of Buddhism makes it a challenging effort (Kabilsingh, 1998), even though many reformations have been made, such as the decision of the Thai Senate Select Committee to invalidate the 1928 ruling that forbade women to ordinate; which was later rejected by the Thai National Bureau of Buddhism (Paudel & Dong, 2017, p. 11), there is still a long way to go.

Revisiting the concept of matrilocality, in Thai society, women are expected to stay "pure" (*P7; P8*) before marriage and are traditionally restricted to the role of caretaker or familial provider. This gender stereotyping perpetuates a cycle of self-objectification and economic dependence (Witayarat, 2023). In feminist theory, the process of (self-)objectification, as conceptualised by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) further illustrates how societal norms and outsider's perspectives are internalised by women from a young age onwards. By observing themselves as objects to be looked at, a woman's intrinsic value is disregarded, solely evaluating them based on appearance. Many women have internalised traditional gender roles as prescribed by patriarchal and religious institutions, leading to societal perceptions of women primarily as virtuous caretakers of their families. These societal attitudes subsequently reinforce objectification and economic repression of women (Thepboriruk, 2019).

The process of the ageist objectification of women in Thailand manifests prominently in the testimonial of a research participant narrating that her previous greater income as an erotic masseuse has decreased due to her perceived decline in physical attractiveness, stating now that she's "old and ugly, nobody wants [her] anymore". At the moment of speaking to her, she worked as a non-erotic masseuse in an establishment that offers erotic and non-erotic massages, earning less money and struggling to provide for her children's education. Despite her desire to be with her children, she is constrained by societal expectations and economic realities, showcasing the intersecting, systemic barriers that enforce gender inequality and economic exploitation in the Thai sex industry.

The Modern Prevalence and Development of Transactional Sex in Thailand

In order to better grasp the modern evolution of transactional sex within Thai society, a gender, sexuality, and feminism scholar[6], interviewed in Bangkok, illustrates the concept of Arb Ob Nuad, a sexual tradition that has quietly existed in Thai culture since the 1940s. Arb Ob Nuad entails a customary Thai form of commercial sex in which men visit specialised bathing houses. Within these establishments, clients engage in various activities including bathing, utilising saunas, and receiving sexual massages. This practice reflects cultural norms surrounding sexuality and commercialised intimacy predating the mass-arrival of soldiers, and later tourists. Through this lens, Arb Ob Nuad serves as a historical precursor to contemporary manifestations of the sex industry in Thailand.

Even though commercialised sex has had a longstanding history in Thai society, the industry has undergone an immense expansion during the Vietnam War (Butler & Suntikul, 2013). In their study, Brodeur et al. (2017) examine the factors that influence the geographical dispersion of the sex industry in Thailand. There is a strong correlation between the presence of US military forces during the Vietnam War era, an initial surge in demand for sex trade, and the sudden growth of the sex industry. This is emphasised by a substantial geographic disparity of establishments offering sexual services; Thai districts near former US bases are currently still habituating five times as many commercial sex workers. Moreover, Boczar (2022) argues that the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam led to an uncontrolled demand for intimacy, resulting in an inflation and thriving market for commercial and noncommercial sex.

Prostitution evolved into not only a means of income but also an opportunity for women to improve their social status, despite the high risks, such as disease and abuse, involved (p. 83). Lingering colonial, and Orientalist perceptions of Asian women as highly sensual combined with the intense sexual frustrations and desires of wartime soldiers (Smith, 2021) created an explosive demand for prostitution among American military personnel. In order to manage these desires and reduce tensions with the South Vietnamese government, the US military actively promoted R&R destinations outside of Vietnam, particularly in Thailand, which offered more safety and legal prostitution (Boczar, 2022, p. 105). Alternatively, the expansion of the sex industry can also be partially attributed to the influx of

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female migrants from regions struggling with an agricultural crisis that took place in the same timeframe (Hung, 2023).

The close diplomatic ties between Thailand and the United States during the Vietnam War, in which Thailand served as an important strategic partner to the US (Pongsudhirak, 2016), have been strongly influenced by historical colonial legacies and global power dynamics (Copeland, 2021; Raymond, 2022). As early as 1833, Thailand, then known as Siam, signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United States, which was primarily focused on economic relations rather than security (Chumroentaweesup, 2021; Prarsirtsuk, 2017). It provided Siam an opportunity to broaden its relationships with Western powers and served as a powerful strategic measure to evade colonisation attempts by European nations (N. N. Smith & Smith, 2019; Pongsudhirak, 2016). In exchange, it offered the US access to mainland Southeast Asia equal to that of European colonists ubiquitous in the region. This diplomatic manoeuvring is typical for Thai foreign policy (Kislenko, 2002) and significant in positioning Thailand within the framework of global capitalism, as it sought to capitalise on its strategic location and resources (Battersby, 1998).

Moreover, Jackson (2008) argues that "hybridity is a defining feature of Thai cultural history and of contemporary Thai culture" (p. 154) and that Thailand has a pattern of symbolically appropriating the authority and prestige of contemporary major powers whereby "an alien capitalist way of life has been indigenised" (Jackson, 1999, p. 5). Thai foreign policy has been metaphorized as "bamboo in the wind" (Klausner, 1993), "always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive" (Kislenko, 2002, p. 537). This approach has been proven reliable throughout a history of various powerful invasions, such as "nineteenth-century imperialism, twentieth-century neocolonialism, and twenty-first century globalisation" (Jackson, 2008, p. 154).

Consequently, Thailand's integration into the global capitalist market, can be considered a principal factor in shaping the country's economic and social structure (Jackson, 1999), leading to major development of commercial industries such as the sex and tourism industry (Suehiro & Wailerdsak, 2013). The widespread presence of sex tourism in Thailand is highly influenced by the country's liberal foreign policies, and its engagement with global capitalism. The interplay between Thailand's accommodation of mass-tourism, the historical high prevalence of sex workers, and the great demand for sexual services fueled by Western visitors makes it a popular destination among sex tourists. Although sex tourism undoubtedly contributes greatly to Thailand's economy, it is imperative to be aware of problematic dimensions within this industry. In order to avoid victimising sex workers, or criminalising

the industry as a whole, the discussion is approached from a sex-positive perspective that aims to centre women's informed choice, agency, and empowerment, and gives space to their voices.

Thailand's engagement with global capitalism, globalisation, mass media, and the international tourism industry creates a continuous cycle, perpetually influencing and reshaping various facets of society, notably the sex industry. The pursuit of financial gain is frequently overshadowing concerns about behaviour and ethics in the considerations of individuals working in the sex and entertainment industry (Arnulf et al., 2020). The commodification of the body might be inherent to prostitution, but in present-day Thailand it has led to the tolerance of any behaviour, corruption, and many problematic attitudes (Servaes & Malikhao, 2017). Due to digitalisation and rising levels of inter-connectivity, the industry has undergone profound changes (Hung, 2024). Commercial and non-commercial intimacy are no longer limited to the physical sphere, but are increasingly accessible through digital infrastructures (Shimshak, 2020). As digitalisation continues to reshape societies globally in all its facets, its influence extends beyond virtual boundaries.

Post-modernity and the Emergence of Digital Landscapes

Moving forward, Thailand's increasing capitalisation and digitalisation has led to shifting attitudes and values. Collier (2018) argues that negative attitudes towards the current capitalist system reflects a loss of trust and support, with many perceiving it as unjust and failing to provide a sense of overall meaning in life. The rise of digitalisation and technologization marks a considerable shift in public values and culture (Stenvall et al., 2021). Due to a constant stream of information that is globally accessible regardless of location, digitalisation is argued to be a central force in reshaping societies, including that of Thailand. Users of digital infrastructures such as social media platforms, forums, and dating applications are continuously exposed to a wide array of information, individuals, perceptions, voices, and opinions originating from all kinds of sources. The impact of this exposure extends beyond mere interconnectivity, and hugely influences the ethics, values, fantasies, and worldviews of both locals and tourists as they navigate through virtual spaces (Chayko, 2014). The accessibility of diverse and global perspectives and experiences results in the reevaluation of traditional norms and societal values, challenging established perceptions of dating and intimacy. This phenomenon is strongly evident in the fieldwork, where online dating is described as significantly divergent from traditional methods. As one

participant highlighted, " [dating through dating apps] is quite different from the traditional, [...] because of [dating apps] the new generation has a different mindset". Through these means, digitalisation not only facilitates global interactions but also incites the reconsideration of love, romance, and intimacy. Moreover, dating applications diversify the locations, circumstances, and contexts in which intimate interactions occur. Digital platforms create new opportunities for locals and tourists to interact, facilitating connections in less commercialised areas in Thailand. Through the increased accessibility of intimate encounters, tourists are able to engage in sexual interactions with locals without the need for extensive knowledge of local areas or having to physically visit specific locations such as massage salons, bars, or clubs. Areas previously untouched by sex tourists now provide tourists and locals with opportunities for sexual interactions through the use of digital platforms.

In summary, the evolution of sexuality and transactional sex in Thailand is multifaceted and subject to a diverse set of influences. Understanding the cultural, religious, and historical contexts of sexuality, tourism, and transactional sex is essential in order to address the emerging and intersecting dynamics of these realms in a digitalised era. Transactional sex in Thai society, historically shaped by cultural practices, traditions, Buddhist notions, and later by global political, capitalist, and tourism dynamics, is now transformed by increasing digitalisation and the emergence of dating apps.

V. From Reveries to Realities: Local's Engagement with Tourists

"I am still in Thailand but it feels like exploring other countries just by talking to them. Like, I can be a tourist as well, in my own country."

This chapter illustrates the ethnographic journey undertaken into the intersections of dating applications, intimacy, and sexual interactions between locals and tourists in Thailand. Drawing upon personal experiences and encounters as a solo traveller in the region, firsthand accounts of the sights, sounds, and emotions that characterise the exploration of this topic are provided. Through personal narratives and reflective analysis, insights into the motivations, perceptions, and challenges faced by the individuals engaged in digital intimacy are set out in this chapter. Central to this exploration are the narratives of locals, whose experiences provide valuable insights into the lived realities of digital sex tourism, both commercial and noncommercial. This chapter analyses the experiences and perspectives of local individuals, particularly women, who engage with tourists through dating apps. Moreover, transactionality is a central point of analysis in this chapter; what motivates local women to engage with tourists on dating apps, and to what extent are these interactions transactional? It additionally aims to describe how digital platforms empower or disempower locals involved in sexual interactions with tourists. Finally, as described in the previous chapter, digitalisation has a significant impact on cultural dynamics, and the (re)negotiation of values, this chapter sets out to uncover the ways in which the use of dating applications impacts the construction of values and more broadly, a cultural identity.

The Lure of Digital Intimacy with Foreigners

With the popularisation of dating apps, social media platforms, and online forums, individuals seeking connections and intimacy are progressively depending on digital platforms to satisfy their desires (Koch & Miles, 2020). The digitalisation of love and desire has considerable implications for sex tourism dynamics, blurring the boundaries between the physical and the virtual, as well as the transactionality of encounters. The allure and motivations behind the interactions between Thai locals and tourists facilitated by dating applications are multifaceted and diverse. However, while in the field, the most prominent advantage of dating apps cited by local respondents was the possibility to expand social connections and the opportunity to broaden cultural and linguistic knowledge. For many locals, especially those with low exposure to foreigners, dating applications serve as a

gateway to interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. As one of the respondent's noted, "I don't approach tourists, definitely no, and I don't work in hospitality so I don't get to meet them". For her Tinder felt empowering as it broadened her opportunities to encounter tourists and encouraged her "to be more outgoing, [...] and have the urge to go out". Another respondent described dating applications to connect with tourists as being "helpful, it's the easy way to meet foreigners". The term "digital flyovers" coined by Cabañes and Collantes (2020) captures this phenomenon, where individuals seek out foreign intimate prospects who bring new experiences with regards to their cosmopolitan desires.

Digital Flyovers

Indeed, not only do dating applications provide the opportunity to enhance social connections, it also facilitates interactions with people from various countries. As one respondent articulated, app dating "opens a new world", thereby enriching their knowledge of different cultures and perspectives. Cabañes and Collantes (2020) conceptualise the phenomenon of digital, cross-cultural interactions in tourism contexts as digital flyovers:

> "that is, digital infrastructures borne out of dating apps and other mobile media that allow [women] to bypass what they think to be 'un-cosmopolitan' [...] men and to connect with foreign romantic prospects who share their own 'globalised' backgrounds and sensibilities" (p. 97)

Through the use of dating apps, these locals can transcend geographical restrictions, facilitating interactions that would otherwise be impossible to initiate. Several of the respondents expressed similar motivations associated with an internal desire to "explore", visit other countries, and "see the world". For instance, one respondent depicted:

> "meeting foreigners [...] frames the way that I see the world. [...] It's almost like going out and going to a new place, it's like taking something from them, taking a new experience."

This is illustrated in various sentiments of local respondents such as, "it feels like I get to explore as well, like actually I am still in Thailand but it feels like I can explore other countries by just talking to them", or "I get to explore more, and maybe I get to go to their countries", and "it opens your new world, especially if you are a local and don't have so

many foreigner friends". While the concept of "digital flyovers" (Cabañes & Collantes, 2020) highlights the ways in which digital infrastructures enable individuals, in particular women in Thailand, to connect with tourists in order to "explore" and transcend physical barriers, it also underscores underlying issues of unequal access to resources. Digital interactions might provide a sense of escapism and a virtual framework to explore other cultures, for individuals who may not have the opportunity to physically travel to other countries. On the one hand, this suggests that dating applications serve as an opportunity to foster cross-cultural experiences and interactions that would otherwise be unlikely. On the other hand, it is crucial to be aware of the discrepancy in terms of economic means and mobility, between locals and tourists. Thai individuals who lack the financial resources to travel abroad are forced to rely on dating applications as their primary access to interactions with individuals from other countries. On the contrary, foreigners who travel to Thailand are privileged both economically and in terms of mobility, inevitably creating power imbalances.

Moreover, the asymmetrical character of these interactions in some cases perpetuates a pattern of dependency, disappointment, or even exploitation. Several of the locals interviewed, showcased aspirations to go abroad by providing statements such as, "I've always wanted to go abroad and meet new people if I get the chance", or, "I maybe get to go to their countries". These local narratives emphasise that some individuals use these platforms not solely as a means to connect with foreigners but also as a potentiality to go abroad. In these cases, locals may feel compelled to prioritise the desires and interests of the tourist in hopes of realising their own travel aspirations. Underlying expectations of reciprocity, although unspoken, in these cases leads to emotional disruptions, feelings of exploitation, or disappointment if their hopes are not realised. Several of the respondents recounted feeling "heartbroken", "disposable", or "used" with regards to their interactions with tourists mediated by dating applications. Additionally, many local respondents attributed the discrepancy in expectations in the case of dating with tourists to a cultural barrier, "Thai culture influences a lot in dating apps, we need a serious thing, but tourists, they're very casual".

It is important to acknowledge that the locals engaging with tourists through dating applications have significantly diverging motivations, expectations, and approaches with regards to dating tourists. Some of the local respondents seemed to be accepting towards the short-term and "casual" nature of dating foreigners, arguing that dating applications are a suitable option as long as one is, "fine with things being very casual, going very fast, and getting sexual gratification". Nevertheless, the majority of locals conversed with, noted stark

differences between Thai dating behaviour and the dating behaviour of Westerners, as one respondent captured:

> "So the nature of Thai people, we don't have open relationships, like maybe it happens but it's not common. We mostly tend to be more serious, so we expect from dating apps to meet a person and get into a relationship, that's a cultural thing. But when we meet a tourist there, they're not committed or anything, so it's kinda like, it creates some problems when using it."

