

Tinder: Communicating Desirability Online

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Abstract

For many of my friends at college, meeting potential dates has become a new challenge since the dating pool has expanded and dating behaviors have changed. Many college students have turned to a new dating app called Tinder to meet new people. It is unique because, unlike traditional dating sites that display general statistics and personalized questions, Tinder relies exclusively on photos and short descriptions in order to find a potential date. In order to observe Tinder profiles, I conducted a virtual ethnography, during which I had to create my own Tinder profile. Once my profile was complete, I conducted 265 detailed observations of UNC heterosexual male Tinder profiles in which I described all pictures from the different profiles I observed. I noted clothing, setting, facial expression, presence of other people, and any other miscellaneous factors in order to recognize trends that were existent. Based on my observations, I noted that, through their pictures, many heterosexual male users at UNC choose photos that display attractiveness, sociability, and wealth in order to attract potential female matches.

Keywords: Tinder, online dating, desirability, virtual ethnography

1. Introduction

Sitting with John, he quickly skims through profiles of potential dates, similar to window-shopping, occasionally swiping right¹ if he finds the user desirable. After a while, he turns to me and agonizes, “People don’t know how to create a Tinder profile. You have to show your face. You can’t show your mom. It’s like the basic rule of Tinder.” For many of my college-aged friends, Tinder is becoming a way to meet new people, due to the vast numbers of people in college and their reliance on technology to communicate. Tinder is popular among college students because, unlike traditional dating sites that require demographic information and lengthy answers no one wants to write or read, it relies exclusively on photos and short descriptions in order to find a potential date (Hitsch et. al, 2006).

Tinder is an increasingly popular way to meet new people nearby. Over 10 billion matches have been made on Tinder through the simple system of anonymously swiping right to like a person or swiping left to pass. If both people like each other, then it is a match, and the ability to chat with the other person through the app becomes available. When making a profile, a person can upload up to six pictures from their Facebook or phone, write a short bio, and include education and work history. Additionally, if two people have mutual Facebook interests or friends, they will be able to see that commonality when viewing the other’s profile.

Once a person creates a profile, he or she can browse a desired gender from ages 18 to 60+ , ranging between a 1-mile and a 100-mile radius. This virtual ethnography explores how the unique features of Tinder are used to construct an online identity in order to attract potential matches. Since Tinder attracts such a wide array of people, it was not feasible due to the brevity of this study to observe all demographics. For the purpose of my study, I observed UNC male heterosexual users², who carefully chose pictures in order convey attractiveness, sociability, and wealth to attract a female match.

2. Methods

In order to observe UNC males' profiles, I had to create my own Tinder profile (Figure 1). In order to set up a profile, it was necessary to download the Tinder app and create an account by connecting it to my Facebook profile. Once my profile was created, I was able to choose up to six pictures to display, whether or not to write a short biography, and if I wanted to display education and job history.

When deciding what pictures I wanted to display on my profile, I considered many different aspects of the photos. I only wanted to show photos in which I looked attractive, but I also wanted to show off different aspects of my personality, like my athleticism, humor, and sense of adventure. I also chose to write a few brief statements in my biography so that potential matches would know a little bit about me. I spent around an hour carefully creating my profile, which is typical of other online daters according to Manning's (2014) research saying, "A great deal of thought and consideration go into identity- construction processes" (p. 309).

Once my profile was complete, I began to go through potential matches. All observations of Tinder profiles were conducted between 7 PM and 9 PM on weekday nights from a central location at Hardin Residence Hall in an effort to control for profiles shown within the one-mile radius (Figure 2). I did not allow my personal opinions to influence whether I swiped right or left. Instead, I swiped right on every profile that showed up on my screen. As each new profile appeared, I took detailed notes of all the pictures displayed, describing physical features, clothing, surroundings, and anything else I thought might be pertinent in my observations. In total, I observed 265 UNC male heterosexual tinder profiles.

