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APP-ILY EVER AFTER – SELF PRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION OF OTHERS ON
THE DATING APP TINDER

by

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ABSTRACT

Location-based real-time dating (LBRTD) apps have become an increasingly common way for people to broaden their social network and meet others for the purposes of dating, friendship, and more. This investigation focused on Tinder, presently the most widely-used LBRTD app. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-three current and recent Tinder users to gain insight into their self-presentation strategies and impressions of others on the app. The questions concentrated around four major topic areas: use of photos, use of bio text, perception of others, and real or imagined deception. A grounded theory approach was used to frame the data. From this, four major themes were derived that characterized Tinder as a unique social space. First, Tinder users maintained an idealistic yet authentic portrayal of the self. Secondly, self-presentation was governed by gender norms, both societal and unique to the app. Thirdly, while these strategies were deliberately planned, they were often structured to appear nonchalant. Finally, concerns about "catfishing" and the authenticity of others shaped both how users presented themselves and the others they chose to interact with on the app. The study concluded by suggesting multiple prospective research directions into this intriguing and under-researched field.

Keywords: Tinder, self-presentation, identity-management, online dating, attraction, technology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The sociological literature often conceptualizes cyberspace as a "heterogeneous social space" rather than an entirely unique domain. Within this space, the physical limitations of geographic proximity and time can be minimized (Barraket & Henry-Warring, 2008). It should be no surprise then that technology has fundamentally changed the way that people in the 21st century date. One of the main reasons for this is the influx of location-based real-time dating (LBRTD) apps. The most popular of these apps, Tinder, boasts 1.6 billion swipes per day, 1 million dates per week, and over 20 billion total matches since it entered the dating scene (Press and Brand Assets, 2018). It is so pervasive that even celebrities have been spotted using it, with Katy Perry, Lindsay Lohan, and Josh Groban among others admitting that they were active Tinder users at one point (Priggs, 2015). However, those who regularly "swipe" on the app know that the remarkable accessibility to matches that Tinder affords also comes with stigmatization. Tinder is sometimes viewed as a "hookup app" – an easy vehicle to obtain casual sex in absence of a true emotional connection. Critics of Tinder have gone so far as to call its use a sign of a "dating apocalypse" (Sales, 2015). While research has shown that there is little motivational difference between those who use Tinder and traditional dating apps (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016), this stereotype still persists. Even the former CEO of Tinder, Sean Rad, addressed Tinder's stigma in an interview, citing an in-app survey which found that 80% of Tinder users were looking for long-term relationships (Dredge, 2015).

Research on Tinder is of particular interest to social scientists because of the rapidly expanding popularity of LBRTD apps. While official numbers have not been released, Bilton (2014) estimates that Tinder has 50 million unique users. Statistics gathered by the Pew Research Center confirm that many are using online resources to enhance their dating life. The numbers

indicate that 15% of all American adults have tried online dating, while 9% specifically use cell phone dating apps (Smith, 2016). Furthermore, these figures are rising rapidly among young adults. The percentage of those between the ages of 18 and 24 who have tried online dating has nearly tripled, with 27% reporting usage in 2015 compared to only 10% in 2013. This is directly tied to surging use of LBRTD apps among that demographic (Smith, 2016). These statistics have the potential to grow even further as acceptance of online dating has become commonplace, especially among those looking for serious relationships (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017).

Online dating has taken several forms over the last thirty years, from back-page personal ads to more traditional websites like Match.com. The ease and accessibility afforded by these methods pales in comparison to Tinder, where you can swipe through thousands of matches in real-time from the venue of your choice – whether it is a crowded bar or the comfort of your own home. The way that Tinder works is quite simple. Upon logging on, potential matches are shown one at a time with their primary picture, name, age, and (optional) college or work affiliation. Users can choose to see bio text and additional pictures (if provided) by clicking various areas of the screen. Before moving to the next match, a decision must be made about whether or not one wishes to connect with the current profile. This is done through the use of buttons at the bottom of the screen or, more commonly, swiping the profile in one direction or another. A right swipe indicates an affirmative response (the user wishes to match with that person) while a left swipe is negative. If both users swipe right, a match is generated and only at that point can the two users communicate with one another. If either user swipes left, no match is made and the app simply moves on to the next profile.

This research will aim to extend the available literature in the field. While numerous studies have been conducted on homosexual LBRTD app usage (see among others: Birmholtz,

Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Goedel & Duncan, 2015), very little attention has been paid to those with a primarily heterosexual user base. Much of the online dating research on heterosexuals has focused on traditional dating websites instead (see among others: Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Hall, Park, Song & Cody, 2010). While a lot of valuable information has been gained through these studies, LBRTD apps differ from dating websites in several key ways. Most notably, LBRTD apps facilitate quick meetings and are potentially more likely to elicit short-term dating strategies from their users (Shrock, 2015). LBRTD apps also have a significantly smaller space available for profiles. Tinder itself limits users to six photos and 500 characters of bio space. Self-presentation within a strict confine of character limits may differ from the large spans of space afforded by traditional dating sites, for example by causing certain types of information to become overvalued (David & Cambre, 2016). Physical appearance and geographical proximity are arguably much more important in an LBRTD atmosphere than a traditional dating website. This means that users may rely heavily on pictures, some forgoing writing a profile altogether (Ward, 2017). Finally, LBRTD apps offer its users minimal set-up and commitment. For example, to use Tinder for the first time, one simply must log-in with their Facebook credentials and a profile is automatically generated. Within a matter of seconds, someone can be using the app to swipe through potential matches in their area. While traditional dating websites are designed to be accessed often, many people use LBRTD apps sparingly or solely within certain contexts (such as traveling to a new location) (Ranzini & Lutz, 2016).

This research study will address the question, "How do individuals structure their identity and perceive that of others on the dating app Tinder?" This will help to extend the findings of a research study conducted by Janelle Ward (2017), who used semi-structured interviews to

investigate impression management in the profile creation stage of Tinder users from the

Netherlands. While Ward's study focused on all activities associated with the app prior to direct

communication (i.e. also assessing motivations for downloading the app in general), this study

will focus on the profile itself and attempt to confirm some of Ward's key findings in an

American sample while also adding unique insight (i.e. investigating the role of deception in

self-presentation on the app).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Implications

There are three relevant theoretical perspectives that can be used to frame this research question: self-presentation theory, identity theory, and evolutionary theory. The first two of these are rooted in the sociological paradigm of symbolic interactionism. The Thomas Theorem states that if people consider situations to be real, this leads to real consequences (Isaac & Swaine, 1928). While Tinder is largely a simulated space, it is one where people interact with the potential benefit of a real-life encounter. Symbolic interactionism itself is based on the original works of George Herbert Mead, many of which are centered on his concept of the self. According to Mead, the self is a "social structure, and it arises in social experience (Mead, 1934, p. 140)." There are multiple aspects of the self that come out based on the social situation at hand, some even within solitude. However, individuals are not always aware of how these aspects may be portrayed to others. Instead, they use these others as a lens by which to view themselves and their own presentation, altering external behavior accordingly. This concept is referred to as the "looking glass self" (Cooley, 1902).

Goffman's (1978) self-presentation theory is a fundamental model of how people will craft and alter their image to project a specific impression to others. Since people do not know what other people are directly thinking of them, they must rely on cues within social interaction to gain insight. These cues can be manipulated by the individual to then provide some form of control over the impression that they give off (Goffman, 1978). Within this theory, significance is placed not only on one's real self but also the ideal self, the person who one wishes to be even if it is not always grounded in reality. If these two variations of the self do not overlap, an

uncomfortable feeling of discordance known as incongruence may occur (Rogers, 1957). Goffman (1978) defines self-presentation as a person's attempts to manage the way that other people view him or her. These cues can be both verbal, outwardly telling people aspects of oneself such as "I'm a vegetarian", and non-verbal, for instance a picture with a pet to convey one's kindness. The interpretation of these cues is then affected by the social environment which may lead to a person not transmitting their intended message (Goffman, 1978). This facet of Goffman's theory may be particularly likely in an online space with limited room afforded to profile creation.

Hogan (2010) extended Goffman's theory to digital platforms by focusing on self-presentation through social media. He notes that social media contains a number of "artifacts", such as photos and status updates, which are used in what Goffman terms "exhibitions", spaces that exist for people to showcase these artifacts. However, a posting online is not a performance in the traditional sense because it is not directly delivered to the intended audience. Within online self-presentation, there is both an intended audience as well as a hidden audience that consists of others who may have access to posted information (termed the "lowest common denominator"). When posting on an app like Tinder, both audiences must be considered (i.e. what may happen if one's boss were to find their Tinder profile). Hogan (2010) also notes the presence of curators, who often order digital content in a way that is meaningful for the audience. This is seen on Tinder through their proprietary and highly guarded "algorithm", which analyzes a user's desirability to ensure that they are shown similar potential matches. Hogan's update of Goffman's theory is crucial here as it explains how online presentation may differ from that of face-to-face interactions. As the goal on Tinder is often to facilitate an in-person encounter, self-presentation must persist with both goals in mind.

Self-presentation differs even more so on LBRTD apps as non-verbal cues carry elevated weight within the confined space of their profiles. When selecting a potential partner, users of dating sites may focus heavily on pictures or subtle cues in the profile's text, for example mistakes in spelling and grammar (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Photos themselves can contain clues to other aspects of an individual such as their interests or even level of education (Ward, 2017). As motivation to self-present increases, so does motivation to self-present favorably, even possibly to the extent of deception. Dating, generally seen as a "high-stakes" social interaction, especially encourages this type of behavior (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012). On dating sites, self-presentation can be viewed as "sales-oriented". Users are often trying to market themselves just as an advertiser would to a product (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Identity theory, proposed by Stryker and Burke (2000), looks at how the self is affected by various meanings that come with the roles that are displayed in modern society. The more salient a specific identity, the higher the likelihood that it will be activated in a given situation. Additionally, the salience of an identity leads to its organization within a specific hierarchy that contains all of a person's available selves. The more committed one is to a certain identity, the higher that it will be within the hierarchy (Stets & Burke, 2003). In the realm of online dating, this shows that people will not only try to demonstrate their ideal self, but will do so in ways that activate subjectively important aspects of their individual identity (i.e. interests, values, etc.). Stryker and Burke (2000) fuse two traditionally competing views of identity: one as social structure and the other as cognitive schema. This helps explain why people online create identities that might be inconsistent with their true "offline" selves. The social structure on Tinder comes in the form of existing expectations, both normative behavior on the app as well as

7

gender roles. The cognitive schema comes into play with how individuals view their own identity salience and portray it in their profile.

One often obvious facet of dating is that males and females place higher emphases on certain aspects of the opposite sex (Buss, 1988). This can be framed through evolutionary theory. While a primarily psychological perspective, this theory has also been used extensively in sociological research to explain differences in dating behavior between men and women (research studies that have taken this approach include Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; and Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012 among others). Because they do not run the risk of pregnancy, males have little consequence for promiscuity. As a result, they tend to focus on a female's physical attractiveness as a sign of the fitness of her genes. Females, who are heavily invested in a comparatively small number of offspring, instead may normatively concentrate on a man's resources and stability (Buss, 1988). Men are more likely to accept any potential romantic encounter and are especially more apt than women to consent to anonymous sex (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Research on college students shows the males are far more likely to engage in "hookups" involving sexual intercourse, perhaps disproportionately with a small number of permissive females (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Evolutionary theory also may shape what each gender looks for in a partner. Men typically prefer younger women, under the presumption that they are typically more fertile. Women, in turn, prefer older men as they tend to be more mature and financially stable (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2010). These differential preferences may lead males and females to emphasize different aspects of themselves when crafting a dating profile. It should be noted that this theory is reductionist by nature and is based on ad hoc explanations. These biological drives could very well be shaped by prevailing social norms and gender roles.