During the interviews, a cultural dissonance in terms of Thai dating norms was observed. According to several of the respondents, dating behaviour in Thailand is currently moving away from "traditional" and "serious" approaches, the main reason for the shift being that younger generations are increasingly amenable to "casual dating" and intimacy. These local observations are confirmed by the literature; influence of modernisation and shifting societal norms have a great impact on dating behaviour. Urbanisation, increased access to education, and exposure to globalised media are pivotal factors in reshaping traditional attitudes towards intimacy and relationships, particularly among new generations in Thailand (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). Moreover, societal and secular shifts towards higher levels of gender equality and women's empowerment contribute to changing attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy among Thai women (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). With improved access to education and employment opportunities, women are challenging traditional gender roles leading to delayed marriages, and higher rates of premarital sex.

Cultural Globalisation

Thus, changing societal norms and secular shifts lead to increased sexual freedoms and evolving attitudes for women (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). This generational shift is reflected in the fieldwork, one respondent, in her thirties, noted,

> "The new generation has a different mindset, about the sexual as well. My generation would probably prefer to get to know the people first, and see what's going on, but you know, the new generation they focus about just sex first [*sic*]".

This observation by a local respondent highlights a divergence between older and younger generations, specifically with regards to their attitudes towards intimacy and sexuality. While she describes how older generations might prioritise forming an emotional bond before engaging in sexual or intimate activities, the younger generation is argued to prioritise instantaneous sexual gratification. This shift aligns with the broader trend of increased sexual freedoms and evolving attitudes towards sexuality as mentioned in the literature. The phenomenon of "cultural globalisation" (Sakwit, 2020) plays a considerable role in reshaping Thai dating behaviour as several local respondents expressed admiration for the perceived liberty and open-mindedness of tourists throughout the interviews. The narrative of one respondent, in her mid-twenties and highly educated, illustrates this phenomenon. She recounted a date she had with a French woman met through Tinder:

> "We met each other, and we actually spent a time together over the night and we felt like this is a very deep connection. This is very nice".

Throughout the interview she seemed to romanticise the idea of having short-term, but intense experiences with tourists, praising the mindset of tourists as "living their life very full", and having "no plans, they left their life", seemingly inspired by convictions such as, "you don't have a full life without exploring". In the context of dating behaviour in Thailand, cultural globalisation is characterised by increased levels of acceptance towards casual sex and is additionally influenced by foreign cultures, imitation behaviour, and resistance towards traditional social controls and norms (Ounjit, 2018; Waratworawan et al., 2021; Yamarat, 2010).

While on the one hand idealising some aspects of foreign cultures, locals seemed to be critical of other aspects as well. For instance, the same local respondent romanticising the idea of short-term and intense interactions with tourists also critically remarked on cultural differences between Thai and Western dating norms. Her major concern in terms of dating tourists revolved around the contrast between the prioritisation of community and family in Thai culture versus the strong emphasis on independence and individuality in Western culture. She explains that in Thai culture the priority is placed on being with others, and taking care of eachother, whereas Westerners tend to emphasise individual responsibilities and freedoms. The contrast in cultural values was evident in her experiences with dating tourists,

> "Different people come from different countries and they have different personalities and characteristics. For example, I dated someone from Austria and she was very on her own compared to Asian people, who are always asking 'how you're doing, are you okay'. You tend to care for them, they are in Thailand and they're from another country so you get worried for them when you have feelings for them. [...] But she would just get annoyed so I felt like maybe it's just cultural differences, it just doesn't go well with Thai characteristics."

Despite these challenges, when questioned about the perceived impact of her interactions with tourists on her wellbeing, the local respondent seemed to emphasise the benefits of her interactions with foreigners; enhancing her worldviews, cultural knowledge, and personal growth. While acknowledging the value of these interactions with tourists, she also illustrated how navigating cultural differences can be challenging and painful,

> "I felt really bad at first because like, I always used to date locals and they really like how I was caring, but when it is about the tourists, I know that this is how they're raised. So, I'm kinda like, I just step back a little. But for me that's hard, I was so heartbroken. I was like 'oh no, I care for them', it felt so bad to step away from them even though you don't want to."

Another anecdote by a local respondent illustrates a similar dynamic of having difficulty navigating cultural barriers with regards to dating tourists. In this case, the respondent felt "dumped" by a tourist she was dating after finding out that the tourist had a partner back home and felt guilty about being intimate with someone else while travelling, "we got really good feelings and I was dumped right there. It's okay, I got over it, but the feelings are very mixed emotions [*sic*]". When questioned how she navigated these experiences, she explained,

> "When you get too attached, it's not good for your wellbeing. I get over it really easy because I have less expectations. When you experience a lot of that, you don't expect too much. You kinda prepare your feelings already and don't get too attached."

The respondent's experience of feeling "dumped" by the tourist who had a partner back home showcases the emotional turmoil that can arise from conflicting expectations. Through managing these expectations and guarding against emotional attachment, locals have found

ways to adapt to the dynamics of digital interactions with tourists. Additionally, when prompted with the question whether she internalises different cultural experiences, the respondent answered,

> "Yes, I get to learn from them, so when Thai people do things, sometimes I think like 'oh actually it is not good for them', so my culture changes. They're like, 'for Thai people this is not good' and I'm like 'oh okay for that culture it's not good', so it changed me. [*sic*]"

Through observing behaviours or attitudes of Thai people that are deemed unfavourable by individuals from other cultures, the respondent reflects on these observations and rethinks them in the context of cultural differences. She recognises that what may be appropriate in her own cultural context, may not necessarily be viewed the same way in another. This personal feature suggests a willingness to adapt to diverse cultural values, which should be evaluated with caution. The cultural hegemony of Western norms and values, which is prominently perpetuated through media, tourism, and globalisation, can contribute to the subalternisation of local cultures and identities (Mostafanezhad, 2013; Sakwit, 2020). Subalternity, as theorised by Spivak (2003) refers to the process of the social, political, and economical marginalisation of the 'Other' within global hierarchical structures. In the context of digital and physical interactions between locals and tourists, subalternity may manifest in various ways. As previously discussed, locals, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalised communities, may occupy subordinate positions relative to tourists, who often benefit from more privileged backgrounds. This power asymmetry has a large potential for exploitation, experiences of disposability, or disappointment on the part of the locals.

Hybrid Resistance

Moreover, as observed in several of the local narratives, some locals tend to conform to Western standards of behaviour, attractiveness, or values in their interactions with tourists, marginalising their own cultural practices and identities. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity (1994) assumes that cultural identities are not fixed or essential, but instead fluid and continuously shaped through processes of interaction and negotiation. In the context of this

study, hybridity seems evident in the interactions between locals and tourists facilitated by dating applications.

Locals in particular seem to navigate between multiple cultural frameworks and constantly renegotiate their identities in a globalised context. The personal narratives provided previously, emphasise how locals are confronted with Western cultural hegemony with regards to their dating experiences. They describe feelings of cultural dissonance and at times, frustration when encountering tourists, particularly with regards to the discrepancy between their local norms and values and the dating behaviour of Western tourists. As locals negotiate between different cultural paradigms and attempt to navigate conflicting cultural axes within their interactions, they seem to engage in both accommodation and resistance to foreign cultural norms. These acts of subversion and resistance manifest in diverse ways, selectively adopting and adapting elements of foreign cultures to suit their own purposes while simultaneously maintaining aspects of their Thai cultural identity. The constant balancing act between resistance against and subversion to Western hegemonic power structures becomes evident in an interview with a respondent,

> "I would match with foreigners because I've never met a person with this nationality before, so exotic. I would already have the expectation that going in, I would be the young, innocent, Thai girl, whatever. A lot of times I would act a little bit more innocent than I actually am, a little bit dumber almost."

When prompted to elaborate on their tendency to act innocent or dumb, they narrated:

> "Meeting foreigners is kinda like, maybe it's the fact that they're just passing through, they're just tourists. I feel like they would have more experience and my way of flirting, or one of the ways at least, is to act, like, really innocent. But it's not like serious flirting, I wouldn't do that with someone that I actually liked. I think it's more like, if I act really cute this person is gonna be like 'I'll buy you anything', and I feel that sense of validation. [...] I tend to do it with tourists more than with Thai people, because with tourists there's no chance of being in an actual relationship, it's more

> casual, and they're often richer. The cuter I am, the more they're gonna simp[7] for me."

The respondent's strategy of adopting an "innocent" or "cute" demeanour to obtain validation and economic advantages from tourists illustrates a nuanced renegotiation of power dynamics and economic incentives. During several interactions with locals, it appeared that some of the, predominantly high-educated and empowered, individuals among them had found innovative ways of challenging power inequalities. They seemed to be highly aware of existing privileges and power imbalances between locals and tourists and found ways to reclaim their agency and control by engaging in creative and covert means to extract economic and material resources from tourists.

One local referenced Madame Praiya, a Thai influencer active on several social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram. She encourages young Thai women to take advantage of Orientalist stereotypes and make income through extracting resources from "rich" tourists. During the fieldwork period, locals all over Thailand illustrated diverse ways in which dating apps were used in order to capitalise on tourists. For instance, a respondent from Chiang Mai, located in the rural North of Thailand, mentioned how several individuals in her social circles use dating apps in order to scam foreigners. She explained,

> "Basically, you just message them and talk about yourself and what you need, and sometimes make very sad stories to make people feel bad for you, and want to support you. After you get the money you disappear from that."

Both phenomena, one observed in Bangkok, the other in rural areas like Chiang Mai, underscore the ways in which locals challenge, and resist power inequalities. These narratives provided by locals emphasise the ways in which locals navigate the digital realm of dating applications to capitalise on opportunities presented by tourists, admittedly in varying degrees of ethical ambiguity and potential harm to both parties involved. In many popular destinations, characterised by mass-tourism, such as the southern islands of Koh Tao and Koh Phangang, as well as coastal cities like Phuket, alternative ways of using dating applications as a means to generate income were observed. In these regions, locals active on Tinder

[7] "The textbook definition of simp is a 'fool' or 'simpleton'. It's now commonly used to describe a weak and submissive person or someone who is overly attentive to the subject of their affection. Often, they put this person on a pedestal, bending over backward to impress them and ignoring their flaws." (Grindr, 2024)

utilised their dating profiles to promote various commodities and services, including the sale of marijuana or vaping products, and the supply of freelance diving instructions or sexual services.

The diversity of digital encounters facilitated by Tinder showcase the diversity in motivations for using these applications, some more genuine than others. Though, in some cases the interactions facilitated by dating applications might have a direct transactional or commercial nature, many of the respondents expressed a genuine desire for connection with foreigners rather than a financial motivation. Due to imbalances with regards to power, privilege, financial resources, and other factors the nature of the interactions has a potential to become slightly transactional, albeit often unspoken. However, some respondents showed high levels of awareness of these dynamics, illustrated in the following sentiment,

> "If I get paid for a date I definitely do it, like, to be paid to play the exotic Asian Oriental girl [...] why not. If he's, like, attractive and you have chemistry I would go on a date for free but if he's paying me, like, I don't see any shame in that. It's his choice to fetishize Asian women so why not get paid for it."

While this statement can be seen as a form of agency, in which an Asian woman asserts control over her own representation and uses it to her advantage, it also raises questions about to which extent this is empowerment versus reluctant agreement to objectification. While the respondent may feel empowered by capitalising on harmful stereotypes, it also reinforces Orientalist narratives that reduce Asian women to exoticed objects of desire. The sentiment indicates a dimension of resignation to the inevitability of being fetishised. The respondent showcases critical awareness of Orientalism, fetishisation of Asian women, and unequal power dynamics between locals and tourists, but rather than deconstructing these stereotypes, they exploit it. When reflecting on their statement and placing it in a larger global context, the participant, considering themselves a feminist, expresses disapproval of the fetishisation of the Orient. Moreover, they observed that within local-tourist interactions "in dating apps, there's already the role of stereotypical Oriental women [*sic*]", remarking that in their own subculture dating interactions are more "respectful".

Transactionality as a Continuum

While examining the use of dating applications by Thai locals and tourists, it becomes evident that the motivations and outcomes of these interactions vary along a spectrum of transactionality. Intimate interactions are inevitably shaped by power dynamics, and while there exist a diversity of motives for using dating applications, personal, material, and economic incentives inevitably shape the transactional nature of these encounters. In essence, the degree of transactionality in intimate relationships, ranging from purely transactional to deeply emotional, is influenced by a complex interplay of motivations. Within unequal relationships, intimate encounters are inherently transactional; sex itself is an exchange between two or more individuals.

As soon as disparities, in terms of power dynamics, socioeconomic status, and other factors, arise, intimate exchanges tend to move towards the more transactional side of the continuum. Moreover, in relationships where power imbalances, socioeconomic disparities, and other inequalities come into play, the transactional nature of sexual or intimate exchanges tend to be more pronounced. For instance, in situations where one partner holds significant power or resources over the other, sexual acts may be exchanged for material benefits or social status. This phenomenon is illustrated in the fieldwork, one local explained that dating foreigners elevated her own social status, “it’s like making [me] more superior than locals”. She further explained that dating foreigners through dating apps can positively influence her financial circumstances, “it helps [...], because when you’re dating a tourist, they buy you stuff”, explaining how dating, thus engaging in intimacy with “White expats” results in increased material benefits.

Furthermore, societal norms, cultural expectations, and gender dynamics further shape the transactional nature of sexual exchanges. In instances where traditional gender roles are prevalent, women may feel pressured to engage in sexual acts to secure financial support or social status, leading to a transactional dynamic in intimate relationships. During interviews examining the economics of dating, particularly regarding who covers expenses such as drinks and food, notable dissimilarities emerged between urban and rural respondents. In rural areas, a profound expectation was observed that men are mainly responsible for financing the date, expressed by one respondent as, “In Thailand, we think that man is above woman, so I think that man should take care of the course and show to be a gentleman” [*sic*]. This expectation, while more nuanced in urban settings, was in some cases still subtly

existent, which will be further elaborated on in the following section delving into rural-urban differences.

Continuing, the tradition of men having to cover finances in terms of dating contributes greatly to transactional dynamics in intimate relationships between men and women. Rooted in traditional gender roles, men are often perceived as dominant figures, while women are expected to adopt a submissive role. In this dynamic, men provide and pay, while women reciprocate by taking care of their partners, including fulfilling their sexual needs. These expectations, deriving from traditional gender roles, can lead to experiences of unsafety, showcased by one respondent recounting a date she had with a tourist,

> "I was with some guy from England, it was very bad, like I said I didn't want to go with him because it was late and I wanted to go home. Then he was saying he paid for my drink and I have to come with him for the night, he was very angry. I called my friend and she brought me home but I was very scared for him, and after that I deleted the app" [*sic*].

This traditional dynamic perpetuates the notion that women are obligated to provide sexual gratification in exchange for material provisions, thus reinforcing the idea that men 'take' sex while women are expected to 'give' their bodies. These expectations and experiences underline the power inequalities entrenched in intimate relationships, shaping the means through which transactionality intersects with intimacy in digital dating.

The Geographical Dispersion of Tradition and Modernity

Various distinctions with regards to attitudes towards intimacy were observed in respondents from rural areas versus those living in urban areas. Not only was it significantly easier to find respondents on dating apps in urban areas, their sexual behaviour tended to be more liberal than that of their rural counterparts as well. Rural participants showcased different motivations, perceptions, and behaviours with regards to dating apps and dating with tourists.

