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To cite this article: Janelle Ward (2016): What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app, Information, Communication & Society, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1252412

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1252412

Published online: 06 Nov 2016.
What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app

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ABSTRACT
Mobile dating applications such as Tinder have exploded in popularity in recent years. On Tinder, impression management begins with a motivation to download the app, the choice of one’s profile photos and an assessment of the expectations of potential Tinder matches. These processes occur in a technologically mediated environment of reduced cues and increased control, local proximity and a reduced filtering process. My focus in this paper is this first stage of impression management, which consists of both impression motivation and impression construction. Specifically, what are the pre-match impression management practices of Tinder users? I present the results of interviews with Tinder users in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited via a Tinder profile that advertised the study using the University emblem and a brief description. Interview questions focused on user understandings of self-presentation practices and profile construction. The interviews also examined how users evaluated their potential matches. Results show users’ motivations for using Tinder range from entertainment to ego-boost to relationship seeking, and these motivations sometimes change over time. Profile photos are selected in an attempt to present an ideal yet authentic self, and chosen as an illustration of not only one’s desirability but also of other indicators such as education level. Tinder users ‘swipe’ not only in search of people they like, but also for clues as to how to present themselves in order to attract others like them. This research offers insight into user experiences and perceptions within the still under-researched area of inquiry.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 March 2016
Accepted 17 October 2016

KEYWORDS
Impression management; self-presentation; mobile technology; dating apps; Tinder

Introduction

Whether seeking a passionate love affair, looking for a spouse, or wanting a casual encounter, people have long devised methods of presenting themselves in the most attractive way to potential partners. Mediated possibilities to connect with others have evolved from newspaper advertisements to teletext to online dating websites, and the latest offerings are matchmaking mobile applications like Tinder.
Impression management or self-presentation exists both face-to-face and in mediated forms. Before a first date, a man shaves, applies cologne, and dresses in his finest. On Tinder, a woman selects an attractive picture of herself as her main photo. In a virtual environment, as in real life, impression management starts prior to a face-to-face meeting or even prior to interpersonal communication. On Tinder, this impression management begins with choosing one’s profile photos. It continues with what Leary describes as impression monitoring: ‘For people to engage in self-presentation, they must monitor, at one level or another, how they are being perceived and evaluated by others’ (1995, p. 47). Tinder users do this by assessing the expectations of potential matches.

There is tremendous research regarding self-presentation and romance in the last decade (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Manning, 2014), examining dating websites such as Yahoo! Personals (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012), Match.com (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006), and OKCupid (Zytko, Jones, & Grandhi, 2014). Recent work examines Grindr, the matchmaking app geared toward men seeking men (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012). Research is emerging on Tinder user awareness of privacy issues (Farnden, Martini, Raymond, & Choo, 2015; Stenson, Balcells, & Chen, 2015). Dating apps present a novel technological environment for impression management, mainly due to issues of reduced cues and increased control, local proximity, and a reduced filtering process. These issues will be explained in more detail in the coming section. First, I provide some detail on Tinder.

**Tinder**

Though dating websites still account for the largest market share,1 dating apps have increased in popularity in recent years. In comparison to dating websites, dating apps ask users to provide limited information for potential matches, namely, a number of photos and an optional small amount of text (Blackwell et al., 2015; Gudelunas, 2012). I distinguish Tinder from dating websites because it is a location-based dating platform available only as a mobile app. Further, Tinder does not ask users to answer compatibility questions and does not allow detailed filtering techniques, features common to dating websites. On Tinder, the first impression users have of a potential match is her/his main profile photo. If a user is interested in seeing more, s/he can tap the profile, which will reveal additional photos, optional text, and shared Facebook friends and Facebook likes.2 Users swipe left to reject and right to accept a potential match. If the right swipe is mutual, it is a match, and Tinder allows users to chat within the app.

