

The University of Akron

IdeaExchange@UAkron

Williams Honors College, Honors Research
Projects

The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors
College

Spring 2022

A Swipe to the Right: Exploring Tinder Use in College Students

Madisyn Smith

mrs271@ziips.uakron.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects



Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Smith, Madisyn, "A Swipe to the Right: Exploring Tinder Use in College Students" (2022). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1482.

https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1482

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

A Swipe to the Right: Exploring Tinder Use in College Students

Madisyn R. Smith

School of Communication, The University of Akron

Williams Honors College

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support and knowledge of The University of Akron School of Communication assistant professor Dr. Rhiannon Kallis. With Dr. Kallis's help and encouragement, I was able to explore a topic I am deeply interested in through serious academic inquiry and qualitative research. Thank you for your guidance, Dr. Kallis. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Kathleen Clark, my professor and Honors Advisor, who supported me through this Honors Project (and personal obstacles) the past nearly two years. This project has taken a considerable amount of time, effort, and, at times, discouragement, but seeing this project come to fruition and gaining invaluable research experience has made it absolutely worth it.

A Swipe to the Right: Exploring Tinder Use in College Students

Introduction

The technological advances of the 21st century have brought humankind the ability to do many things such as social networking, buying and selling goods and services, and consuming news and information at the literal tap of a finger. Technology, and social networking sites in particular, have made the processes of interpersonal communication and, thus, connection, over virtual platforms almost instantaneous. Hence, technology has given people the opportunity to initiate relationships online. On online dating applications like Tinder, users can potentially connect, communicate, and form various types of relationships with other users at the literal swipe of a finger. With a number of users amounting 50 million, Tinder is among one of the most populous dating applications to date (C. Smith, 2020). Of some 50 million users, approximately 85% of Tinder users are between the ages of 18 and 34 (A. Smith, 2016). Moreover, according to Tinder itself, more than half of its users are Gen Z, making Tinder a dating playground for young adults and, thus, current college students (Tinder, 2020). While some research has been conducted on the overall use of Tinder and other similar dating applications, little research has been done on the motivations behind Tinder use and the reasons behind “swiping” (i.e. pre-interaction preference) in college-aged populations. Hence, the purpose of this study will be to explore Tinder use among college students, with attention to motivation behind Tinder use and pre-interaction preferences that garner either a swipe right or a swipe left.

Tinder and the Interface

Created in 2012 as a “social discovery platform”, free-to-download-and-use dating application Tinder has uprooted common preconceptions of online dating (LeFebvre, 2018, p.

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

1207). Unlike dating sites like eHarmony and match.com that use complex methods to present its users with potential matches, Tinder presents its users with the unique opportunity of creating potential matches themselves. To do so, upon creation of a profile, Tinder users are presented with other users' profiles that consist of demographic information such as first name, age, employment status, education level, and general location (presented as "x miles away").

Although Tinder does have paid upgrades that allow users to see profiles from all over the world (called Tinder Passport), the baseline, free version of Tinder presents its users with profiles of other users that range from 1 to 100 miles away. To get these approximate locations, Tinder uses GPS cell phone signals and generates profiles for users to view in a user-specified mile radius, hence, the user can choose how close or how far potential matches will be from their approximate location (Hayes, 2020).

In addition to basic demographic information and approximate location in terms of miles, Tinder allows users to upload up to nine photographs and a 500-word maximum biography to their profiles. Biographies, and photographs in particular, are especially useful for Tinder users as it allows them to see other users and, thus, make a swiping decision based on preferences. LeFebvre (2018) delves into this in her study on Tinder use: "Tinder generates novel pre-interaction mechanisms that position potential offline meeting initiation through photographs and bios. Premeditated actions individuals take leading up to potential matches are strategic" (p. 1216). LeFebvre continues on to describe the importance of photographs and biographies as it pertains to expression/representation, and how that affects potential partners: "Tinder offers the space (setting, scene and stage) for individuals to generate representations that promote who they are (in their mind's eye) and who they want their potential partners to be based on appearance

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

[photographs] and interests [biographies]” (pp. 1216-1218). Tinder’s unique mechanisms encourage users to act on any pre-interaction preferences they have.

Tinder users have two options when they are presented with other users’ profiles: a swipe to the right or a swipe to the left. Tinder creators implemented this “swiping” method to mirror an interactive game of cards where users can theoretically remove any unwanted “cards” from the playing deck (i.e. swiping left), while simultaneously keeping any good “cards” on the side to potentially use later (i.e. swiping right) (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015). However, swiping right only creates a match when both users have swiped right on each other. This mutual swipe right signifies that both Tinder users have indicated some sort of interest in each other’s profiles. Both users are notified once they are matched and they then have the ability to message each other (without pictures as to prevent unwanted explicit material), start a conversation, and potentially form a relationship, whether it be platonic, romantic, or casual.