Both rural and urban respondents expressed difficulties in navigating cultural differences during their interactions with tourists. Urban locals who shared their motivations for using dating applications to connect with foreigners often showcased a sense of curiosity about foreign cultures, perspectives, and worldviews. For instance, one respondent recounted,

> "I just felt like, you know, why not date a tourist as well, because I've been dating locals in the past and I wanted to experience something else. Connect with tourists to see what they are, what are their perspectives, views. That's very significant different to dating locals. If you date locals the chance of getting into a relationship is very like, a lot, but if you date with tourists, getting to know them in a very short period of time, but then you felt like you have experienced something. It's something you cannot experience with locals, like, you know, getting to talk to people who are not from here, it's just a different level, different thing. [*sic*]"

This sentiment showcases a desire to explore and experience foreign spheres, perceptions, worldviews. The first and foremost motivation is experiencing these unfamiliarities, not finding a partner. Interestingly, language learning was not a considerable factor for urban respondents, with some even recounting providing assistance to tourists with language barriers during interactions, "I take them around and help them through the way if they have troubles with the language barrier". Given its status as a global metropolis, it comes as no surprise that Bangkok has an international ambiance, with a considerable number of its residents being proficient in English. This is showcased by one of the respondents, narrating,

> "I mean, I don't really have problems with speaking English. I speak English a lot with my friends in the ballroom culture[8]. We almost only speak English, some of them are Thai but we speak English anyway because it's fun. I am a bit more expressive in English, so I don't think there's a language barrier."

On the contrary, language learning appeared as a primary motivation for rural adolescents using dating applications. Many expressed strong aspirations to improve their English skills and viewed dating applications as a practical tool for language learning. Alternatively, rural respondents emphasised finding a long-term partner as another central reason for using dating applications. Moreover, conversations about intimacy and finding a partner revealed differing perspectives between rural and urban respondents. While urban respondents more often showcased acceptance, or in some cases a preference, for casual encounters and having "a

[8] "Ballroom culture, drag ball culture, the house-ballroom community, and similar terms describe an underground queer subculture, founded by black trans and queer folks, in which people "walk" (i.e., compete), perform, dance, lip-sync, and model in different categories, which are designed to simultaneously epitomise and satirise gender constructs, occupations, and social classes, while also offering an escape from reality." (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.)

good time", rural respondents emphasised the significance of long-term companionship and cultural expectations surrounding monogamy and sexual purity. They tended to see casual encounters as a disadvantage rather than an advantage of app dating,

> "I mean, the disadvantage is that it's almost a waste of time, it's already not serious right, it's already a casual thing. I don't really have sex with any strangers so I don't even get that. I don't even get the satisfaction of a one-night stand, because like, I just don't feel comfortable. [*sic*]"

The rural disapproval of casual dating seems to derive from the fact that rural adolescents drew more heavily from local and traditional values. Indeed, traditional perceptions with regards to gender roles, sexuality, and intimacy were more evident in the perceptions of rural locals, expressed by one respondent as,

> "For Thai culture [...], or tradition, we think that man is above woman. So I think that man should take care of the course and show to be a gentleman or like, show to be a leader. [*sic*]"

While discussing the financial aspects of dating, such as who should pay for drinks, food, transport, or activities, rural respondents expressed more homogeneous, rigid, and traditional perceptions such as,

> "Thai people are very traditional. Like in Thailand, man is like the head of the family. So if you go on a date with Thai men, he will pay for everything and he will pick you up and bring you home."

Though most rural respondents centred traditional norms in terms of dating behaviour, some also showed resistance with regards to these values, as showcased in the below interaction with a young man raised in a rural part of central Thailand, who was now working in a hostel in Pattaya. When questioned how his community generally perceives Thai adolescents using dating apps to meet tourists, he answered,

> "They think negative of someone on dating apps. Because it's culture, they say, have only one time, one girl and one men only. Not two girl, not two man, or many guy.

> Can only have one soulmate until you die, but it's stupid. We have to marry first and then stay together but after that if you don't like me what do we do? But if you stay together first and you're okay and then after we get married it's better. [...] In Thailand just sex is negative, is problem with culture. [*sic*]"

He appeared frustrated about strict and traditional dating norms and advocated for more liberal attitudes. These liberal attitudes were more profoundly present in urban locals, who seemed to be more influenced by global values such as "autonomous choice, romantic love, and international reputation" (McKenzie et al., 2021). However, as previously discussed, global and local values seem to have a complex interplay in urban locals, adapting and adopting aspects of various cultures while simultaneously maintaining aspects of their own culture as well. At times leading to contradicting perceptions and statements, for instance, while discussing the economics of dating, one respondent who drew heavily from cosmopolitan worldviews, advocating for more liberal gender roles, spoke, "sometimes, ladies have to pay for the men, so bad". While saying this, she lowered her voice, and gasped, conveying a strong disapproval of this situation, further elaborating that in Thai culture men are expected to pay, and making women pay is heavily frowned upon. Later in the interview she stated,

> "I just feel like there's no one that has to pay, [...] it's not about gender, it's about what you're feeling, you want to pay or you don't want to pay, or do you want to split. For me, it's not based on gender, but some people may think men are more dominant so they have to pay, some people might think that, but for me no."

Initially, the respondent seems to express disapproval of the situation in which women have to pay for men, her physical reaction while saying this, lowering her voice and gasping, conveys strong feelings about who is responsible for financing the date, in this case men. Later in the interview, she emphasises the importance of personal choice in financial matters. She rejects the idea that payment should be determined by gender, aligning more with a global trend of gender equality, and individual agency. The contradiction in her statements reflects a tension between societal norms and personal views, and while the respondent may have a progressive attitude towards dating, she is also influenced by cultural expectations. Similar contradictions in the examination of values and attitudes towards dating and intimacy were present in many of the urban respondents. These narratives reflect the ongoing

renegotiation of cultural values in urban contexts, where traditional norms coexist with globally emerging ideals of autonomy and equality. The formation of a cultural identity in urban environments, especially that of a rapidly globalising metropole such as Bangkok, is complex and subject to many foreign influences.

The Duality of Dating Applications: Opportunity (f)or Disappointment

While the Thai respondents were generally excited about the opportunities and advantages that interacting with tourists through the use of dating apps provided, there was a darker side to their living realities as well. Many recounted experiences of feeling "used", unsafe, or exploited by Western tourists. The main disadvantage of dating with tourists seemed to be the transient nature of the interactions.This is illustrated by various locals who express their disappointments with regards to dating tourists,

> "The disadvantage is that it's almost a waste of time. It's already not serious right, it's already a casual thing. [*sic*]"

The temporary nature of interactions with tourists through dating apps poses novel challenges for locals seeking out genuine connections. While tourists may view their digital encounters as part of "the local experience", some locals approach them with hopes of building meaningful relationships. Subsequently, many local respondents expressed feelings of disappointment and disposability, one of them remarking:

> "So I learned using the dating app: don't get your heart involved. Just get to explore and let's see how things go but don't expect too much. Most Thai people are very serious, I've seen many people get heartbroken because their date don't have the same intentions. [*sic*]"

The living realities illustrated by the local narratives highlight the discrepancy in intentions between locals and tourists, with the former often left feeling used or disposable when the latter fail to reciprocate their seriousness. However, locals showcased various ways to cope with the transient nature of dating tourists, some of them viewing these interactions as opportunities for personal enrichment rather than an emotional investment. For instance, one respondent recounted,

> "It's almost like going out and going to a new place. That's how I think about it—not to be too attached to them, but to take something from them, take some experience."

Others illustrated how they perceived their interactions with locals as an opportunity for novel or exotic experiences, stating,

> "If it's a French guy, I can tell other people, 'I went on a date with a French guy, so exotic.'"

This sentiment additionally showcases how exoticism can work both ways, and while exoticism is a complex phenomenon that can have various positive and negative implications, when handled ethically and respectfully, the allure of 'the exotic' can promote interest in and appreciation of diverse cultures. Evidently, while openness to, and interest in other cultures is beneficial, it is crucial to refrain from placing certain cultures or ethnicities above others. While discussing cultural differences and motivations for dating with tourists with one of the respondents, they narrated how within their social circle going on dates with Europeans "sounds like boasting", they explained,

> "Some of my friends are looking for hot White guys, so they're like, 'Oh my God, I slept with this hot White guy,' and it's almost like a badge of honour."

This statement emphasises the ways in which some locals perceive dating tourists from particular cultural or ethnic backgrounds as a status symbol or a form of social currency. While in some cases, dating an individual from a different cultural or ethnic background may be seen as openness to and interest in different cultural experiences, for others it may be motivated by aspirations to alleviate their own social status. Through the valorisation of Whiteness, tourists are perceived as exotic trophies or status symbols, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining the potential for genuine connection. Chapter seven further explores the underlying systematic axes of power, such as colourism, the valorisation of Whiteness, and coloniality that shape intimate interactions in the realm of tourism.

Conclusion

This chapter narrates the living realities of locals engaging with tourists on dating applications. It showcases that the circumstances, motivations, and characteristics of the locals engaged are diverse and while transactionality formed the common thread of the narrative, it should be portrayed as a continuum rather than a binary factor. The Orientalist depiction of Asian women as being sexually available and money-driven is inaccurate and reinforces harmful attitudes towards these individuals. While many Westerners have the privilege and resources to travel around the world, many individuals from less privileged backgrounds do not have these opportunities, creating an unequal dynamic in the interactions between those who can afford to travel and those who cannot. Dating applications provide new avenues for cross-cultural exploration, engagement, and interactions in ways that were previously nonexistent. Many of the locals are active on dating apps motivated by a variety of intentions; to improve language skills, enrich personal experiences, and meet individuals from other countries, which they often cannot visit themselves. When closer assessing these motivations, it becomes apparent that while some locals harbour hopes of eventually being able to travel themselves, their intentions are genuine and primarily come from a place of curiosity and sincere interest in other cultures. Additionally, the romantic or sexual nature of dating applications simultaneously serves as a gateway to connect with potential romantic partners.

This dual opportunity, cultural exchange and romantic prospects, leads to overlapping intentions among users. Historically, Orientalist narratives and Western media have framed Thai women as “gold diggers”, seeking out “rich, Western husbands”, with countless online blogs and YouTube videos on how to identify and avoid these women. While some locals may have economic motivations for engaging with tourists, a significant number do not. The interpretative phenomenological analysis of the living realities of dating app users reveal a broader range of motivations, challenging simplistic and essentialist stereotypes, emphasising the diversity and complexity of its local users. Cultural and situational differences frequently lead to asymmetrical intentions, leading to feelings of disappointment and disposability. Navigating through multicultural spaces can lead to confusion and frustration with regards to conflicting values and attitudes towards interpersonal dynamics. While many locals showcase high levels of adaptability to foreign cultural influences, their experiences illustrate that Thai attitudes towards dating, such as seriousness and a desire for deep emotional connection, at times clash with the more transient, casual, and sex-centred nature of tourists’ behaviour.

Moreover, the emergence of dating apps has greatly enhanced opportunities for locals to interact with tourists. Previously, these two groups had to physically visit specific locations to find each other, but digital platforms now make cross-cultural interactions accessible to everyone. It is important to recognise that stereotypes about locals seeking relationships with tourists are shaped by Orientalist, and sensational narratives perpetuated by Western media, often based on extremes found in sex tourism hotspots. In reality, the locals encountered on dating apps are far removed from these stereotypes, showcasing a much broader and much more nuanced range of motivations, behaviours, and experiences.

VI. A Digital Odyssey: Tales Behind the Tourist

This chapter serves to illustrate the expectations and interactions of desire through the tourists' gaze. Through the examination of personal accounts of tourists, this section delves into the motivations, behaviours, and perceptions of tourists who use dating applications to connect with locals in Thailand. This chapter seeks to examine how the desires of tourists are constructed, negotiated, and experienced in the intersecting realms of intimacy and tourism, increasingly facilitated by dating applications. Additionally, this chapter explores the ways in which tourists perceive themselves within the current conceptualisation of sex tourism. By exploring these dynamics through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on fields such as critical gender theory, post- and decolonial theory, and anthropology, the nature of desire and intimacy in the context of tourism, and how this is facilitated and impacted by digitalisation will be explored.

The emergence of digital technologies, particularly smartphones, has significantly impacted tourism by enhancing overall travel experiences, especially in terms of accessibility and manageability of information, transport, and accommodation at travel destinations (Dogliana, 2022). The development of smartphones has allowed tourists to access instant information and support, improving their engagement with destinations (Kadam & Sen, 2023) leading to increasing levels of dependency on mobile phones to manage activities, accommodations, transport, and social connections while travelling. While backpackers are generally not perceived as typical sex tourists, the emergence of digital platforms such as dating apps, facilitate intimate and sexual encounters between locals and tourists, blurring the overlapping fields of sex and tourism.

All of the tourists interviewed were backpackers travelling solo through Asia for extended periods of time, ranging from a few weeks to several years, none of them considered themself a sex tourist, even though the large majority of the male respondents questioned had engaged in sex with locals on various occasions. In order to conceptualise and examine the intersecting dynamics of power, intimacy, and tourism in the present-day landscape of increasing connectivity and digitality, it is essential to reconsider traditional definitions and scopes of sex tourism. Sex tourism is typically associated with individuals travelling to specific destinations with the sole intention of engaging in sexual activities with local sex workers (Miller, 2012). However, the emergence and rapid development of digital landscapes, particularly dating applications, have obscured the lines between sex tourism and other forms of travel-based intimate encounters.

One critical feature of the current conceptualisation of sex tourism is the level of intentionality in terms of seeking out encounters. Currently, sex tourists are characterised by their premeditated desire to seek sexual gratification in the form of paid encounters with sex workers (Oppermann, 1999). However, due to the emergence of dating applications and other forms of technology-mediated communication, the intention to engage in sexual encounters with locals while travelling may not always be explicit or premeditated. While interviewing tourists using dating apps, the large majority of respondents firmly stated that sex was not among their primary objectives to travel. Rather, many of the tourists seemed to experience sexual encounters in opportunistic ways, or as a result of meeting, according to them, "readily available" individuals during their travels.

The large majority of tourist respondents expressed feeling "more extravert" and "more open" while travelling. The sense of freedom, liberation, and self-reflection while travelling described by the majority of tourists interacted with, is a widely observed phenomenon in tourism research (Bloom & Goodnow, 2013; Caruana & Crane, 2010). The sense of liberation, mobility, and anonymity that travelling provides contributes to tourists' openness to meeting new people and engaging in diverse social encounters while moving around. While tourism offers unique forms of freedom, it is crucial to understand the various constraining and commodifying dynamics it produces.

The Conceptualisation of Sex Tourism by Tourists

Caruana and Crane (2010) analyse constructions of freedom in three main types of tourism; hedonistic tourism, independent tourism, and responsible tourism. Hedonistic tourism refers to a type of tourists that prioritise the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence, mainly partaking in activities such as partying, consuming alcohol or drugs, and engaging in various forms of organised entertainment and leisure. This type of tourism often exacerbates and reinforces existing power imbalances between tourists and local communities. Tourists come from more privileged backgrounds, and have disposable income to spend on leisure and desire, wielding significant economic power over locals depending on tourism for their livelihood. This dependence often leads to local economies being shaped and controlled by the demands and desires of tourists (Lacher & Nepal, 2010). Through the commodification of freedom in the tourism industry, local communities may become invisible and excluded from the construction of freedom. The differentiation between the local community and other travellers was highly evident in the conversations with tourists. When describing their

intentions, expectations, and experiences, in terms of dating app usage in Thailand, a division between local women and female travellers engaged with on dating apps was revealed. For instance, one respondent explained,

> "So it [is] different obviously, some other travellers I met I've travelled with a bit afterwards, most locals were just hookups."

