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Love on the Move: How Tinder is changing the way we date

By Livia Gerber

7-9 minutes



Everyone wants to be a winner in the dating game; but it doesn't always work that way ...

A 2015 article in the [New York Post](#) argued that mobile dating apps, such as *Tinder* and its many clones, are ultimately 'tearing society apart' by drastically changing the way young single adults in Western society seek and pursue romantic and sexual partners.

A recent study by [Mitchell Hobbs](#), [Stephen Owen](#) and [Livia](#)

[Gerber](#) (2016) asks whether that assessment is really true. The project explores the experiences of dating app users and investigates how the technology has influenced their sexual practices and views on romantic ideals and long-term relationships.

Offline desires, online realities

Meeting sexual and romantic partners specifically through dating apps has four characteristics: First, users are able to engage in casual, one-off or short-term, sexual encounters without engaging in any further social interaction. Second, dating apps allow users to broaden their romantic networks, extending beyond their existing social networks. Thirdly, dating apps are an efficient means of connecting with several potential partners at the same time. And, fourth, the emergence of dating apps has perpetuated a culture in which communication is increasingly focused around self-presentation and self-commodification.

The latter characteristic in particular may generate a sense of anxiety and frustration around the need to create a successful profile.

Self-presentation in the dating game

Mobile dating apps were initially designed as a type of game to take the stress and emotional investment out of dating. The tactile functionality of the app, combined with users' photo-based profiles resembles a virtual stack of cards: Profiles are presented like playing cards, and the user can swipe left on the screen to 'dislike' or swipe right to 'like' a profile. These profiles are only shown once – swiping left to 'dislike' therefore eliminates these profiles from the 'game'. Mutual right swipes result in a 'match' and only then can communication be initiated. Successful *tindering* is therefore in part measured by the amount of matches

one obtains, as one of our participants explained:

Yeah when you get matched it's like ooh! That's quite cool, that's the fun part and that's also probably quite the addictive part of it as well, I'd imagine. And yeah it's obviously good for good feelings.

Despite this elation of getting a match, many – particularly male – participants expressed a sense of frustration over their lack of success (i.e. their lack of matches) when using dating apps, indicating that dating apps may be perpetuating the exact anxiety they were designed to eliminate:

Tinder is purely based on looks. It's a numbers' game essentially. It's swipe how many times you want. Um so I don't personally like it still as a primary means of finding a relationship.

Engagement with the 'game' creates a level of anxiety that appears to stem from not gaining access to the smorgasbord of potential sexual and romantic partners theoretically available through dating apps. As another male participant remarked:

Everyone is copping a root but me.

In the online sphere, unattractive men have less chances at winning mutual matches, creating a sense that the average-looking guy is missing out on the dating game:

The 10% of highly attractive people fucking all the time make the rest of us feel bad.

In an offline context, 'average-looking' guys might be able to harness their interpersonal and communication skills instead:

I'm not suited to this app. I'm trying to find the right phrase but like the profiles that you think would get like high likes because of certain things they put in isn't really me and I don't try and do it. I also just think I'm more traditional in so far as I like to bump into

someone at a bar or room across- eyes across a room that's how I actually connect with people because I think half of meeting someone the fun is body language like reading little bits of body language.

In sum, how to present oneself in the best possible light online is a major concern for the users of dating apps. Whilst some participants felt that they are not suited to mobile dating apps due to a lack of successful self-presentation strategies, others engage in self-commodification in an attempt to increase their dating app success.

Self-commodification in the *Tinder* game

Self-commodification becomes an essential part of designing one's profile. One interviewee described how he helped his friend to improve his *Tinder* profile:

So I ask 'Can I look at your profile and can I change it for you?' So I get him a different picture and I make his profile his 'buyer' – he didn't have a buyer. I made his profile a buyer, and said 'You can always go back' and it blew up! It was almost like in the movies.

Users have the option of adding additional information or captions (referred to here as a 'buyer' and elsewhere as 'digital pick-up line') to their profiles. While some profiles strategically communicate very little, some male participants reported feeling put off by long digital pick-up lines:

So most of the time apparently it's just a highly sexualised or very blunt statement of intentions. Um there are funny ones. But um and then some like you see some girls will put- um have like a really long thing, really long statement about fun-loving. Everyone in the world apparently is fun-loving. Oh god. Worst, most overused statement I've ever- but anyway [sighs] um the- at the

very end of these monstrous spiels sometimes they'll write 'say orange if you've read this.' And so you're expected if you match, the first thing you say to them is orange to show that you've actually read through it.

In general, men appear to be less particular about whom they swipe right on in an attempt to increase their chances of gaining a match. However, these swipes do not always result in the kind of match the users were looking for, as another participant indicated:

He was frustrated cause of like five matches he'd had in the last two weeks four of them turned out to be prostitutes. The thing that made him so angry was that one of them actually talked to him for a whole week before she told him her rates.

In sum, male participants reported many frustrations related to looking for love on the move: getting a match was not actually 'as easy as play' – and even if they got matches, they were not always the kind of match they desired.

Changing communication strategies for the sexual marketplace

Dating apps certainly do not take the stress out of trying to find love, sex and romance. On the contrary, they may be creating new anxieties around online communication strategies. Male users, in particular, expressed frustration over the need to brand themselves as desirable commodities in the sexual marketplace. If dating apps are indeed 'tearing society apart' it is not because they result in everyone having casual sex all the time but because they create many more desires than they can fulfill.

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Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2016). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy
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