Tinder Use Motivation & Relationship Formation

Tinder has no boundaries when it comes to the type of relationships formed, or not formed, through its usage. Tinder simply connects two parties together; Tinder does not initiate anything for its users and places the option of communication and, thus, relationship formation, directly onto its users. To most, Tinder is commonly seen as a “hookup app” to form casual, sexual relationships. However, some users state that their motivation for using Tinder lies on the simplicity of the platform itself or the potential to form a variety of relationships such as platonic friendships, committed romantic relationships, business relationships, and more. Of a study conducted on 395 “emerging adult” and Millennial Tinder users (ages 18-34), 48.3% of users stated that they used Tinder for a variety of reasons (i.e. good marketing, friends use the app, etc.), 14.8% stated they used Tinder because of its simplicity and user-friendly design, 8.9% of

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

users stated that they used Tinder in hopes of forming either romantic or platonic interpersonal relationships, 7.9% of users joined out of curiosity, 5.1% of users joined for potential hookups and sexual satisfaction, 4.1% of users joined for location proximity to other users, 3.8% joined simply as a way to socially connect to people, and 2.3% joined because the interface seemed like a fun game (LeFebvre, 2018, pp. 1215-1216). Moreover, some users are active on Tinder for personal reasons aside from the potential to form relationships. These personal reasons for Tinder use can include self-worth and self-esteem, validation, and excitement (Sumter, 2017).

It can be argued that the motivations behind Tinder use correlate with users' reasons for swiping right versus left on potential partners. This can be argued based on UG theory, which says that people actively choose different types of media to fulfill their wants and needs (Katz, 1973). Although social media was not invented at the time of the theory's inception, modern communication research has successfully applied UG to social media. For instance, Whiting and Williams (2013) found that people use different social media for various reasons such as participating in social interaction, seeking information, passing the time, getting entertainment, etc. In other words, some people go to Facebook for social interaction, Twitter for news, and, in this case, Tinder for possible romantic and/or sexual interactions. Therefore, one can logically declare that Tinder users' motivations for downloading and using the application (i.e. for their own uses and gratifications) will affect pre-interaction preferences and, ultimately, swiping decisions. For example, one can declare that, based on UG theory, a user who is strictly using Tinder as a "hookup app" will have different swiping methods and pre-interaction preferences for potential sexual partners than Tinder users who use the app in hopes of starting romantic and/or platonic relationships. Little research has been done regarding the relationship between Tinder use motivation and pre-interaction swiping methods, so the purpose of this study is to

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

empirically explore that of college-aged Tinder users, who make up a good portion of the currently active Tinder population.

Tinder Swiping Strategies

As previously mentioned, Tinder's signature function, called swiping, gives users the unique opportunity to separate potential matches from non-potential matches. In other words, swiping allows users to declare some type of (non)attraction to the profiles they are presented through swiping left or right. Although the implicit use of Tinder is to swipe right on users one is interested in and, inversely, swipe left on users one is not interested in, some Tinder users have adopted unique swiping strategies that relate to their motivations to use the application. While some users look for attraction first and then make a swiping decision, other users apply something known as the "shotgun approach". According to LeFebvre (2018), the shotgun approach entails swiping right on every profile to maximize the chances of matches; shotgun approach users typically have lots of matches (as they swipe right on everyone) and will sift through the matches later to decide what users they will initiate conversation with (p.1220). On the other hand, some Tinder users sparingly swipe right, which is called selective swiping: "...they [selective swipers] had particular criteria or standards, and if they were not present, they quickly dismissed them" (LeFebvre, 2018, p. 1220).

Attraction's Role in Dating Applications

Attraction is a core principle underlying the use of dating applications like Tinder. According to attraction theory, individuals tend to create relationships with people they consider to be attractive (DeVito, 2016). Although attraction is usually thought of as physical attractiveness, attraction theory claims that there are several factors that influence attractiveness. Factors that influence attractiveness include similarity, proximity, reinforcement, physical

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

attractiveness and personality, socioeconomic and educational status, and reciprocity of liking. If one looks at the interface of Tinder, it is apparent that the application presents its users with several of these factors: proximity as users can see how far away potential matches are, physical attractiveness and personality as users can see photos and read short biographies of potential matches, and reciprocity of liking as users are matched when both parties swipe right, indicating a mutual “attraction” or interest in each other in some capacity.

One specific factor of attractiveness, proximity, is a factor that Tinder and other geo-based dating applications take advantage of. Bleyer (2014) emphasizes that the parameter of proximity is especially useful for dating application users who are looking for casual sex, as potential partners could be close in distance and could therefore physically meet in a short amount of time. As it pertains to profile photographs and biographies (i.e. the “physical attractiveness and personality” component), both play significant roles as it pertains to attractiveness. In a study done by LeFebvre (2018), physical attractiveness was found to be a substantial factor in swiping decisions, as profiles that were perceived to be attractive garnered more likes. The same LeFebvre study found that users who were perceived to have similar personality characteristics (such as agreeableness and openness from Lewis Goldberg’s Big Five personality traits) to the swiper were more likely to be swiped right.