The difference this respondent makes between other travellers who he might travel with afterwards, or locals who he reduced to casual hookups. The difference suggests colonial attitudes with regards to locals, who were perceived as "just hookups", disposable subjects merely intended for sexual gratification, whereas other travellers were recognised as equals that could potentially become travel companions.

Some tourists conversed with seemed to be highly aware of their freedom, power, and privilege while others did not express any awareness with regards to the disparities relative to locals. For instance, one tourist active on dating applications expressed he was open to dating other travellers, but not to dating Thai locals. He explained that the language and culture barriers were too significant for him, and that he does not want to feel like "some pathetic sex tourist exploiting Thai girls", remarking that the economic disparities between Westerners and Thai locals produced unequal power dynamics. He further elaborated, "I feel like the Thai girls on these apps hope for a better life in the West and I don't want to date them under false pretences".

Though the sentiment expressed by the respondent underscores an awareness of power dynamics and potential exploitation involved in cross-cultural intimacy, his reluctance to engage in romantic relationships with Thai locals also highlights a somewhat simplistic understanding of the socioeconomic disparities that can influence such interactions. It is crucial to approach the analysis of local-tourist interactions in a nuanced way that neither victimises or essentialises all locals or tourists, as exploited or "pathetic sex tourists". While economic disparities and power imbalances are real and highly present, they do not uniformly dictate the motivations or agency of all individuals involved.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, many Thai women navigate their social and intimate lives with autonomy, agency, and a diversity of intentions and circumstances that go way beyond mere economic or material gain. Moreover, strictly refraining from dating locals due to not wanting to give them "false pretences", though reflecting an awareness of potential

ethical issues, suggests a somewhat paternalistic assumption that all cross-cultural encounters are inherently exploitative.

In order to create an atmosphere in which intimate relationships between Western tourists and Thai locals are based on mutual respect, interest, and affection it is crucial to consider ethical implications when engaging in interactions shaped by power dynamics. Indeed, by seeking out to ensure honest and equitable intentions, relationships based on similar interests, intentions, and mutual respect can be fostered, instead of one based on transactional or exploitive motives. Dating applications offer a space for interactions between individuals, eliminating physical and cultural boundaries, potentially even equalising some aspects of power dynamics in providing both locals and tourists with a degree of choice and agency over their interactions, though not erasing other disparities such as socio-economic, gendered, and racial ones.

On the other side of the continuum were tourists that felt empowered using dating apps while travelling. One respondent spoke, “I think that the use of dating apps empowers you while travelling. As a White man you are seen as rich and a beauty standard in most Asian countries. This does translate in a lot of matches and an abundance of choice”, emphasising increased opportunities and choice due to racial privileges. This self-described experience of empowerment, highlights the ways in which racialised dynamics influence power and privilege, enhancing the social and sexual capital of White tourists, further examined in the next chapter.

Many of the respondents expressed having no pre-planned sexual expectations when travelling to Thailand, most of them already used dating applications in their home countries and still had the app installed when arriving. One respondent recounted, “I was bored and I thought fuck it, I’m downloading Tinder and see what happens. You get a lot of matches like almost instantly, a lot of Thai locals”, suggesting dating app usage as an incidental or secondary aspect of their overall travel experience. Not surprisingly, the individuals engaged in these types of digitally mediated sexual encounters do not identify themselves as sex tourists, even when they do seek and obtain sexual gratification from locals, and in some cases also pay for it.

A 29-year-old French backpacker, travelling through South-East Asia for over a year, provides a telling anecdote illustrating this phenomenon. He is very open about his experiences with transactional sex, frequently purchasing sexual services at massage salons, in the form of massages with happy endings. Despite repeatedly visiting these kinds of establishments for paid sex, he does not consider himself a sex tourist. When prompted to

define a sex tourist, he sketches the image of "people who go to Thailand for two weeks to party and have sex". He says he feels different, emphasising that he travels first and foremost and simultaneously makes use "of a system that's already in place". He explains, "if the establishments weren't there, I wouldn't go look for them. I never go to places specifically for sex.". The backpacker's narrative showcases how the normalisation and availability of sexual services in Thailand cultivate an atmosphere in which such transactions are seen as a byproduct of travel rather than the main purpose. This disconnection from the traditional image of sex tourism allows individuals to rationalise their behaviour as part of their broader travel experiences, rather than categorising themselves within the stigmatised label of a 'sex tourist'. Moreover, the lenient attitudes towards transactional sex by tourists such as the French backpacker, illustrate a grey area in which sexual encounters are neither the primary motive for travel, nor entirely unintentional.

Transactionality

While the majority of respondents did not directly pay for sexual encounters with locals, when examining their experiences more closely, many of the interactions seemed to have a transactional nature, though varying in degree. While exploring the scope of sex tourism, two main aspects seem to characterise the definition of sex tourism; transactionality and intentionality.

Oppermann (1999) argues that the scope of sex tourism extends beyond conventional understandings of prostitution, and encompasses more than mere financial transactions. Instead of direct monetary exchanges, the 'sex seeker' may for instance offer accommodation, clothing, gifts, or travel to the 'sex provider'. When discussing the economic and transactional aspects of dates between locals and tourists, many of the tourists declared that they financed the majority of the expenses, such as one respondent narrating,

> "I feel like even though I am travelling around on a budget I still have much more money to spend. I would always pay for the drinks and food, sometimes also for the room, most of the time I take a double room so if I already have it booked they can just join for the night."

This scenario does not neatly fit into the definition of sex tourism, which typically involves a monetary or material exchange for sexual services. Even though this would not be considered a form of prostitution or sex tourism, the situation in which men cover the expenses of the

date is indicative of unequal economic dynamics, potentially leading to exploitation. As discussed in the previous chapter, traditional gender roles position men as ‘providers’ who pay for the date, potentially leading to women feeling pressured to engage in sexual activities as a way to reciprocate, or men expecting sexual access in exchange for their expenses. The case of a local respondent that recounted how a tourist had paid for her drinks and expected her to stay the night with him in return, cited in the previous chapter, showcases these problematic dynamics. In this situation, the tourist’s primary motivation for covering the expenses was to gain sexual access to the local respondent, which can be seen as a form of transactional behaviour, bordering on sex tourism. In other words, if a financial transaction is explicitly linked to sexual services or if there is a pattern of tourists exploiting local individuals for sexual purposes, it could be considered sex tourism. However, if expenses of dates are covered based on altruistic reasons, or mutual consent, as illustrated by various other tourist respondents, it may not meet the criteria for sex tourism.

Intentionality

Ultimately, the level of transactionality is interconnected with the intentions and motivations underlying the interaction, which is where the second aspect, intentionality, comes into play. The phenomenon of tourists travelling to a specific destination with the explicit intention of engaging in transactional sex with locals is a defining characteristic of sex tourism. Intentionality thus distinguishes sex tourism from more incidental sexual interactions that may occur while travelling. When questioned what mainly made respondents use dating applications in Thailand, one respondent answered,

> "I used Tinder back home, so I just kept using it here. I didn’t really think about it much."

Most respondents participating in this study, except for two individuals, seemed to engage in sexual interactions with locals in a more incidental way, most frequently as a continuation of their pre-existing use of dating applications rather than a deliberate plan formed before arriving in Thailand. The tourist respondents described their use of dating apps as an accustomed activity that they continued while abroad, without specific focus on exploiting local sexual services. The respondents that displayed less incidental behaviour, expressed preconceived, Orientalist notions about Asian women being “very eager” and expressed curiosity about this phenomenon before travelling to Thailand. In these cases, sexual

interactions with locals were secondary aspects of their travel experience, suggesting that their behaviours do not neatly fit into the traditional conceptualisation of sex tourism, which revolves around seeking transactional sex as a primary intent to travel. This notion of sex as a secondary aspect of travel experience, challenges the traditional conceptualisation of a sex tourist, suggesting a spectrum of intentionality rather than a binary classification.

When prompting tourist respondents to describe sex tourism, many constructed a stereotypical, highly negative image, using descriptors such as “old”, “dirty”, “pathetic”, and “fat” to characterise sex tourists. These descriptions reflect the significant stigma attached to individuals perceived as engaging in sex tourism. For example, one respondent stated,

> “Sex tourism is when you have weirdo’s who go to Pattaya, they go to Phuket, they have exceptionally young girls on their lap, they’re normally English, German, or Russian. They try to find a very young girl, pay her money, and the parents sometimes allow it because they need the money, and they relax the laws now. It’s the only way some of these families can get money, it's horrible, it exists because they let it happen in a sense, it’s still horrible.”

This highly negative presentation is further reinforced by another respondent who remarked,

> “I would say they’re all old, they prefer the young aspect about it, which is creepy as fuck. They want small girls.”

These depictions illustrate the implications of transactionality and intentionality in sexual interactions and how they are perceived. Additionally, a notable factor in the stigmatisation of sex tourism is the age disparity between the sex seeker and sex provider. Respondents frequently highlighted the phenomenon of older men seeking much younger local “girls”, as illustrated by one respondent,

> “I think traditional sex tourism is more focused on older men that just want sex every day for a few weeks a year.”

Not surprisingly, larger age gaps are more likely to be associated with exploitative dynamics. One of the local participants, occupied as a sex worker herself, remarked, “[Men] all want very young girl, who look like child [sic]”. Sex tourism is frequently associated with

unethical practices such as paedophilia, sex trafficking, and exploitation. Many of the tourists argue that dating applications offer more ethical alternatives to traditional sex work, which is often perceived with considerable disapproval. Not only are dating apps less associated with exploitation, they are also perceived as less transactional. One tourist remarked how,

> "Some girls latched after by some fat tourists down in Phuket, you know, she's probably like 'He's got a lot of money just do it'. But on Tinder, yes, you're rich anyway so you get a lot of women, but the age is definitely older",

While acknowledging that digitally mediated encounters still involve a transactional element, illustrated by the observation that being rich leads to "[getting] a lot of women", he argues that the age gap is significantly smaller, as women on Tinder are "definitely older". Additionally, the same respondent later on in the interview states,

> "I come out with a lot of money, like Westerners have a lot of money compared to locals so if we're having food and it's not that much to me, I just say like, 'Fuck it, I'll pay for it', you know because it's so cheap out here. I feel like she doesn't need to spend her money when I have a lot back home."

This sentiment illustrates the normalisation of financing the expenses in these interactions without recognising it as a form of transactional exchange. The same inherent power dynamics are present in both sex tourism and digitally mediated encounters, emphasising the necessity for a nuanced approach with regards to defining sex tourism. Exploring the spectrum of transactionality and intentionality unveils that stigmatisation intensifies with greater intentionality and explicit transactions. Vice versa, less intentional and transactional interactions are perceived more lenient, despite the fact that on the less intentional and transactional end, the same underlying power dynamics and inequalities influence these interactions.

The absence of cognizance does not appear to be rooted in deliberate maliciousness but rather, many tourists, with whom interviews were conducted, expressed a perception of Thai locals as equal in terms of privilege while simultaneously exhibiting a reluctance to acknowledge their own privileged status. This phenomenon underlines a broader issue within the tourism industry, where tourists may negligently perpetuate power imbalances due to a

limited understanding of socioeconomic or political complexities inherent to the areas they visit.

Motivations and Expectations

The expectations, perceptions, and motivations underlying the usage of dating apps by tourists were diverse and multifaceted. Throughout conversations with tourists, two main reasons for engaging with locals on dating applications seemed to emerge; cultural immersion and sexual gratification. Various tourists expressed a genuine interest in the local community and culture, perceiving dating applications as the most accessible way to interact with local individuals. Dating applications provided an opportunity to get access to the local way of living, discover lesser known places, and get recommendations, or as one respondent articulated,

> "I thought it might be a nice way to dive into their culture and get a unique experience. I also like asking locals for advice on their city."

Other tourists expressed similar sentiments, expressing the value of interacting with locals to enhance their travel experiences,

> "She has shown me parts that I've never seen on my own, like backend spots, really good food places, like that. You see it through their perspective, like a local experience."

Moreover, the locals encountered on dating apps were generally labelled as "more interesting", "more eager to meet", and "a lot easier" when compared to users in their own countries. All respondents seemed to be aware to a certain extent of the different intentions with regards to dating app usage between locals and tourists, observed by one respondent as,

> "Different kinds of objectives so to speak cus what they want from it, you have to kind of figure out, because obviously I'm travelling around not looking for, like, a relationship, […] it's just hookups, just casual."

With regards to motivations for being on dating apps, he perceives a discrepancy in objectives between local women, and what they are searching for on Tinder, or himself, "obviously travelling around not looking for a relationship". For these individuals, the transactional or short-term nature of their encounters may limit the depth of the connection, leading to a perception that their interactions lack genuine contact or cultural immersion. Parry et al., (2023) provide a critical lens on this issue, suggesting that digitally mediated interactions may negligently reinforce cultural hegemony rather than challenging normative ideals.

They argue that the pursuit of romantic or sexual connections through dating applications perpetuate existing cultural norms and reinforce dominant narratives, rather than subverting them. This is confirmed in the interviews conducted, a significant part of the local participants expressed an openness to Western values and worldviews, whereas none of the tourist participants recounted adopting any Thai values. Moreover, tourists, "not looking for a relationship", frequently approach their interactions with locals through dating apps with a mindset shaped by their own cultural norms and expectations, due to the casual nature of their expectations. This approach often prioritises physical attraction and immediate gratification over cultural exchange or personal interest. As a result, these interactions have a high potential to become superficial and transactional, only serving short-term needs and instant gratification.

While cultural immersion may be a primary reason for some tourists, others seemed to gravitate more towards the sexual aspect that dating applications provide. Though both motivations can be present simultaneously, one respondent expressed,

> "Well I think it's not like a connection with the local culture when you're just shagging Thai girls, [...] I don't think it's impacting [my travel experience] much if any at all."

By framing his encounters with locals as "shagging Thai girls", the tourist reduces local women to mere objects of sexual desire, reinforcing sexist and Orientalist attitudes towards local communities. The tourist's assertion that these encounters do not significantly impact his travel experience reflects a sense of entitlement to the bodies of local women, treating them as disposable objects of desire rather than equals in a sexual exchange. Furtheron in the interview, the same respondent compares his dating app experiences at home with his experiences in Thailand, arguing that women in England are more boring, prudish, and not

open to “one night stands”. He narrates how the women he encountered in Thailand were more assertive and sexual, observing that “Thai locals are a lot easier”. Urry (1992) conceptualises this mechanism through which tourists commodify and consume the local culture and people through a lens of exotisation and Othering as the ‘tourist gaze’. This consumptive gaze is illustrated by a respondent describing his dating app behaviour as,

> “I was just sat in bed swiping pretty liberally like, ‘Fuck it, haha’, maximise it while I’m here.”

By perceiving his potential ‘matches’ as something to “maximise”, the respondent showcases the detached and consumerist attitude towards local individuals which forms the essence of the tourist gaze. In this context, the tourist gaze serves to reinforce existing global hierarchies of power and privilege, positioning the tourist as the dominant principal who controls and defines the narrative of the encounter. Subsequently, local women are relegated to the role of readily available objects of desire. While dating apps enhance social connections and provide new opportunities for cultural immersion to both tourists and locals, the boundaries between genuine exploration, personal indulgence, and sexual gratification are getting increasingly blurred.