8

Research on Traditional Dating Sites

Before the advent of the Internet, people used personal ads to find a mate in a virtual space. The ads often reflected what was desirable in a given location and were impacted by gender-specific behaviors. This medium was the backdrop for one of the first studies on selective self-presentation and "online" dating, conducted by Gonzales & Meyers (1993). The researchers found that heterosexual women commonly emphasized their own physical attractiveness. Additionally, heterosexual males were most likely to mention financial attributes and heterosexual females were most likely to report seeking them (Gonzales & Meyers, 1993). It should be noted that personal ads were typically short blurbs of text listed in the classified section of a periodical and generally did not include pictures. Despite these stark differences, many of the self-presentation strategies remained consistent when dating moved "online".

The popularity of the Internet fundamentally changed the way that people communicated with one another. Social interactions could begin and thrive even in the absence of geographical proximity. Unsurprisingly, the Internet quickly became a means to facilitate romantic encounters. What today are called "traditional dating sites", such as Match.com, Yahoo Personals, American Singles, or Webdate, became increasingly more mainstream (Toma & Hancock, 2010). These websites gave users more opportunities for autonomy and personalization than personal ads. People could now update their profile in real-time, upload recent photos, communicate instantaneously through email, and browse through thousands of users with relative ease (Toma & Hancock, 2010).

The very nature of these dating sites led to an important issue in self-presentation that remains crucial today. As the typical goal of these sites is to eventually lead to "real life" interaction, users had to maintain a delicate balance. The information that someone shared must be accurate enough to be portrayed in a face-to-face meeting, but still must be flattering enough to pique initial attraction (Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Birmholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). So while the motivation to stretch the truth online is often high, it can only be realistically afforded to a certain degree. If anything about the profile is potentially false, it must be strategically crafted so that the user would not be immediately "outed" upon their first face-to-face encounter with a potential partner.

While many fear deception online, it may be more of a presentation of one's ideal self rather than true intent to mislead. However, there are still several ways that a person may choose to strategically misrepresent themselves on an online dating profile. One of the most common is to stretch the truth in regards to one's attributes, such as height, weight, and age. This strategic misrepresentation is often correlated with self-monitoring, a personality trait that measures the degree to which a person will publically alter their persona to please a certain audience (Hall, Park, Cody, & Song, 2010). Distinct gender differences exist, as men are more likely to lie in general (Hall, Park, Cody, & Song, 2010). Consistent with the presented theories, males are more likely to provide misinformation about their financial attributes. They are also likely to be dishonest about their height, as tall men are typically seen as more dominant (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). Perhaps surprisingly, they are also more likely to lie about their age (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). In fact, the only attribute that women consistently alter more than men is their weight (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Hall, Park, Cody, & Song, 2010). This finding makes logical sense given that women with high BMIs are less likely to be contacted on dating

10

sites (Hitsch, Hortaczu, & Ariely, 2010). Controlled laboratory research confirms these findings, as men changed their self-reported personality and physical attractiveness when anticipating a date (rather than believing they were simply filling out a "personality questionnaire") but females did not (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012).

Profile pictures are another medium where impression management is key, even if it can be potentially misleading (Hancock & Toma, 2009). There are several ways that an over-idealized presentation can occur. The photo can have discrepancies based on physical characteristics, such as heavy use of makeup or overly-flattering poses. The photo can also be outdated or touched up using photo-editing software such as Photoshop (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Profile pictures sometimes serve the opposite goal however, being used as a way to bolster one's credibility (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). In fact, if an online dater posts an accurate photograph they are more likely to be honest in other aspects due to increased likelihood of detection. Despite this, online daters are likely to be least honest with their photographs than any other aspect of their profile (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). It is estimated that nearly a third of online dating profile pictures contain a substantial degree of inaccuracy (Hancock & Toma, 2009). There are many factors that determine which users will post inaccurate photos. Less attractive people are more likely to use potentially deceptive photos and women are more likely than men (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Female profile pictures contain nearly three times the amount of misleading information, most notably that they are more likely to post older photographs, thus depicting themselves as younger (Hancock & Toma, 2009). All of this is unsurprising given the male preference for younger females and disproportionate emphasis on physical attractiveness.

In the world of online dating, not all deception is created equal. For example, if someone has slightly lighter hair in their profile picture it is generally seen as inconsequential while lies about relationship status are viewed as particularly severe (Hancock & Toma, 2009). It should be reiterated that not all online daters are deceptive in their profiles and many seen as misleading do so unintentionally. For some, their profile reflects their "ideal self" even if that is not what is always on display (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Females in general typically see their photos as accurate even if independent raters claim otherwise. This could be because they believe they can alter their appearance to match the photograph, for example through enhancing their hair and makeup (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Research on social media in general has found that women are more likely to post close-up photos that emphasize the face while males prefer full-body images (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012). This may be because a pretty face for females and a muscular body for men fits into the gendered nature of what is seen as attractive.

Research on Homosexual LBRTD Apps

Initial research on LBRTD apps has focused on homosexual variants because they were popular before their heterosexual counterparts (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). While there is not perfect inferential generalization between the two platforms, insight can be derived from looking at some of the self-presentation strategies employed. One of the most commonly studied of these apps is Grindr, which caters specifically to men seeking men. Grindr has over 3.5 million users and is used in 192 different countries (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014). Gay men are drawn to Grindr for several reasons, including ease of use and relative anonymity (Gudelunas, 2012). These apps are commonly accessed by their users, with

one study reporting that Grindr users opened the app an average of 8.38 times per day and spent over an hour using it (Goedel & Duncan, 2015).

However, self-presentation strategies on apps catering to gay men can also be unique because users must combat the dual stigmatization of the LGBQT community in general as well as the fact that dating apps are often associated with casual sex. Euphemisms are a common strategy for communicating intentions and attempting to reduce these negative connotations. Language analysis of profiles show that the word "looking" is the most common word used and serves to communicate both preferences and dislikes. An analysis of what followed the word "looking" showed that people who were looking for casual sex often used euphemisms such as "fun" and "NSA (no strings attached)". When people used "not looking", they were unlikely to use these euphemisms and instead mention the more obvious verbiage of "hookups" (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014).

Research has found six distinct motivations for using Grindr: social inclusion (such as receiving compliments), sex, friendship / socializing, entertainment, romantic relationships, and community (meeting others in the gay community) (Van de Wiele & Tong, 2014). Despite its reputation as a "hookup app", about twice as many users report socializing (rather than casual sex) as one of their primary motivations. Users seeking long-term relationships were also more likely to be honest on their profile, while those seeking either social inclusion or sex were the most likely to deceptively self-present (Van de Wiele & Tong, 2014). Despite catering to a different target demographic, many of the strategies used on Grindr also apply to dating apps primarily intended for straight individuals, such as Tinder.

Research on Tinder Itself

As mentioned in the introduction, Tinder is the most common LBRTD app for heterosexuals and its use is steadily increasing (Smith, 2016). Tinder is predicated on a quick, swiping action that has the potential to feel like a "game" to its users (David & Cambre, 2016). As previously mentioned, users on Tinder are presented with profiles and can quickly swipe left (for no) and right (for yes). Research on Tinder is still in its infancy. One intriguing recent finding is that both males and females who use Tinder report increased negative perceptions about their bodies (Miller, 2016). For the men in the study, but not the women, Tinder use was also negatively correlated with levels of self-esteem (Miller, 2016). Directionality is unknown however, so the findings could possibly indicate that people with low self-esteem are drawn to the app rather than the app itself causing the decline (Miller, 2016).

Motivation for using Tinder sometimes differs from that of traditional dating sites. Tinder is a social phenomenon, sometimes used for strictly entertainment purposes rather than with the intention of actually meeting someone (David & Cambre, 2016). While Tinder, like Grindr, has a reputation as a "hookup app", researchers have found six distinct motivations for using Tinder: hooking up/sex, friendship, relationships, meeting people while traveling, self-validation (boosting one's own self esteem by gathering "matches" and eliciting compliments), and entertainment (simply browsing through profiles with no intention of a face-to-face encounter) (Ranzini & Lutz, 2016). More users reported being motivated by love than casual sex, refuting the "hookup app" stereotype (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). Additional research has found that the higher level of sexual permissiveness seen in Tinder users can be explained simply by the fact that they are younger in general than the users of traditional dating apps (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016). There are also key demographic differences in regards

to motivation. Men outnumber women on the app by approximately a 3:2 ratio (McGrath, 2015) and numerous studies have confirmed than they are more likely than women to use Tinder for the purpose of casual sex (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016; Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016). They are also more likely to use it for relationships and travel encounters while women are more likely to use the app for self-validation and friendship (Ranzini & Lutz, 2016). Several motives, such as love and casual sex, are positively correlated with age (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). Low self-esteem also serves as a strong predictor of which people are likely to use the app for the purpose of casual sex (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017).

Demographic variables also predict who is more likely to use potentially misleading information when crafting their profile. Tinder users overall report more true self-perception than deception, showing that for the most part people believe they are being honest. Those who use the app for self-validation are the most likely to deceptively self-present, followed by those seeking casual sex. This trend was also disproportionately present among homosexual and highly-educated users (Ranzini & Lutz, 2016).

Ward's (2017) study aimed to investigate "pre-match impression management" in Tinder users. Through semi-structured interviews with Dutch participants, she assessed motivation and identity construction in Tinder users in each step prior to actually finding a match. A number of insights were gleaned from her data. All interviewees had at least two photos on Tinder, though not all chose to include text in their profile. One of the main motivators in choosing pictures was the opinion of friends. They tended to choose pictures that their friends liked or approved of. Number of Facebook likes was also used as a shortcut to assess the popularity of prospective profile pictures (Ward, 2017).

In addition, Ward (2017) found that her interviewees often "experimented" with their profiles, trying new pictures and text to see the result. Users reported quickly judging other users based on their initial profile and others' profiles became a way to learn both dos and don'ts for one's own. An example of this is that both genders tried to downplay overt sexuality in their profiles, seeing it as an undesirable trait (Ward, 2017). Overall, "All interviewees strove to make a positive impression, essentially aiming for a balance between an ideal and an authentic self-presentation. They hoped to demonstrate the kind of person they are, and, simultaneously, the sort of person they wanted to attract (Ward, 2017, p. 1652)."

Ward's (2017) study serves as the backdrop for the current investigation. The presented literature frames online dating as a unique social space with its own norms and constraints. Both sociological and psychological theoretical lenses provide insight into gender-specific behavior online and predict how users will craft the most advantageous identity given the space provided. Tinder is no exception and its wide popularity is largely based on its ease of use. It is anticipated that self-presentation on Tinder will be a deliberate process which also involves the feedback of others to provide insight into the identity being constructed. Users will be motivated to show their ideal self while keeping any enhancements realistic enough to predicate a face-to-face encounter. While Ward (2017) focused extensively on impression management, this study will look at its interaction with perception of others to shape normative behavior on the app. Since a grounded theory approach will be used, no hypotheses will be derived and instead confirmation of background literature will emerge directly through the data.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twenty three participants took part in this research study as recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All were either current or recent college students at large universities in the Southeast U.S. Fourteen females participated (age range: 18-25, mean age: 20.9) along with nine males (age range: 19-24, mean age: 21.1). The emphasis on relatively young college-aged participants was purposive considering the aim of the study as they are the most common demographic to use LBRTD apps. Recruitment for the study was not always easy and participants had to be gathered through a variety of methods. Five of the participants were from the researcher's personal contacts, three were gained through various means of snowball sampling (two participants brought their significant others who they had met on the app), one responded to an ad placed on the university's Reddit page, three responded to flyers that were hung and distributed on campus, and the remaining eleven participated for extra credit in their sociology course. Little difference was seen in the interviews of those from each of the various recruitment methods and all self-selected to take part in the research. Most of the respondents were heterosexual and indicated that they only swiped on the opposite sex on the app, however one homosexual male, three bisexual females, and one heterosexual female who also swiped on females for platonic friendships participated in the study. See Appendix A for a table of participant pseudonyms, age, gender, and sexual orientation.