Tinder was launched in October 2012 and has achieved global popularity. It has more than 50 million global users in 196 countries, with 9 billion matches since its inception.3 Globally, Tinder users login an average of 11 times a day and spend between 7 and 9 minutes swiping during a single session. Women browse profiles for 8.5 minutes at a time versus 7.2 for men (Bilton, 2014). In the Netherlands, there were an estimated 1.5 million users in 2014 (Eigenraam & Zandstra, 2014). Though the app itself is relatively new, the concept of meeting a romantic partner online is not. According to Statistics Netherlands, between 2008 and 2013, 13% of Dutch people met their partners online, and half of these met on dating sites.4

My motivation for conducting this study, presented as a research question, is to explore: **What are the pre-match impression management practices of Tinder users?** For this paper, I
draw on the impression management literature, keeping in mind the relevance of a technology-mediated dating environment. I first present theoretical considerations, followed by a description of the interviews I conducted with Tinder users. Interview analysis is followed by a conclusion and discussion.

**Impression management on dating apps**

Goffman (1959) classically argues that individuals attempt to control or guide others’ impressions by manipulating setting, appearance, and behavior. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), there are two key processes in impression management. First, there is impression motivation, ‘when people become motivated to engage in particular self-presentation behaviors’ (Leary, 1995, p. 53). Past research has established that in the context of mediated dating environments, users are highly motivated to control the impression they create (Ellison et al., 2012; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Zytko et al., 2014). This high motivation can be illustrated in how users are sometimes tempted to present themselves in idealized ways. For example, researchers have found that women have the tendency to decrease their reported weight, while men increase their reported height, and men are more likely to exaggerate their income levels (Feingold, 1990; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Hall et al., 2010; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Toma & Hancock, 2010). The second process of impression management is impression construction: when people explicitly choose the impression they want to make and decide the method they will use to create it. Researchers have elaborated on a number of these construction methods. For example, Leary (1995) discusses self-descriptions, attitude statements, social associations, and deception. Tinder users engage in impression construction when deciding which pictures and text to include, and which strategies to use during this process.

The environment, however, is key: Goffman’s initial work on self-presentation focused on face-to-face communication. Numerous scholars have adapted Goffman’s ideas to electronic environments, though still in an interpersonal context (e.g., Miller, 1995; Papacharissi, 2002; Tufekci, 2008). According to boyd and Ellison (2007), a social network site is a web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

Dating apps like Tinder differ in the sense that connections are not public. However, the profile itself is semi-public and centered around the user, offering the opportunity to connect with other users. In Goffman’s terms, Tinder provides the user a stage where s/he can perform.

In this paper, I focus on self-presentation in earlier stages of impression management: In a setting like a dating app, where the potential of romantic encounters loom, users must first be motivated to create a profile before interacting with others. At the same time, others’ impressions are key. On Tinder, users are only provided with positive reinforcement in the form of a mutual match. Users are not explicitly aware of who has rejected them.

Within this environment, users construct a profile, observe how others have constructed their profiles, and choose potential matches based on these profiles. On Tinder,
this process takes place in an environment that is defined by (1) reduced cues and increased control in profile construction; (2) local proximity of matches; and (3) a minimal filtering process, where Tinder users are exposed to all other users in a geographical, age, and sex-defined area, and must navigate through these potential matches by swiping.

**Reduced cues and increased control**

Dating app users operate in a reduced cue environment, where cues are static and not dynamic. Walther’s hyperpersonal model emphasizes that in such an online environment, individuals have increased control over self-presentation. Communication is asynchronous and it cannot rely on nonverbal communication cues, which are harder for individuals to control. Thus, users can more easily adapt their self-presentation in an online environment like Tinder as compared with face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996). This is the case on more general social networking sites such as Facebook (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) and particularly true in relation to online dating (Ellison et al., 2006, 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Manning, 2014; Toma & Hancock, 2010). Ellison et al. (2006) discuss how online daters are able to optimize their self-presentation and establish credibility in this environment by balancing ‘accuracy with self-promotions and desirability’ (p. 430). Hardey (2002) also notes ‘users feel obliged [to] anchor their on-line identity in their off-line embodied self’ (p. 579).