Moreover, Asian women are frequently objectified and stereotyped, exemplified by one respondent, saying,

> “Asian women have better manners than most Western women I know, they just seem more happy to be with you”

This statement highlights the Orientalist stereotype of Asian women as being more accommodating, submissive, and sexually available, which will be further elaborated upon in chapter seven. While on the one hand Asian women are being framed and stereotyped as more desirable in terms of sexual behaviour, submissiveness, and sensuality, when inquiring about the nature of their dating app encounters, all of the tourists interviewed described them as temporary or casual relationships, “just for fun”. This dynamic makes a stark difference with the expectations and hopes described by the local respondents, who were often seeking genuine connections and described feelings of disappointment and disposability when confronted with the casual attitude of tourists. Western tourists seem to be socialised with the idea of Thai women being overtly willing, assuming that all women found on dating

applications are interested in casual sex and short-term intimacy. Several respondents described observations of Thai women as being highly available, one respondent described,

> "My Tinder went really hard in Thailand. In the Netherlands I only had a few matches or likes a day. In Thailand I got like 99+ likes in one night, of which many, many women approached me to get a date. In the Netherlands that never happens. "

When asked to explain why Thai locals are so overly willing to date tourists the respondent answered,

> "I think they all secretly hope that White tourists come back for them, even if they say they don't. [...] I think that many women are looking for a rich husband, one that is richer than Thai men, to care for their family. [*sic*]"

The narrative that this tourist is constructing is drawing from typical Orientalist tropes; the perception that Thai women are overly willing to engage in intimate relationships with Western men, strengthened by his belief that many of these women harbour secret hopes of securing a better life through marriage to a wealthy foreigner. Thai women are stereotypically portrayed as money-driven, deceitful, and the main caregiver of "their family". As the previous chapter of this thesis has already demonstrated, the motivations, circumstances, and experiences of Thai women are far more complex and diverse. Coming from various socioeconomic backgrounds, many of these women are seeking out cultural exchanges and personal enrichment, rather than "rich husbands". While financial considerations and social capital may play a role in these interactions, the simplistic and essentialist notion that all Thai women are looking for "rich husbands" does not capture the essence of why local women engage with tourists on dating applications. Additionally, due to cultural differences, several of the locals interviewed described a preference for serious relationships rather than short, casual intimate interactions. In failing to acknowledge the diverse and unique intentions and experiences of these women, the opportunity for genuine, respectful relationships is overlooked. In order to de-marginalise Thai women it is crucial to acknowledge and respect their agency, rather than reducing them to passive recipients of Western altruism.

Moreover, further into the interview the same respondent argued,

> "I heard from various sources that many Thai boys undergo gender transition to work in the sex industry, red-light districts or bars where women can be hired for sex, to earn a lot of money. Many parents also certainly encourage their children to work in these bars to earn money."

This statement highlights several misconceptions and problematic views that were encountered in many of the conversations with tourists. The respondent's observation that Thai 'boys' transition to female gender roles in order to work in the sex industry significantly undermines and invalidates their gender reality and commodifies transgender bodies. By suggesting that gender transition is primarily economically motivated, he simplifies complex socio-cultural dynamics into a singular narrative of financial motive, aligning with sensational, Orientalist tropes often perpetuated by Western media and tourists. With a quick Google-search on the term 'ladyboy', a term frequently used by tourists to describe Thai transgender women, all kinds of transphobic search-results appear, such as "Oi, oi, be aware of the kathoey[9]!", " How do you recognise the difference between a lady or a ladyboy", and countless other sensationalising websites, YouTube videos, and newspaper articles. The respondent's statement highlights underlying transphobic attitudes and a lack of understanding about transgender individuals and their motivations for transitioning. The assumption that transition is undertaken solely for financial gain invalidates transgender identities, suggesting that their experiences are not legitimate or authentic, but rather a career choice. Additionally, these assumptions potentially lead to harmful narratives that transgender people are deceitful, money-driven, and exploit their identities for personal gain. This dehumanises transgender identities and reinforces discriminatory attitudes and practices against them. While Thailand is renown for its relatively visible transgender community, these complex gender identities are part of a long-standing cultural context and should not be simplistically connected to economic activities or sex work. Finally, while poverty is an issue in Thailand, which may push some individuals towards transactional sex practices, it is inaccurate to suggest that parents broadly endorse gender transition and sex work on their children, rather the opposite could be argued, as sex work is still greatly stigmatised in Thai society.

[9] Kathoey is a Thai word that refers to people with male bodies who are transgendered (male to female), and is additionally used to effeminate gay men. Attitudes in Thai culture toward kathoey are complex and dependent on a range of social factors. Historically, it appears that kathoey occupied a spiritual role in Thai society. (Matzner & Costa, 2015)

Commercial Sex and Dating Apps

Dating applications offer new ways for locals and tourists to engage in transactional sex, whereas previously tourists had to physically visit establishments for commercial sex, nowadays many individuals offer their sexual services on dating platforms. During the fieldwork period, these individuals, offering sex on dating applications, were omnipresent. Various of the tourists interviewed reported encountering these profiles, one expressing,

> "Quite a few matches seem too good to be true, a lot ask for sex within a few chats. Most of the time I unmatched or ignored those."

However, not all tourists avoided these encounters, several narrated how they engaged with profiles that suggested commercial transactions, mainly through the participation in the creation of pornographic content for the OnlyFans[10] accounts of locals. This form of sexual interaction underlines a shift in how commercial sex is practised and negotiated in the digital age. One respondent shared their view on this phenomenon, saying,

> "I think you can mainly see it by how people are dressed, like, some have pictures in lingerie and stuff. So, you also know, like, a couple of them would send you their OnlyFans and things like that afterwards as well. [...] I definitely met some people that would say 'hey tourist come over'. They would use a messenger app for it, I think it's called Lime, and then they'd send me photos, send me a link to OnlyFans or something, ask if I would wanna make some content. Why not? Win-win. I think their OnlyFans is controlled by them instead of a prostitute where it would be a pimp or something. I would never use it for prostitution or whatever."

This anecdote showcases how commercial sex is facilitated by various digital platforms. Unlike traditional sex work, which often involves the intervention of exploitive pimps or brothels, platforms like OnlyFans empower sex workers to have direct control and agency over their content and earnings. While the shift to digital platforms like dating applications, and OnlyFans offers various benefits, it also raises ethical and moral considerations about power dynamics. The interactions between tourists and locals are still influenced by broader

[10] OnlyFans is a digital subscription platform on which primarily sex workers produce pornographical content for their subscribers.

socio-economic disparities. While some tourists do not view commercial sex facilitated by digital platforms as oppressive, others acknowledge its potentiality for coercion and control. As one tourist stated, “I think a lot of them can be pushed by their boyfriends, like some of them would allow them to date with farang, tourists, to bring money back home at the end of the day”.

Moreover, various contradicting perceptions towards commercial sex were provided by the respondents. When both of the respondents that had engaged in the creation of OnlyFans content were presented with the question whether they would purchase sexual services of a prostitute, both respondents expressed disapproval of purchasing sex. One participant reacted with horror, stating that he “would never exploit women in these positions”, while simultaneously not perceiving any moral concerns in participating in the creation of pornographic content for a Thai woman’s OnlyFans account, arguing that the creation of pornographic content is not a form of commercial sex. When invited to reflect on his different attitudes towards various forms of transactional sex, he argued that pornography entails a “more professional set-up” and the sexual interactions are “exclusively between actors, they have health-checks, directors, [...] I would say that’s definitely different”. Different forms of transactional sex provide various circumstances and contexts, ranging from fully consensual to highly exploitative, and while adults occupied in the porn industry may have made informed choices, the pornographic industry as a whole poses considerable challenges.

Saunders (2020) highlights that pornography and erotica have become intrinsically linked to digital networks, playing a central role in the attentional and informational economies of digital capitalism (pp. 1-5). The intersection between the commercialisation of the female body and the perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes within pornography is highly evident in the categorisation and labelling of porn performers based on ethnicity and gender (pp. 70-72), such as “ebony”, “Asian”, “interracial”, “MILF”, “lolita” (Chude-Sokei et al., 2016; Hald & Štulhofer, 2015; J. G. Smith & Luykx, 2017). Misogynistic and racialised language used to commodify and objectify women, particularly those of non-White ethnicities is exemplified in titles such as “18 yo Bangkok slut” and “three Asian bimbos fucked on a bus” (Saunders, 2020, p. 72). Pornography is a highly patriarchal industry, influenced by Orientalist, racist, and sexist stereotypes that perpetuate harmful narratives about women’s sexuality. Female and non-White bodies are materialised “as both divergent and controllable, while the male body is implicitly established as the norm which does not require classification” (p. 72). Consequently, the digital porn industry fuels fantasies with

orientalist tropes that negatively influence the living experiences of individuals that are perceived as sex providers (Chow-White, 2006).

Conclusion

All with all, this chapter illustrated the dynamics of desire and intimacy as narrated through the tourists' gaze. The motivations, behaviours, and perceptions of tourists using dating applications to engage with Thai women reveal a complex landscape in which the traditional confines of sex tourism are blurred. The emergence of dating applications has significantly transformed the ways in which tourists interact with locals, frequently leading to encounters that are opportunistic and complicated by the sense of freedom, anonymity, and consumerism associated with tourism.

A disparity in terms of nuance between the narrative of locals and tourists arises due to the relatively homogenous nature of the tourists' statements, often lacking the depth and diversity observed in the narratives provided by local participants. Moreover, some of the tourists provided problematic and shocking remarks, revealing attitudes that were challenging to emphasise with. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all tourists have these problematic attitudes, some of them expressing a more genuine desire for cultural interactions. These tourists expressed a motivation to engage with local culture beyond sexual encounters, though power imbalances inherent to their interactions complicated these intentions. Moreover, when assessing the ways in which tourists conceptualise sex tourism, many tourists active on dating apps, including those engaging in typical sex tourism practices, do not consider themselves sex tourists and morally reject sex tourism practices. When reflecting on their perceptions, they seem to be unaware or ignorant of the inherent power dynamics involved in their interactions.

At the end of the day, all tourists participating in the research seemed to support equal and consensual engagement with locals, revealing that the commodification, exploitation, and objectification of local women stems from broader oppressive, and colonial systems rather than personal immorality. This suggests that the way to more equitable interactions lies in creating broader societal awareness. Western tourists are currently socialised with the idea that the cultures and communities at their travel destination are consumable and serve their travel experience. This is caused by Orientalist, patriarchal, and colonial frames of thought, leading to the commodification and exploitation of local individuals. Overall, while dating applications create new opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, they also perpetuate

persistent issues of power inequality and oppression, emphasising the cruciality of awareness among the individuals involved.

VII. Weaving Threads of Power: The World Wide Web of Digital Sex

> "*Despite evidence that kathoeys are creative agents capable of manipulating tourists in artful ways, I argue that they are subservient subjects in a postcolonial political economy of sexuality*." (Tan, 2014)

In the digital age, the features of the tourism, sex, and entertainment industry have undergone profound transformations; online platforms have significantly altered the dimensions of intimate encounters across borders. Building upon the personal narratives and living realities of the individuals involved in intimate encounters in the tourism industry in the preceding chapter, this section delves deeper into the systematic intricacies of contemporary sex and tourism dynamics in Thailand, and particularly its digital dimension. Here, an exploration of intersectionality and the influence of power dynamics on experiences, interactions, and perceptions within the digital realm of sex tourism will be conducted. Setting off with an examination of intersectionality, this section delves into the complex interplay of ethnicity, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status with regards to encounters between tourists and locals, especially through dating applications.

The problematic aspects of sex tourism in Thailand both in the conventional and digital context are confronted; the longstanding legacy of Orientalist stereotypes and the valorisation of Whiteness are identified, exploring how colonial legacies continue to echo in the digital realm, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and creating social and sexual capital for particular groups of individuals. As this section navigates through these discussions, it is evident that acknowledging, understanding, and addressing these intersectional power dynamics are essential in order to cruise to a more equal future. Through the interrogation of Orientalist narratives, and by challenging racism and sexism, and advocating for more equitable interactions, this chapter aims to decode the complexities of digital desire and pave the way for a more inclusive and respectful atmosphere. The sub-question addressed in this section is: How do gender, racial and other power dynamics manifest in the digitally mediated interactions between tourists and locals in Thailand?

Intersectionality and Power Dynamics Within the Digital Realm of Sex Tourism

This chapter sets off with an analysis of the intersectionalities shaping intimate encounters between tourists and locals in order to situate the concept of digital sex tourism within the wider scope of a colonial global tourism industry. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) forms an important fundament for this analysis, as intersecting individual factors such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status significantly influence individual interactions in, and more broadly, the complexities of sex tourism. It is crucial to understand how these intersectional elements shape experiences, perceptions, and motivations in the realm of digital sex tourism in order to unravel the power structures that shape these interactions. In order to grasp the interplay between privilege and marginalisation in the realm of digital intimacy, this section will proceed with an examination of the most clearly observed individual intersecting factors in the field, namely race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Colourism and the Valorisation of Whiteness

Even before entering the field, in the very first interview conducted, colourism showed out to be a significant and crude theme in the discussion about (digital) sex tourism. During a conversation about my upcoming fieldwork in Thailand an acquaintance shared their own experiences of using dating applications during their travels in Thailand. They recounted experiencing a stark increase in popularity with regards to their dating profile, attributing this to their White skin colour. According to them, Whiteness was perceived as the epitome of beauty in Thailand. To illustrate this point, they described an encounter where a Thai man pointed to his own brown skin, saying “bad”, and then gestured to the acquaintance’s white skin, saying “good”.

Throughout the fieldwork the valorisation of Whiteness turned out to be a living reality in local-tourist interactions. When asked the question whether the usage of dating applications while backpacking in Asia felt empowering or disempowering in any way, a respondent answered “as a White man you are seen as rich and a beauty standard in most Asian countries, this does translate in a lot of matches and an abundance of choice”. When presented with the question what caused the increased matches, messages, and dates in Thailand for White men, all participants related this phenomenon to skin colour, a general perception of Whiteness as superior, and additionally to their perceived wealth. This is confirmed by most, but not all, the interviews with locals. Many of the Thai respondents claimed that according to Thai beauty standards, “you have to be really skinny, [...] really white, and good looking”. One respondent observed that tourists and expats do not share the

same values in terms of beauty standards, “they actually don’t care what you look like”. She continues to argue that tourists are in her opinion more open-minded and more accepting towards a variety of body types. Another Thai respondent pointed out the role of the media in shaping beauty standards, “in the media there’s always just one type, very skinny, very white”.

Colourism, “the preferential or prejudicial treatment of same-race people based solely on their skin colour” (Walker, 2011), is an ongoing issue in many Asian societies. While the origins of colourism can be traced back to colonialism, during which Whiteness was associated with social and economic privilege, colourism also predates European contact in some Asian cultures (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Moreover, in addition to its strong colonial roots in many parts of the world, the preference for lighter skin has historically been deeply ingrained in many cultures all over Asia, especially in the countries China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand (Yeung, 2015). In these countries, white skin was often associated with a high social status, as a pale skin implied not having to labour outside in the sun. Additionally, there is a large and wealthy population of Thai-Chinese living in Thailand, estimated to control over 80% of the country’s overall market capitalisation. According to Franco and Roach (2023), the beauty ideal in Thailand has been established by this “immigrant, ethnic minority whose skin tone is in fundamental contrast to 86% of the population” (p. 3). Furthermore, a preference for Sino-aesthetics is reinforced by the “Korean Wave” (Franco & Roach, 2023, p. 4), as well as an increasing popularity of Japanese pop-culture, and the commercialisation of East Asian popular artists.

