

Creating a Future Relationship or Destroying My Self-Esteem: An Exploratory Study on Dating App Experiences and Well- Being

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Abstract

Location-based dating apps such as Tinder are rising in popularity as more adults seek online outlets to garner romantic partnership. Engagement on such apps can lead to an increase or decrease in self-esteem, which this study explored. Thirty-one participants explained how creating their profile, swiping, matching, and messaging connected with their well-being. Results reveal female users have an overall more positive experience than males, who noted more examples of unrequited communication on Tinder. Gay males in particular shared stories of insecurities while viewing others' photographs and contemplating communicating with others. The practical implications provide suggestions for Tinder to continue to alter its interface: 1) consider implementing measures to ensure accurate photographs are connected to users; 2) create a swiping experience that does not allow users to rapidly swipe right on all profiles, and 3) explore options with subdivisions of Tinder, such as Big and Tall or Curvy. Continual evaluation of user experiences on Tinder is necessary to monitor users' mental and emotional well-being.

Keywords: dating apps, self-esteem, Tinder, well-being

Introduction

Social media use in the U.S. has grown to 72% (Pew Research Center, 2019) and has become an integral part of users' daily routine. While social network site (SNS) use can have positive impacts on users (i.e., increase self-esteem and social capital) it can also have deleterious effects (Uhls, Ellison, & Subrahmanyam, 2017). Engaging on social media can decrease users' self-esteem and cause body dissatisfaction (Uhls et al, 2017; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014; Forest & Wood, 2012). While much of this evidence is derived from traditional social network sites, self-esteem effects may also apply to dating sites and dating apps. Much of the research regarding online dating has focused on self-esteem as a predictor variable in terms of one's likeliness to use online dating methods and present an authentic online profile (Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014; Gatter & Hodgkinson, 2016; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). The current study explores self-esteem as an outcome to engaging in online dating.

Specifically, this study explores users' experiences creating a profile, swiping on others, matching, and messaging on the unique and popular app, Tinder. Users give insight into how this overall process impacts their self-esteem. Participants refer to specific aspects of Tinder (e.g., match before messaging policy, rapid swiping) that contributed to an increase or decrease in their self-esteem. Findings of this study provide a theoretical understanding of users' self-esteem experiences after engaging with the most-popular geolocation dating app. Results also have a strong practical application. Suggestions are provided at the conclusion of this study for improvements to Tinder's interface and how alterations might change users' experiences for the better.

Literature Review

Self-Esteem and Self-Presentation

Self-esteem is defined as the self-evaluation a person holds regarding their worth, success, and capabilities (Coopersmith, 1967). It is a variable that can change in terms of positive or negative evaluation of the self, based on one's daily experiences (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Closely related to self-esteem is self-presentation, which explains the creation of an ideal image. Self-presentation traces back to the work of Goffman (1959a) who stated an important part of socializing is "the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways" (p. 53), such as to "put on a show" (Goffman, 1959b, p. 17). The previous concepts can be studied via in-person interactions and online encounters. The following sections present relevant literature on how virtual experiences are connected to users' self-esteem and

self-presentation.

Online dating experiences. According to the Pew Research Center (2020), the number of U.S. adults who have tried online dating via a website or app has grown to 30% (Anderson, Vogels, & Turner, 2020). With the number of online daters increasing comes the need to understand their experiences and well-being. Like other social media experiences, online dating can lead to an increase or decrease in self-esteem. Many users, particularly heterosexual females, flock to these platforms to seek the gratification of an ego boost (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010). After creating profiles and receiving complimentary messages, daters are more aware of their positive qualities and what they have to offer a romantic partner (Heino et al., 2010). This can be an exciting revelation that often stems back to strategic profile creation and impression management.

Unsurprisingly, those who are searching for a partner online will put forth a first impression of themselves that highlights their finest features (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). Online communicators have an opportunity to reveal certain sides of their personality and physical appearance through their profile. Therefore, the manner in which people present themselves online can be more ideal and differ greatly from their offline self (Walther, 1996; Bonebrake, 2002).