Though Tinder mimics dating websites in some ways, it reduces these self-presentation cues further. Users can only provide a limited amount of information to potential partners, namely, a number of photos and a small amount of text (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Gudelunas, 2012; Handel & Shklovski, 2012). Tinder users are, therefore, left with a few carefully chosen photos and an option for brief text.

**Local proximity**

With location-aware mobile devices, we can now connect with people in our close vicinity for particular purposes. Dating apps are also referred to as ‘location-based real-time dating’ applications (Handel & Shklovski, 2012) or ‘People-Nearby Applications’ (Van de Wiele & Tom Tong, 2014) as they draw on the location of the user in order to provide matches in one’s geographic proximity. Location-based dating apps may facilitate users meeting face to face and potentially forming a relationship (Blackwell et al., 2015; Ellison et al., 2012), which could increase impression motivation.

Further, due to the issue of proximity, especially in the case of location-based dating apps, there may be less of a tendency to deceive potential matches, as there is a real chance that they will meet face to face and form a relationship (Ellison et al., 2012). Researchers describe this as identifiability or the ease with which an online identity can be connected to a known person (Blackwell et al., 2015; Woo, 2006). Due to this possibility, Blackwell et al. (2015) say users have ‘an incentive to present in an attractive, but plausible, light’ (p. 6).

**Minimal filtering process**

When it comes to choosing romantic partners, filtering works to screen potential contacts. Focusing on how people choose sexual partners online, Couch and Liamputtong (2008)
describe filtering as ‘simple assessments of attractiveness and geography and physical proximity … identity, including appearance, personality, sexual tastes and preferences, and risk management’ (p. 273). Best and Delmege find that in an online dating environment that offers a ‘plethora of choice … filtering strategies are adopted spontaneously and refined conscientiously by participants’ (2012, p. 253). This process is often more complex on dating websites, in which users are allowed to additionally screen potential matches on height and weight (Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007), race (Lin & Lundquist, 2013), and education level (Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011).

In relation to dating websites, Best and Delmege (2012) describe the filtering process as starting with an initial screening, where users choose potential romantic partners based on search criteria. Then, users interact with the preselected potential romantic partners via messaging. On Tinder, filtering operates by allowing users to determine with whom they would like the possibility to chat, but users are provided only with geographical proximity, age, and sex as criteria, in contrast to more detailed filtering options on dating websites (Hamilton, 2016). This adaptation provides further incentive for research into the impression management practices of dating app users.

**Method**

With these theoretical considerations, my research tries to answer the following question: *What are the pre-match impression management practices of Tinder users?* In line with Leary and Kowalski’s (1990) concept of impression management, my goal is to, first, understand Tinder users’ motivations for downloading and using the app and, second, explore how Tinder users construct her/his profile and swipe potential partners. I examine these queries through interviews with Tinder users in the Netherlands.

Similar to Blackwell et al. (2015), participants were recruited via Tinder profiles that advertised the study using the University emblem and a brief description. Hamilton and Bowers (2006) suggest that researchers should ‘select the most appropriate Internet site to place an announcement of the study’ (p. 825). Two profiles with the username ‘TinderStudy’ were created: One male and one female, both with a reported age of 25 years. This strategy allowed me to access both male and female Tinder users, contributing to the aim of interviewing an equal number of each. Participants could email or contact me through Tinder with questions or to participate (see Figure 1).

Within 2 weeks, 11 male participants contacted me and I conducted the interviews in that time frame. Female users proved more difficult to recruit: In the initial two-week period, I received only three responses via the TinderStudy profile, and resorted to snowball sampling my previous interviewees, both female and male. This issue is addressed again in the discussion section.