In these societies, as well as those colonised by Europeans, such as the Philippines, skin colour has been closely tied to social class and beauty standards, with lighter skin symbolising higher status and attractiveness (Glenn, 2008; Yeung, 2015). Mainly for women, light skin is considered the epitome of femininity, beauty, and purity (Dixon & Telles, 2017). The gendered dimension of colourism facilitates the marginalisation of already subjugated individuals, dark-skinned women may experience discrimination not only based on their skin tone, but also because of their gender and race. This is showcased in a field interaction with the Australian owner of a brothel in Phnom Phen, the capital of Cambodia. The informant provided insights into the operationalities of his brothel. He described how the women employed there had the autonomy to set their own prices, and that the establishment retained a share of each transaction, amounting to 15$ per customer. Notably, he observed a preference for lighter-skinned women, particularly evident among Chinese tourists. These

women were able to command higher prices compared to a "typical Khmer[11] girl", underlining the gendered dimension of colourism. Firstly, it highlights how in brothels, which are already heavily associated with exploitation, colourist biases are perpetuated and reinforced. The preference for lighter-skinned women, particularly among Chinese tourists, demonstrates how societal beauty standards have an impact on not only sexual hierarchies, but also on economic transactions. Dark-skinned women, such as those described as "Khmer girls", are disadvantaged within this system, facing discrimination not only based on their gender and race, but also their skin tone.

Secondly, this anecdote extends beyond the boundaries of this Cambodian brothel, as the experiences of Thai locals interviewed in Bangkok also shed a light on the dynamics between gender and skin colour. One of the respondents shared the notion that having sexual interactions with "hot, White guys" was being considered a "badge of honour" among their social circle, underscoring the superiority placed on proximity to Whiteness. Conversely, the feelings of inadequacy and internalised racism described by several Thai respondents who reported feeling "cheap" and "like the stereotype poor, Thai woman" when seen with a White man reveals the psychological impact of colourism and sexual hierarchies on individual experiences of self-worth and identity. Overall, these field interactions underscore the complex ways in which colourism intersects with gender, race, and power dynamics in conventional sex tourism as well as non-transactional interactions between tourists and backpackers through digital means. Indeed, these intersections reinforce systematic inequalities and marginalise already vulnerable individuals. While sharing this personal insight, the respondent also recognised a general preference for dating individuals of White ethnicity, among their social circle, indicative of the omnipresent valorisation of Whiteness, as a marker for social and sexual capital within Thai society. This interaction underscores the intertwined axes of power, consisting of historical legacies, media representations, and interpersonal perceptions, that influence and shape beauty standards and intercultural interactions.

Moving forward, the valorisation of Whiteness is strongly characterised by perceptions of White superiority, illustrated by the following field interaction:

[11] The Khmer people are an ethnolinguistic group that constitutes a large part of the population of Cambodia, they are a predominantly agricultural people (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

> "Thai people always have this view that being White is superior to them, we call it farang[12], they are always like *'ohh'* farang. It's a positive word, they feel like being White is really superior."

When prompted to elucidate why this was, she elaborated:

> "So, the elders, they are like 'you like my country, you come to my country!'. It's also about money, they always think White people are rich, they see the West as more modern, more civilised, more intelligent, everything just more superior than the locals, the Thai."

The respondent was then questioned about her thoughts on the impact of colonialism on these observations:

> "Could be, but our generation, we don't think like that anymore. We think we are equal, it's all about equality these days. We are different and equal, we don't think that farangs are superior anymore."

The quoted interaction provides a touching depiction of the living reality of colonial legacies, even though Thailand has never been colonised. The use of the term "farang" to denote White people is indicative of a cultural mindset that associates Whiteness with superiority and privilege. This perception is further illustrated by the respondent's elaboration, which underscores the deeply ingrained belief that being White equates to being modern, civilised, and more intellectual. The association of Western countries with progress and prosperity serves to reinforce notions of White superiority. Nevertheless, the consecutive statement provided by the respondent reflects a generational shift in attitudes towards race and equality. The observation that "our generation" no longer accepts the belief in White superiority suggests a growing awareness and rejection of racial hierarchies. The emphasis on being "different and equal" underscores a shift towards inclusivity and the recognition of the

[12] "A farang is a Western or European person of light-coloured skin. It is the term that Thais use to refer to white people of European origin judging from the dominant physical appearance, such as height, prominent nose, light-coloured skin, eyes and hair" (Chaisiri, 2016, p. 6).

inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of racial or ethnic differences, implying a chasm with previous generations' deference to Whiteness.

More of the Thai respondents signalled a growing awareness and more equal attitude towards racial hierarchies, even though throughout the fieldwork interactions Whiteness is still heavily associated with wealth and social status, there are also many counter-narratives. For instance, one informant explained the Thai concept of a "burger-flipper", which is a term used among Thai locals to describe Western tourists who "live like royalty" in Thailand but have "shitty jobs at home, like working as a burger-flipper at a fastfood restaurant". The term "burger-flipper" underscores the disparity between the perceived wealth and status of Westerners abroad and the reality of their socioeconomic status at home. The term carries the implication of a low-paying, low-status occupation, suggesting that despite their Whiteness, they occupy socioeconomically disadvantaged positions in their own countries, challenging stereotypes of White superiority. By highlighting this socioeconomic diversity, the notion that all White individuals possess the wealth, privilege, and status commonly associated with Whiteness is deconstructed.

Social and Sexual Capital

Building onto the discussion about colourism and the valorisation of Whiteness in the context of digital interactions between locals and tourists, it is crucial to explore how these oppressive dynamics have an impact on access to resources by certain networks and groups of individuals, which is conceptualised as social capital. More specifically, the notion of social capital as conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) refers to the "aggregate of current or potential resources related to existing, permanent networks based [...] on institutionalised relationships of interpersonal respect and acceptance" (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016, p. 89). Indeed, when applying this framework to the context of colourism in Thailand, it appears that social and sexual capital is more accessible to individuals with lighter skin, who profit from societal privilege due to lightness as a marker of beauty, desirability, and higher status. Many of the field interactions shed a light on the lived experiences and perceptions of local individuals regarding beauty standards and racial preferences, during the fieldwork, a 22 year old respondent was interviewed.

They identified as a queer activist, studied film studies at a renowned art academy in Bangkok, and were active on various dating applications. The respondent expressed their perspective on this topic, remarking, "in Thailand, [...] the standard of beauty is very colourism [*sic*]". When questioning the respondent further about this observation, they

explained that in the context of app dating, there is a stark contrast of how in Thailand individuals of Arab ethnicities were viewed in comparison to those of White ethnicities. Whereas Arab descendents are often regarded with disdain, being perceived as undesirable, or as per the words of the respondent, “Thai people will see them like ‘blegh’, like no”. Those of White ethnicity are often admired, seen as attractive, fashionable, and wealthy, as the respondent described, “they see White people as ‘woahh’, like I don’t even know what to say, like hot, and cool, and rich”.

When probed about the potential impact of colonialism on these beauty standards, despite Thailand not having been colonised, the respondent acknowledged the probable impact of colonial legacies, attributing it to both historical and contemporary factors. The respondent emphasised the role of media representations in perpetuating colourist ideals, noting the use of discriminatory language and imageries. The respondent exemplified this with the pejorative use of terms like “dark-skin”, or the phenomenon in the film industry, that comedic or lesser roles are more often assigned to darker-skinned individuals, again, similar to the cases of the brothel industry in Cambodia, and the racial hierarchies on dating applications, perpetuating a cycle of limited accessibility to social, sexual, and economic capital for darker-skinned individuals. This observation underlines that despite Thailand’s historical autonomy, an enduring legacy of colonialism still has a great impact on societal attitudes towards skin colour and a discrepancy in accessibility to various forms of capital based on skin colour.

Moving forward, during the interviews, a space and opportunity for reflection on these issues was offered. During the interview with this respondent, a discussion took place about colourism and how to cruise towards a more equal society. They emphasised the importance of engaging directly with individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds to challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes perpetuated by media representations and historical legacies. While acknowledging the allure of exoticism, the respondent emphasised the value of genuine connection and interest beyond surface-level fascination, “I think it’s better to talk to the real people of an ethnicity [...] if there are the same interests, it’s easy to connect and not only be interested in the exotic part”.

Orientalism

"The continuing legacy of colonialism is not only political and economic domination, but also the creation and recreation of myths, stereotypes, and fantasies, shaping the West's view of Others. It may also be argued that these views shape the "Others" view of the West." (Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 490)

In the exploration of the various factors that shape the concept of intersectionality and its interplay with power dynamics, colourism, as shown in the previous section, has a pervasive impact on societal norms and perceptions of beauty, social hierarchies, and the formation of sexual capital. Another phenomenon deeply intertwined with issues concerning ethnicity, oppression, and social equality is Orientalism as theorised by Edward Said (1979). While colourism primarily relates to the preferential treatment or prejudice based on skin colour within a particular racial or ethnic group, the concept of Orientalism extends way beyond these borders; it critically assesses the, predominantly Western, perceptions, representations, fantasies, and imaginaries of Asian cultures, peoples, and identities. Indeed, colourism and Orientalism may be two distinct concepts, each with its own set of contexts and societal implications, however, in the case of sex tourism in Thailand, it becomes evident that these two phenomena are heavily intertwined in various occasions, and continuously reinforcing each other leading to a vicious cycle. Indeed, colourism serves as a catalyst for the perpetuation of Orientalist imaginations, reinforcing racialized stereotypes and hierarchies that privilege Whiteness and inferiorise non-Western cultures and peoples.

The correlation between colourism and Orientalism reflects a broader causality between intersectionalities such as race and gender, and power within global systems of oppression. In the same way that colourism imposes hierarchies based on skin colour, Orientalism reinforces notions of cultural superiority and inferiority, illustrating Eastern cultures and peoples as exotic, mysterious, uncivilised, or backward in comparison to Western norms and values. One of the tourists interviewed stated, "I think that the society in Asia classifies White men as more beautiful [...] The beauty standard in Asia is a white, even pale, skin". Interestingly, the respondent remarks 'the Asian society' as a singular society, homogenising Asian cultural diversity. Portraying the East as a singular and enclosed space that represents the entire Orient is typical for Orientalist discourse (Haldrup & Koefoed, 2009). Additionally, the observation showcases how Orientalist perceptions of beauty align with colourist ideals, attributing superiority to White individuals while denigrating darker-

skinned individuals. Moreover, when presenting the same respondent with a set of questions regarding the increased popularity of his dating profile in Thailand, he stated:

> "Parents are enormously happy with a White son-in-law and they are not happy with dark grandchildren, which they will also regularly show. I also heard that Thai men are much more violent, and regularly hit and sexually abuse women. In general, White men are much nicer compared to Thai men, and less controlling."

This statement illustrates the ways in which the deeply entrenched stereotypes and biases perpetuated by Orientalist, racist, and kyriarchal narratives have a great impact on the perceptions of tourists. The assumption that parents prefer a White son-in-law over one with darker skin, over one with darker skin and that they express dissatisfaction with dark-skinned grandchildren underscores the pervasive influence of White superiority and colourism in Thai society. Opposite to the denigration of darker-skinned masculinities, another Western respondent's perception that White men are seen as "rich and a beauty standard" made him feel empowered and desirable within the context of digital sex tourism. The preference for Whiteness not only reflects internalised racism, but also perpetuates social inequalities by devaluing individuals based on their skin colour.

The familial preference for a White partner for young women in Thailand, is confirmed by a Thai respondent, who recounted, "my mum [...] actually wanted me to date non-Thai, because she felt like I get to explore more. I maybe get to go to their countries and she's like, 'that's good for you'". The respondent's mother encouraged her to date non-Thai individuals, which was motivated by potential benefits of cross-cultural relationships, such as exposure to different cultures and travel opportunities. Nevertheless, the respondent acknowledged a potential judgement from more traditional elders who adhere to strict cultural norms, "they're very traditional, only date Thai, never had sex before marriage, so that's a judgement that could happen". The expectation of only engaging in intimate relationships within one's own nationality and refraining from premarital sexual interactions, underlines a tension between modern attitudes towards dating and intimacy and the persistence of traditional values within Thai society. The respondent further elaborated on the perceived preference for White people on dating applications:

> "Actually, there's this view that some Thai people dating foreigners is another level of dating, it's like making that person more superior than dating locals. Maybe because, first you have to be able to communicate, secondly because they're like so different,

> so much to differences in lifestyle and everything you have to be able to cope well, so they kinda felt like okay that's superior. Some people they're like, tourists have money, so that's another thing. But not for me. I don't think about that."

The respondent's observation that some Thai people perceive dating foreigners as a sign of superiority reinforces the idea of global sexual hierarchies and how this influences accessibility to social and sexual capital as discussed earlier. The notion that dating a foreigner is considered "another level of dating" suggests a hierarchy that places non-Thai individuals, in particular Westerners, on a pedestal above locals. Additionally, the association of foreigners with wealth further underscores the influence of economic factors in shaping romantic preferences and notions of desirability. The respondent's personal stance, stating that she does not consider financial status when dating foreigners, challenges the stereotype that all cross-cultural relationships are motivated by financial gain or social status. Nuances like these, highlight the diversity of experiences and motivations within dating app users and emphasises individuals' agency and autonomy in choosing intimate partners.

Revisiting the Western respondent prior to this section that portrayed Thai men as more violent and controlling to White men, reflects a typical example of racialized and gendered stereotypes. This classic stereotype not only essentialises and dehumanises Thai men, but also reinforces a narrative of Western superiority and paternalism. Such representations support the marginalisation and Othering of non-Western men, while simultaneously valorising Western masculinity as more desirable and less threatening. As discussed in the conceptual framework, the way in which these oppressing dynamics operate hierarchically along various intersecting axes of race, gender, and power is what Schüssler (1993) conceptualises as kyriarchy. Within a patriarchal system, Thai men may indeed hold certain privileges over Thai women, yet they are not exempt from experiencing other forms of marginalisation and oppression. As showcased in these field interactions, that serve as a case study of broader global and systemic issues, kyriarchal structures intersect with racial and gender hierarchies leading to unequal access to social and sexual capital and reinforcing hegemonic power dynamics.

Some respondents communicated suspicions that "certain girls" active on dating applications are "pushed by their boyfriends to date tourists" in order to engage in sexual activities for money. The dichotomous portrayal of Asian women as subservient and sexually available, and Thai men as controlling and abusive provides tourists with a saviour complex and serves them with a sense of righteousness with regards to their interactions with local

women. Additionally, the perception that women are pushed by their partners to sexually engage with tourists in order to support their families reinforces a narrative of Asian women as passive subjects dictated by coercive males, thus victimising them.

Moreover, the narrative of Thai men as controlling and abusive is brought up in various occasions during the interviews with tourists, ranging from subtle statements such as "I think a lot of women can be pushed into sex work by their boyfriends" to "Thai men are much more violent, and regularly hit and sexually abuse women". Interestingly, in current Orientalist research, Asian men are thought to be portrayed as passive, lazy, and effeminate (Barber, 2014; Deng, 2022), thus contradicting the portrayal of Thai men as controlling and violent, provided in the interviews. On the one hand, Orientalist stereotypes portray Asian men as docile and submissive, reinforcing notions of Western dominance in terms of masculinity. On the other hand, the narratives found in the field, about Thai men being controlling and violent suggest a fear of emasculation and loss of power, which may lead to the exaggeration, or even distortion, of the behaviour of Thai men as violent and abusive in order to uphold Orientalist tropes of Western men as White saviours and to justify their sexual privileges (Straubhaar, 2014).