Impression Formation & Decoding Tinder Profiles

Impression formation on Tinder is unique from other dating applications in that users have the power in their hands to determine attraction, make a swiping decision, initiate conversation, and/or form interpersonal relationships. Tinder profile components such as biographies and photos play a large role in pre-interaction preferences and, thus, impression formation. LeFebvre (2018) delves into this in detail:

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

The pre-initiation process afforded through Tinder indicate that individuals employing mobile dating apps process must (1) know, select, and narrow potential partner qualifications (i.e., selecting dating parameters); (2) create an individualized online impression through photos and bio—by knowing how to present him/herself as a viable partner; and (3) filter through another’s interpretations of themselves portrayed through photographs and written descriptions when determining potential partners’ worth. The premediated pre-interaction processes demonstrate static, scripted intrapersonal activities designed to hopefully generate interpersonal communication, and potential relationships (p. 1219)

As LeFebvre mentioned, profile components such as photos and the bio are crucial in Tinder users’ abilities to simultaneously highlight themselves, while determining the worth of other Tinder users. Ward (2016) connects the creation of online dating profiles (i.e. computer mediated communication) to face-to-face encounters like blind dates: “Whatever the method the strategy is the same: self-present in a way that makes you attractive to others” (p. 82).

The unique characteristic about computer-mediated communication, such as interactions on Tinder and other dating applications, is that cues are limited compared to face-to-face communication. However, a limitation of cues does not make online communication impersonal. In fact, Walther (1996) insists that computer-mediated communication can be hyperpersonal. Walther’s hyperpersonal perspective on computer-mediated communication argues that computer-mediated communication is very personal and can even go beyond the intimacy of face-to-face interactions in that those communicating online can (1) convey high levels of emotion and (2) actively choose what to disclose (1996). Disclosure is directly related to the creation of Tinder profiles in that users actively choose how to portray themselves through what

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

to include—and what not to include—in their profiles. Moreover, the limitation of cues in computer-mediated interactions influences the impressions that are made through the small amount of personal information showcased on Tinder profiles. For example, Tinder users only have a select number of pictures and a small blurb of biographical information to form impressions of other Tinder users, so it can be argued that a significant amount of weight is placed on these profile components when users make a swiping decision.

It can be inferred that there is a relationship between how Tinder users form their own profiles and, similarly, how Tinder users decode and judge the profiles of others. According to Ward's 2016 study on impression management on matchmaking applications, Tinder users build their profiles off the profiles of others: "They [the Tinder-using study subjects] hoped to demonstrate the kind of person they are, and, simultaneously, the sort of person they want to attract. Tinder users not only swiped to perfect their own profiles, but also swiped to find potential matches" (p. 1652).

When Tinder users are choosing what profiles are desirable versus what profiles are not desirable, they are initiating in a process called filtering. Filtering, according to Ward (2016), is simply a process where users choose a match (p. 1653). Filtering on Tinder heavily relies on available profile photographs, as different characteristics such as attractiveness, personality, age, race, or even perceived educational status can be inferred from the available photographs on a user's profile (Ward, 2016, p. 1653). Moreover, profile biographies play a role in this filtering process. In the same study, Ward (2016) found that some Tinder users heavily disliked (and, thus, usually swiped left) on users that had spelling mistakes anywhere in their profiles; in fact, a study subject said that they connected spelling mistakes in biographies with people of "lesser intelligence" (p. 1653). This filtering process users complete when making swiping decisions can

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

ultimately be related to Walther's hyperpersonal interaction theory as it pertains to computer-mediated communication: those that utilize online dating applications such as Tinder receive a limited number of cues from other users, thus, placing weight on what cues are available to them (i.e. photographs, biographies, basic demographic information).

Method

Participants

Five participants were selected via a criterion sampling approach. Prior to participation, participants received an informed consent form that described the study at hand and presented any risks and discomforts of participation. Participants ranged from ages 18 to 23 to mirror common ages of college students. Furthermore, study participants were currently enrolled students at a college or university who were currently active on the dating application Tinder at the time of their interview. An active status on Tinder at the time of interview was crucial as it supplied the most up-to-date information on participants' Tinder experiences. Participants were not limited to any one gender identity; persons of any gender identity were open to participation if they met the age and enrolled student criteria. Similarly, participants were not limited by sexual orientation as this study is concerned with the overall experience of college students on Tinder, which includes persons of any sexual orientation. Participants were not limited to having a specific relationship status, which could have included statuses such as: not in a relationship, casually dating one person, casually dating multiple people, married, engaged, never been in a romantic relationship, separated, divorced, domestic partnership, or committed relationship (multiple people) (LeFebvre, 2017). Participation was open to persons of any race or ethnic identity.

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Procedures

Five participants who met the above criteria concerning age, enrollment in a college or university, and current activity on Tinder were recruited via a.) social media postings and/or b.) University of Akron email. The first five participants who met screening criteria were asked to schedule one semi-structured virtual interview with the researcher concerning their motivation behind Tinder use (i.e. looking for a romantic relationship, searching for a causal relationship, seeking casual sex, etc.) and pre-interaction preferences when it comes to swiping on other Tinder users' profiles. A full transcript of the interview questions can be found in *Table A* below:

Table A: Interview Questions

Section I: Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What college/university are you currently enrolled in?
3. What is your major?
4. What is your current relationship status?

Section II: Motivation for Using Tinder

5. Why did you download Tinder?
6. What kind of relationship(s) are you looking to form on Tinder?

Section II: Pre-Interaction Preferences & Swiping

7. When you are looking at a profile, what is the first thing you notice?
8. Are there certain aspects of a profile that automatically make you swipe left? What and why?
9. Are there certain aspects of a profile that automatically make you swipe right? What and why?