Methodology

The research was conducted by way of semi-structured interviews. This provides a standardized set of questions for each participant as well as flexibility to explore insights unique to each interview (which is helpful in expanding upon themes in a grounded theory approach). Semi-structured interviews were especially appropriate for the current research as they mimic a conversational style, allow researchers to examine a potentially unknown topic in-depth, and provide a thorough understanding of the answers provided (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). They also offer versatility to explore potentially conflicting accounts and discern differences between interviews (Fylan, 2005). An interview schedule was created (see Appendix B) that was rooted in the available literature on LBRTD apps and informed by the theoretical insights of self-presentation, identity, and evolutionary biology. The intent was to explore questions in five areas: general questions about demographics and motivations, profile pictures, profile text, perceptions of others, and the real and perceived use of deception. The interview schedule was sent through email prior to the interview so participants could familiarize themselves with the questions. The interviews were held in private locations, which consisted of conference rooms in the sociology department, study rooms at the library, or a secured, confidential location at the researcher's place of employment. Once participants arrived, they were shown the informed consent document, the audio recorder was tested, and then questioning began. Participants were encouraged to use their phones to access their Tinder profile to give the most accurate information, though only a small number of the participants actually did so. After questioning was over, participants were asked holistically if there was anything further they wanted to add, then if there was any part of the interview that they wished to omit from the analysis (all participants declined). There were no major ethical concerns and all policies were approved by

the university's IRB. Each participant read the aforementioned informed consent document and verbally indicated that they understood their rights as a research participant. While the topic of dating and self-presentation has the potential to be mildly embarrassing, there were no signs of distress and several participants communicated after the interview that they enjoyed it and even found it fun.

<div align="center">Analytical Strategy</div>

The data collected was analyzed based on a grounded theory approach. This was intended to derive theory from empirical data itself rather than the converse, using data to confirm a preexisting theory. This perspective begins with rich qualitative data and finds prevailing themes, which are then coded and summarized (Habib & Hinojosa, 2015). LaRossa (2005) recommends three stages in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding sets the stage for looking for higher-order concepts and serves as the initial process of finding similarities in the data. This is based on the concept-indicator model, which looks for key indicators that highlight a concept and compares them to other concepts that were coded the same way. Open coding additionally involves the initial development of categories, interrelated thematic areas that underlie the data. Axial coding occurs within categories and links categories with subcategories. Here, the key is to discover axes, or key themes central to the data being collected. Selective coding is when the researcher chooses the overall story to tell with the data. This occurs after the key themes have been selected and now must be conveyed to the reader (LaRossa, 2005). Within a grounded theory approach, the constant comparative method is one of the main guiding principles. Here, statements are compared both within and

among interviews to find commonalities and illustrate themes (Charmaz, 2006). This manifested in the present study as a dynamic process of continuously revisiting the interview data and allowing inductive data collection to shape subsequent questioning. Open coding began with finding commonalities on a question-by-question basis while axial coding structured these initial categories into well-defined themes. Selective coding produced the narrative that is outlined in the following section. Data collection occurred until theoretical saturation, or the point at which the data can yield no new additional insights, had been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While there is no absolute threshold for how many interviews are needed within a grounded theory approach, research has shown that as few as 12 interviews can provide saturation with themes beginning to emerge from the first six (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The criteria for theoretical saturation were satisfied in this investigation when new data simply began to fit within existing themes rather than creating new understandings, leading to a sample size of twenty-three participants. Because the sample of this study was homogenous in several aspects (i.e. same age range, all current or recent college students), theoretical saturation could potentially be achieved more quickly.

To illustrate the use of a grounded theory approach, consider the following quote from Roxanne (a pseudonym) that will be later discussed in the section on "prettiness", which is discussed as an indicator of the theme "idealized but authentic self-presentation":

"The pictures that I use [are] normally pictures where I'm out so I usually have make-up on and I'm probably dressed a lot better than I normally would be on a daily basis because I don't wear makeup every single day. So yeah, they're just more like... they're the better version of me I would say."

Several key words and phrases represent this indicator including "makeup", "dressed a lot better than I normally would", and "better version of me". The overall premise here is that Roxanne uses an idealized version of her own physical appearance to attract matches on the app, but the depiction she portrays is still genuine to her true conception of self. Other themes and indicators were uncovered in the same fashion and used to create the narrative that I express in the analysis that follows.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Questions on Demographics and Motives

The survey's initial questions sought insight into motives behind the use of Tinder in general and how it fit into participants' overall dating scheme. While not part of the study's overall aim (and thus not incorporated into its four initial themes), these questions served as ice breakers and provided understanding of how use of the app is embedded into the way present-day singles meet one another. Though the sample was relatively homogeneous, consisting primarily of college students, the way that Tinder was used varied from person-to-person. The majority reported a short-term style, using the app for a limited time frame and distinct purpose then deleting it out of "boredom" or dissatisfaction with the results. For a few participants, spikes of usage coincided with major life milestones such as a significant birthday or moving to a new location. For example, Frankie (a pseudonym, as are all participant names in this analysis), who had just turned 21, reported that being at an age where he was now legally able to drink and enter certain establishments led to a major increase in his success on the app. Gloria, also 21, mentioned that she was most active on the app when she first came to college and now only uses it sparingly.

Despite the stigmatization that often comes with Tinder, very few participants in the study actually reported casual "hookups" as a primary motivation for using the app. Similar to the findings of Ranzini and Lutz (2016), they used the app for a variety of reasons. Mary, 25, revealed that though she was aware of the reputation of Tinder, it was something that she wanted to distance herself from,

"Obviously the app is mainly used just for hookup and kind of what it said. But I know when [men on the app] ever did say they wanted to meet up, I kind of said straight away through the message that I didn't want to… or we can meet up but I don't want a hookup or a relationship."

Though Mary did eventually find a relationship from the app, this was unintentional and her initial motivation was solely friendships and conversations. Any sort of intimacy was out of the question in her mind. She was not the only participant who was aware of the stigmatization behind LBRTD apps despite being an active user. Sarah, 21, became interested in using the app for long-term dating when she saw other friends having success. She said, "I kept it more of a joke at first, then after… I was like, 'Oh wait, this is actually a real thing,' because both of my roommates met boyfriends on Tinder." Here viewing the experiences of others led to a change in the perception of the app, in this case considering its potential utility for finding a relationship. The prevailing view among participants was that Tinder was more than a "hookup app"; it was an avenue for people to interact in various ways. According to Frankie,

"I think it does get unfairly branded as a hookup app. I think that's pretty inaccurate too. At least in my experience, a lot of the women I've met were definitely looking for something more a lot of the times. I think it just depends on the demographic you attract."

There were exceptions to this however, as two male subjects did report that they were most interested in using the app to find partners for casual sex. One of these was Doug, 23, who stated, "The best times I found on Tinder [were] when you went out at night and you just swipe right at night and obviously that when most of the stuff goes down." Adam, 21, cited "hookups"

as a major reason for his use of the app and revealed that he had a date directly after interview with a female that he had begun talking to only the day prior.

The young adults in my study also had diverse views on Tinder's role in modern-day dating as a whole. Mike, 20, was drawn to the aspect of being able to keep his options open without actively having to date:

> "Tinder was kind of me actively putting feelers out there. But, it was very indirect… When I was drinking with buddies or something like that, there was no going up to a girl and trying to get her number or anything. So Tinder was like a way for me to circumvent actively looking for a girlfriend or looking for a relationship or something like that. There was a real passive kind of approach. Convenience was the word."

In this sense, Tinder was a way for people to keep their options open without having to expend a lot of effort at actually trying to date and meet someone. Additionally, it was often used as a sort of training in social encounters. This was mentioned by Julia, 19, who said she used the app to talk to males because she was "guy shy". Frankie added, "It was a nice way to go on dates without the pressure of asking someone out. Because you both like each other [through mutual right swipes on the app]." Participants in this sense were able to interact with potential partners with little fear of true rejection. On the app, rejection is indirect and typically unbeknownst to the user as no notification is generated from a left swipe. Tinder also broadened social networks and exposed people to others that they might not have encountered otherwise. Adam noted, "There's so many more girls you can find on there than you can run into on campus." However, he also found that this could be a detriment by adding, "But, I've noticed that the relationships and friendships that I make on campus and in real-life versus meeting first on Tinder, they tend

24

to be a little more solid and concrete." So Tinder was a convenient mechanism for finding new people to interact with, but did not always lead to the same lasting interaction that stems from meeting someone organically. Another major trend was that many participants in the study felt like online apps were essential for any type of real success in today's dating climate. Tyler, 22, noted that "a lot of people around my age don't really approach people in public anymore," while Nathan, 20, added, "I wish I could just go up and say hi to a girl without it being very risky. A lot of girls are really on edge when a guy will just come up and say hi." In a way, face-to-face interaction has been devalued (or is seen as potentially chancy) and people who may not necessarily prefer to use dating apps still feel that they have to in order to find the best array of eligible partners.

Returning to the research question of how people construct their identity and perceive that of others on Tinder, four central themes emerged from the data that characterize behavior on the app. Firstly, users strove for an *authentic yet idealized self-presentation*. As most people on the app sought eventual face-to-face encounters, they portrayed their best side but also one that could be realistically upheld in person. Second, *gender norms shape the way that people behave on the app*. Males and females' differential expectations and gender normative behavior on Tinder (i.e. males typically sending the first message) led to certain aspects of profiles being intentionally designed to elicit a certain response. Next, self-presentation strategies on Tinder are *deliberately crafted while trying to look nonchalant*. Users often spent substantial time and effort considering their image while also trying to appear apathetic and avoid the implied neediness that characterizes traditional dating sites. Finally, users were motivated by *concerns of "catfishing" and the authenticity of others*. While participants felt they were accurate in their

own identity, multiple means were often used both to bolster one's own credibility and verify that of potential matches.

Authentic yet Idealized

Consistent with the findings of Ward (2017), the Tinder users in the present study tried to stay true with their profiles while also putting their best side on display. Some of the properties of this theme included physical appearance, humor, sociability, common values and interests, tactical use of group photos, and using aspects of the self to filter out undesirable others. This led to indicators such as "prettiness", "flexing" (for males), being "funny", and "having friends". These were seen in participants' photos, text, and even emojis. Many interview participants were consciously aware of this strategy. For instance, Roxanne, 18, reported,

> "I think it's pretty authentic but I think it's the better version of me. I do study
> and I'm with my dog, but I mean I do a lot of other things too. I feel like I focus
> on the motivated aspects of my personality when obviously I have off days too
> and that's not really something that's in my profile."

Her point was echoed by Ginger, 24, who said,

> "I think it's at least 90% authentic. I don't think it can be always 100% honest
> because if every photo is of you smiling… your whole life isn't constantly you
> smiling, so you are putting a certain face out there. But generally you're a good
> happy person, so you put those good photos of you."

Each of the interviewees discussed similar strategies, a focus on what Goffman (1978) termed the "ideal self". The profiles on Tinder are crafted to elicit attention and attempt to stand out among the thousands of other singles on the app. Users must give their very best impression in hopes of attracting a match. In this process, emphasis falls to one's perceived best features and how to enhance them.

Physical Attractiveness

The ideal self was predicated in a number of ways. As men focus more on a female's physical aspects (Buss, 1988), female Tinder users paid close attention to their pictures and the impression they gave off. This was a way to elicit positive responses and right swipes on the app regardless of underlying motive. When speaking of her selection of photos, Gloria stated,

"I always pick the best one. I never pick one where it's not the best… I use the pictures that show me as being most pretty… nice outfits, just those in general, and mostly selfies that just show my face."