Moreover, Black and Arab men have been constructed as "violent, barbaric, and backward" (Khalid, 2016, p. 5) for a long time, through Orientalist discourses, especially with regards to their attitudes towards women. These securitising narratives serve to justify discriminatory policies and practices aimed at controlling and marginalising certain groups of men and are effectively being used in order to mobilise people against those that are perceived threatening to Western hegemony (Khalid, 2011).

One of the respondents provides a valuable example of these dynamics, strengthening the argument. While discussing how dating app experiences could possibly be enhanced with regards to safety, the tourist suggested filtering based on preferential nationalities or languages spoken, "it sounds a bit harsh, but if you have a nationality setting on there [...], I wouldn't say avoid these 'types' of people, but if you want to find some people over here [...] you feel comfortable speaking to, [...] you could do that". Even though the tourist refrains from explicitly advocating avoidance of certain groups of people, this preference reflects an underlying bias that aligns with the sexually racist hierarchies described in the literature, which he does seem to be aware of, by stating that his statement might come across "a bit harsh". By selecting preferences based on nationality, the tourist inadvertently contributes to the perpetuation of exclusionary dynamics in intimate interactions.

Contrary to the securitisation of non-Western masculinities, Eastern femininities are highly subjugated and fetishised. The ongoing perpetuation of Orientalist narratives of Asian women exoticise, and stereotype them as submissive and hypersexual (Persaud & Chin, 2015), leading to harmful perceptions that objectify and dehumanise Thai women (Trương, 1990). For instance, when presented with the question whether buying sexual services as a tourist in South-East Asia is unethical, a Western research participant, regularly engaging in both commercial and noncommercial sex while travelling, responded:

> "In the ideal world this business would not exist, [...] but the girls here are different from the women back home. A lot of them are very sensual, very sexual. Some of the girls just like the work, a girl told me that she used to work at a bank but that she didn't like the work, she liked this work more. Thailand is the best place to experience sex work, it is very organised and most girls are very enthusiastic about the thing."

The practice of Orientalism has been illustrated as the phenomenon in which "an all-powerful, masculine West seeks to penetrate a feminine, powerless, and sexually available East in order to possess its resources" (Boone, 2014, p. 11). Eroticism and Orientalism are highly interconnected, and well-observable in statements provided by tourists when discussing their experiences and perceptions of Thai women. The remark that "in the ideal world the [sex industry] would not exist" followed by "but", indicating an exception, "the girls here are different from the women back home", implies that Asian women are excluded from this moral judgment. In acknowledging that the sex industry should ideally not exist and then proceeding to justify its existence in Asia by highlighting the self-observed enthusiasm of Thai women for this type of work, the tourist employs a form of moral dissonance. This is enforced by the illustration of Thai women as "very sensual" and "very sexual" sustaining typical Orientalist stereotypes as mentioned above, disregarding diversity in characteristics, experiences, and realities of Thai women engaged in sex trade.

These attitudes are in a similar manner identified in digital sex tourism, where tourists engage in both commercial and noncommercial sexual interactions with locals through the use of dating apps. During an interview with a tourist active on dating applications in Thailand, he described some key differences between his experiences with women in Thailand compared to women in England. Similar to the tourist engaging in conventional sex trade, he described Thai locals on dating apps as "more forthcoming, more straightforward, more keen to meet you". He described his interactions with women at home as "boring" and

superficial, and illustrated this with women not being open to ‘one-night stands’, whereas in Thailand he described his experiences as being able to do “whatever you wanna do”. When prompted to describe experiences with regards to dating locals in Thailand, all of the tourists described Thai women as assertive or “very willing to go on dates”.

Indeed, the various depictions of Thai women as “enthusiastic about [sex work]” or “more forthcoming, [...], and more keen to meet you” compared to Western women perpetuates the stereotype of Asian women as sexually available. This confirms the Orientalist notion of the East as a place where Western men can fulfil their sexual fantasies, which is further reinforced by the portrayal of Thai women as passive objects of male desire, willing to engage in whatever activities the tourist desires. Additionally, the description of interactions with Western women as “boring” and superficial because they are not open to one-night stands or casual sex further deviates sexually available and unrestricted Asian women from the monolithic stereotype of Western women reduced to sexual prudes.

While interviewing locals, the Orientalist stereotype of Asian women was vigorously contradicted, highlighting diverse and genuine motivations and experiences of locals who engage with tourists through dating apps. For instance, one local expressed her frustrations while dating tourists through Tinder, she stated, “sometimes it’s just a weird person, like they only want to have sex or they are not friendly and don’t treat you well”. Indeed, she communicates her struggles with encounters where the tourist is only interested in sex or displays disrespectful or unfriendly behaviour. By contradicting the stereotype provided by tourists, of Asian women as passive and sexually available participants, she instead showcases the agency and boundaries set by locals in terms of digital dating. Similarly, another respondent explained how a negative interaction with a tourist she met through a dating application had refrained her from using the app again. She narrated,

> “I don’t really use dating apps anymore for some time now. Before, some guy from England was very bad, like, I said I didn’t want to go to another bar because it was late and I wanted to go home. Then he was saying he paid for my drink and I have to come with him for the night. He said some bad things.”

This experience illustrates how, in this case, the tourist felt entitled to sex and attempted to coerce the local individual into a sexual encounter. All of the Thai individuals interviewed, who did not use dating apps solely for commercial sex, provided counter-narratives to Orientalist stereotypes. They all desired to establish meaningful connections beyond mere

sexual interactions, and all expressed a preference for spending time with tourists, in order to explore and exchange language, knowledge, and culture.

Transactional Sex as a Gendered Issue

As mentioned in the conceptual framework, James et al. (2019, p. 50) composed three key principles with regards to male tourists. Namely, their socialisation with a sense of entitlement to sexual access to women, especially those of colour, who are perceived as willing and available for sexual encounters, as confirmed by the fieldwork displayed in the previous section. Secondly, the reality of poverty in some regions, in which individuals may turn to sex work as a means of economic survival. And thirdly, the impact of political and economic institutions that facilitate and sustain the travel of Western men to specific destinations for the purpose of purchasing sexual services. However, similar to male sex tourists, some Western women may relish the anonymity and liberty afforded by travel, enabling them to engage in noncommercial sexual encounters far removed from societal scrutiny, and even seek out the services of sex workers while travelling (Sanders-McDonagh, 2016).

During the fieldwork period in Thailand, an conversation with a Scottish woman in her twenties, travelling solo for six months, was conducted. After some small talk she narrated how she engaged in a spontaneous sexual interaction at a massage salon in Pai. Prior to this encounter, she had never purchased sexual services, however, during this particular session, the Thai masseuse had offered her a “happy ending”. Her curiosity aroused, the respondent impulsively accepted. The experience, described by the respondent as sensual and intimate, left a positive impression on her, prompting her to return the following day. Reflecting on her encounter, she expressed openness to similar experiences in the future, although solely under the condition that the initiative originates from the masseuse rather than actively seeking out such encounters herself. When prompted with the question if she would also do this at home, she acknowledged that such an encounter would be unlikely in her home environment, “here you don’t really know anyone, I can try out new things without permanent consequences, nobody knows me anyways and I’m always moving around”. This anecdote illustrates the ways in which Western women, like the above-mentioned respondent, may embrace anonymity and liberty inherent to travelling, allowing for exploration and experimentation in various forms of sexual encounters. Though, it is important to note that

this interaction seems to serve as an exception rather than the rule, as no other women were encountered during the fieldwork period that have provided similar narratives.

In the occasion of discussing dating applications, intimacy, and sex work with female backpackers, most expressed a reluctance with regards to purchasing sex or meeting with Thai males through dating applications. The main reasons for this being safety concerns, the awareness of the potential of exploitation in the sex industry, or the absence of interest in engaging in sexual interactions with locals. One self-identified female, bisexual backpacker explained that she would not meet-up with male locals, but had met up on various occasions with female locals connected via dating applications. When prompted to explain why, she argued

> "I feel more vulnerable meeting up with guys, you always hear these horror stories of young women being kidnapped, raped, or murdered in some far-away place. I don't want to end up as a newspaper headline."

She articulated a contrast in her approach to dating male backpackers versus local men, attributing it to a perceived difference in safety. She noted that because backpackers were temporary visitors and did not reside in the region, she felt less apprehensive about potential risks such as abduction or harm. Interestingly, some of the local women interviewed articulated a similar concern, but vice versa. When presented the question whether there are any safety concerns with regards to dating tourists through dating applications, one respondent expressed a strong sense of insecurity in the event of using dating apps, noting the lack of familiarity with tourists met through these platforms. She illustrated this with an anecdote about a friend who unknowingly met up with a European man who was a "big criminal", and had been involved in murder and other serious offences. Both of these narratives portray the insecurities lived through by women globally, strengthened in unfamiliar contexts, such as inter-cultural dating where language and culture differences might enhance feelings of unfamiliarity and vulnerability.

Moreover, patriarchal norms perpetuate a notion of male dominance and female submissiveness in heteronormative relationships. Women are more often socialised and conditioned to be cautious and vigilant due to a genuine, and pervasive threat of gender-based violence, including sexual assault and harassment, which is also showcased in the fieldwork. Several of the Thai locals interviewed articulated experiences of feeling unsafe, having their boundaries crossed by men, and some even encountering sexual assault. One respondent

recounted a “disastrous” date, they explained how after accompanying a tourist to their apartment, they had been sexually assaulted. First, the respondent was offered marijuana, which they declined, in the meantime their date became increasingly intoxicated. The respondent further explained how the tourist “started touching me, and I was like ‘oh my god’, stop”, to which their date persisted, “so I was like, ‘okay, I have to go’”. The tourist then “broke down” to the respondent, who had to run out of the apartment being followed by the tourist. Reflecting back on the incident, the respondent described it as significantly traumatic, and expressed a lingering sense of anger and confusion following the encounter.

The prevalence of gender-based violence and the sexualisation of women contribute to a heightened sense of vulnerability. Even in terms of consensual sexual interactions, men are often still portrayed as active agents who ‘conquer’ women, whereas women are more often stigmatised for their sexual activity (Bay-Cheng et al., 2018; Lischinsky, 2017). One of the Thai respondents expressed how her intentions and activities on dating applications were subject to constant stigmatisation and judgments of older generations, “I try to explain: ‘oh we’re just friends’, you know, [...] but it happens to you so many times, you get judgement from many, many people”. This phenomenon of sexual typecasting is interrogated by the broader framework of third-wave feminist theory. Challenging the construction of women’s sexuality as passive, victimised, and conquered and replacing it with the construction of women as assertive agents in control of their own sexuality.

Contrary to the stigmatisation and victimisation that women face in the context of sexual interactions, men often are not subjected to the same double standards and do not experience equivalent forms of “embodied self-surveillance” (James et al., 2019, p. 50; Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015). Feminist scholars have theorised that because men typically “do the penetrating” (James et al., 2019, p. 50) and acquire social status through sexual ‘conquests’ with women, they invariably uphold a dominant position within the sexual hierarchy, irrespective of their racial or economic standing or relation to the woman involved (James et al., 2019). This is also exemplified by the phenomenon that men are more often labelled as ‘sex tourists’, women are more often characterised as ‘romance tourists’ (Bauer, 2014; Herold et al., 2001). Likewise, whereas stigmatised labels such as ‘prostitute’, ‘hooker’, or ‘whore’ are deeply associated with women, men engaged in sex work are often euphemistically referred to as ‘beach boys’, ‘gigolos’, or ‘romantic entrepreneurs’ (James et al., 2019). Indeed, sexual behaviour of men and women during travel, are significantly distinct and by equating the two, the power, effects, and contexts of these behaviours are overlooked. James et al. (2019) thus comes to the conclusion that sexual encounters in the

context of tourism are "governed by heteropatriarchal and colonial conventions that disproportionately disempower women, particularly women of colour" (p. 50).

Revisiting the phenomenon of stigmatisation and victimisation of sexually active women, and in particular sex workers, leading to the dehumanisation and marginalisation of individuals participating in sex trade. This is illustrated by a respondent interviewed in Pattaya, his sister is a sex worker and he works at a local hostel, at the end of the interview, when asked if he wants to add anything to the interview, he expresses:

> "One thing I wanna tell you, in Pattaya we are human. We are same just different job. This job doesn't hurt everybody, [my sister] is okay with doing it. No one is hurting, not feeling down, it's okay. It's just a job, I meet many sex worker and she's just a normal girl and very kind. She respects herself more than normal people, she is fighting for the money for survival. Most sex worker work this job for daughter or son. [*sic*]".

He further highlights the dehumanisation of sex workers in Pattaya, illustrating how this perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence and marginalisation:

> "If you think [of her] badly, you will do bad thing with her. [...] If you see her low you will treat her low but if you see her normal you will treat her normal. And if you treat her normal, she don't steal your money, because you treat her like a normal people. But if you treat her like a bad people, she will be bad to you and that's why sex worker look badly. [*sic*]"

The informant suggests that the way individuals perceive and treat sex workers has a significant and direct impact on their behaviour and interactions with sex workers. If sex workers are viewed in a negative light, or as inferior or "social pollutants" (Armstrong, 2018, p. 1997), individuals are more likely to engage in harmful behaviour towards them. Vice versa, if sex workers are treated in respectful manner, they are less likely to engage in criminal or retaliatory actions. This anecdote illustrates the cruciality of acknowledging the humanity, agency, and autonomy of sex workers.

Interestingly, when discussing the status of sex workers in Thailand and comparing this to the experiences of individuals selling sex on dating applications, a significant contrast was provided. One respondent argued,

> "When you work in the regular place in a traditional way, you won't feel you're valuable that much, you know what I mean. But when you meet online, sometimes if you can't make the deal, the person has not seen you yet so you're safe, you also just keep yourself from the real people."

In other words, she notes the devaluation of traditional sex workers, who interact with clients in bars or brothels. She then mentions the increased safety and anonymity that dating applications provide, "if you can't make the deal, the person has not seen you yet so you're safe", underlining the unsafe environments that sex workers have to work in.

Another respondent who participated in commercial sex through dating apps, or as per her own words, "I don't just go with them for free but, maybe they give me some money or a gift, and take me to a fancy place", underlined a stark difference in finding clients at a bar or "on the streets", versus finding clients through dating apps. She noted,

> "I feel like dating apps make everything better. When you work in a bar people can be very disrespectful because, like, they see you work there and think of you low, like 'oh you're one of those girls'".

She added that dating applications provided her with more anonymity in terms of occupation, and additionally increased her agency in terms of where, when, and with whom she wanted to engage in these interactions. Another benefit of using dating applications to find clients, according to her, was that, "you don't have to be in the bar all day, and people don't really look down on you. It feels more like a date.". Since using dating applications, she had more time and felt more confident, "I feel more strong now because I can make a lot of money and can buy things for myself". Even though she was generally positive in terms of her experiences as a sex worker, she also acknowledged the toll that the stigmatisation of sex work had on her life. She recounted how she wants to do "this work, but so many people think so bad, like no honour and shame".

