

College Undergraduate Experiences with Dating Apps

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ABSTRACT

Background: Among 18 to 24 year olds, the use of online dating has tripled from 10% to 27% from 2013 to 2015. **Methods:** In this study, we interviewed five college undergraduates ages 18 to 26 to understand their experience with dating apps. We employed a phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews and participant drawing sessions. **Results:** From the interviews and drawings, we found that all participants used the dating app Tinder. Participants reported using Tinder because they wanted to date or have casual sexual encounters with people and the app makes it easy for them to find and meet people with whom have similar expectations. We also learned about Tinder culture being one centered around sex and the stigma associated with being a Tinder user. Participants stated that they would prefer to meet prospects for a serious relationship in real life as opposed to on an application like Tinder. However, participants still held some optimism that a serious relationship could develop from a Tinder match. **Discussion:** The casual sex culture associated with Tinder and the ease of meeting someone through a dating app may increase the rate of transmission of sexually-transmitted infections in this population and inform opportunities for health education. Usage of Tinder as a means to improve self-esteem may also indicate that there are opportunities to educate college undergraduates about more diverse and long-lasting methods to improve self-confidence.

INTRODUCTION

The use of dating apps is currently prevalent. A national survey by the Pew Research Center found that 15% of American adults have used online dating sites or mobile dating apps (Smith, 2016). Amongst 18- to 24-year-olds, online dating has tripled from 10% to 27% between 2013 and 2015 (Smith, 2016). The growing use of dating apps signals a broader transformation in dating, but the underlying experiences of modern dating have not been well studied. In this research study, we set out to understand the experience of using dating apps from the perspective of undergraduate college students to better understand their motivations for using and expectations of the apps.

BACKGROUND

There are many types of dating apps with different target audiences and purposes. The most popular dating apps in the US include *OkCupid*, *Happn*, *Coffee Meets Bagel*, *Bumble*, *Tinder*, *Down*, *Lulu*, *Match*, *Zoosk*, *Grindr*, and *Hinge* (McAlone, 2016). Certain apps are targeted towards specific populations. Some apps (e.g., *Down* and *Grindr*) are perceived as “hook-up” apps, whereas others (e.g., *Match*) are more for finding a serious long-term partner. In most dating apps, users first create a profile and provide some personal information. Users are also asked to upload photos of themselves to complete their profile. In the case of *Tinder*, they indicate their preferences for potential partners based on gender, age, and geographical vicinity and the app uses this information to show users profiles of people who match their criteria. Users can then swipe right (“like”) or swipe left (“pass”) on people’s profiles and if the person

“likes” them back, they are matched and can start chatting with each other through the app’s messenger feature.

We are interested in college students’ experiences with using dating apps in particular because a sizeable percentage of the dating apps’ user base falls within this demographic. In addition, *Tinder*, a widely popular mobile dating app, was piloted on college campuses (Empson, 2013). We are also interested to see if the themes of love and casual sex, validation and self-worth, excitement, and ease of communication appear in our study because recent research found that these themes are the main reasons that young adults use dating apps (Sumter, Vandebosch, Ligtenberg, 2017). Quantitative studies have been conducted in this area but there is little published qualitative research on this topic. We hope that findings from our study will provide rich contextual information on the experiences and motivations that college undergraduates have with using dating apps.

METHODS

Methodology

We employed phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of undergraduate students and their use of dating apps. We decided upon phenomenology as it would enable us to study the structure of conscious experience from a first-person point of view, enabling us to examine and understand a more holistic experience of online dating (Smith, 2007). Within phenomenology, we used the methods of: 1) semi-structured interviews, 2) a drawing exercise, and 3) a questionnaire. We employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

Recruitment

We recruited participants through convenience sampling and guerilla recruitment on the University of Washington campus. In total, we recruited five participants, and provided each participant with a \$5 Starbucks gift card as incentive for their participation.

Methods

Over the course of two weeks, we conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews in various reserved rooms on campus, with each session lasting no more than 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in pairs. One team member served as the interviewer, walking the participant through a brief pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix A), the consent process, the interview itself, and the drawing exercise. The other team member served as notetaker and recorded verbatim responses, overall observations and subtle cues in tone, gesture, and body language exhibited by the participant.

The drawing exercise was integrated into the interview session. Participants were asked to draw a memorable experience they had that stemmed from using a dating app. They were asked to explain the drawing to the interviewer, and the interviewer followed up with any probing or clarifying questions.