The emphasis on "prettiness" and personal appearance was a common theme among the females that I interviewed. Roxanne points out,

"The pictures that I use [are] normally pictures where I'm out so I usually have make-up on and I'm probably dressed a lot better than I normally would be on a daily basis because I don't wear makeup every single day. So yeah, they're just more like… they're the better version of me I would say."

Concerning her photos, Bianca, 19, added,

"It's a lot of selfies, then a couple of pictures of me standing up so you see what I look like standing up. Then one of me and my friends so it's like, 'Hey, I look great,' and here's how I look standing up and here's me with a friend."

This was a strategy that had the potential for success, as male respondents often reported physical attraction as a primary reason to swipe right on the app. When asked what stuck out to him as positive in female profiles, Nathan said, "I mean, number one thing is obviously if I find them attractive. If I don't find them attractive, then I'm not going to swipe right. That's the number one thing." Adam was more specific, mentioning that he enjoyed women "showing cleavage. Obviously guys like bikini pics and stuff like that… definitely a lot of bikini pics." This should be no surprise, especially given that the nature is the app is that photos are shown upfront and you have to put forth effort (by clicking) to actually read a user's bio. As men are more likely to use the app to find sexual partners (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016; Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016), aspects of a female that show attractiveness and reveal the body have the ability to be successful. Female self-presentation was highly focused on creating a lasting physical impression.

This trend does not mean that males couldn't emphasize certain features of their physical appearance as well. When describing his profile pictures, Adam mentioned,

"So this first one, I'm on the beach holding up a Frisbee in a tank top and I'm definitely flexing. So, there's that. That's the first one. Second one, I'm sitting on a dock just smiling, just yeah. Next one, I'm on a wave runner, also flexing."

The emphasis on flexing [showing his muscles] shows what he feels is apt to catch the eye of prospective females on the app. Adam was one of the males who reported being motivated by

casual sex, which may explain the prominence of physical appearance as a strategy for his own profile as well as something that he was looking for in others.

Humor

Another way that participants optimized their self-presentation was through the use of humor. This could be displayed in both pictures and bio text. An example of the former is Ashley, 21, who's initial profile photo features herself "in a taco suit". Tyler described an elaborate, humorous photo that he and his friends took specifically to use on the app,

> "I took this picture with my friend and the idea was just to make the most
> ridiculous picture possible basically. We're both drinking beer and we have these
> Japanese pornographic hentai body pillows and it's shot on a disposable camera…
> It's cut out of the picture, but we're watching blank static on this Hello Kitty CRT
> TV. And that's just something I have on my profile because it's weird."

In this sense, humor becomes idealized. Though few people are that zany constantly in their outside lives, it is another trait that can be emphasized in a limited presentation space to set oneself apart from the competition. In fact, users were often quick to mention that this humor was not as much of a true part of their personality as the profile would have it seem. Despite her taco photo, Ashley stated,

> "I mean I'm not as fun… I portray myself as more fun than I am because in real
> life I'm kind of boring. I just sit in my room and do homework or go to Starbucks
> and do homework or I work a lot."

Again, though humor is an authentic aspect of the self, it can also become idealized to show one at their funniest rather than at a typical moment in their ordinary daily lives.

Humor was also a major area of emphasis in the bio as users attempted to portray the best sides of their personality through text as well as photos. This was often manifested in short, one-liner type statements that were included in the bio. One especially notable tagline came from Victoria, 23, who mentioned, "I did put 'Swipe right?' and then I put 'Does a bear shit in the woods?" Tyler's entire bio simply was "hot boy doing hot boy things." Adam composed his own humorous poem: "They say the funniest way to a woman's heart is through her funny bone, but I don't believe it exists. It's an urban myth, nothing more, the same as Bigfoot and the clitoris." Nathan claimed that he was looking for "a girl to throw goldfish in my mouth from across the room." While males on the app were more likely to emphasize humor in their profile, it was by no means an exclusively male strategy. In addition to Victoria's joke, Ashley mentioned, "I need someone to marry for FAFSA money." The use of humor served simply as another way to emphasize one's positive qualities within the space provided.

Group Photos

Yet another major strategy on the app was the use of group photos to show that a user indeed has friends and is not socially undesirable. This is a known strategy on the app, as Felix, 19, pointed out when he said, "In the group photos, I was trying to emphasize… I learned this from other people… that you are a people-person, that you like hanging out with other people." When asked why she included group pictures in her profile, Bianca, replied, "[to show] that I hang out with people, that I'm not a weirdo creep, that I have friends." Frankie added, "Just to

look like I'm sociable. I made sure it was women in the group just to kinda look like, 'Ok, this guy's not a creep. He doesn't look like a creep, he has lady friends." Mike, 20, echoed the same theme in his interview when he mentioned, "just to show, hey I'm a sociable person who isn't just some weirdo who doesn't have friends." When asked about their motives behind the inclusion of group photos, many participants used the same types of terminology such as "weirdo" and "creep". In this way, self-presentation is idealized by distancing oneself from stigmatized "others". Rather than simply knowing what traits are valued, Tinder users were also highly aware of the aspects that were potentially unappealing and tried to provide evidence that they did not possess those undesirable qualities.

Common Values and Interests

The use of subjectively important aspects of the self was utilized to show one's best side. College affiliation was used not only a filtering strategy (to try to find other like-minded college students) but also to show some aspect of the self. Alyssa, 18, chose not to include a bio at all, but used one of the features within the app that allows users to show their current workplace and education. When asked why she chose to add her university to her profile, she stated, "because I match with a lot of [college] guys, and it shows that I'm smart." Mary deliberately kept her college visible even after graduating as a way to maintain her university affiliation as an aspect of her social identity, even if it wasn't current. She mentioned,

> "It just said I was a [college] student even though I already graduated recently,
>
> but I didn't change it because where I was is just a college town and I feel like

some people, especially [college] students, they kind of look down at people who

go to community college."

Similar to the inclusion of group photos, a distinct strategy for using college affiliation could be to distance oneself from perceived negativity rather than emphasizing the positive aspects that come with being a university student, such as affluence or the perceived intelligence mentioned above.

Text also served as a way to highlight one's uniqueness and the values that they found most important about themselves. Bianca referenced this strategy as a strong motive when discussing her bio text,

"If someone found [my profile] funny or interesting we would have the same

wavelength and [I'm] also trying to emphasize my "wokeness" [Woke is a slang

term that emphasizes being enlightened and aware of social issues]… because I

feel like I'm trying to show that I'm aware of a lot of things and I'm interested in

a lot of things and I know about a lot of things."

She later adds that her profile mentioned that she "touched Harry Styles [a popular singer formerly of the boy band One Direction]" as another way to add a unique detail about herself, showing her experiencing a rare encounter with a coveted celebrity. Cassie, 22, revealed, "I put that my favorite place is Costco… At one point I did put I love holographic Pokemon cards… like little weird quirks like that." Underlying all of these strategies is that Tinder users were emphasizing the traits that they subjectively felt were most important and positive about themselves. When asked about his photos, Nathan was quick to point out, "Well, I look happy in them. That's the big one. I don't want people to think I'm some grouchy guy." Doug said that

his photos stressed "professionalism. I like to keep a professional look in all of my social media." Cassie indicated, "I like food. So meeting people, grabbing food is kind of the point." So while self-presentation was often idealized, which aspects became idealized were often centered on the individual's own values and tastes.

When one chooses an ideal image to display on a dating app, they must be cautious not to stretch the truth too far. There is a certain level of validity that is crucial for Tinder users and they must maintain a delicate balance between their idealized and authentic selves. If one wishes to facilitate any sort of in-person encounter with a match, they must present a side of the self that is still achievable. Frankie, who was primarily motivated by long-term dating, was intimately aware of just how idealized his presentation strategy had become on the app:

> "If you were to look at my photos and kind of determine my life as revolved
> around that then that would be very wrong. Like I said, it's hobbies that I do very
> rarely on occasion… I actually went hiking recently, within the last month. But
> let's say in the past five months, I've only gone hiking twice. But if you look at
> my photos, it probably implies that I go more often than that… you have to show
> that you're a fun guy, stuff like that, when in reality we probably stay home and
> play a lot of video games."

This adventurous and outdoorsy side that he emphasized on the app was only a small and relatively rare side of his true persona. While he genuinely did enjoy the hobbies he listed, they were something that were only rarely part of his life. Bianca added, ""I feel like that's deception just common among all social media. We just want to put our best idealized selves forward." While there was an undertone of authenticity, the end result was often significantly idealized.

33

Filtering Out Undesirable Others

One final strategy included the use of text to filter out undesirable others. Cassie gave a unique example of this when she mentioned,

> "So I was in Utah for a bit and… it's a Mormon state… so just to filter out what
>
> I'm actually seeing… is maybe some alcohol emojis because I'm not Mormon.
>
> And it was very common for other Mormons [to be on Tinder] looking for
>
> Mormons. So that was the only thing really changing in terms of trying to get a
>
> different crowd of people."

So while not a heavy drinker herself, the use of alcohol emojis on her profile served the purpose of overemphasizing a minor aspect of her personality to eliminate a large number of unwanted potential matches. Julia had a similar issue when she found that many guys contacted her on the app with drastically different motives than she possessed:

> "Initially, I would have people coming up like messaging me about… everything
>
> just fits into smoking or something... because at first people are like, "Hey, want
>
> to meet up to smoke?" and I'm just like, "Nooooo. I just feel like after that
>
> [changing her profile] it kind of narrowed it down."

In this way, she was able to emphasize her motives for using the app to paint herself as undesirable to those who she did not wish to engage. This strategy could also cause her to be seen as more appealing to those who share the same intentions or lifestyle habits.

An Authentic Summary

Each of the aspects discussed in this section shares a common theme. The Tinder users sampled would focus on a small number of subjectively important traits (physical appearance, sociability, etc.) and emphasize those to please, or sometimes discourage, a certain segment of their audience. There was nothing intentionally misleading about this strategy though it did paint a picture that sometimes failed to represent everyday life. Tinder users, with only a brief chance to make a first impression, wished to craft the most ideal identity that they could. However, what was ideal was unique to the individual and tailored to the type of person that they wished to attract.

Gender Norms Shape Behavior on the App

Another major thematic area arose as it became clear that males and females had a very different experience when using the app. Females were more successful at garnering matches overall and in turn could attract partners with minimal effort. Not only was this a widely known fact among respondents of both genders, it influenced self-presentation to a significant degree. Some of the key properties of this theme include females being more selective (i.e. indicated by the use of qualifiers in their bios), males aware as their role as initiators (i.e. looking for "conversation starters" in female bios), the use of dogs in male profiles, and the use of humor to deflect from typical gender norms (i.e. emphasizing a less than ideal male body). As a whole, these indicators showed that gender was a major determinant of behavior of the app, whether it was something that was emphasized or ridiculed.

Female Choosiness

Consistent with the findings of Clark and Hatfield (1989), males were far less choosy when swiping on the app leading to females more easily garnering matches. This led to a dynamic where females could sit back and be selective, waiting for guys to come to them. Frankie mentioned, "I know with girls as soon as they start swiping they get 'likes' avalanching them." Males on the other hand had to resort to measures designed to increase their chances. Adam described a strategy of swiping right on every profile to widen his pool of potential matches: "A lot of times I don't even bother looking. I just swipe, swipe, swipe, swipe. I feel like a lot of guys do that too." Felix mentioned that he did not always read the bios of females and focused more on the girl's physical appearance: "Sometimes, depending on the day, I would just swipe through photos. I felt like an 'average guy on Tinder." Because males already outnumber females on the app (McGrath, 2015) and they were willing to swipe right more often, it became much easier for females to instantly connect with willing males. While males needed to stand out from the crowd to find success, females could sometimes employ a minimalist approach and still find plenty of potential options (especially if she was physically attractive). This led to an overall devaluation of bios among female participants. Mary mentioned, "So in the bio I think I only had two or three things, like really short." Alyssa forwent writing a bio altogether, saying, "I honestly never had a bio, because… I feel like bios are super cringey [cringeworthy]." Cassie said that her bio included "just what I like to do, where I like to go, and a bunch of emojis." In this sense, females had to concern themselves much less about presenting a wealth of information up front because they knew that they would be able to secure matches regardless. In this sense, self-presentation strategies could be minimal and focused solely on a couple of pictures, yet still effective.