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

10. What impact do a profile's photographs have on your swiping decisions?
11. What kind of Tinder profile photographs make you more likely to swipe right?
12. What kind of Tinder profile photographs make you more likely to swipe left?
13. How important is physical attractiveness when swiping?
14. What impact does a person's Tinder biography have on your swiping decisions?
15. What elements in a Tinder biography would make you more likely to swipe right?
16. What elements in a Tinder biography would make you more likely to swipe left?
17. How would you describe your swiping strategies on Tinder?

Based on the above interview questions, the following research questions emerge:

RQ1: Why do college students download Tinder?

RQ2: What impacts a swipe right?

RQ3: What impacts a swipe left?

Measurements

Participants will be asked about their motivation behind Tinder use and pre-interaction preferences when it comes to Tinder swiping, as outlined in the interview questions provided in *Table A*. Responses will be descriptive and will allow for follow-up questions.

Analysis

This study employed qualitative data analysis procedures through categorization and coding as is described in *Qualitative Communication Research Methods: 4TH Edition* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Participant responses were categorized through high-inference categorization; participant responses, although complex at times, exhibited overarching themes. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), high-inference categorization "...calls on the researcher to discern an organizing principle, or commonality, that isn't explicitly stated, but rather captures the

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

meanings that underlie expressions of belief, knowledge, and emotion” (p. 316). Categories were then be broken up into specific codes based on further similarities through pattern-recognition as described by Lindlof and Taylor (2019).

The Present Study

Participants

From July of 2021 to October of 2021, five eligible research study participants were virtually interviewed about their Tinder use and profile preferences. Participant ages ranged from 21 years to 23 years, with the average age of participants being 22 years. All five participants were active on Tinder and were enrolled in a college and/or university. All five participants were single at the time of interview. Of the five participants, three identified as female and two identified as male. To protect the participants’ identities, they were given a pseudonym. Thus, this study interviewed Peyton (female, 22), Jacob (male, 22), Steve (male, 22), Victoria (female, 23), and Megan (female, 21).

Results

Motivations for Tinder Use

RQ1 explores why college students decided to download, and subsequently use, Tinder. Based on participant answers to the questions listed in *Table A*, some potential motivations for downloading Tinder (**RQ1**) included: (1) just for fun (i.e. “...downloaded it as a joke...to people watch...”, Peyton; “...downloaded it as a joke in my friend group...”, Megan; “..I got it as a joke my freshman year in college when other people had it and figured I could meet some people...”, Jacob), (2) to meet people (i.e. “...I had friends and my brother had used it before and said to download it to meet new people”, Steve), and (3) curiosity (i.e. “...I was bored and wanted to see what it was about”, Victoria). Out of the five participants, therefore, 60% (3/5) said they

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

downloaded Tinder for some sort of fun, 20% (1/5) said they downloaded Tinder for the sole purpose of meeting people, and 20% (1/5) said they downloaded Tinder out of sheer curiosity about the application itself. Therefore, potential answers to **RQ1** include just for fun, to meet people, and sheer curiosity.

When it came to participants' answers about what kind of relationship(s) they were looking to form on Tinder (**RQ1**), common themes included: (1) friendship first, romance later (i.e. "...I wanted a relationship, but I wanted to form a friendship with said person first", Megan; "...at first, just a friendship...but later I was looking for a relationship, like a long-term sort of deal", Peyton; "...maybe friends that could eventually turn into a relationship", Victoria) and (2) not necessarily to date (i.e. "...not looking to date, but you never know...", Jacob; "...I told myself I would never date someone off the app...but you could meet someone miles away and end up having the same interests", Steve). Thus, 60% of participants (3/5) were interested in making friends first and then forming romantic relationships through Tinder and 40% of participants (2/5) were not outwardly looking for a dating relationship. Therefore, possible answers to **RQ1** regarding the types of relationships participants were looking to form through Tinder use included friendship first and romance later and not explicitly "dating" relationships. A table including themes and some participant responses related to their motivation for Tinder use can be found in *Table B* below:

Table B

Why participants downloaded Tinder	Relationships looking to form through Tinder
- Just for fun ("...a joke...", "...to people watch...")	- Friends first, romance later ("...friends that could eventually turn into a relationship")
- To meet people	- Not necessarily to date ("...not looking to date, but you never know", "...told myself I would never date

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

	someone off the app...but you could meet someone...and end up having the same interests")
- Curiosity (“...bored and wanted to see what it was about”)	

Pre-Interaction Preferences

RQ2 and **RQ3** focus on what aspects of Tinder profiles influence Tinder users to swipe right versus left. Interview questions 7 through 9 are concerned with overall Tinder profile preferences. Emergent themes about the first thing participants notice on a Tinder profile include: (1) photographs, (2) age, (3) bio and then photographs. While three respondents said profile photographs catch their eye first, these respondents supplied different reasonings, included as sub-themes here: (a) to learn more about who someone is and (b) physicality. One respondent said they looked at the age first, and another respondent said that they equally weigh biographies and photographs, but that biographies would decide if they would look at the photographs. Of the five participants, 60% (3/5) looked at photographs first, 20% (1/5) looked at age first, and 20% (1/5) looked at bios and then moved to photographs. A table including themes, sub-themes, and participant quotes can be found below in *Table C*:

Table C

First thing noticed on a Tinder profile	Corresponding participant quotes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Photographs - (a) Learning more about someone - (b) Physicality 	(a): “...look at the background of pictures to see what they’re doing to learn more about them...”, Jacob (b): “...their smile”, Victoria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bio and then photographs 	“...I was a huge bio reader, so if you caught my attention with the bio, I would look at pictures too”, Megan

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

When it came to asking participants about aspects of profiles that would make them swipe left (**RQ3**), they responded with themes such as: (1) risky behaviors, (2) boredom, and (3) children. Potentially risky behaviors, according to participants, included things like drug use, excessive partying, any nudity, alcohol abuse, smoking cigarettes, and only looking for hook-ups. One participant said the following: “If they smoke cigarettes, if I see them with alcohol in every one of their pictures, if it says they’re just looking for hook-ups...I just don’t want to get involved in any of that stuff”. As it pertains to the theme of “boredom”, one participant said they would swipe left if the profile was just not interesting: “...I didn’t find it interesting or didn’t find them that interesting...”. One participant said that if the profiles they were presented with had photographs of children that appeared to belong to the user, it was an automatic no. Therefore, 60% of participants (3/5) said that the presence of risky behavior made them swipe left, 20% of participants (1/5) said that profile boredom made them swipe left, and 20% of participants (1/5) said that children made them swipe left.

On the other hand, when asked about things that would make them more likely to swipe right (**RQ2**), participants responded with the following themes: (1) perceived commonalities, (2) humor, and (3) personality type. According to two participants, perceived commonalities included anything that seemed to be in common between them and the user they are presented with: “...they’re able to be around family and take care of other people and animals. That’s more of a personality I’d like to be around, more of a caring personality. I think it’s easier to start conversations because I have a dog and have children in my family”. As it pertained to humor, participants said the following: “...if the bio made me laugh. Finding someone that’s serious is a good thing but finding someone that can be not so serious and can have a fun time is a win for me”. And, as it pertained to personality type, one participant said the following characteristics

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

that were apparent on a profile would make them swipe right: "...adventurous, outgoing...". Therefore, out of five participants, 40% (2/5) based right swipes on perceived commonalities, 40% (2/5) based right swipes on a presence of humor, and 20% (1/5) based right swipes on an apparent presence of "interesting" personality characteristics. A table including potential reasons both for swiping right and swiping left can be found below in *Table D*:

Table D

Reasons participants swiped left	Reasons participants swiped right
- Risky behaviors	- Perceived commonalities
- Boredom	- Humor
- Children	- Personality type

Interview questions 10-13 (as seen in *Table A*) asked participants about the specific impacts Tinder profile photographs had on their swiping decisions (**RQ2** and **RQ3**). Common themes that emerged regarding this impact include: (1) photographs play a big role in swiping decisions, (2) photographs are the only deciding factor in a swiping decision, and (3) photographs and biographies are equally as important in impacting swiping decisions. As it pertains to photographs playing a big role in swiping decisions, study participant Peyton said the following: "I would say it's a big part of the decision...it's the first thing I see when a profile comes up. Right then and there if the first picture is not something I like it's an automatic no". Similarly, participant Steve said that pictures invite you to see more about a person, what they do, and what environments they frequent, which allows him to better make a swiping decision. As it pertains to photographs playing the only role in swiping decisions, participant Jacob said the following: "I don't really read the bios so the photos are pretty much everything about if I swipe right or left". As it pertains to photographs and bios playing an equal part in influencing swiping decisions, participant Victoria said the following: "I feel like they play a big role. I think it's probably equivalent to their bio".

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Of the five participants, 60% (3/5) said photographs play a large role in swiping decisions, 20% (1/5) said photographs are the only deciding factor on a swipe, and 20% (1/5) said that photographs and biographies are equally as important.

Interview questions 11 and 12 asked participants what types of Tinder profile photographs made them more likely to swipe right or left (**RQ2** and **RQ3**). Study participants said that the following photograph types made them more likely to swipe right (**RQ2**): (1) photographs that showed some type of commonality, (2) photographs that were visually appealing, (3) all photographs, and (4) photographs that showed personality. Two study participants insinuated that photographs that exhibited commonalities or common interests between themselves and potential matches made them more likely to swipe right because it showed likeness. Peyton, who said she has a sports background, said the following about athletic photographs: “I could see them being athletes so that was really cool”. Megan, who said she likes to take mirror selfies, said the following regarding mirror selfies on Tinder profiles: “I personally like mirror selfies. I think it’s because it’s how I like to take my photos so I think it falls between common things”. As it pertains to swiping on photos that were visually appealing, participant Victoria said the following: “...if it’s just a decent picture, I don’t care if its professional or anything I don’t look at specific things in particular”. Study participant Steve expressed that there are no photos that he likes more than others, but that there are only photos he does not like. Lastly, participant Jacob said the following regarding swiping right on photographs that showed particular personality traits: “I like when people are...doing something in their photos. Not all their pictures are of them standing in the mirror”. Earlier on in Jacob’s interview, he mentioned that he swiped right on people he perceived to be adventurous and outgoing. When asked a follow-up question about the photographs he preferred to see on Tinder profiles, Jacob said that he liked to see photographs that showed

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

potential matches being adventurous; therefore, Jacob swiped right on profiles with photographs that exhibited specific personality traits he was looking for. For question 11, 40% of participants (2/5) said that they swiped right on profiles with photographs that showed some sort of commonality between them and potential matches, 20% of participants (1/5) said they swiped on profiles with visually appealing photographs, 20% of participants (1/5) said they would swipe right as long as the profile had no pictures they did not like, and 20% of participants (1/5) said they would swipe right on a profile if the photographs exhibited personality traits or characteristics they were looking for in a match.