Research suggests online daters will review and revise their profile based on how well it is performing. If online daters are not receiving the number or quality of matches they expect, they will edit their profile in hopes of performing better (Heino et al., 2010).

Tinder. Traditional dating sites, such as match.com, dominated the online dating scene in the mid to late 1990s and into the early 2000s. A shift in how online daters experienced potential matches and romantic interactions came when location-based applications (apps) were introduced in 2007 (Bonilla-Zorita, Griffiths, & Kuss, 2020). Location-based dating apps (LBDAs), such as Grindr, Bumble, and Tinder, have emerged as popular media for users looking to secure quick romantic or sexual connections (Coduto, Lee-Won, & Baek, 2020). LBDAs offer significant differences from dating sites in terms of their “mobility, proximity, immediacy, authenticity and visual dominance” (Chan, 2017). First, regarding mobility, users access LBDAs mainly from their mobile phone, not their desktop. This gives users the ability to take this communication practically anywhere. Second, users connect with others who are within their immediate geographic region. LBDA users can choose to connect with others who are within a few miles from where they are using the app. Third, there is an underlying assumption that quick connections will be made on these types of apps. Some users connect and meet the

same day, which is less common on traditional dating websites. Fourth, many LBDAs require users to sign in with a verified social network site account, such as Facebook (Chan, 2017). This adds to the veracity of one's profile and gives others more confidence to interact. Fifth, LBDAs are highly visual platforms. Profile photographs display across the entire mobile screen, as opposed to dating websites which typically include more written biographical information in a profile (Chan, 2017).

Aside from being the most popular LBDA, yielding 26 million matches everyday (Tinder, 2020), Tinder is a unique platform to study for several reasons. First, it is a visually based dating app. Tinder profiles contain laconic biographical information. Thus, this places great emphasis on physical appearance. Second, users are permitted to communicate only when they match, meaning both users indicate interest. Users swipe right on others to indicate they are interested, and swipe left if they are not interested. When there are two interested parties, a match is made. This checkpoint is in place to thwart unwanted communication. Third, the motivations for using Tinder are less clear (Ward, 2017) compared with traditional dating websites (e.g., eHarmony.com; Match.com) where users are known to seek committed, long-term, romantic relationships. Tinder also differs from other LBDAs in terms of societal stereotypes. Grindr is known as a gay hook up app; Bumble is known for women making the first move; and Hinge is known for making committed connections. Previous studies show Tinder users are motivated to use the app for entertainment purposes (Kallis, 2020; Ligtenberg, 2015; Ward, 2017), casual sex (Kallis, 2020; Sales, 2015; Stenson, Balcells, & Chen, 2015), dating/long-term romantic relationships (Foster, 2016; Kallis, 2020; Stenson et al., 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), and to boost their ego (Ward, 2017).

Present Study

Although Tinder users may engage on the app for an ego boost, it is plausible for the opposite effect to occur as well. While the growth of social media use and dating apps could be beneficial in terms of socialization for users with low self-esteem, past studies found varying results, with many reporting negative effects regarding self-esteem and social media use (Vogel et al., 2014; Forest & Wood, 2012).

Online dating has continued to rise but research has not kept pace with the potential negative outcomes (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2020). This study seeks understand how the process of using Tinder, a notoriously appearance-focused dating app, impacts users' self-esteem. Therefore, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1: How do the features of Tinder impact users' self-esteem?

RQ2: How do the swiping, matching, and messaging processes on Tinder impact users' self-esteem?