Because females could afford to be choosier on the app, they sometimes mentioned qualifiers, lists of negative qualities that they did not want in a male, in their bios. Though this was not a strategy expressly mentioned by any of the females that I spoke with, it was mentioned by nearly every male as something they found negative when swiping through female profiles. On the contrary, none of the 23 interviews mentioned qualifiers being used by males. As an example of this, when asked about his dislikes Juan mentioned,

"Nothing really, unless it's I only like so-and-so type of guy or I'm looking for a sugar daddy or something specific… I only date Hispanics or I only date black or I only date white or I only date 6 foot and up and stuff like that."

However later, Juan did point out that this was only a turn-off if he did not meet the stated criteria. If girls were looking for someone with the same attributes as him, their use of qualifiers did not bother him. Not all males in my sample agreed however. Nathan, felt that this exclusionary approach made females appear stuck-up and conceited. He said, "That just kind of comes off somewhat snooty. Like, I'm so fantastic that you have to be perfect... No one's perfect." Mike added, "If you are asking for certain characteristics on such a limited space that you have on Tinder, then you are probably not a person that I would want to meet up with in real life anyway." This could potentially be a strategy for self-preservation and avoiding the negative feeling of being rejected. Adam saw the use of qualifiers as a double-standard, responding, "It's like how would you feel [as a female] if someone says don't even bother if you're not x amount of pounds or if you're not blue eyes or brown eyes." These comments show two aspects of gendered self-presentation on Tinder. Firstly, since females attracted a large number of matches they could stand to focus on what why they should not choose a male rather than why the male

should choose them. Secondly, males overwhelmingly disliked the approach, particularly when it disqualified them as a potential match and weakened their chances.

On an app where the males often have to stand out to attract a female, there was certainly a sense of trying to be dominant in one's specific domain. Tyler described Tinder as "a constant game of out-alphaing each other in your own field of attraction." The exact "field" was subjective to the participant, but for Tyler it was appearing as disinterested and apathetic as possible. In his interview, he discussed how he felt when he encountered male profiles that exhibited this trait of "apathy" to a larger extent than he did:

> "So, usually whenever I'm at a certain iteration in my profile… like I'm a cool guy… cool, ironic, whatever and then I meet someone who's even more apathetic than me and I'm like, 'Wow, I've gotta chase that.' It sound ridiculous when you're talking about who you are as a person and looking at other people's profiles like 'I've gotta chase this new fad' or whatever. But it's how we are sociologically."

So while apathy isn't considered to be a typical feature of male attractiveness, it was something that Tyler felt that he had to demonstrate more so than any other male on Tinder. Being able to showcase dominant levels of apathy is a behavior that may be unique to an online environment. It can't be reliably mimicked in face-to-face interactions because, as Tyler pointed out, "It's just a lot of people sitting in a bar not talking to each other basically." Instead, the app gives males an opportunity to show their dominance and stand out in a specific area, whether that is apathy, humor, or anything else that they choose to emphasize.

Males as Initiators

Another of the most oft-mentioned gender norms on the app was that males are typically expected to initiate conversation once a match had been made. Alyssa pointed out, "I don't know any females who message first on Tinder. It is always the guy who messages first and I've never messaged anyone first." This is no different than in real-life encounters, where males are expected to make the first move. On Tinder, where females are more easily able to match and find potential suitors, males then must find unique ways to initiate conversation. The fact that males nearly always open the conversation was often considered when deciding what information to potentially include in one's profile. Oftentimes, males beginning a conversation on the app by simply saying hello was seen as unoriginal and undesirable to females. Mary described this approach as "very tedious and boring." Men instead oftentimes used a strategy of focusing on the content in a woman's profile to tailor an initial greeting specifically targeted to her. With this in mind, females would deliberately add specific information to their bio so that males would have a "conversation starter" after matching. Tyler was highly aware of this strategy and mentioned, "Actually, this is another aspect of Tinder… it's very rare that the girl messages first. So usually I'm just trying to read their bio to come up with something and then it turns into a conversation." Mike added,

> "It's kind of weird because as a male… you are kind of the initiator even in these online apps. So you are more going off of what's on their bio and if you get the conversation going then maybe they will check yours to maybe have some snappy comment."

This was further reiterated by Nathan, who found it frustrating when girls did not include something in their bio to draw off for initial conversation:

"A lot of times [females] will complain, 'Oh no one ever says anything but hey to me.' But I don't know who you are besides the fact that I think you're pretty, and if I just say, 'Hey, you're pretty,' how's that going to come off?'"

In the absence of a detailed bio, males would have to find something unique in the pictures to mention, as in the case of Frankie who met his current girlfriend on the app and initiated the conversation by complimenting her eyebrows. This fits in with the gendered norms of the app, where males will draw from physical appearance in the absence of other information. The theme among these male interviewees was that the norm that males must initiate conversation was something that they heavily considered when swiping through females on the app.

Because females knew that males were deliberately scanning profiles for approach strategies, this factored in to the information that they chose to include. To aid males in finding something notable to say, females could choose to provide humorous one-liners, unique tidbits about themselves, or potential mutual interests. When asked why she included certain humorous aspects in her bio (such as the fact that she was her fifth grade class president), Mary replied, "I guess it was just kinda trying for if they did message me then they would have something funny to say back instead of the same generic, 'Hey, how are you?'" Sarah, whose profile included the tagline "Bad at bios, good at Vine references," said that she added that specific line to her profile because of "how it would start the conversation, like [male matches] mentioning something either they saw on the pictures or in the bio. So it made it easy." Ginger tried the same approach by mentioning her interest in travel, but found that her results were mixed. She said,

"So sometimes of course you get the people who are like, 'Oh, I love to travel. Where have you been?' and that kinda starts a conversation there. Then, there's some people that just don't care and they're just kinda swiping through so they

didn't care what your interests were, probably didn't even look at it, and then just

having random conversations. "

So even though females did appreciate males who focused on their profile when initiating conversation, it was not necessarily essential to elicit a female reply. However, it was cognizant in female's minds that males would possibly use the information in their profile as an approach strategy, so they selected and controlled it to encourage the type of conversation that they wanted to have.

Interestingly, bio text could also be used as a strategy to create controversy and try to stimulate approach from women. Adam noticed that his custom poem produced a surprising result in addition to bolstering his overall success rate. He said, "I actually got way more first messages from girls, either saying, 'The clitoris is definitely real,' or, 'You don't believe in the clitoris?' or 'Bigfoot's real,' but definitely got a reaction from it." As the goal for males in initial interaction is typically to pique the female's interest enough for a reply, Adam was circumventing that through the brashness of his language and encouraging his female matches to make the first move. It should be noted that Adam's strategy was still sexually provocative in nature and fell in line with the traditional emphasis on female physical appearance. In this example, however, the reversal of the app's gender normative behavior played a role in his strategy for self-presentation. Rather than him having to make the first move, his bio encouraged girls to come to him.

Males with Dogs

Another strategy that was strongly delineated by gender was the use of dog photos in profiles. Dogs were mentioned far more likely than one would expect in conversations about online dating. Guys would talk about their dogs and take photos with them while girls nearly universally indicated that they were likely to swipe right if a guy had a cute dog in his profile. Roxanne stated,

> "I definitely swiped on guys that have pictures of them with their dog or in their bio, they're like, 'Ask me something about my dog.' I mean, it's been positive because I feel like it kind of opens somebody up. I mean if they are talking about their dog then they obviously like animals."

Sadie added, "What really attracts me is if they have a dog in one of their profile pictures." Some females indicated that they would swipe for the dog even if they weren't ultimately interested in the male himself. Cassie mentioned, "I just really like dogs so it really just captures my attention. I probably am just more interested in the dog than the guy."

But what does a photo with a dog say about the male himself? Could it give some insight into the male's personality, potentially that he is caring or an animal lover? Or do women simply think that dogs are cute? Either way, both genders were aware of this strategy to the point that males taking pictures with dogs are essentially a stereotype on Tinder. Nathan said,

> "Girls think dogs are cute. So I threw that in there. I noticed when I was [browsing through female profiles], a lot of girls would put 'send me pictures of your dog', so I was just like let me put a picture of my dog on my profile."

Felix, who included a picture of simply his dog alone, added, "A lot of girls like dogs and I thought since I have a really cute dog, they'd be like 'Oh, tell me about your dog." Even if a male doesn't have a dog, the need for a dog photo is so compelling on the app that he might resort to other means. This was the case for Adam, who stated "I have a picture with my friend's dog. I wouldn't call that deception… but that was just because it was a cute picture with his dog so I used that one." That fact that this is a widely-used tactic shows how strongly the app encourages certain gender-specific presentation strategies. To maximize their success, males focused on a plan that would likely garner success with females, regardless of whether it was a strong part of their own personal identity. The "dog" might represent the sweet and compassionate qualities that females valued in a potential mate and males were quick to affiliate themselves with that aspect, either genuinely of the self or simply as a strategy to attract potential mates.

Humor to Deflect from Gender Stereotypes

Another way that gender shaped behavior on the app was the way in which males would use humor to deflect from traditional gender stereotypes and conceptions of masculinity. "Traditional masculinity" may require a male to present as muscular, athletic, and dominant. An example which poked fun at this was present in Mike's profile, which included a picture of him defeating an 8th grader in a pushup competition with the lines "aspiring dad bod" and "world champion – more push-ups than an 8th grader awardee". When asked why he included these lines in his profile, he responded,

"Well one of them is just a self-deprecating joke about me not having abs at the time when I was currently going through that. The second one… one of my pictures of physical fitness was me doing push-ups next to an 8th grader and absolutely destroying him. So, references to the pictures or just self-deprecating jokes."

Here, humor became a way to poke fun at what is typically seen as attractive and desirable in a male. The term "dad bod" refers to a joking aesthetic of one who has a body more similar to a busy father than the masculine ideal of a muscular gym rat. By associating oneself with this humorous dynamic, a male on the app can show that he does not take himself too seriously and perhaps ridicule those who do. Tyler, whose bio stated that he was a "hot boy doing hot boy things", explained,

"The reason that's there is it's silly. No one refers to themselves as a 'hot boy', at least not in regular speech. And what are 'hot boy things?' That makes no sense either. So it's just supposed to be kind of whimsical and apathetic."

While this was something more prominent in narratives that males constructed, this did not stop females from poking fun at gender roles as well. Katie, 18, mentioned in her profile that she liked to cook "but that also if I do cook for you it's not going to be often and the meal is going to be vegan. Like little things about me kind of in a humorous way." She drew on the normative conception of females as providing for males in the kitchen, but also showed that there were conditions that separated her from that stereotype. By ridiculing gender normative behavior, users could show their own positive aspects even if they were discordant with the stereotype.

A Gendered Summary

The prevailing theme here is that many of the self-presentation strategies on Tinder were at least indirectly affected by the app's implied gender norms. Males had to try harder to stand out, were expected to reach out to the female upon matching, and had to expend effort to show their dominant or otherwise attractive qualities. If they did not possess the qualities of traditional masculinity, they often mocked those qualities in a way that was thought to create appeal. Females, on the other hand, could sit back and let males come to them. Because of the influx of potential matches, they focused more on guiding the ways that males would approach them. They were able to be choosier and emphasize what they did not want in a partner rather than attempting to distance themselves from the crowd. It was essentially understood that any physically attractive female would find success on the app while males had to exert more effort.