Question 12 asked participants about what kind of Tinder profile photographs made them more likely to swipe left (**RQ3**). Common answers between participants included: (1) photographs that exhibited lifestyles they did not like, (2) photographs that included previous relationships, (3) group photographs, and (4) clear photographs. Two participants said that if a profile included photographs of things like guns, parties, or drugs that it would be a swipe left. Jacob said the following regarding his answer: "...if they're like shooting a gun or something like that. That's the only thing I don't like about adventurous people...like 'country' people I guess". On the other hand, Megan said the following about her answer: "...some profiles have people who just post them partying and that's not really me...if you're doing something I don't like that much like partying or doing something illegal or like guns I don't personally vibe with that". As it pertains to photographs that showed what appeared to be previous partners or relationships, Victoria said the following: "If they have a picture with like a previous ex or something and they're like crossed out [it's a no]". Participant Steve said that profiles with only group pictures would make him swipe left: "it's supposed to be a 'you' profile not a 'I have eight friends around me in every single photo' [profile]...and I can't tell who is who. If it's every single photo and there's two or three people,

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

you know, you get confused on who is who”. One participant said that clear photographs made them more likely to swipe left: “Probably professional pictures because it looks clear and professionally done”. Out of five participants, 40% (2/5) of participants said that photographs showing lifestyles they did not like would make them swipe left, 20% (1/5) of participants said that photographs showing a previous relationship would make them swipe left, 20% (1/5) of participants said that a profile with only group photographs would make them swipe left, and 20% (1/5) of participants said that professional style photographs would make them swipe left.

To wrap up the section on profile photographs, question 13 asked participants how much importance they placed on physical attractiveness when swiping (**RQ2 and RQ3**). Common themes between answers included: (1) important, but not overwhelmingly important and (2) overwhelmingly important. Two participants (40%) said that, while looks are important, other aspects play a role in their overall swiping decision. Peyton, for instance, said the following: “It’s about 60%. It’s not a huge deal to me, but it definitely catches my eye”. Another participant, Megan, said the following: “I don’t think it’s the most important thing. It’s definitely a factor in my book, but like I said looks are just a bonus for me, technically. So, if I think you have a really good personality and you’re cute, you’re winning. But, I’m not gonna base my decision on solely looks; it’s kinda a combination. Its like a 50/50 from looks and personality”. The remaining three participants (60%) said that physical attractiveness plays a large role in their swiping decisions. Jacob said the following: “I would say it’s pretty important. I would say a 9/10”. Another participant, Steve, said the following: “I would say if you name things from least to most important it’s obviously the first thing you see...my first thing I see is smile/teeth. Even if you are hot and smile that can take you all the way down to ‘I’m not going to date you’”. *Table E* below shows common themes for all four interview questions (10-13) regarding photographs on a profile:

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Table E

Photographs' impact on swiping decisions	Photographs that influence a right swipe	Photographs that influence a left swipe	Importance of physical attractiveness
- Big role	- Commonality	- Unlikeable lifestyles	- Important, but not overwhelming
- Only role	- Visually appealing	- Showed previous relationship	- Overwhelmingly important
- Equally important to bio	- Only bad photographs influence swiping	- Only group photos	
	- Shows personality	- Professional photos	

Questions 14-16 asked participants about Tinder profile biographies. Starting with question 14, participants were asked what impact Tinder biographies had on their swiping decisions (**RQ2** and **RQ3**). Common themes to answer this question included: (1) large impact, (2) medium impact, and (3) only made an impact after matching. Three participants (60%) said that biographies played a considerable role in how they swiped. Peyton, for instance, said that biographies sometimes said more than profile pictures: “[A bio] is the second thing I look for. It’s like the big thing of how or why I swipe right. I don’t really swipe right because of looks. If I think they’re cute I look into their captions [bio] and then determine if I swipe right or left”. Victoria, who said biographies had a medium impact on her swiping decisions, said the following: “That’s iffy because some people don’t have a bio. For other people, it just depends what’s in it. [It doesn’t bother me when people don’t have a bio] because there’s other things they can put...it’s not just the bio, there’s other things involved [like their social medias]”. Lastly, Jacob, who said he does not look at bios until after he is matched with someone, said the following: “I don’t read the bios until after I match with the person. I don’t see a point in reading

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

a bio if I swipe right and you don't match. I just wasted about a minute of my life".

Question 15 asked participants what elements of a Tinder biography would make them more likely to swipe right (**RQ2**). All participants (5/5) noted that the inclusion of some type of humor in a biography would make them more likely to swipe right. However, two sub-themes appeared from participants' answers: (1) humor and commonality and (2) humor and conciseness. Four participants said that a biography that was funny and simultaneously showed shared interests between them and their potential match would garner a swipe right. Jacob, however, said that the key to his right swipe is to be funny and concise: "I like one-liners essentially like a funny one-line sentence. I don't want someone to describe like their whole life in their bio".