Method

Participants

The researcher, who also served as the interviewer, recruited Tinder users from university classrooms, in-person social networks, and online social networks to take part in this study. To qualify, potential participants needed to be 18 years of age or older and used Tinder within the past year to communicate with others and potentially form romantic relationships. The researcher conducted individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather an understanding of Tinder users' overall experiences, including the impact on one's self-esteem from using the app. The researcher initially interviewed two participants from her network. Those two participants then referred others to be a part of the study, thus creating a snowball sample. The 31 total participants ranged from age 18 to 40 years, who engaged on Tinder in various parts of the world (e.g., United States, China, South America, Israel). Participants included males and females with varying sexual orientation. Quotes from participants are presented using pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons.

Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher recruited participants and conducted interviews using face-to-face and phone methods. This study, focused on self-esteem, was part of a larger research project about relational development, maintenance, and dissolution via Tinder.

Some questions for the interview guide were inspired from Fox, Warber, and Makstaller's (2013) study on relationship development over Facebook. The remaining questions were developed by the researcher and reviewed by a committee of three communication advisers. Questions relevant to this study include: 1) Tell me about your online dating background. Have you used sites or dating apps other than Tinder? What made you choose Tinder? 2) Tell me about your use of Tinder. Can you describe your profile? 3) Tell me about the matching process. What made you swipe right or left? Roughly how many matches have you had? 4) Tell me about your initial conversations with matches. What did s/he communicate? What did you communicate? 5) Overall how would you describe your experience dating on Tinder? What are the pros and cons?

All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Data were analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory. The researcher engaged in coding the data by first

using open coding, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002). During the initial coding, the researcher also demonstrated line-by-line analysis, paragraph analysis, and entire document analysis, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Upon completion of this process, axial coding commenced. During this stage, the open codes were folded into related subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Lastly, the researcher used selective coding techniques to refine the categories and note emerging themes (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

To address issues of reliability, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for consistency in driving conversation, with a reasonable allowance for flexibility. Additionally, the researcher interviewed until she reached the point of saturation, meaning additional interviews resulted in little to no new information (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Regarding the accuracy of results, rich data were gathered and analyzed from 31 interviews. In total, the researcher produced 23 hours of conversation, with single-spaced transcriptions totaling 537 pages. The researcher was involved in all aspects of data collection and analysis, which contributes to accuracy. By conducting interviews, listening to the audio recordings several times, transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, and reviewing the transcriptions, the researcher was very familiar with each conversation. Furthermore, participants' direct quotes are used throughout the results section in order to accurately convey the meaning of interviewees' experiences.

Results

Thirty-one participants revealed information about swiping, matching, and messaging on Tinder and how it impacts self-esteem. Interviewees noted the nature of the app can cause self-consciousness around physical appearance, but other features of the app allowed them to feel confident approaching others online. The overall process of using Tinder to seek a romantic relationship led to hesitations in connecting with others, a decrease in self-esteem, as well as opportunities for an ego boost. Table 1 summarizes these themes, which are explained in detail throughout this section.

Table 1

Themes

<u>RQ</u>	<u>Themes</u>	<u>Subthemes</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
<i>RQ1: How do the features of Tinder impact users' self-esteem?</i>	1. Appearance-conscious	a. Profile pictures	Visual nature of the app causes self-consciousness
	2. Tool for confidence boost	a. Others	Other users (especially women) gain confidence on the app
		b. Self	How the nature of the app (i.e. match notifications) gives users confidence.
	<i>RQ2: How do the swiping, matching, and messaging processes on Tinder impact users' self-esteem?</i>	1. Hesitations	a. Swiping concerns
b. Lack of confidence to message			Fear of not receiving a response
2. Decrease in self-esteem		a. Few matches	Not matching with others
		b. Not receiving messages from quality matches	Receiving few messages or messages only from unattractive matches.
3. Ego boost		a. Quality and quantity of matches	Receiving many matches and/or attractive matches
		b. Compliments	Receiving flattering messages from others

Appearance-Conscious

The visual nature of Tinder was a point of conversation for many participants. When describing their overall experience, their own profile, and others' profiles, appearance often emerged as a topic of contention regarding users' well-being.