I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with 11 men and 10 women, aged 19–52 years, which lasted between 45 and 107 minutes. As all interviewees were based in urban surroundings, interviews took place in a city convenient for the interviewee. The interviews were conducted between October and December 2014, at a location chosen by the interviewee (a bar or a café). Face-to-face interviews can be successfully conducted on Internet-based research topics (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Interviewees had used Tinder between two months and one year, and most were active users at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in English. Before scheduling the interview, I confirmed
with each interviewee that s/he was able to communicate fully in English. All interviewees were asked the same questions from a semi-structured interview guide prepared for the research. Like in Ellison et al. (2012), the open-ended interview questions focused on user understandings of profile construction. The interviews also examined how users evaluate and choose potential matches. Participants were assured of their anonymity and were informed that any quotes taken from their interviews in written or spoken reports would use pseudonyms and exclude potentially identifying details. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative textual analysis followed a revised version of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis should be ‘grounded’ in interview data; resulting explanations draw from participant responses rather than relying on preexisting theoretical insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process was revised in the sense that the theoretical framework and interview questions played a role in my interpretation of the interview data. I read transcripts in their entirety, and then engaged in the process of open coding followed by axial and then selective coding. The themes that emerged from this process are presented in the results section. Quotations from interviewees serve to illustrate the results and give voice to the participants in the research (Creswell, 2007).

Results

Why create a Tinder profile? Via the interviews, users’ impression motivations were uncovered by how they spoke about their use of Tinder and what their ultimate goal was while using the dating app.

_Tinder use as entertainment, ego-boost, or searching for a partner_

When initially asked why they used Tinder, all but two of the interviewees described their use as entertainment or an ego-boost. Erwin, 34 years old, identified wholeheartedly with the notion that Tinder was just for entertainment: ‘For me it’s more like a game.’ To
illustrate, he pointed to the games folder on his iPhone. ‘See, the app is right here, right next to Candy Crush.’ Erwin added: ‘It’s so superficial. And as soon as you realize that and accept that, it starts to be fun.’ Sergio, 46, said something similar: ‘I started just for fun, you know, it was a thing to pass the time.’ Others saw Tinder as an ego-boost. Colin, 21, said: ‘Why do I use Tinder? In the first place, I think for attention.’

Other users expressed a different motivation for using the app. They joined Tinder as a way to recover from a breakup, with the motivation to quickly find a new partner. Ross, 26, said, ‘I’d come [to the Netherlands] for [my ex-girlfriend] and I’d forgotten to make a balance. So then I needed Tinder instantly to work. I needed people to meet up, and hang out, immediately.’ Susan, 34, was on Tinder for two months before meeting her current boyfriend on the app:

I used it every day. I’d just got dumped. I’d just turned 34, and I was set on not staying alone, just miserable and by myself, I’m going to do something ... I downloaded it, it was super easy. I think I was on it multiple times a day. I was lying in bed crying for my ex and then whenever I had a match I was like, ‘Yes! There are still men out there that like me’.

Yet these motivations also changed over time. I heard from users who revealed a hope for finding love, after initially using it for entertainment or ego-boost. As the interviews progressed, there was a tendency for wishful thinking to emerge. Sergio put it this way: ‘If I find someone I want to live with on Tinder it’s ideal. But it’s not something that I’m really looking for.’ It worked the other way, too: Reinout, 27, spoke about his use of Tinder with a self-deprecating humor. Like others, he had an ambitious streak when downloading the app that later faded: ‘At first I was really looking for a girlfriend. And now it’s more like yeah, I just enjoy dating.’ He had learned how to play the game, but when asked to articulate his ‘ultimate goal,’ he returned to a relationship mindset: ‘The ultimate goal is to meet this one perfect match who will be my best friend for the rest of my life.’

**Impression motivation in a stigmatized environment**

Motivations for using Tinder are not clear-cut. Tinder’s reputation as reported in the media varies from a ‘hook-up’ app⁵ to a serious tool to finding relationships.⁶ An emerging issue related to motivations was a still-present stigma for dating online. Aya, a 22-year-old student, refused any ambitions for love or a long-term relationship from Tinder. She said: ‘I still feel it’s strange to search for people online if there are so many real people out there ... I know some people who have a relationship from Tinder but ... I actually think I would feel ashamed.’