Of the 265 profiles I observed, I matched with 237 of them (indicating a mutual interest). In an effort to try and understand how these users constructed their Tinder profiles, I began conversations with twenty males through the app's chat feature³. Because I was trying to get realistic responses and did not want their answers to be skewed, I did not tell any of the men I matched or chatted with that I was conducting an ethnographic study. Instead, I acted like I was interested in them and tried to insert my questions into the natural flow of conversation.

In order to preserve the privacy of the men in this study, no names or identifying information from my chat conversations was recorded. When I used screenshots of individual profiles, I did explain to the individuals that I was conducting a research study and I asked permission to use their profiles as examples while blurring their faces and names to remove any identifying features. Permission was asked and given after the interview session had been conducted.

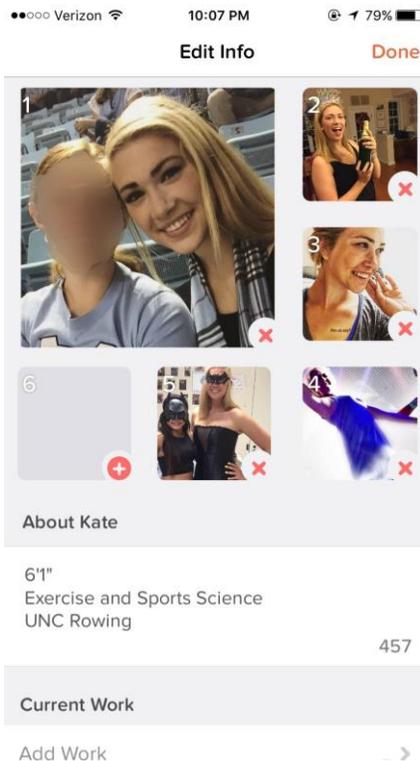


Figure 1: Editing Tinder Profile



Figure 2: Editing discovery settings

3. Discussion

3.1 Attractiveness

Of the 265 male Tinder profiles I observed, there was a wide array of photographs that I saw. From selfie-stick photos to gymnastic competitions, and professional portraits to poorly lit group shots, likely every type of photo imaginable was included in the profiles I examined. Based on the profiles I looked at, men chose on average to display 4.57 out of the six possible pictures. However, through my observations, I began noticing trends of types of photos included in users' profiles. Many users included at least one photo featuring their face exclusively. In my study, 70.94% of the profiles I looked at included photos that highlighted the user's face (Figure 3 and 4). In fact, many had this photo set as the profile photo⁴, which is the first photo displayed to potential matches when viewing the user's profile. The primary use for this type of photo is to show potential matches his facial features.

In one photo, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian male was in a well-lit, outdoor area, dressed in a tux and blue vest and looking towards the camera smiling. The photo is cropped from just under his collarbone to just above his head, so his face is the only subject of the photo. When asked why he chose this picture to be displayed first, the user said he felt "confident in his appearance" and "attractive and thought girls would think so, too." By placing such an emphasis on his own face, the user was attempting to broadcast his attractiveness to potential matches. He felt attractive, and was confident that women would agree, so he chose that picture in order to display his attractive physical features. Another user said he picked this type of photo because, "It was the best photo [of him]," hypothesizing that potential matches would agree, too. By choosing to put his best photo first, he indicates that he wants to attract the opposite sex. Subconsciously throughout our society, men try to make themselves appear more attractive because they know women like more attractive men (Kreager et. al, 2014). By choosing their best or most attractive pictures, these users hope to attract more potential matches than if they chose a picture in which they did not feel as attractive.

Tinder's set-up is such that potential matches do not necessarily see the entire profile that a user has taken time to construct. It is possible to only see the primary photo and make a decision based on that. Since male users know this, they use their profile photos to make themselves appear more attractive to the opposite sex in order to acquire matches. Males want their first impression on potential matches to encourage females to want to match with them. Many achieve that impression by choosing a profile picture that they deem physically desirable by females.



Figure 3: Photo featuring user's face



Figure 4: Photo featuring user's face

3.2 Sociability

Another type of photo that was common to many of the profiles I observed was a group photo, usually featuring the male user and one or more peers of similar age. However, family photos were also common, and also included in the analysis of group photos. While these two types of social pictures have different immediate effects, by choosing to display either type, the male is broadcasting his sociability (Figure 5 and 6). Of the profiles I observed for this study, 80.75% of users chose to display a group photo on his Tinder profile.