Profile Pictures

Participants referred to the visual nature of the platform as having an impact on their confidence. Noteworthy in conjunction with these results were participants' self-reports of the accuracy of their photographs. Most respondents reported no severe alterations to their profile photographs. They expected to meet other users in person and did not want to misrepresent themselves. Adam (40, M, gay) described how his picture brought forth feelings of self-consciousness about his size.

It's too straightforward in that it's just about pictures. In your profile, you can say as much as you want, but if they're just looking at your picture, they don't have the idea in their head that this is a bigger person, even though the picture might look like you – when you're going on there you put your best foot forward and you put your best pictures on there and some of your best pictures might not appear as a bigger person. And so I always try to point out I am a bigger guy. I'm not thin. This is my waist size and I'm definitely bigger than a football player just so you know. My face pics are very flattering and so I have that whole self-conscious type thing going on. So I sort of wish Tinder had something that had 'big and curvy' [filters] or something like that.

Adam stated that his self-confidence is at the forefront of his mind when using Tinder because he was worried users would not understand his size. Like others, Adam put his best, yet unaltered, picture forward, but also recognized that in doing so, others may think he is smaller than he is. Tinder's focus on appearance made Adam hesitate to interact with others on the app.

Chandler (26, M, straight) recounted a similar scenario that prompted him to delete Tinder. He considers the platform to focus solely on photographs and he did not think he had any attractive pictures of himself anymore. He explained he had gained weight and has a receding hairline, so he did not feel confident putting himself online. It did not help that the previous time he used Tinder, he could not secure any offline connections and received very few messages from women.

Pictures also had an impact on how users viewed their own

attractiveness. For Justin (19, M, gay), even seeing a profile of a person who he deemed to be attractive and confident negatively affected him. He explained, "I don't like shirtless pictures. Honestly it's more about me. I feel intimidated. I'm like oh they have a much better body than I do and also they're more confident than I am." Justin's ego was involved as he said the experience was about him. Justin found the male to be good-looking but did not like that the user was shirtless and confident, as Justin was not. This made Justin feel intimidated and it lowered his self-confidence.

Overall participants described Tinder as a superficial, shallow app because of the emphasis it places on visual beauty. This aspect of the app made some users, mostly men, question their confidence to even continue using Tinder.

Tools for Confidence Boost

While Tinder's visual nature caused a loss of confidence for many users, participants noted other outcomes that were beneficial. Not all aspects of Tinder were detrimental and could often serve as a confidence tool. Interviewees explained how this works for others and themselves.

Others

The app was conceptualized as being a confidence tool for other users. While being interviewed, many participants said other users were mainly on the app to feel better about themselves. Chasity (20, F, straight) and her friends used Tinder, but not as a serious dating app.

Well some of my friends have it and I feel like no one really takes it seriously. It's more like a confidence boost for most people or like to flirt. I really think a lot of people just use it as a confidence boost.

Anthony (30, M, straight) agreed and explained the reasoning behind his opinion:

I think there's a good percentage of females out there who are using Tinder as an ego-booster. They're just on there to feel good about themselves when they see there's a handful of guys swiping right, basically affirming that they feel attractive and oh they get the ego boost, oh look a buncha people think I'm hot. They're not actually looking to strike up a conversation, like, I've been on Tinder before, messaged a number of girls, and I'm not saying stupid things, I'm coming up with genuine things, but yeah, I think some of these girls are just not even looking to talk or meet or anything, they're just looking for oh ten guys think I'm hot, so more of an ego

boost.

Anthony believed a lot of women used Tinder for confidence boosts because he would message women thoughtful conversations and they would not respond. However, women tended to receive an enormous number of messages on Tinder and sometimes became overwhelmed. Anthony's statement contributes to the idea that many users think other users are on the app to boost their confidence, but this serves as reasoning behind Anthony not receiving conversation back from women at times. His rationale behind not receiving responses from women helped to protect his ego from being bruised.