Colin agreed. He explained how the stigma of having a Tinder profile impacted his reluctance to initially pair his real Facebook account with the dating app: ‘First I had a fake profile. Then I thought, why not? Everyone’s doing it. It can’t possibly hurt me.’ Colin revealed his actual identity, but would not go so far as to wish for an actual relationship from a Tinder match: ‘I have friends who have relationships from Tinder but I think it’s more shameful than something to be proud of ... Yes, you’re a lovely couple but you met on an application on your phone.’

If a Tinder user has different motivations for using the app, and her motivations change over time, this can present challenges for impression construction. Blackwell et al. found something similar in their study on the dating app Grindr: Users ‘can
have a range of norms and expectations, with little evidence in terms of visible cues from others to confirm or refute these expectations’ (2015, p. 1128). Despite such complications, a Tinder user must choose particular photos and text to present her-/himself in a desired way to potential partners. The next section will look at how Tinder users make these decisions.

**Constructing a desired impression**

Impression construction is about choosing the kind of impression to create and deciding precisely how to go about doing so (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Toma & Hancock, 2010). For my interviewees, impression construction on Tinder was a carefully chosen process. As with online dating websites, construction of the Tinder profile is of utmost importance: it represents ‘the first and primary means of expressing one’s self during the early stages of a correspondence and can therefore foreclose or create relationship opportunities’ (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 423). On Tinder, whether one is using the app for entertainment, seeking an ego-boost, or an eventual relationship, success is defined by an attractive profile, validated through mutual right swipes.

**How I want others to see me**

All interviewees had at least two photos on their profile, and some chose not to include any accompanying text. All said they had chosen pictures they liked or pictures their friends liked. For some, friends’ approval was communicated in person or via liking a photo on Facebook: The number of Facebook ‘likes’ pictures received played a big role in determining what they thought would get a positive response. Wildon, 43, stated: ‘I chose these pictures because they have likes on Facebook. I don’t know myself whether I look good in a picture.’ Johanna, 32, put it like this: ‘I chose these photos because that’s the way I want men to see me. That’s the way I see myself. The best way.’ Ideal yet authentic was important to interviewees. Erwin agreed: ‘Your Tinder profile should be realistic. There’s nothing more annoying than someone saying, “I expected you to be different”.’ Johanna added, ‘Yes I have pictures with my children. This is me, this is the total package, take it or leave it.’

Profiles were constructed with the aim to avoid certain appearances. According to one woman, seeming too sexual was one look to avoid. Christina, 40, claimed: ‘I would never put up sexy pictures, or pics that don’t look like me.’ This also happened for men. Wildon said: ‘I want women to see me as handsome. Serious. And I don’t want to be the guy who is starting with questions about sex.’ Aya referenced her photo choices by describing the kind of person she wanted to avoid looking like: ‘I want guys to know I’m a student … you can see that I’m not wearing that much makeup or excessive jewelry or those brands that different people wear.’

**Profile experimentation**

Every Tinder user must construct an impression. And yet, Tinder profiles are not static. Like other social media platforms, changing photos and text is possible and interviewees often took advantage of this opportunity. A number described their profile changes as
experiments. Erwin put it this way: ‘Yes, I change my Tinder profile. The second version I put up only two pictures and no text. I got amazing results.’ Ross had two profiles on Tinder:

In the beginning I couldn’t figure out which pictures to put up to get matches … I just did it as an experiment, to see what would happen. One profile is completely normal … the other profile I made it more sexual. More like topless pictures … just to see if there’s girls out there that would be [interested], because there are certain dating apps or websites that are sexual.

With perhaps the opposite intention, Johanna did a ‘philosophical profile’ experiment:

For a while, I had a Tinder account with only a philosophical quote for my profile photo. It was very interesting because the alpha males would match with me just to tell me that I’m a bitch and I don’t understand how nature works. They couldn’t understand it, couldn’t get it, and that was a filter for me. That’s not the kind of guy I want.