A male user often had at least one picture of him with one or more friends. The association with people of similar age – especially females – shows that the male is social and well liked by his peers. By broadcasting his peer sociability, the male indicates that he would be well liked by a potential match as well. One user displayed a photo of him and two females outside at night in front a road; all of the photo's subjects seemed to be caught mid-laugh and were in a group hug. While the user was dressed in an elf costume, one female was dressed in a leopard leotard and animal ears, and the other wore a black cat suit with animal ears. The costumed clothing indicates that the picture was taken around Halloween time. By using this picture, the user shows he is popular amongst his friends, specifically females. By including a picture with two women, the user adds credibility to his profile, indicating that females enjoy his company thus implying the potential match will as well. Manning (2014) reveals that online daters edit themselves "to create a desired impression in the audience" (p. 310). By showing himself with other attractive females, the user creates an impression that females like him, thus hoping to attract potential matches. He portrays himself as desirable so to encourage potential matches to think so as well.

Another common type of group photo that was included in several male users' profiles was a picture of the user with his family. One user posed in front of a marina in between two smiling adults. The similarity in facial features between the users and the two adults was reason to infer the familial relationship. When asked why he included a picture with his family, the user said, "I thought girls would take me more seriously if I had a picture with my mom. Like it would prove I'm not on here just for a hookup or something." By including a picture with his family, the user hoped to attract potential matches who were looking for a serious relationship. Though the family picture has a slightly different impact on potential matches, it achieves the same effect as a group picture with friends. Both photos show that the user is social, and both are displayed with the goal of attracting more potential matches.

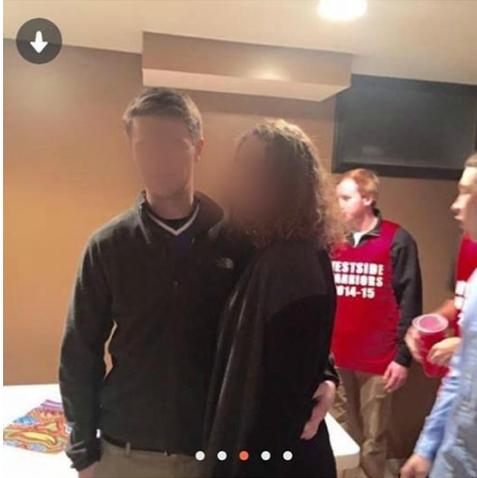


Figure 5: Photo showing sociability



Figure 6: Photo showing sociability

3.3 Wealth

The final stock photo common to many male Tinder profiles is one portraying wealth. In my observations, 82.64% of users included a picture with a material object that can be associated with wealth, making it the most common picture based on my virtual ethnography. Wealth can be displayed in various ways – a car, a boat, name-brand clothing, etc. (Figure 7 and 8). The status symbol does not need to be the main subject of the picture for it to be noticed. Some users pose in front of cars, houses, boats, or smoking cigars. The user is still the main subject of the photograph, but the subconscious symbols of wealth do not go unnoticed.

One user's photo showed him, a tall Caucasian male with sandy hair, in front of three boats at dusk, posing in a Polo Ralph Lauren hat and polo shirt, Ray-Bans covering his eyes, and holding a flute of champagne. The various symbols of wealth – expensive clothing, an extravagant beverage, and several commodities – communicated that the male user was financially wealthy. Money is an attractive attribute, which is demonstrated throughout pop culture. As a result of this, most females, regardless of their own income levels, are more attracted to men of a higher income level (Kreager et. al, 2014). Women are more likely to be attracted to a man with a higher income level than one of a lower income level. By including wealthy status symbols, users are able to suggest to women that they have money.

Despite the research validating this, a male user interviewed disregarded the symbols of wealth, saying that the picture was chosen simply because, "It was a good picture." Despite denying the symbolic nature of his photos, the photo still showed wealth, supports Manning's (2014) statement that, "Communication does not have to be intentional to be intentionally strategic" (p. 312). The users interviewed may not be conscious of their communications of wealth, but the communication is there, nonetheless. Male users are able to attract more potential matches because of their subconscious displays of wealth and financial stability.