Finally, Dmitri (30, M, straight) uncovered that on the surface Tinder is a dating app, but he was certain that a true reason behind people using it is to build their own confidence.

I think some people use it as a motivation tool. They use it just to see how many people will swipe back with them. Even if they don't have any intention of actually talking to you, I think guys and girls can both use it to be like oh look I've got all these hits. That's my conspiracy theory on people using Tinder – they use it to boost their self-confidence.

Dmitri's opinion on others' use of Tinder is that making matches will impact their self-worth and give them more confidence in their ability to attract others romantically.

Self

Participants provided instances where the nature of the app allowed them to feel confident attracting daters. Users felt more comfortable being active on the app because of the seemingly preventative measures that were already built into the app. Fitch and Zack called attention to the restrictions on matching and communicating via the app as helping users manage their egos. Fitch (33, M, gay) stated, "If one of us swipes 'no,' you're not notified." Similarly, Zack (30, M, straight) said, "You got to make a judgment without really having an immediate effect on somebody's confidence. It wasn't like you're walking up to somebody and getting shot down or them walking up to you and you shooting them down." Dana (21, F, straight) also noted how she knew everyone on the app was available so that took the apprehension out of part of the process.

So in person you don't know that the person's interested cause on the app it automatically tells you they're interested. So it kind of takes off the first step of being awkward of asking if they're interested. And everyone's already on the app so you don't have to go search out is this person available or not available.

When searching for a partner offline, part of the process is wondering if the other person is single and interested. If they are not available and/or interested, the result can be a bruise to one's ego. On Tinder, users have knowledge of this, so this serves to protect their ego.

The app's settings for revealing matches provided some protection from embarrassment. If the other user did not "like" a person back, the user who swiped right was not notified. This aspect of the app sets it apart from offline initiations and other traditional dating websites, which Tinder users noted as a positive feature of the app.

Nick (36, M, straight) also did not become too upset with a lack of reciprocation of matches on Tinder because of the large pool of daters available. Regarding a lack of matches, Nick said:

You don't take it personal, you know, at least you tried. Like I don't get upset about it like oh well why not, why don't you like me? Like okay that's fine. You know, I got 50 more matches, I'll find somebody.

Nick and other participants reminded themselves they secured many other matches, which they used as a way to manage their self-confidence and continue using the app. Participants reminded themselves they had several others to choose from and moved on quickly before they could feel any negative emotions from the event.

Hesitations

Although Tinder users felt some features of the app helped them to continue having confidence, there were still hesitations. Specifically, users were concerned about swipe and message reciprocity. These thoughts caused users to hesitate to take the next steps in many cases.

Swiping Concerns

Because many users were on the app to find a romantic partner or a sexual hook up, they knew their emotions would be involved and their confidence or feelings of self-worth could be altered. There was potentially a lot at stake concerning one's emotions when using Tinder, so users hesitated before swiping.

Colton (36, M, gay) defined Tinder as a dating app, not a hook up app, and therefore felt he was more susceptible to unpleasant feelings from using the app to try and secure a date.

I feel like there's less at stake on those [hook up apps]. I feel like on Tinder there's a little more, you know because it's – people use it for dating and stuff like that so I feel like you're putting more on the line.

Participants explained they would hesitate to swipe right on someone they were interested in because they were worried about how they would feel if the person did not swipe back. Although there are legitimate reasons for not receiving matches (e.g., a user has not seen someone's profile yet, a user has not logged onto the app for some time, a user deleted the app) those who were interviewed did not consider these scenarios when sharing how the lack of matches made them feel. To avoid those feelings of decreased confidence from lack of matches, participants simply stated they may not swipe right on a person who intrigued them. Participants said they would often swipe left on people who were much better looking than them because they figured that user would not be interested in them.

I usually will only swipe right if I think that they're chubbier like me. And even then it's very rare that I swipe right – I swipe left a lot more than I swipe right. I would say 95% of the time I swipe left and it's not because I'm not interested or I don't find the person attractive, but I can just tell that they're not going to be into me.