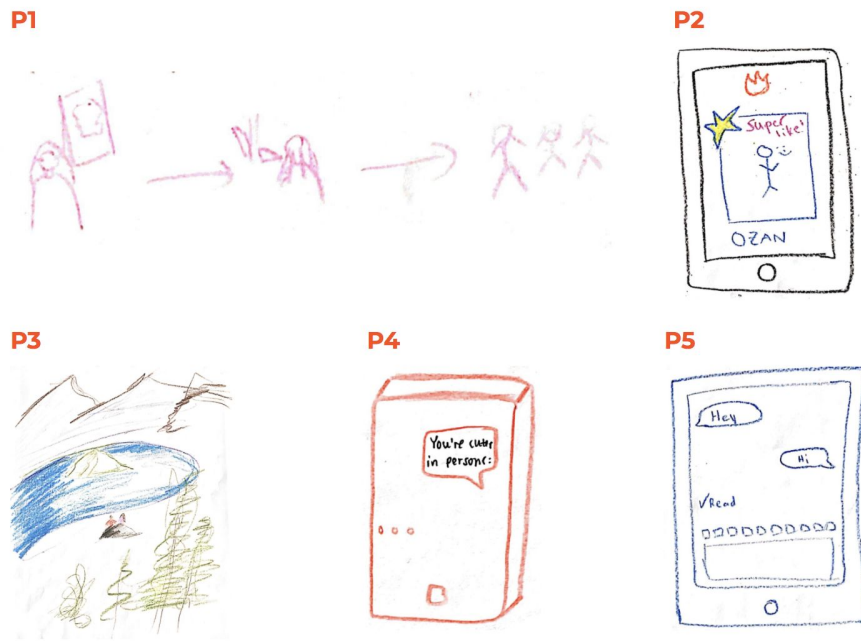


Figure 1. Participant Drawings of Memorable Experience from Dating Apps

Analysis

We analyzed the data in multiple stages based on thematic analysis. First, we categorized the verbal content of the interviews into themes and broad topics of discussion. We refined the themes over two rounds of discussion, the second round using selective processing to re-examine the data for any thematic edits that need to be made. Second, we analyzed the non-verbal data based on observations of facial expressions, gestures/postures, and emotions, to determine if there were any patterns that stood out (see Appendix B).

FINDINGS

Entertainment

There were a variety of ways in which Tinder was used as a form of entertainment. Tinder was referred to as a game. Male participants who gamified Tinder did so as a means to compete with each other to receive the most matches and phone numbers. Female participants who viewed Tinder as a game, did so as a way to pass the time and be humored by the funny profiles and pick-up lines that come from Tinder matches. Tinder also acted as an ego boost when feeling down.

Expectations of Casual Sex

Getting entertainment from Tinder in the form of casual sex also occurred. The dominant discourse of Tinder is that it is used for casual sex, also referred to as “hooking up.” Participants stated that people readily send sexualized messages to their matches.

Although it is widely understood that casual sex occurs on Tinder, there was negative reaction to the labels (i.e., ‘f*ck boy’ or ‘slut-shaming’) associated with Tinder users.

Ties are Easily Made and Broken

The dominant discourse of Tinder and its usage for entertainment has revealed some cultural norms, referred to as “unwritten rules.” Since sex is expected to be casual, halting communications afterwards, otherwise known as “ghosting”, is normal between Tinder matches. When unplanned encounters with past Tinder matches occur in person, the norm is to ignore them. This may be a means to protect their own and perhaps each other’s privacy so that they do not have to face the stigma of having met on Tinder.

Hope for a Serious Relationship

The commonly held method to meet someone when looking for a serious relationship is via real life meetings, as opposed to via a dating app. Reasons for this include the perception that the quality of the relationship is better if the partner is introduced in real life, and that meeting people in real life are often facilitated through a common interest or activity.

The reputation of Tinder does not affect the optimism that people have for finding a serious relationship from it. Participants stated that they joined Tinder after hearing about it from friends. Some have seen their friends’ Tinder matches evolve from a mere match to a steady relationship.

Social Pressure to be in a Relationship

We observed a contrast between the expectations of Tinder interactions and feeling pressure to be in a relationship due to college atmosphere and familial expectation. The perception that everyone on campus is in a relationship can make a person feel insignificant and drive them to seek activity on Tinder. The reference point from parents and family members successfully meeting their significant others at university creates an expectation that one’s soulmate should be found during college.

Tinder Makes it Easier

Tinder made a couple aspects of participant’s lives easier. First, it made it easier for participants to meet a larger number of people more quickly. The abundance of matches and the app itself helps initiate conversations more easily. Tinder also allowed participants to indirectly express their interest for someone in real life. When in contact with someone in person, suggesting that he/she seek them on Tinder to get matched was a way to tell someone of your interest without explicitly saying so.

However, Tinder can also make communication more complex and stressful. Participants stated that they use multiple mediums (Tinder messaging, Snapchat, Facebook, and phone text messaging) when corresponding with a match. Tinder increases the amount of digital communication and management of several “matches” at the same time. The long, drawn-out conversations and a tendencies to over-analyze and ruminate over messages was a source of anxiety.