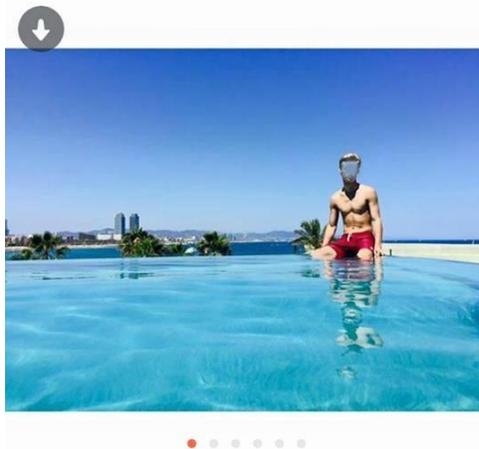


Figure 7: The user sitting in a private pool can communicate wealth



Figure 8: Watermark & name brand clothing display wealth.

3.4 Challenges

The most challenging aspect of this study was anonymity, both for the users that were subjects in my ethnography and for myself. It was difficult figuring out how to observe profiles while maintaining each person's privacy and without skewing responses. By refusing to record names, I was able to conduct the study while keeping each person's identity and any identifying factors out of any notes. Any pictures used were used only with the permission of the user *after* interviews were conducted, so that responses were not skewed based on knowledge of the research.

Anonymity for myself was also a concern. I used my real name and real photos of myself, and users I matched with on Tinder went to the same university that I attended. I commonly saw users in public that I recognized from my research, and quite often, they would recognize me, as well. Users commonly would try to approach me when they saw me in public, which I tried to avoid for my own safety and for the integrity of the research project. Additionally, when I matched with someone I knew, I had to avoid explaining to him why I matched with him. While doing this study did put my name and face on an app and make it possible for subjects of my research to recognize me, I could not think of a reasonable alternative that would provide the same results within the ethnography. Though I was presented with some uncomfortable situations, I knew from the beginning that conducting this research would not be easy or comfortable.

The final challenge was simply coming up with a method of analyzing the data I collected from the app. Tinder uses a complicated algorithm to choose which potential matches to display, so the users that showed up on my screen were not entirely random. Additionally, since I am female, I would only be able to see the heterosexual male or homosexual female side of Tinder. If I would want to observe the heterosexual female or homosexual male side of Tinder, I would need to create a fake account, which would create challenges of its own. The most effective way to study Tinder would most likely be in partnering with the app itself to study many different profiles, similar to how Manning (2014) studied an online dating website. This would eliminate the need to create a personal profile or be limited to specific demographics. However, due to the brevity and small size of my research project, I would not have been able to attempt a partnership with such a large company.

4. Conclusion

Entering college means entering a new dating pool, and for some it is difficult to adapt to a new population and new dating practices. In my virtual ethnography, I was only able to study one population of Tinder at one specific college campus. My findings are based on heterosexual males at UNC. However, homosexual males, heterosexual females, or homosexual females at UNC, other colleges, and other age groups may display different practices when constructing

a profile. Through their pictures, heterosexual male users at UNC display attractiveness, sociability, and wealth, but it would be interesting to conduct another study to see if the same behaviors are reflected in the other demographics. I hope to continue my research in the future by investigating other demographics both on UNC's campus and on other college campuses.

5. Resources Cited

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6. Endnotes

1 "Swiping right" is synonymous with liking someone and/or finding him/her attractive; "Swiping left," indicates not liking someone and/or finding him/her unattractive.

2 UNC males refer to males ages 18-22 within a 1-mile radius of Hardin Residence Hall on UNC South Campus.

3 Interview questions

- a. Why did you create a Tinder profile?
- b. How did you choose your initial picture?
- c. Why did you choose this group picture?
- d. Why did you choose # of pictures?
- e. Why did you choose to write/not write a bio?
- f. How did you decide what to put in your bio?

4 "Profile photo" indicates it is the first photo a potential match sees when looking at a profile.