Deliberate Self-presentation While Trying to Appear Nonchalant

When talking to participants about the image they crafted on their Tinder profile, it was abundantly clear that the majority put a good deal of thought into the creation of their profile and how their image was presented. On the other hand, this level of deliberation was something that had to be hidden as its outward appearance may give off the quality of being needy or desperate. As Tinder users often used the app as a way to put out feelers into the dating world without coming out and clearly advertise that they were looking for a partner, the ideal self also reflected this notion of indifference. Several properties were found that revealed the deliberate nature of the app such as the social process that went into profile creation (i.e. the use of direct feedback

from friends or social media) and a resistance of traditional dating site profiles or anything that could be construed as "basic" (which could be indicated by a disdain for "ordinary" or "boring").

Profile Construction as a Social Process

The effort that went into constructing one's profile was evidenced was by the way that users sought out feedback about one's profile, either through direct conversations with friends or social media. This was also a major finding of Ward's (2017) interviews with Dutch Tinder users. Females on the app were especially likely to use a social approach to profile creation, often showing it to their friends to get their opinions. Ginger described this process by saying,

> "Definitely my best friend was the selection party in that, making sure that I
> didn't have bad angles or weird shots or anything like food in my mouth and I
> take pictures all the time so… I want make sure those weren't like the crazy
> photos I put. So yea, they went mostly through my best friend."

This direct verification was also evident through Roxanne, who added,

> "Yeah, I have [showed my profile to] a few of my friends. I'm just like, 'Oh, do
> you think this is a good picture?' And with my bio too, I'm like, 'Does this sound
> okay?' It's kind of nice to have an outsider's perspective because I could think it
> sounds one way or looks one way and it might not."

This shows that self-presentation was a process that had to be confirmed through others to make sure that the intended message is transmitted. Consistent with the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, oftentimes others serve as the lens that one uses to view themselves. By sharing

and verifying one's profile with friends, Tinder users can ensure their image is satisfactory before officially placing it on the app for potential matches to view. On the app itself, no feedback is given when users swipe left so there is no way to determine if an aspect of one's profile is discouraging potential matches.

Friends were not the only source of advice that was used. Bianca described a dual process in assessing the suitability of her profile:

> "I usually would ask my friends about the photos. I was like, 'Which one do I pick for the profile?' and then it was also based off of what people's reactions were to the photos and which photos tended to get the most responses to or the most comments, whether it be on Twitter, Instagram, or then bring it to Tinder or even on Tinder already and people say, 'Oh yeah, I like that picture."

Not only was she obtaining direct feedback from friends, she also used the reactions that she had already obtained on social media as a shortcut to assess the suitability of her photos. As those had already been exposed to a wider audience, this process gave potential insight to which photos would be more popular for attracting matches on Tinder. This sentiment was echoed by Roxanne, who also utilized this pre-verification process: "On my Instagram, I have quite a bit of followers so I just picked the most popular photos and I just decided to use those because those were the ones that everybody seemed to like the most." Pictures were assumed to have a universal appeal and success in one online venue was assumed to transfer to further success on Tinder.

While some of the males interviewed used the same types of overt techniques, they were less likely than females to mention a social strategy. Nathan, an exception to this trend, had a particularly innovative approach to obtain direct verification:

"I'd [typically] never do this but actually for these pictures I texted my friends' girlfriends saying, 'Hey, are these pictures fine? What's up?' because I've known them for long enough now that I feel comfortable asking that so I ask them their opinion."

In a follow-up question, he shared that he did not ask all of his friends' girlfriends, only those who resembled the type of girl that he wished to meet on the app. Yet again, there is a deliberate strategy of verifying one's self-presentation before actually putting it on display. However, Nathan's technique is more focused as his sample was carefully chosen to represent the target audience that he wished to appeal to. However, more of the males interviewed described an implicit style for altering their profile where they would gain insight by using app and observing how others present themselves. This represented more of a vicarious form of verification. Tyler said,

"It's like whenever you swipe through Tinder and begin seeing other people's profiles you pick up ideas, you pick up common communication tactics, you pick up ways of portraying yourself, and you start to formulate and modify your profile."

Felix indicated that he would sometimes listen in on others' conversations about their Tinder profile and join in without disclosing that he actually used the app himself. This dynamic was what led to him deciding to incorporate more group photos:

48

"I sort of eavesdropped and looked over their shoulders [to] sort of see what they

were using, and sometimes I would add to the conversation, like ask, 'Well why

would you use that?' and one of them would say, 'Well group photos... girls love

it when you use group photos.' So okay, I might as well use it"

So while the males on the app were also highly cognizant of the image they were portraying, they were sometimes uncomfortable asking for feedback directly. Still though what they found implicitly affected the way they altered their profile over time.

Katie's experience took others' feedback to the extreme as her friend created her entire profile. She indicated,

"Well it was initially made by my best friend... I suppose I got her feedback on

everything just because she was the one who initially made it so she put out an

image of me first and I kind of just altered it a little bit."

While Katie's friend created the initial presentation, she then transformed her friend's conception to match more what she wanted to convey about herself. Much of this involved taking down full-body pictures of herself in swimwear, as she felt this gave off the wrong message, and replacing them with more traditional, selfie-style poses. By doing this, she indicated that her profile went "mainly from more 'Hi, I'm at the beach' photos to 'Hi, this is my face." Once again, self-presentation was derived from an offshoot of other's perception and then crafted to convey an intended message. Katie's experience shows that others serve as a lens for self-presentation though not necessarily the penultimate source. Overall, both genders overwhelmingly used some sort of methodical process to guide their own profile creation to ensure that their profile was acceptable to generalized others.

49

Despite all of this careful planning and deliberation, profiles were often constructed in a way that was intentionally crafted to look nonchalant. There was a significant disdain for those who appeared they were trying too hard. Tyler mentioned, "It's like a very careful dance and the second that you seem clingy or whatever, then you get dropped." This was something that several participants had to learn over time as they gained experience with the app. Participants reported that as they developed new iterations of their profile, the bio would progressively get shorter. This was strongly articulated by Tyler, who said,

> "When I first started, I just had this big wall of text and I showed it to my friend
>
> that had been on the app for a while and he said it was just abhorrent. There's no
>
> room for intrigue or interest, you're just like showing everything about yourself to
>
> begin with and you're not trying to play the game at all. So, over time, my bio
>
> has just gotten smaller and smaller… If you go too long, it seems like you're
>
> trying too hard and a large part of the app is appearing cool, hip. So it's short
>
> now."

A long bio or generally any aspect that gives the appearance of trying too hard was associated with a host of negative qualities such as being "needy" or "desperate". Participants also tended to shorten their bios over time because they felt that the bio was unimportant or that long bios would potentially go unread. This again illustrates some of the factors of profile construction that were consciously considered by users. Katie, who felt her bio was long by typical Tinder standards, mentioned, "It's not two lines. I think it's like maybe four and a half. It's not long but it's just long enough that you'd kind of look at it and go, 'Is she cute enough?" For Ashley, when I asked her why her bio consisted primarily of emojis, she replied, "It's more tempting to

look at it… because if you look at the picture and then you see a bunch of text you don't want to read it." Felix felt that shortening his bio led to increased success:

> "So it's changed in the sense that it's gotten shorter and shorter. It actually made
> it easier to talk when we did have conversations because now, instead of reading
> my bio, they have to ask me questions. It got shorter and shorter because I didn't
> want to put as much. People didn't really read it."

These quotes indicate that having a long bio was potentially seen as negative. It either portrayed the user in an unflattering, needy light or was totally ignored due to the quick-swiping nature of the app. Whether real or perceived, shortening the bio was seen as a strategy that could lead to increased success on the app. Not only does it achieve the goal of distancing oneself from the negative connotation of neediness, it also increases social engagement by forcing others to ask questions.

In general, Tinder users tried to distance their self-presentation from the stereotypical format seen on traditional dating websites, in which a user tries to disclose a wealth of information about their interests and desires upfront. When asked about her turn-offs, Ginger remarked, "The bio itself just being too long, where it's almost like, 'Wow, any question I could've asked you to create a conversation is almost pretty much laid out there so where do I begin with this?'" Therefore, if users were too upfront in their profile, it could detract from a future conversation rather than stimulating it. This supports Felix's assertion that long bios discourage dialogue. This sentiment was also revealed by Sadie, whose bio simply said, "I can probably read your fortune" to coincide with her newfound interest in tarot card reading. When asked to explain her concise use of text, she explained, "If they really want to get to know me, they can just message me." The overriding theme here is that disclosing too much about oneself

in the profile is potentially negative as that information could be better saved for a conversation. In one's Tinder profile, it is better to foster a sense of intrigue and potential mystery rather than putting everything out there at once.

"Basic" is Bad

Another major negative that participants revealed was what they perceived as "basic", a slang term that represents being too ordinary or mainstream. Often "basic" was equated with being a "typical" user of traditional dating sites. Mary summarized her turn-offs on the app by saying, "I just think it goes back to the basic generic thing where they just say what year they graduated, major, smoke, down to chill, whatnot. It's very generic." Felix added, "[It is negative] when it is just selfies of them, just the same styles of selfies but from different backgrounds. I felt like they were just in some sense basic and I wouldn't want to be with someone that basic." But there was also a fine line between being basic and presenting too far on the other end of the spectrum, wholly unmotivated. Though Tinder users did not want to look like they were trying too hard, they still needed to look like they were putting forth some sort of effort. This was seen in an almost unanimous disdain for users with blank bios. Cassie pointed out, "I think if he can't be bothered to write a bio, then I can't be bothered to swipe." Josh felt that there was something suspicious about someone who disclosed very little about themselves, saying,

> "Only having one or two photos is usually a little sketchy because I'd be like, 'Is there something you don't want to share or are you trying to go for the mysterious, swipe right to find out more, kind of vibe?"

When asked why she disliked profiles without bios, Ginger revealed,

> "Because it almost represents no personality. Almost, because it's saying, you
> had at least a sentence to put something about yourself that could be intriguing,
> [but] you didn't even take the time to say something about yourself that would
> attract somebody else. So it's kind of saying either you don't have time or there's
> nothing interesting about you or you're not real."

In this sense, Tinder users could not appear totally disinterested or they would fail to garner attention from others. While having too much on your profile could mean you were too needy, having nothing could range from being perceived as not caring and lazy to being suspicious and having something to hide.

Interestingly enough, though Tinder is designed to allow users to quickly swipe through profiles by basis of a single photo, most participants reported examining the profiles closely and reading the bios when deciding whether to swipe right or left. Sarah paid so much attention to the profiles of others that she began to notice a trend. She felt that most Tinder users, whether intentionally or not, used the same formulaic approach with their photos. She described this approach by saying,

> "I feel like people have an algorithm. They'll put their selfies and then one of
> their full body and then it's always pictures of friends and the last one is always
> their dog. I've talked about this with so many people and it's so weird."

Given the strong emphasis to avoid looking "basic", there seemed to be a typical formula that was common to profile creation on the app. While basic in the sense of traditional dating apps was seen as undesirable, there was a basic format for Tinder profiles that could elicit success

even if it was seen as essentially copycat. The sheer existence of this formula once again showcases the deliberate nature of Tinder profiles. There is a pattern of profile construction on the app that is formulaic yet also viewed as successful.

A Deliberate Summary

The key here is that the strategies used on Tinder are inherently designed to look unintentional when they are far from it. It is easy to look at a profile and think that the user quickly chose a couple of selfies and scribbled out a bio without giving it much thought, but that was typically untrue for the participants I interviewed. Not only were the pictures deliberately chosen but they were also often verified with others or through additional forms of social media. There was heightened awareness of what not to do in one's bio even if it was a strategy that was successful for other forms of online dating. There was also a minimum threshold of effort that had to be expended for people not to be viewed as undesirable on the app. While users wanted to it to appear that they weren't trying, they were actually trying very hard.