When asked about their profile creation, many interviewees referenced their potential Tinder matches as sources of inspiration. As their knowledge of how the app worked increased, they became expert on how they should present themselves, based on what they like and do not like about their potential matches. There was a constant comparison with others along with descriptions of what to embrace and what to avoid. This ranged from the type of photos and text to even the order of photos. Susan revealed, ‘I saw lots of people having lots of text and that was not something I wanted to do … the quote I had [on Tinder] represented something that I wanted to represent.’ Reinout said: ‘The first and last photo are important. There’s a girl, first picture, beautiful. Last one? It’s terrible. No, no, no.’ Because he had repeatedly had this experience while searching for matches, he realized the importance of keeping up an attractive appearance from start to finish. Thomas, 52, put it like this: ‘If I saw someone who had pictures thought-out like mine, I’d probably find that interesting. An interesting background would trigger me, so I’m putting on my profile what triggers me.’

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. Tinder users not only swiped to perfect their own profiles, but also swiped to find potential matches.

**The swiping culture**

In order to explore how Tinder users choose their matches, interviewees described their thought process in deciding whether to swipe left or right, thus rejecting or accepting a match. Interviewees swiped through potential matches in real time in order to demonstrate this process, but did not interact with past or current matches as this went beyond the scope of the inquiry.

When swiping, users first see the primary profile photo. Unsurprisingly, users do focus their evaluation on superficial characteristics present in this profile photo. As Colin stated: ‘It’s like sitting outside at a café and judging people as they walk by.’ The main reason interviewees gave for rejecting potential matches was the rather subjective trait of unattractiveness. Johanna demonstrated this while swiping: ‘This one? No. He has a round face and I really hate sunglasses.’ Sergio knew what he was looking for, but was not sure how to articulate it: ‘For me it’s all about the pictures. I want to see a face and a
face that I like … someone must attract me. It can be the shape of the mouth, nose, hair, anything.’

But this superficial evaluation quickly veered into more specific characteristics. Johanna became more precise when asked to describe what constitutes a left swipe for her: ‘There are the men with the fish and men posing with cars that aren’t theirs and men drinking. No. Swipe swipe swipe.’ Wildon had much to say about this topic: ‘Stupid pictures, duck faces, and people with animals. Dolphins, elephants, tigers, all cliché. I screenshot them.’ Later, while we swiped together, he paused on one potential match: ‘Her profile says “Yoo-hoo! Are there still nice men?” I’m almost sure she’s not my type. The yoohoo type.’ Thomas covered a range of these:

This is going to sound awful … I’m quite fit and sporty and I’m really not into fat people. Fat people, straight away. Also pictures with dogs. And also when the profile pictures don’t show the person, like a landscape … what are they hiding? And the other one is a picture of six or seven people. Who’s the person?

**Filtering on Tinder**

What can a photo show? Appearance, of course. Attractiveness. Perhaps personality. But other aspects emerged in the process of discussing match selection, for example, more obvious traits such as age or race, and also less evident aspects such as perceived education disparities. These aspects became apparent when interviewees were asked to specify which matches they rejected.

As in past research, interviewees used a process known as filtering when choosing a match. However, here, filtering is examined in the pre-interpersonal communication phase, via profile assessment.

Photos reveal more obvious traits such as race and age. Colin was asked about who he swiped left on, and replied: ‘Well, the non-Caucasian, and someone older than 30, that would be goodbye.’ Colin and others also mentioned their Facebook likes helped signal the intelligence or general interests of a potential match. Christina revealed the following:

… For the most part I’m just attracted to white men, and they have to be fit … I like very intellectual, nerdy guys, and when it’s all like these pictures of them just partying with their friends, on the boat, at these techno parties, at the festival, it’s like the same shit over and over.

I had more than one interviewee tell me that duck-face selfies signal low education. Erwin prefaced his growing pessimism for Tinder with the following: ‘I consider eighty percent of the country to be of lesser intelligence. And that eighty percent is now taking over Tinder.’ When asked for an example, he said: ‘There are so many spelling mistakes. If I see one I’m gone. It’s as simple as that.’