Table 1. Themes Identified from Semi-structured Interviews (n=5)

Theme	Representative Data
Tinder is a form of entertainment	P2 "Use it as a time-waster." P4 "I was with friends and trying to see how many girls we could connect with." P5 "I played Tinder for 3 hours last night."
Ties are easily made and broken	P1 "If I see them on campus, ignore them or if they're cool you can say hi." P5 "With Tinder, I'm ok to stop messaging someone. Ghosted because the conversation is so boring."
Hope for a serious relationship	P5 "Roommate met her boyfriend on Tinder. Several friends have relationships out of Tinder. Might as well try it." P3 "I'm looking to meet people. My last relationships fizzled out."
Social pressure to be in a relationship	P2 "On [Tinder] because a lot of our friends are in relationships but we're not."
Tinder makes things easier	P1 "Like that Tinder is fast to get matches." P3 "Tinder is easy."
Communication on Tinder is stressful	P5 "30 texts on the app, then exchange phone numbers and then another two months go by and then 'oh let's get coffee' and nothing happens for six months."

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be taken into context when interpreting our study findings. First, we recognize that dating experiences or feelings about them may be sensitive to share. While some participants were open to discussing their romantic or dating lives, others may not have been as forthcoming. Under some circumstances, our participants may not have felt entirely comfortable with revealing their true thoughts or feelings. Second, the interviewer and note taker responsibilities were rotated amongst the group so as to provide an equal amount of experience. Variability was introduced as interviewers may have different interview style and engagement with participants. In order to create a comfortable environment for the participant to feel willing to openly discuss their dating experiences, we chose not to videotape or voice record the interview. All data collection was performed by the notetaker. Data analysis was limited to the amount of notes the notetaker could record during the interview and variances in note style and substance had to be collated.

DISCUSSION

Our findings were similar to the findings in Sumter, Vandenbosch, and Ligtenberg (2016) in that themes of love and casual sex, excitement, validation and self-worth, and ease of communication emerged as reasons why college undergraduates use dating apps. This was interesting given that their sample consisted of 18-30 year old Dutch young adults and they conducted their study through an online survey, while our sample consisted of young adults in the US with ages ranging from 19-26 (Sumter, Vandenbosch, and Ligtenberg, 2016). We also found that most people in our study used a dating app because they heard about it from a friend, which matches with the Sumter's (2017) finding that trendiness was a motivation for dating app use. In our study, people liked how Tinder made it easier to meet a lot of people and

to initiate conversations, which was in agreement with Pew Research findings that 61% of people who have tried online dating find that it is an easier and more efficient way of meeting people compared to other methods (Smith, 2016). However, we also found that Tinder made communication harder for some users because they spent a lot of time ruminating over how to best respond to messages and had to manage multiple matches and communication mediums.

We found that college undergrads understood that there was a culture of hook-ups and casual sex with dating apps. This finding matches data from another study; in a sample of 266 *Tinder* users between the ages of 18-30, 18% had a one-night stand after getting a *Tinder* match (Sumter, Vandenbosch, Ligtenberg, 2017). Despite the culture of casual sex that is associated with *Tinder*, some participants in our study still expressed hope that a serious relationship could result from *Tinder* because they know of people who met their significant other through a dating app. One of our participants is currently in a relationship with a woman he met on *Tinder* even though their initial interaction was a casual hook-up. Interestingly, Sumter and colleagues (2017) also found that love was a stronger motivation than casual sex for using *Tinder*, which suggests that young adults use *Tinder* more for finding a serious relationship than for mere sexual encounters.

Finally, our study offers more insight into the relationship between self-esteem and *Tinder* use. Prior research conducted on 1,300 mostly college students revealed that *Tinder* users have lower levels of self-esteem than nonusers. The study also found that both female and male *Tinder* users felt less satisfied with their bodies and looks when compared to nonusers (Strubel & Petrie, 2016). A possible explanation of why *Tinder* users have lower self-esteem could be that they people with lower esteem are motivated to use the app as a means to boost their self-esteem. Also, people with higher self-esteem might be less inclined to use an app due to their confidence in their ability to meet potential partners without the assistance of a dating app. These reasons for and against using dating apps were brought up by some of our participants.