User Authenticity and Concerns about "Catfishing"

Though online dating has become more commonplace, there are still major concerns that the person on the other end of the screen may not be who they say they are. The term for this is "catfishing", derived from the MTV reality show of the same name that followed the stories of deceptive online romances. While emphasis on the ideal self can be potentially viewed as "strategic catfishing", the perceived deception on the app went beyond that and led users to authenticate their own true identity as well as question that of others. Several properties

highlighted this theme such as a common view that one was being authentic (seen in indicators such as "genuine" or "accurate"), the use of multiple forms of social media as a form of verification (i.e. Instagram, Snapchat), an aversion for profiles with difficulty identifying the user, and a general mistrust of others that was far more prevalent in females (i.e. the aversion to "fuckboys").

Perceptions of Personal Authenticity

The Tinder users interviewed were highly aware that not everyone on the app is completely honest and it is often hard to quickly ascertain in a digital space whether or not other users are legitimate. Despite these concerns, nearly all participants felt that they were authentic in the self that they presented on the app. According to Mike,

> "I felt like my profile is pretty accurate, spot-on as much as you can get with five or so pictures and like two sentences. It is just a description of who I am as a person without explicitly going into like 5'10, 180 pounds, etc. I didn't feel as if I was hiding anything necessarily or even that I was overblowing myself to a point... But I feel as if I was putting out a very accurate, like hey, I am this person, here is my proof."

While he felt like the simple fact that everything he chose to include in his profile was true confirmed his authenticity, he still acknowledged that it is hard to be completely candid with the limited space afforded by Tinder profiles. Authenticity was seen in this case as an absence of outright deception rather than full openness. Gloria added,

"I believe it 100% that it's an authentic representation because I just show it how

it is. I don't try to show my body parts as being big like the typical Instagram girl.

I don't ever try to edit my photos and things like that and I'm not flashy with what

I have or what I'm doing."

Again, she felt that since she did not explicitly try to deceive others that her profile was true to herself even if it was simplistic. By not telling outright lies, participants felt they were telling the truth. However, conceptions of authenticity manifested differently for some users. Sometimes, authenticity could be achieved by users disclosing aspects of the self that could be viewed as negative by potential matches. Katie mentioned,

"I also have heart disease, so one [picture shows] I'm wearing [a heart monitor]. I

don't think it'd be noticeable to anybody else but it was enough for me to say 'Hi,

I'm wearing these electrodes that are connected to a monitor that I have to wear

from time to time,' so like, 'Hi, this is something that happens every so often,' to

normalize it."

Ginger added, "A lot of the pictures I use I didn't have makeup on. I'm very specific to do that because I don't wear makeup often." For these users, they deliberately presented a side of their lives that was not ideal but was more indicative of their true self. They felt that sincerity was a better approach so that potential matches had a realistic idea of what to expect. In this sense, participants tried to distance themselves from the stigmatization and possible ethical unease that would come with even partial or strategic catfishing.

When the participants interviewed did report deliberate misinformation, most of it was relatively minor. Perhaps the most severe discretion reported was lying about one's age. While I

did not interview anyone who was presently under 18, some of the younger participants in the study discussed making slight alterations to their age when they were 17 so that they could gain access to the app (which sets the minimum age limit at 18). All of the participants who did this made it clear that they only attempted to match with people that they were legally allowed to pursue based on consent law. Josh revealed,

> "So I think the only dishonest thing I've ever been on my profile was my age for those few months when I changed it to 18 and that motive was in order to actually match with more people to have a wider pool instead of 'there's no more people in your area…' I know the age of content and that kind of stuff had basically a four-year window... So for me at 17, if they were 21 it was fine"

So lying about one's age was not necessarily intended to mislead other users, but instead to get around Tinder's age restrictions. In a way it was the digital equivalent of using a fake ID to get into a bar. Other "deceptive" behavior was even more innocuous. As mentioned before, Mary lied about her college affiliation, saying she went to the local university when she was actually enrolled in community college. She did this because of the stigmatization involved, saying, "[Other people] kind of made slightly little comments about downgrading people who went to community college… because of that I kinda got into that mindset also a little bit." Victoria was misleading by omission, failing to mention the temporary fact that she had a broken leg that limited her ability to live the active life she portrayed in her profile. She stated, "I was injured so obviously I couldn't go out and do so much but I never put that in my bio." However, most of what my participants considered potentially dishonest in their own profiles was the idealized presentation discussed previously in this analysis. Deliberate attempts to mislead were rare and far from what would be considered total catfishing.

Boosting Authenticity through Multiple Forms of Social Media

Because of the omnipresence of potential catfishing, users often used multiple forms of social media to both confirm their own identity as well as verify that of others. This is built into the Tinder app as users can link their Instagram account directly to their profiles. By clicking this Instagram link, potential matches could view more photos as well as "follow" them [subscribe for access to their content]. Since Instagram profiles are more extensive, they were typically viewed as a better gauge of authenticity than what was readily available on the Tinder app. Alyssa explained the addition of her Instagram to her Tinder profile by saying,

> "Because I only have one picture and I have no bio, and a lot of guys, when they
>
> message me, they are like, 'You look strange. You look like a catfish… because
>
> you only have one picture,' and I don't have a bio and then I didn't have
>
> Instagram connected to my Tinder before. So then they are just like, 'I don't
>
> know if you're real or not."

Roxanne liked to use Instagram to get more information about her matches, particularly if they could potentially be hiding something on their Tinder profile. She stated,

> "Well I link my Instagram because I think it's suspicious when other people don't
>
> have any other accounts attached to it just because they could be catfishing or I
>
> also want to see if they have other friends or what they do because some people
>
> lie [especially] if they're dating someone."

Again, the consensus here is that Tinder profiles with a link to Instagram are more "real" than those that don't have one. In a way, the credibility of one's profile is strengthened through this form of triangulation. Obtaining the Instagram or other social media handles of one's matches

through conversation was often used as a strategy to double-check the authenticity of others after matching took place. This could be preempted if users included the information straightaway in their profile. Juan was particularly sensitive to potential deception because of a previous experience on his Facebook account in which he had photos stolen from his profile and used to deceive others. Because of this, he wasted little time obtaining additional sources of information about his matches, typically asking for it in the first two or three messages of conversation. When describing why he took this careful approach, he said,

> "It's so easy to screenshot nowadays and impersonate somebody else and I had that done to me before social media even boomed. There were some that were fake profiles too and I caught onto them quick because I like to ask for their Instagrams and their Snapchats in order to verify that they're a real person… see more photos, see if their friends are interacting with them… because I've caught on to a lot of things. Some people get very on edge when you ask for their social media then their profiles disappear, then you never hear from them again, they try to deviate from the question, they say 'Oh, I don't have Instagram or Snapchat.' I mean, in this day and age and you're in this age group, when you don't have any social media it's kind of hard to believe when so many people are interacting online and you have a Tinder."

Reluctance to provide other forms of social media was taken to mean that other users were potentially deceptive or hiding something. More was typically better when verifying the true identity of matches on the app. More pictures, more social media accounts, and more information in general gave greater insight into whether or not others on the app were real.

While there is a hierarchy in how legitimate profiles on these apps were viewed, using multiple means to verify identity was a common practice.

Difficult to Discern Identities Lead to Mistrust

Concerns about authenticity led the Tinder users interviewed to be particularly sensitive about profiles in which identifying the true person was difficult. One common source of disdain was multiple group pictures with no individual shots. Doug stated, "If there's like ten people in the photo, I'm not going to sit there and search through it to find out which one you are." Mike added, "If there were a lot of group photos and it was just a struggle, I would give up and not even bother." Adam felt that this strategy was particularly deceptive in nature. He added,

> "But you see a lot of pictures where you can't tell who she is… like a group of six
> girls and you'll focus on the attractive one and by the last picture she'll have one
> by herself and you'll be like, 'Oh, so she wasn't the one I was attracted to.' So
> they lead you on."

In this sense, there was an attempt to mislead by drawing attention to attractive others to pique initial interest. If a user could use more attractive friends to facilitate a match, they could potentially strike up interest in other ways, such as through conversation.

While having solely group photos was a strategy that was frowned upon, at least there was some attempt by users to show their genuine image. This wasn't always the case. When asked her dislikes on the app, Gloria described, "Cartoons as a profile picture because I really don't know who you are." Sadie described "guys who just have a black screen. And then, in their bio, they are like, 'Just looking for hookups.' Look, I'm not going to swipe right on you

because I can't even see you." Users that did not include a real picture were seen as fraudulent and potentially hiding something. This was a strategy that was nearly unanimously seen as negative on the app. The less that could be determined about a person's true identity, the more likely they were seen to be a catfish or potentially "sketchy".

Gender and Misleading Self-Perception

Despite the self-reported honesty of participants, many of them had major concerns that other Tinder users were not so forthcoming. This was a trend with a clear gender divide as females were much more distrustful of males on the app. When asked how authentic she felt males were on Tinder, Julia said, "I never believe them." When asked to elaborate, she added,

> "I feel like sometimes on social media people do portray themselves differently so
> I always have that doubt. Like, I know you look good here and I know you look
> like a nice guy. You have a picture of you and your mom. But in the real world,
> you're probably not like that."

Oftentimes, males were seen as more deceptive due to the gender normative behavior on the app discussed in a previous section. Because they had to work harder for matches, they would potentially say or do whatever it took to facilitate initial attraction. This was the opinion of Alyssa, who said,

> "I feel like [guys] are more deceitful than girls. Honestly, a lot of guys put 6 feet
> in their bio when they're 5'8" or something like that because I feel like guys want
> girls more than girls want guys… and it's harder for a guy to get a girl than a girl

to get a guy. So when a guy wants a girl, it makes it seem like he's better than he actually is."

As males had to work harder to stand out, the motive to mislead became stronger as well. This is consistent with research findings that show that men are more dishonest on dating apps in general (Hall, Park, Cody, & Song, 2010). Also consistent with the theories presented in the literature review, males often showed off aspects that emphasized dominance or prosperity. When asked about dishonest content in male profiles, Sadie mentioned, "Some people literally have only wads of money in their hand… They have hundreds and hundreds of dollars. I'm pretty sure that's going to rent." However, the question of which gender is more deceptive was not always cut and dry. As one of the few bisexual respondents, Katie had a unique perspective since she swiped on both males and females on the app. She felt that both genders had the propensity to stretch the truth, albeit in different ways.

> "I think you get a lot better of an idea of what a guy looks like than what a girl
> looks like from her photos because filters and angles and makeup and things like
> that are a lot more [prevalent] with women as opposed to men. So usually you get
> a 'this is what I look like' with guys and then an idealized version with girls. But
> when it comes to bios I think girls are a little bit more detailed-oriented. Even if
> they don't intend to put that much information, they kind of tend to put more than
> a guy would."

So males took a no-nonsense approach in their photos yet disclosed little in their bios. On the other hand, females strongly idealized their pictures yet provided more text to serve as a window into their personality.

One of the main reasons that female participants doubted the accuracy of male profiles is because of the belief that many males on the app are strongly motivated by one-night stands and casual sexual encounters. Several females used the slang term "fuckboy" to describe a lascivious male who was willing to do or say anything to obtain sex. The perceived high prevalence of fuckboys on an app like Tinder led to apprehension from female users to take male profiles at face value. Julia felt that there were certain telltale signs that would enable her to identify these males on the app.

> "I feel like you can kinda tell. It's kinda stereotypical, but you know when they have the really nice polo and the shorts. They just look really clean. Like there was this one guy in particular; he looked perfect. He had his suit and it was just one photo. He had his hair all nice and he was had a little wine in his hand and in his bio he just put, '[Medical School],' and I'm like, 'Oh my God, this person swiped on me.' First thing, 'Hookup?' 'No.' And like, he just left me [unmatched with her on the app]."