On the other hand, question 16 asked participants what elements of a Tinder biography would make them more likely to swipe left (**RQ3**). Common themes of answers between participants included: (1) offensiveness/ derogatory language, (2) plainness, (3) humorless jokes, and (4) "rules". Two participants (2/5) said that anything in a bio that was offensive to themselves or others would make them swipe left. Peyton, for instance, said that anything offensive or derogatory aimed at females would be an automatic swipe left. Similarly, Victoria said the following: "The main thing I can think of is if it says they're only on Tinder for hook-ups...guys that put in their bio that they're looking for girls with like juicy butts and stuff in their bio that's just weird to me". Steve said the following regarding his answer of plainness influencing a swipe left: "If it's just plain like...nothing to them. They just filled out with they were told [age, where you go to school, generic information]". Megan, who said that humorless jokes influence her left swipe, said the following: "...something random or something that has nothing to do with them or I've stumbled across some profiles that just have like a corny joke

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

and I didn't find the joke funny or it was an overused joke and then I'm just like 'eh I don't know about that one'". Lastly, Jacob said that a bio that included "rules" would influence his left swipe. According to Jacob, "rules" are desperate: "...if they look desperate pretty much like if they have a bunch of rules in their bio like do's and don'ts and 'swipe right if you like this and this and this', I don't know". *Table F* below displays themes from questions 14-16:

Table F

Importance of biography on swiping decisions	Aspects of a biography that would influence a right swipe	Aspects of a biography that would influence a left swipe
- Large impact	- Humor and commonality	- Offensive/ derogatory language
- Medium impact	- Humor and conciseness	- Plainness
- Only made an impact after matching		- Humorless jokes
		- "Rules"

Question 17 asked participants about their swiping and if they thought they were more lenient or selective with their swipes (**RQ2** and **RQ3**). Participants either said that they were (1) more lenient or (2) more selective with their swipes. Two participants (40%) said that they thought of themselves as more lenient with swipes; Jacob said that "...eight out of ten times" is a swipe right because he "...just likes getting matches", whereas Megan said that she likes to be more lenient so she can "...see where it goes". On the other hand, three participants (60%) said that they thought of themselves as more selective with swipes; Steve, for instance, said the following: "I would say it's more swiping left than it is swiping right". Similarly, Peyton said the following: "I believe I am way more strict than most people. I am picky when it comes to people that I talk to in general, so me deciding who to talk to on a dating app makes it even worse just because I have so many hoops for these profiles to go through...it just takes a lot for them to

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

even get a swipe right out of me”.

At the culmination of the interviews, participants were asked if there was anything else they wanted to share about their experiences on Tinder. While these responses are not included in analysis like the previous questions, here are some of the experiences participants shared:

- Jacob: “I’ve had a lot of different conversations with a lot of different people... a lot of different characters. I’ve hung out with a few of them”.
- Megan: “I think overall my experience has been good. I’ve made a few friendships out of this that I still talk to every once in a while. Even though we never got to a relationship, I’m glad I still got that friendship with them. I think it could be beneficial in that way too, like, if it doesn’t work out you could always be friends”.
- Victoria: “I have never met a decent person from Tinder”.

Discussion

Motivations for Tinder Use

The participants’ motivations for Tinder use (**RQ1**) included “just for fun”, “to meet people”, and out of “curiosity”. No participant mentioned downloading or using Tinder for the sole purpose of casual sex. While some people do use Tinder for the sole purpose of finding casual sexual partners, the results of this study suggested otherwise. In fact, the results of this study pointed toward the idea that college-aged Tinder users download and use Tinder for the opportunity to initiate and create potentially meaningful human connection that is not entirely sexual. Thus, contrary to popular belief, Tinder is not simply a glorified “hook-up” app, but is, instead, an effective computer mediated communication platform where individuals can meet, interact, and initiate some form of meaningful relationship based on their own preferences through swiping (**RQ2** and **RQ3**).

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Pre-Interaction Preferences

Overall, the main idea that emerged from participant answers regarding their pre-interaction preferences and swiping behaviors was swiping right (**RQ2**) on user profiles that exhibited commonalities, humor, perceived compatible personalities, and agreeable behaviors. On the other hand, the main idea of swiping left (**RQ3**) on profiles was regarding a lack of humor, a presence of risky behavior or incompatible lifestyles, offensive or derogatory language, and boredom. From these pre-interaction preferences, it is clear that the participants of the present study wanted to meet and connect with Tinder users they felt they were compatible with on a level other than physical or sexual (**RQ2** and **RQ3**).

When it comes to the importance of physical attractiveness, the study participants shared that physical attractiveness is either important or overwhelmingly important when they decide to swipe right versus left (**RQ2** and **RQ3**). While this could be tied to some sexual desire, that possible sexual desire is not the sole reason some Tinder users swipe right, as the majority of study participants said they take profile biographies into an equal or higher account than photographs when they make their swiping decisions. Thus, while the importance of physical aspects should not be undermined when looking at Tinder swipes, the importance of personal and social aspects that are found in Tinder biographies play a large role in swiping decisions, as well. It can be concluded, therefore, that in the case of Tinder users who are not on Tinder for the sole purpose of looking for casual sex, profile photographs and biographies simultaneously impact one's perception of a Tinder user they are presented with and, thus, affect a swiping decision.