Attraction is subjective and laden with factors other than sex appeal. These results suggest a mirroring of self-presentation with one’s potential matches, as users overwhelmingly reported searching for people like them. Optimists might say that Tinder could be the great leveler of matchmaking. Because Tinder users have to swipe through every potential match presented to them, filtered only by geographical proximity, age, and sex, people could perhaps discover they are attracted to those previously pre-filtered out. Interviewees here have revealed that other factors are just as important as looks,
and the tendency for humans to seek out comparable others still emerges. There were few exceptions, from those who at least considered expanding their dating horizons. Wildon said: ‘Sometimes I am curious about women who are not my type. But I don’t think it would work in the long term.’

Thus, the process of choosing matches on Tinder is driven by physical attraction, but perceived similarity is also essential when selecting matches. Of course, this process may change when the need to connect outweighs the need to find a similar match. Reinout, 27, stated: ‘There are days when I’m out of dates … then I like more people on Tinder.’

**Conclusion and discussion**

In this paper, I have examined Tinder users’ pre-match impression management, looking at their motivations for using the app, the process they go through in choosing their profile photos and text, and how they swipe for potential matches. From entertainment to ego-boost to relationship seeking, users vary in their motivations for using the dating app, sometimes changing them over time. The still-present stigma of technologically mediated dating (Wildermuth, 2004) may impact users’ willingness to view it as a tool for serious dating or relationship seeking: Using Tinder ‘just for fun’ is more acceptable. Yet, recent survey research on Tinder users found no differences in the motivations of Tinder users and dating website users, but did observe a slight difference in the sexual permissiveness of the groups (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016). More research is needed to clarify this aspect of dating app use.

Photos are selected in an attempt to present an ideal yet authentic self, in line with past research (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006). Tinder users often search for potential matches to provide clues as to how to present themselves in order to attract others like them. This project did not examine reaction to particular matches, but rather focused on the general process of using Tinder. It could be that users tweak profiles as a response to particularly attractive others. Future research, perhaps following dating app users over time, could examine these possibilities.

In a reduced cue environment, results show that Tinder users use these minimal cues to show who they are, primarily via photos. They also take advantage of the controlled environment to conduct profile experiments to see how change to their self-presentation may improve their approval from others on the app. Profile choices are contemplated and often changed, as users alter their profiles in order to experiment with how reactions vary.

In terms of selecting matches, interviewees demonstrate knowledge of a particular set of ‘courting rules’ (Hardey, 2008) explicit to the dating environment. Hardy describes this as follows: ‘… individuals have to learn how to “decode” the profiles displayed on these sites and make choices on the basis of these mediated interactions’ (p. 1112). Such knowledge could facilitate the possibility of an off-line meeting. In terms of choosing who they want to interact with, findings here show that interviewees overwhelmingly search for similar others, though a few did use the opportunity to match with those they would not usually select. This points to another inclination predominate on dating sites: Homophily, or ‘love of the same,’ is the tendency people have to seek out others like themselves. People like those who are the same age, have the same race, and possess similar educational backgrounds (Harrison & Saeed, 1977; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).
Tinder’s swiping environment provides few technologically enabled filtering options. In this case, filtering went beyond appearance into other identity factors, such as perceived education level and indicators of socio-economic status. Unlike traditional dating websites that often ask for height, weight, race, or education level (Hancock et al., 2007; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Skopek et al., 2011), there are often no other indicators beyond a few photographs and a few words of text. This allows a different perspective on Tinder: Impression management is focused on that brief moment where one decides whether to swipe right or left. At the same time, Tinder could also be viewed as a platform that includes and excludes as we do in real life.

This paper focused on the ‘pre-match’ phase of Tinder profile construction and match selection. In relation to self-presentation, Goffman (1959) imagined face-to-face communication and talked about the reciprocal influence on actions when in each other’s immediate physical presence. Digital presentation is a fundamentally different context, and scholars have dealt with these distinctions. For example, Hogan (2010) takes Goffman’s work and applies it specifically to online media. Hogan’s thinking sees the Tinder user as curator, and curators ‘filter on behalf of the audience … filtering implies that one can evaluate a set of things before they are presented for consumption’ (p. 382).