There is a strong correlation between stigma and the marginalisation of sex providers, sex worker rights advocates underline the importance of changing negative attitudes towards sex workers to enhance their safety and rights (Wijers, 2022). The process of 'Othering' of sex workers is often reinforced by media depictions portraying sex workers as either "victims or social pollutants" (Armstrong, 2018, p. 1997). Moreover, research has shown that dehumanisation, sexualisation, and objectification of sex workers across various cultures,

leads to violent attitudes towards these sexualised targets (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Participants of various studies regarding the dehumanisation and sexualisation of sex workers have shown to be “more willing to inflict harm” (Wollast et al., 2018, p. 70) on sexualised individuals (Sanders, 2016; Wijers, 2022; Zhang et al., 2016).

A powerful driving force behind harmful stereotyping, and consequently the marginalisation of sex providers is the global mass media. Van Esterik (2020) argues that “the voices of Thai prostitutes, when they are heard, are framed by Thai and foreign mass media" (p. 163). This framing is accompanied by significant levels of sensationalising and dramatising aspects inherent to sex tourism, rather than addressing the Orientalist, colonial, and sexist features underlying local prostitution. Additionally, Tantiwiramanond and Pandey (1987) argue that the narratives produced by mass media are often crafted by Western observers and tend to evaluate the status of Thai women in terms of Western feminist indicators, such as occupation and education, and thereby failing to take into account Thai values.

Conclusion

A nuanced understanding of the ways in which threads of power are woven into a complex social tapestry has been constructed through the lenses of post- and decolonial theory, feminist theory, and critical tourism studies. The discussion was structured into five main threads of power; intersectionality and power dynamics, colourism and the valorisation of Whiteness, social and sexual capital, Orientalism, and the gendered nature of sex tourism. The concept of intersectionality coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) is central to the analysis of how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, intersect to cultivate unique experiences of privilege, oppression, and marginalisation. In the context of intimate interactions between locals and tourists, facilitated by dating apps, these intersections manifest in unequal power dynamics between Western tourists and Thai locals. Western tourists, predominantly White, often occupy positions of privilege and power, both economically and socially.

These disparities in terms of power and privilege stem from historical and present-day systems of oppression, such as coloniality, capitalism, and patriarchy. Moreover, the colonial era might arguably be in the past, but colonial structures still continue to have a massive impact on global social hierarchies. Colourism, coupled with the valorisation of Whiteness, plays a considerable role in shaping the desirability and social capital of the individuals active

on dating apps. A deeply ingrained preference for lighter skin, largely associated with Western beauty standards, aggravates already skewed power dynamics. These processes of valorisation are evident in the ways in which Thai locals seek higher social status and validation through dating White tourists, subsequently reinforcing perceptions of White superiority and desirability.

Global hierarchies of desirability are produced through the capitalisation of social and sexual status. Moreover, the common perception that tourists possess greater economic capital, enhances their sexual capital. Subsequently, tourists might engage in transactional relationships that obscure the lines between genuine connections and commodified interactions. Locals, on the other hand, may interact intimately with tourists to enhance their social capital, whether through financial or material gain, upward social mobility, or the perceived status of associating with foreigners.

Next, the framework Orientalism illustrates the ways in which Western tourists perceive and engage with Thai locals through a gaze of exoticism and Othering. The Orientalist gaze reduces Thai individuals, and particularly women, to stereotypes of sexual availability and subservience, perpetuating harmful narratives. Additionally, the tourist gaze, coined by Urry (1992) and showcased in the behaviours of tourists on dating applications, underscores the objectification of Thai locals, who are commodified and reduced to a mere component of an ‘exotic’ travel experience.

Lastly, sex in tourism, in the broadest sense of the concept, is inherently gendered. In a largely patriarchal world, women are carrying the burden of sexist double standards surrounding sexual behaviour. Thai women engaging with tourists on dating apps often face stigmatisation, being framed as oppressed victims, sex workers, or gold diggers regardless of their intentions or circumstances. Contrarily, male tourists mostly escape such stigmatisation, despite engaging in the same behaviours. This gendered stigma emphasises the inescapable sexist, moral double standards that dictate the realm of sex and intimacy in the tourism context.

Concluding, the manifestations of gender, racial, and other power dynamics in the digital realm of sex and intimacy in the Thai tourism industry is complex and deeply rooted in global mechanisms of privilege and oppression. While the identities, features, perceptions, motivations, and experiences of locals and tourists on dating applications are unique and multifaceted, the interactions they engage in are not merely personal, but entrenched in and shaped by larger frameworks of systemic inequalities and power imbalances.

VIII. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study is to explore, map, and decode the digitally mediated interactions between tourists and locals in Thailand. Through the exploration of behaviours, perceptions, and experiences of young tourists and locals active on dating apps, the evolving global power dynamics present in these interactions were interrogated. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis, drawing from post- and decolonial theory, feminist theory, and critical tourism studies, this research illustrates the novel ways through which technological development shapes and is shaped by existing power dynamics.

The emergence of dating applications, and its usage among tourists in Thailand has significantly altered the contemporary realms of transactional sex and tourism in Thailand. Historically, sex tourism has been characterised by premeditated travel with the intent to engage in transactional sex. However, in present-day tourism dynamics, sex and intimacy facilitated by dating applications, could be distinguished as incidental or secondary aspects of travel experiences. The incidental usage of these platforms by tourists, who often still have the app installed due to their pre-existing usage of dating apps at home, obscures the lines between typical sex tourism and more casual sexual interactions.

As illustrated in the previous chapters, the historical evolution of sexuality in Thailand, paired with the emergence of digitally mediated forms of communication, cultivate new opportunities for locals and tourists to engage in intimate encounters in ways that challenge and redefine previous conceptions of sex tourism. Through the interrogation of various intersecting mechanisms of power that are systematically shaping the dynamics of sex, love, and intimacy in the interactions of locals and tourists, this study assessed how the emergence of dating apps has altered the traditional patterns of engagement in transactional sex among tourists and locals in Thailand.

The rise of dating applications has significantly altered the traditional patterns of engagement in transactional sex among locals and tourists in Thailand; transforming the ways in which these interactions are initiated, negotiated, and perceived. Traditionally, sex tourism in Thailand has been closely associated with specific regions and clear conceptualisations of sex tourists and local sex workers. This traditional landscape of sex tourism has been shaped by various socio-economic factors, such as poverty, gender inequality, and a legacy of colonial and neo-colonial influences, which all contributed greatly to the commodification of sex and the valorisation of Whiteness. Transactional sex, initially emerging as a by-product of military presence during the Vietnam War, it developed into a thriving sector within the

broader tourism industry. Attracting Western men seeking exotic and often cheaper sexual experiences, facilitated by Orientalist narratives that exoticised Thai women as submissive and sexually available. The transactional nature of these interactions was explicit, with tourists directly engaging with sex workers in designated areas in Thailand such as Pattaya and Phuket.

The onset of digital technologies, specifically dating apps, fundamentally transformed these traditional features. Dating apps such as Tinder provide a digital platform for more nuanced and more diverse forms of interaction between tourists and locals. Unlike traditional sex tourism, which consists of distinct transactional exchanges, dating apps enable encounters that are more casual and ambiguous, blurring the transnational nature of these interactions.

Local users active on dating apps often have diverse motivations for engaging with tourists, ranging from personal enrichment and cultural exchange to seeking intimate relationships. However, the intersection between these various intentions often leads to an overlap between cultural exchange and romantic or sexual intentions. Despite the diversity of motivations, a persistent perception among locals was revealed that associating with White tourists potentially provides social and sexual capital, influenced by colonial mechanisms and a desire for upward social mobility.

Tourists using dating apps in Thailand predominantly do not consider themselves sex tourists, even when engaging in a range of transactional encounters with locals. When interrogating their motives, they seemed to be opportunistic, substantiated by the sense of consumerism and freedom that is associated with tourism. While some tourists genuinely seek cultural experiences and meaningful interactions, they may still unconsciously perpetuate colonial and patriarchal dynamics, viewing locals through an Orientalist lens that exoticises and commodifies their interactions.

Several systemic mechanisms of oppression are underlying these interactions. A strong preference for and valorisation of Whiteness by various local communities can be traced back to colonial legacies and a global hegemony of Western values. This dynamic implicates both the motivations of locals to engage with tourists and the expectations of tourists while travelling. Moreover, engaging with Western tourists can enhance a local's social status or provide economic and material benefits, intertwining social and sexual capital in their interactions. Furthermore, the exoticisation of Thai culture and people through Orientalist frameworks, perpetuates problematic attitudes and behaviours that reinforce stereotypes. Finally, transactional sex is deeply gendered, with male tourists and female locals being the most common dynamic. Dating apps have however enhanced diversity and

inclusivity, allowing for different gender pairings and a broader spectrum of sexual orientations to interact in these spaces.

Assessing all these intersecting aspects within the realm of digitally-mediated sexual interactions, transactional sex between locals and tourists in Thailand can be understood as a liminal concept; existing in a sphere that blurs the boundaries between traditional sex tourism and more modern, digitally-facilitated intimate encounters. Dating apps have introduced new layers of complexity and variety, impacting the transactionality of these interactions that remain entrenched in the same underlying power dynamics. By examining the liminal landscape of transactional sex through the lenses of digitalisation, tourism, and power dynamics, it becomes evident that dating apps have simultaneously enhanced access to cross-cultural interactions while maintaining existing inequalities.

While travel destinations are popularly perceived as a playground for personal exploration, experimenting, and fulfilling sexual desires and fantasies, it is essential to acknowledge and respect the local communities that are living there. Their culture, lives, and realities should not be perceived as a touristic experience, the individuals living there are not fictional characters part of an Orientalist dreamscape in which tourists can break out of their own social constraints, anonymously trying out new dimensions to their identities.

For future research, a thorough, intersectional analysis of the ethical and moral dilemmas of digitally-facilitated interactions between locals and tourists would contribute greatly to the discussion of this topic. How can equality be enhanced between locals and tourists interacting on dating apps, and what is necessary to achieve that? And do different gender pairings in cross-cultural relationships influence power dynamics; are queer cross-cultural relationships potentially more respectful? In order to cruise towards a more equal futurity, it is essential to address these issues. Tourism and technological development should be approached more responsibly, acknowledging and challenging power dynamics, marginalisation, and privilege and oppression. Hopefully, fostering a more critical, equal, conscious, and ethical global atmosphere for future generations.

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Appendix A: Research questions

How has the rise of dating apps altered the traditional patterns of engagement in sex tourism among backpackers in Thailand?

How has the emergence of dating apps has altered the traditional patterns of engagement in transactional sex among tourists and locals in Thailand?

What are the experiences, motivations, and perspectives of local individuals, particularly women, who engage with tourists through dating apps?

To what extent do digital platforms empower or disempower local individuals, especially women, involved in sex tourism?

What is the role of transactionality in these encounters?

What are the experiences, motivations, and perspectives of tourists who engage with locals through dating apps?

How do they perceive themselves within the current conceptualisation of sex tourism?

What are the potential gender, racial, and power dynamics involved in the usage of dating apps by tourists and locals in the context of sex tourism?

Are there any emerging trends or practices in the use of dating apps that challenge or reinforce gender, racial, or social inequalities in the context of sex tourism in Thailand?

Appendix B: Interview questions

LOCALS ENGAGING WITH TOURISTS THROUGH DATING APPS

1. Can you describe your experiences with using dating apps to connect with tourists in Thailand?
2. What motivated you to start using dating apps to meet tourists? Were there specific expectations or desires that led to this decision?
3. How has the experience of dating tourists through these apps compared to dating locals or meeting people through traditional means?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages, in your opinion, of dating tourists through dating apps?
5. Have you noticed any cultural or language barriers when connecting with tourists? How do you navigate these challenges?
6. Can you share any memorable or impactful experiences you've had while dating tourists through dating apps?
7. How do you perceive the impact of these interactions on your personal life, including your social connections and well-being?
8. Do you feel that dating apps have influenced your empowerment or agency in any way? If so, how?
9. Have you encountered any safety concerns or issues while using dating apps for dating with tourists, and how have you addressed them?
10. In your view, what could be done to improve the experiences and outcomes for locals using dating apps to connect with tourists in Thailand?
11. In your view, how do locals perceive and define their engagement with tourists through dating apps? Is it considered a form of sex work or a different kind of relationship?
12. What motivates you and other locals to use dating apps to connect with tourists or travellers? Are there economic motivations, and if so, can you explain them?
13. How does the experience of using dating apps for such interactions differ from more traditional forms of sex work or dating for locals?
14. Have you ever felt judged or stigmatised by society or others for your involvement with tourists through dating apps? How do you handle such judgments or perceptions?
15. Can you share any insights into how your interactions with tourists through dating apps have influenced your economic prospects or financial situation?

16. Do you believe that there is a difference between engaging with tourists through dating apps and engaging with them through other forms of employment or relationships?
17. How do cultural norms and expectations impact your experiences and choices when using dating apps for sex or relationships?

TOURISTS ENGAGING WITH LOCALS THROUGH DATING APPS

1. What motivated you to use dating apps to connect with Thai locals during your backpacking trip in Thailand?
2. Can you describe your expectations and desires when using dating apps for these interactions?
3. How do your experiences with dating Thai locals through dating apps differ from dating fellow travellers or using traditional methods to meet people?
4. Have you encountered any cultural or language barriers in your interactions with Thai locals on dating apps? How do you handle these challenges?
5. What do you perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of using dating apps for these purposes during your travels?
6. Can you share any memorable or impactful experiences you've had while dating Thai locals through dating apps?
7. How do these interactions affect your overall backpacking experience and your connections with the local culture?
8. Do you feel that your use of dating apps while backpacking empowers or disempowers you in any way? Please explain.
9. Have you faced any safety concerns or issues when engaging with Thai locals through dating apps, and how have you addressed them?
    a. How could experiences and outcomes for people using dating apps while travelling be enhanced?
10. How would you describe the interaction with locals on dating apps, does it differ from your dating app interactions at home? If so, how do they differ, which experience would you consider more positive and why?
11. How do you personally define sex tourism, and do you consider your use of dating apps as a form of sex tourism? Why or why not?

12. What motivated you to use dating apps for intimate encounters or relationships during your visit to Thailand, and how does this motivation compare to your understanding of traditional sex tourism?
13. Can you describe the differences, if any, between using dating apps and engaging in traditional forms of sex tourism in Thailand, in terms of your experiences, interactions, and perceptions?
14. Have you had conversations with other travellers about their use of dating apps for similar purposes, and how do they view it in relation to sex tourism?
15. Do you believe that your interactions through dating apps have any economic impact on the locals you meet? How do you perceive this impact?
16. Have you personally encountered any locals who you believe engage in sex work through dating apps? How do you view their experiences and motivations?

Appendix C: Code Book

Code group	Experiences with Dating Applications	
	App Experience	
	Motivations for App Usage	
	Advantages of Application Dating	
	Disadvantages of Application Dating	
	App Engagement vs. Other Forms of Engagement	

Code group	Impact of Interactions	
	Memorable Experiences	
	Impact on Personal Life	
	Impact on Social Connections	
	Impact on Well-being	
	Safety Concerns	
	Addressing Safety Issues	
	Empowerment through Dating Apps	
	Agency in Dating Apps	
	Local Perception and judgements	
	Defining Engagement with Tourists	
	Economic Impact	
	Financial Situations	

Code group	Improving Experiences and Outcomes	
	Suggestions for Improvement	
	Desired Outcomes	

Code group	Cultural and Language Barriers and Expectations	
	Cultural Barriers	
	Language Barriers	
	Navigating Cultural and Language Challenges	
	Impact of Cultural Norms	
	Cultural Expectations	

Code group	Discrimination, intersectionality, colonial legacies	
	Racism	
	Colourism	
	Sexism	
	Unequal power dynamics	
	Orientalism/exoticism	