Through Katz's UG theory, it is argued that individuals choose different types of media to use to fulfill specific gratifications. If the media in question is Tinder, some Tinder users use

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Tinder to meet people, to look for casual sex, to entertain themselves, to initiate romantic relationships, etc. Through UG theory, the reason why any one individual uses a media will impact how they use said media. In the case of the present study, real Tinder users claimed that they used Tinder (**RQ1**) to (1) meet people, (2) fulfill personal want of fun/entertainment, and (3) quench their curiosity about Tinder itself. As it pertains to participants of this study wanting to meet people through Tinder, study participants said they were (1) interested in creating friendships that may turn into something romantic later or (2) not necessarily looking to date, but not necessarily opposed to it (**RQ1**). When looking at participants' swiping strategies and pre-interaction preferences, it is evident that the study participants swiped on people they seemed to be compatible with because they were open (though some more than others) to the possibility of initiating and creating meaningful interpersonal relationships through Tinder that were not solely casual sex. In fact, zero of the five participants mentioned anything about hooking up nor casual sex in their interviews; instead, they emphasized seeking out and, thus, swiping right, on people they thought they would be compatible with based on their own standards, personalities, and lifestyles, which certainly supplies a heartening perspective on how college students use Tinder.

Limitations

While this study was conducted using a criterion sample, this study only employed five participants who were all from the same geographical area. To gain a plethora of different perspectives and, thus, gain as many different participant experiences as possible, it is important that future studies (1) interview a greater sample size and (2) increase the geographical spread of participants. While the present study was informative and garnered valuable information about college students and how they use Tinder, the participants in this study all went to college in Northeast Ohio and may have had some overlapping experiences and techniques on Tinder.

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Therefore, it is important for future studies to consider how college students in other geographical regions view and use Tinder, as well.

Conclusion

From this small-scale study, it is clear that, contrary to popular belief, Tinder is not just a “hook-up app” for college students. In reality, Tinder gives college students the opportunity to meet people, hone what they are looking for in a person, and even make long-lasting friendships that may or may not lead to something romantic in the future. Through swiping left and right, Tinder users are given the power to seek what they want and, inversely, dismiss what they do not want. In the age of new media, meeting and communicating with people through technology such as social media and dating applications is not taboo; in fact, it is widely recognized and accepted—especially amongst college-aged individuals.

Since college-aged individuals are not using Tinder solely for the purpose of casual sex, their swiping decisions are widely based on commonalities, shared interests, and compatible personality types/traits; all things that could potentially signal a meaningful connection. Regardless, Tinder has a bad reputation, especially with older audiences. Why is it that looking for casual sex in-person (say, at a bar) seems to be more socially accepted than looking for casual sex through a dating application? Is it the introduction of technology into the mix or the fact that many Tinder users are college-aged? Nonetheless, through research and through the interviews conducted in this study, it is clear that Tinder is a valid space to meet people, to have fun, to communicate, or to do whatever any given user wants to use it for. As mentioned earlier in the study, Tinder really is a dating playground for Gen Z. What was Gen X’s “We met at church” may very well be this generation’s “We met on Tinder”.

References

- Ansari, A., & Klinenberg, E. (2015). *Modern romance*. Penguin Press.
- Bleyer, J. (2014). Love the one you're near. *Psychology Today*, 47(4), 36-38.
- DeVito, J. A. (2016). *The interpersonal communication book*. Pearson.
- Hayes, R. (2020, October 1). *How to change your location on Tinder*. Tech Junkie.
<https://social.techjunkie.com/change-location-tinder/>
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509-523. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747854>
- LeFebvre, L. (2018). Swiping me off my feet: Explicating relationship initiation on Tinder. *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships*, 35(9), 1205-1229.
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265407517706419>
- Lindlof, T., & Taylor, B. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods: 4th edition*. Sage.
- Tinder. (2020, August 21). *Making the first time count this November*.
<https://blog.gotinder.com/making-the-first-time-count-this-november/>
- Smith, A. (2016, February 11). *15% of American adults have used online dating sites or mobile dating apps*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/02/11/15-percent-of-american-adults-have-used-online-dating-sites-or-mobile-dating-apps/>
- Smith, C. (2020, July 29). *50 Tinder statistics and facts: By the numbers*. DMR.
<https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/tinder-statistics/>
- Sumter, S. R., Vandenbosch, L., & Ligtenberg, L. (2017). Love me Tinder: Untangling emerging adults' motivation for using the dating application Tinder. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(1), 67-78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.04.009>

A SWIPE TO THE RIGHT

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3-43.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F009365096023001001>

Ward, J. (2016). Swiping, matching, chatting. *HUMAN IT*, 13(2), 81-95. From,

<https://humanit.hb.se/article/view/516/579>

Ward, J. (2016). What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(11), 1644-1659.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1252412>

Whiting, A. & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(4), 362-369. From,

https://www.daltonstate.edu/directory/82/files/Whiting_Williams_QMR_2013.pdf