Adam (40, M, gay) did not take a chance swiping right on anyone who he perceived as physically smaller than him, as he assumed they would not be interested in him. Adam was able to protect himself from possible rejection if he took the approach described above to matching on Tinder.

Colton (36, M, gay) also said he usually swiped left on very attractive people and said that even when he took a risk and matched with an attractive person, he was still unsure if the user actually liked him because he heard that some people swipe right on everyone.

If a guy's really, really hot a lot of times I do second guess myself. I'm like oh he's way out of my league. If they're too pretty-boyish, I'm like oh there's no chance. I would probably swipe left on them. I mean sometimes I'll swipe right just to see. Cause every once in a while it's always fun like Oh! That's a match! That's weird! But some people told me that they swipe right on everybody. I'm like well that makes me feel bad because I always thought when I got a match that it was a good thing! And if people are just swiping right on everybody, then, how are you supposed to know?

Some doubt entered Colton's head when he matched with an attractive person. He was unsure if that user was genuinely interested, thus he would hesitate to message him. For that reason, as Colton stated earlier, he usually chooses not to swipe right to protect his feelings.

Lack of Confidence to Message

In addition to users hesitating to swipe, they also hesitated to message even when making a match. Users like Colton were hesitant about messaging first because they feared not receiving a message back. Colton explained this in the following:

I don't message them because I'm afraid they won't respond or something because I get in my head like oh they just swipe right on everybody then you know? I'm really bad and really good at talking myself out of things. I'm my own worst enemy in a lot of these situations because I have some bravado, but the real confidence isn't always there.

Users were aware of their own levels of confidence while navigating the app and often times did not take chances on someone because they were worried the user would not reciprocate the same feelings even after they matched.

Justin (19, M, gay) had also agreed with this mantra and said, "I usually never message first. I don't have the confidence to do that." Both Colton and Justin recognized their self-confidence and did not want to hurt their self-esteem by attempting to message a match first and possibly not hear from them.

Decrease in Self-Esteem

While participants revealed how they intended to protect their self-esteem by taking certain precautions, decreases in self-esteem were unavoidable in many cases. These scenarios usually included receiving few matches and messages.

Few Matches

In addition to visuals having an impact on one's ego, the idea of matching tied to users' self-esteem. Nick (36, M, straight) revealed the matching process served as a means of lowering confidence if he failed to receive matches any given day.

Sometimes I'll go a day or two without any matches, and it's like I don't really have much incentive to keep signing in and because it's like oh I'm a loser I don't have any matches. It can be kind of addictive. You kind of start to place self-worth or self-value on the number of matches that you have. There's this little like thing in the top right screen, and it looks almost like a quotation mark or a thought bubble and a little orange dot will appear if you have a new match or if you have a message. So you'll sign in, and it'll tell you right away if that's blinking or it's not, that means you have a message or you don't. So if you go a day or two without having it then it can mess with your psyche a little bit, like oh man I haven't met

anybody or I haven't had matches with anybody, and I swiped right on 30 profiles. I mean, none of those 30 profiles swiped right on me. Am I just not attractive or what am I doing wrong with my profile? Or maybe I'm not as cool as I thought I was, or you know, those types of thoughts.

Nick placed importance on whether others swiped right on him, as did Jake (21, M, straight). "Let's say you are trying to match a lot of people and you don't match with them," said Jake. "It can lower your self-esteem and really hurt your self-image, making you feel like you're not pretty enough or not handsome enough."

Not Receiving Messages From Quality Matches

Communication was also something that affected users' self-esteem. When another user initiated a conversation, it meant they were interested. But, if the initiator was unattractive, that influenced how the receiver perceived their own attractiveness. Nick discussed this during his interview.

I've noticed the ones that communicate with me first are the ones that you don't ever really want to communicate with. So it's kind of depressing cause you're like, man, is that my level of attractiveness? Because this is the only type of woman that's trying to talk to me first.