In this sense, guys who seemed "too good to be true" were likely to be motivated by sex and potentially deceptive in their self-presentation. It wasn't simply females who mentioned this gender divide. Mike tried to explain why it occurs by remarking,

> "We have not necessarily more at stake, but more of a hold to make ourselves look as attractive as possible to get a break from the general bell curve. I don't know what mathematical principle it is that a lot of people like to expose and talk about how it is real, like 20% of males sleep with 80% of females, or something like that. But I feel like a lot of guys really do get it into their heads and they're like, how do I break from that 80% to get into that 20%?"

63

Therefore, if males assume that only a certain privileged few are achieving success in finding casual sex on the app, they will do what it takes to join that select group even if it means bending the truth. If Tinder truly is a numbers game, extreme methods may be used to improve one's statistical probability for success.

Despite some concerns about catfishing, the males in the study were more trusting of female profiles as a whole. Perhaps this is because females have more success on the app with less effort, therefore their motivation to mislead is low. This could also be due to gender stereotypes that females overall display more honesty and integrity. Frankie put this into perspective by saying,

> "Speaking with my friends, who are all heterosexual guys of different ethnic backgrounds, we were all maybe closer to my level of deception. So we all kind of portrayed a part of ourselves that is much more rare on occasion. But when I spoke to women and I spent time with women on dates and everything, I noticed a lot of them were much more authentic. I felt that vibe. At least my girlfriend [who he met on Tinder], she was very authentic. A lot of the dates I went on with other women, they were very authentic in their profile and their presentation. I am actually finding it hard pressed to find one that wasn't."

Mike added, "I don't necessarily feel that [Tinder] is not authentic, but it's a heavily regulated snapshot of the best in a person's life." Very few males felt that females were deceptive outside of the presentation of idealized photos. Not only are women more successful in gaining matches on the app, they are also more likely to be motivated by long-term relationships rather than casual encounters. Because of this, true disclosure is key. It is easy to hide certain aspects if you

only intend on meeting someone for one night but much harder to escape the truth if you wish to create a more genuine connection.

A Deceptive Summary

While most Tinder users report authentic self-presentation with perhaps some minor discretions, their perception of others does not match the candidness that they attempt to provide in their own profile. Fear of catfishing abounds with Tinder users seeking to verify the true identity of their matches through methods such as obtaining multiple social media profiles and avoiding profiles with difficulty discerning the true identity of the user. Males are thought to be more dishonest because of both their need to impress females users as well as their increased focus on short-term interactions. Concerns of deception affected the way that Tinder users constructed their own profile and heavily shaped the way they viewed others.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From the aforementioned data, it is evident that Tinder is a unique social space that facilitates a number of self-presentation strategies. Not only do sociological variables such as gender stereotypes shape behavior, but also factors that are unique to the app itself such as limited profile space, the emphasis on visual imagery, and the fast-paced swipe functionality of deciding on potential matches. While males and females both use the app with the intention of connecting with like-minded others, disparate expectations and perceptions of success rates lead to differences in behavior. This creates norms embedded into the app that are often followed in an attempt to bolster rates of success. Tinder users are highly invested in their self-presentation even within a medium that is sometimes viewed as superficial. The richness of presentation strategies within this social space is somewhat paradoxical to its relative simplicity and ease of use.

Returning to the literature, Tinder users share several similarities with those of other online dating platforms. The theme of presenting an "authentic vs. idealized" self is one that permeates most of the studies conducted on dating profiles (see among others Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Birmholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). While Tinder is a very diverse tool, the goal for most users is still some sort of face-to-face encounter. Interacting with people only on the app itself is rare and would probably be unsatisfying for most. The goal of creating a profile is simply to promote initial attraction and it is relatively obvious that people would do so by emphasizing their subjectively best aspects. While Tinder is sometimes viewed as a "shallow" medium, the participants that I spoke with were anything but. There was often a large amount of speculation even when simply deciding what pictures to use and often people were afraid of giving off the wrong impression. In this

way, Tinder is no different from meeting people organically. Walking up to an attractive member of the opposite sex in a bar, one will still fix their hair, straighten their posture, and think of a good opening line. The biggest difference is that Tinder users can manipulate those qualities to their liking to a large degree beforehand then broadcast them to a large audience. However, putting one's "best foot forward" is still key.

Interestingly, though research shows that men are more likely to lie on their dating profiles (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008), on Tinder that may be more of a stereotype rather than reality. In this study, very few participants of either gender reported any misinformation and, when it did exist, it was relatively mild. Despite that, one of the main trends in the data focused on the notion that males were overall more trusting of female profiles rather than vice versa. Perhaps the males that I spoke with were more honest than the norm or maybe the surging popularity of online dating (and stigma of "catfishing") has made lying outright something that is uncommon today. Either way, these stereotypes still exist based on a grain of truth that might not still be true.

What all of this means is that "online" spaces are very different today than they were a decade ago. Cell phones have become a necessity rather than a luxury and a plethora of convenient and inexpensive options exist for meeting mates in cyberspace. As more people than ever are using digital means to look for serious relationships (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017), this means that we may be progressing socially to a world where face-to-face interaction is devalued, a fear of many of the participants in this study. Norms governing online interactions have been rapidly changing as today's young adults find it difficult to imagine a world without the Internet. A similar parallel can be drawn with ride-sharing apps such as Uber. The social norms of "Don't talk to strangers" and "Don't get into others' cars" have been replaced by a service that allows us

to literally summon strangers to our homes to pick us up for a ride. Tinder can be viewed in the same way. While it used to be considered strange or potentially dangerous to meet someone online, this is no longer the case. Technology affords convenience but also has a way of drastically altering social norms.

While looking at Tinder profiles provides a wealth of insight into what people emphasize when looking for a partner, it is important to note the limited role of the profiles themselves in the overall spectrum of the app. As Tyler pointed out at the end of his interview,

> "As far as Tinder profiles go, they really just are the starting point for any future
> interaction. So, people place a lot of importance on them because they determine
> that first 50% chance, do I get a left swipe or right swipe? But once you're past
> that step, they don't really matter. I've never matched with someone and they've
> commented explicitly on my bio or on my photos. It's like after you match, it's
> no longer about Tinder and your profiles. At this point, it's more like talking to a
> human and starting a conversation. So a lot of times, profiles… as soon as they
> give you that right swipe, they are no longer really mattering."

So while initial self-presentation is important, it is not everything. While Tinder profiles arouse preliminary interest, they do not determine whether two people will continue to converse or formulate a true connection from the app. Once the spark has been lit, conversation becomes the driving force rather than the image that someone began with. In a way, the profile is only a small picture of the complex puzzle that characterizes online dating today.

Limitations

While the current study provided in-depth insight to a popular online interaction app with a paucity of existing research, there are still some limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample was largely homogenous, consisting of college-students and recent graduates from one particular state. While the age range of the sample resembled the target demographic of Tinder, the results may still be geographically limited or differ for those outside of the university crowd. However, the similarity in participants did serve to facilitate theoretical saturation. Additionally, due to social desirability bias, some of the participants may have been reluctant to disclose the full extent of certain topics, especially those that are stigmatized such as deception. I found that several participants held back explicit language or apologized when certain words slipped, though I had assured them that they could talk openly about their experiences. (Interestingly enough, they were still engaging in impression management even during the interview itself) Also, while Tinder is a popular dating app it is still only one of many options that exist for today's singles. Several participants reported having accounts on multiple dating apps, such as POF (Plenty of Fish) and Bumble. The findings of my research may not be completely inferentially generalized onto those platforms. For example, on Bumble males are not allowed to send the first message and females must initiate all matches. Gender normative behavior may manifest itself differently given the rules unique to that specific app. Finally, qualitative research by nature is open to subjective interpretation and may contain inherent bias. To increase the credibility of my interpretation, it is important to use personal reflexivity to allow the reader to determine the trustworthiness of this investigation. As someone who has personally used Tinder for a significant portion the last four years and encountered numerous female profiles, including that of my last serious relationship, it is a possibility that my previous experiences may have

influenced the way I viewed the data. This was counteracted through researcher triangulation, showing the transcripts to my advising professor and verifying that he saw the data in a similar fashion to my interpretation.

Directions for Future Research

As research on Tinder is still in its infancy, there are a lot of intriguing directions that future investigation can take. One potential idea is to use mixed method research by combining interviews with a content analysis of the profile itself to triangulate findings. Different age groups could also be assessed to see if older users of the app, with dating experience before the rise of technology, present themselves differently on an online platform. Rather than focusing on pre-match profile construction, future researchers could analyze self-presentation strategies used during conversations on the app and upon meeting in-person. This could even be compared to one's profile to see if conceptions of the ideal self are upheld over time. Finally, other online dating apps, such as Bumble, OK Cupid, and POF, could be researched to see if their unique qualities stimulate different types of strategies from their users. Overall, LBRTD apps hold a highly prominent role within dating today and represent an area for researchers to concentrate on for insight into how single people meet one another in the 21st century.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sexual Orientation
Adam	male	21	straight
Alyssa	female	18	straight
Ashley	female	21	bisexual
Bianca	female	19	bisexual
Cassie	female	22	straight
Desiree	female	24	straight
Doug	male	23	straight
Felix	male	19	straight
Frankie	male	21	straight
Ginger	female	24	straight
Gloria	female	21	straight
Josh	male	20	homosexual
Juan	male	24	straight
Julia	female	19	straight
Katie	female	18	bisexual
Mary	female	25	straight
Mike	male	20	straight
Nathan	male	20	straight
Roxanne	female	18	straight
Sadie	female	20	straight
Sarah	female	21	straight
Tyler	male	22	straight
Victoria	female	23	straight

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Initial Questions

1. Age and gender.
2. When did you first start using Tinder and how long have you been using it?
3. What are your main motivations for using Tinder?
4. How does Tinder fit into your overall approach to dating?

Questions about profile pictures

1. Describe the photos that you chose to use on your profile.
2. When selecting photos, what aspects of yourself were you trying to emphasize?
3. In what ways (if any) have you obtained feedback (through friends, social media, etc.) before selecting your photos? How did you use that feedback?

Questions about profile text

1. What text (if any) do you typically include in your bio?
2. What aspects of yourself were your trying to emphasize through your selection of text (for example, personality, hobbies, group affiliation)?
3. When interacting with others, did your bio have its desired effect? (For instance, how did it affect the way that people approached you on the app?)
4. How has your bio changed over time? What factors most motivated you to change the text?

Questions about aspects of others' profiles that stand out

1. When browsing others' profiles, what are some aspects of their photos or bios that stand out positively?
2. When browsing others' profiles, what are some aspects of their photos or bios that stand out negatively?
3. In what ways have you used others' profiles to help you refine your own?

Questions about deception (ones' own and perceived in others)

1. How much do you believe that your profile is an authentic representation of yourself? Why?
2. In what ways have you ever been dishonest on your profile before? What was your reason behind this?
3. When browsing the profiles of others, how authentic do you believe that they are? Why?
4. What types of dishonest content do you believe that you have observed in others' profiles?

APPENDIX C: IRB HUMAN SUBJECTS PERMISSION LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Johnathan Dunlop** and Co-PIs: **Harold J Corzine, and Shannon Krista Carter**

Date: **June 28, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 06/28/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination, Category 2
Project Title:	App-ily After After – The Role of Gender in Self-Presentation on Location-Based Real Time Dating Apps.
Investigator:	Johnathan Dunlop
IRB Number:	SBE-18-14130
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Renea Carver

Signature applied by Renea C Carver on 06/28/2018 10:02:18 AM EDT

Designated Reviewer

Page 1 of 1

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