Table 2. What is Already Known & What this Study Adds

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College undergraduates use dating apps for love and casual sex, excitement, validation and self worth, and ease of communication. • Trendiness is a motivation for dating app use. • Online dating is an easier and more efficient way of meeting people compared to other methods. • <i>Tinder</i> users have lower self-esteem than non-users.
WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tinder</i> provides a way for college undergraduates to raise self-esteem, albeit temporarily. • Perception that college undergraduates are all in a relationship drives willingness to try and use <i>Tinder</i>. • The increase of digital communication to simultaneously manage conversations with several <i>Tinder</i> matches can increase stress and anxiety.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Results from this study aid in helping to conceptualize the motivations, perceptions, and encounters that college students have with using dating apps. The widespread acceptance of casual sex through Tinder should be studied with relation to college undergraduate awareness of safe sex practices and sexually transmitted diseases. This will help inform and improve the development of health interventions aimed at safe sex practices. On the other hand, our findings can also work to dispel the stigma that Tinder is just used for casual sex; we found that people do hope for and end up in committed relationships from dating app use and this may be in part due to the social pressure to be in a relationship during college.

Future research should examine whether these findings can be replicated in different cultural contexts, geographic regions, and age groups in addition to studying whether the dominant discourse of Tinder being used for casual sex remains true. Another interesting research topic would be to use a longitudinal study design to examine the psychosocial impacts of long-term dating app use on young adults.

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APPENDIX A. PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

Dating App Experience of College Undergraduates

- How old are you? [Open Text Field]
- What is your gender? [Open Text Field]
- What year of college are you in? [Open Text Field]
- What are you majoring in or what are you planning to major in? [Open Text Field]
- What is your sexual orientation? [Open Text Field]
- What is your current relationship status? [Open Text Field]
- What methods have you used to meet people to date? [Open Text Field]
- Which dating apps have you used before? [Open Text Field]

The questionnaire revealed that we interviewed 3 male and 2 female undergraduate students. Participants ranged from 19-26 years old and included a variety of sexual orientations, including straight, CIS straight, bisexual, and lesbian. All 5 participants reported having used *Tinder* before, but apps such as *Bumble*, *Grindr*, and *HER* were also mentioned (each app mentioned only once).

APPENDIX B. NON-VERBAL DATA ANALYSIS

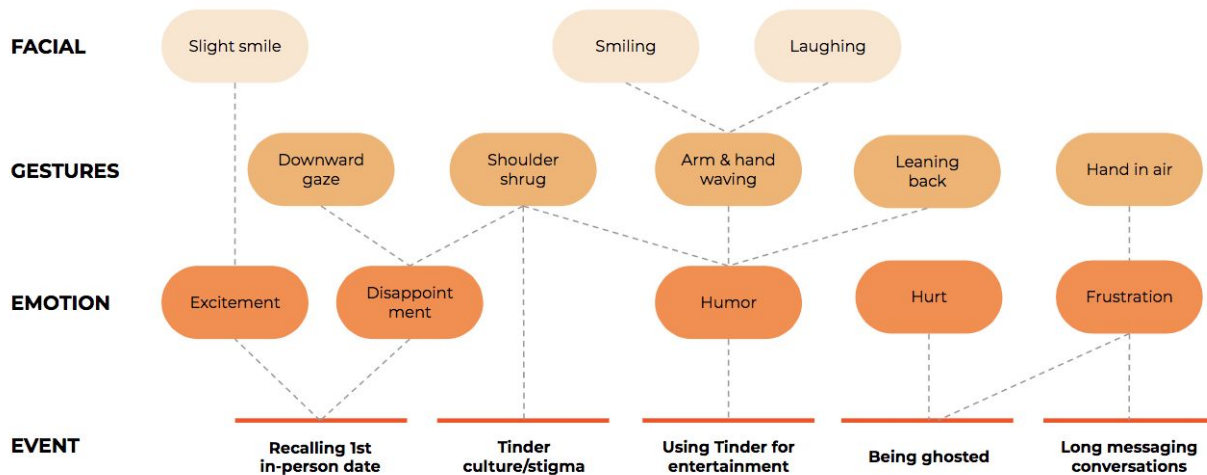


Figure 2. Emotions, Gestures, and Facial Expressions in response to Events

APPENDIX C. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The five authors of this paper each moderated at least one interview and drawing session. Each author also took notes for and observed at least another interview and drawing session. The authors also collaborated on data reporting, analysis, presentation creation, and the writing of this paper.

Natalie Huang

Participated in designing interview questionnaire, non-verbal data analysis illustration, and presentation slides. Contributed in writing Limitation section of the paper.

Alice Lin

Participant recruitment and compensation logistics. Created digital questionnaire with content from Emily Zeng and Christina Mauri. Created non-verbal data analysis illustration with Natalie Huang. Contributed to writing Findings, Limitations and Discussion sections of the paper.

Christina Mauri

Participated in participant recruitment. Created content for digital questionnaire with Emily Zeng. Contributed to writing Finding and Abstract sections of the paper.

Lillian Xiao

Contributed to writing the introduction, methods, and analysis sections of the paper and drafting the consent form.

Emily Zeng

Participated in participant recruitment and contributed to writing the Background and Discussion portions of the paper.