At the same time, the promise of physical interaction plays a role here: Leary argues that ‘people tend to be more concerned with how others view them when they anticipate future interaction with them’ (1995, p. 57). Even in this pre-match stage, with a lack of interpersonal or face-to-face interaction, it seems such influence occurs on Tinder. Users are imagining who will see them, both those they want to meet and those they do not want to meet, and their desired self-presentation is important to tweak and maintain even before chatting with a match on the app or meeting them in person. In her discussion about networked privacy, boyd (2012) points out how our data ‘provides a probabilistic image of who we are based on comparisons to other people’ (p. 348). Tinder’s algorithm is not made public: though filtering criteria are limited, it is not entirely clear which profiles are presented to users, complicating knowing to whom users are comparing themselves.

Yet, dating ‘profiles are essential for online daters because they constitute a gateway for future FtF dating’ (Ellison et al., 2012, p. 2). This paper did not delve into what happens after a Tinder match, but this is an issue of great interest for future research: Face-to-face interaction with matches is an important continuation of impression management. Gershon (2010) describes this as ‘media switching’ and has explored its constraints on romantic relationships. This process may be complicated further in a relationship that began on a dating app. Hardey (2004) also argues that authenticity is key for successful communication between strangers attempting to develop a trusting relationship. The concept of authenticity is emerging in recent scholarship on Tinder use (Duguay, 2016). Still, ‘… physically copresent interaction still has to be managed in a manner which consolidates the dyadic encounter … such meetings may still be disappointing when physical copresence fails to match the expectation of one or both individuals’ (Hardey, 2002, p. 582).

A note of caution is in order whenever studying a trendy technological innovation: Since this research was conducted, Tinder has changed its interface to allow users to include their education and work information on their profiles. Users can also ‘Super Like’ other profiles, thus bringing their interest and their own profile to the front of another user’s queue. Such changes are a reminder of the importance of maintaining a broader theoretical lens and not focusing solely on technological features.
Beyond theoretical considerations, several issues related to the process of data collection are worth mentioning. The first is the difference in recruitment experiences between female and male Tinder users. Two weeks into my recruitment via the app, of the fourteen email responses I received, only three were from women. The three who eventually responded to my request also requested more information about the project and proof of my personal identity; male respondents did not do so. Such difficulty reminded me that for women on Tinder, I was presenting as a man – without an identifying picture – asking to meet and interview them. This issue highlights the importance of issues such as safety that women particularly face online (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

Further, it is important to keep in mind who actually responds to a request for academic research via a dating app. Though diverse in terms of age, my interviewees as a whole were almost all highly educated and white. Their stereotypes – and rejection – of those from other walks of life were in line with the past literature: This tendency has been found to be a common practice on dating sites when seeking potential partners (Fiore & Donath, 2005). But what about those Tinder users my interviewees rejected? What is their experience of self-presenting and selecting matches on Tinder? Even in past literature these individuals seem underrepresented, with an elite group giving voice to research findings. This is an important factor to remedy in future research.

This research has provided a look at the new phenomenon of mobile matchmaking apps and has helped discover similarities and differences with past research in terms of impression management, particularly in an environment of reduced cues and increased control, local proximity, and a reduced filtering process. It offers insight into user experiences and perceptions within a still under-researched area of inquiry and makes a case to continue researching mixed-mode relationships in the context of dating apps, where users anticipate a move from technologically mediated to face-to-face communication.

Notes

2. For a visual illustration of the app, see https://www.gotinder.com/. Tinder’s features have changed since I conducted this research; this issue is dealt with in the discussion. Although most users create profiles with their official Facebook account, others do so with a fake account, thus distorting their name, age, or other identifying features.
3. As of 14 March 2016, Tinder reports 1.4 billion swipes per day, 26 million matches per day, more than 10 billion total matches, and users in 196 countries. More here: https://www.gotinder.com/press.
6. See the Stuart Dredge piece ‘Tinder is for more than just casual sex, says CEO Sean Rad’ in The Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/nov/05/tinder-app-users-casual-sex-long-term-relationships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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