Even though Nick matched with this user and she communicated with him first, he felt poorly about himself because she was not as attractive as he had hoped. This influenced Nick's view of himself and led him to question his own physical attractiveness.

Receiving messages from unattractive users can lower one's confidence, as can Tinder conversations that do not result in offline meetings. Chandler (26, M, straight) could not launch any type of face-to-face encounter by using the app, which affected his emotions. He described the app in one word: "depressing."

It never really went anywhere. Couldn't make any sort of communication with anyone, which considering the entire purpose of it is to talk to people to eventually go out, hang out, and do things, um, whether that leads to anything or not the fact that nothing ever happened, that it seemed like nobody was ever interested in me in any way, shape, or form was just, I guess disheartening.

Chandler was upset that he could not realize his goal of finding a partner by using the app, because that is what the app was designed to do.

Ego Boost

The dark side of engaging with LBDAs leaves users with lower self-esteem. However, the light side can provide users with an increase in self-esteem. Users felt an increase in self-esteem mainly through the quantity and quality of matches they received and compliments from other users.

Quality and Quantity of Matches

Bryan (20, M, gay) noted that simply matching with someone attractive on Tinder confirmed his ability to appeal to a good-looking mate:

When you match, a lot of times I feel like you don't converse. You just match to know oh okay, I could get someone that attractiveness as a partner but I'm not going to for some reason. And sometimes I guess I use that for that but you know, who cares. If you're making yourself happy with an app then do it.

Bryan was not alone in his thought process; Ethan (33, M, straight) also revealed the effects of making matches on Tinder and not conversing with them:

Of the matches that I don't chat with, it's because my, I guess my inhibitions were lower, and you kind of get a high about or you feel good about yourself when you get a match, and so therefore sometimes they might not be a person that you would necessarily take out. But if you get that match you feel, okay, I'm still desired.

Without even communicating, Bryan and Ethan both had positive outcomes to their ego by simply swiping through others' profiles and making matches. Bryan believed if users were not misrepresenting themselves and making fake profiles, using Tinder for the sake of seeing how attractive of a match you can make was appropriate.

Thomas (31, M, straight) talked about matching in a positive light as well and said he was pleasantly surprised when he received a large number of matches while using Tan Tan (the Chinese version of Tinder) in China. "I had a ton of matches in the beginning. So it was intense for a little bit, but it was exciting! It was cool because it was like wow all these people want to talk!" While Thomas spoke with about half of his matches, the sheer act of making a match boosted his confidence and made him excited and happy. He had a lot of success on the app, which contributed to his positive outlook and confidence after using it.

Sandra (18, F, straight) also talked about an aspect of the matching

process that gave her confidence. She pointed out the unique aspect of Tinder in that it allowed users to feel more comfortable to convey their interest in someone compared to offline situations:

You wouldn't go up to somebody and say I'd swipe right on you, so you don't exactly know who thinks you're attractive, personality and body wise and whatnot. But over Tinder people just do it. So once you see you have a match, it's like, oh wow I never would have thought that. And then other people probably think that too, like oh wow I never would have thought a girl like that would think I'm worthy enough. So it kind of, it definitely boosts your confidence a bunch.

While the matching process allowed Bryan, Ethan, and Sandra to feel a boost of confidence, Dominique (27, F, straight) stated that she felt self-assurance while out in person with men she had matched with on Tinder:

In terms of every single date I went on I always got, "Why are you on Tinder? Because like why are – how are you still single?" is a question I would always get. I was like that's a great question! I would love to know the answer to that. Can you please let me know, that is a great question. So it was actually a boost of an ego sometimes.

Matching was a significant component of ego as users, especially males, talked about how excited they were to get several matches. While females at times became annoyed by all of the notifications, they still proudly announced they had hundreds, even thousands of matches from Tinder. The messaging element was yet another way users gained confidence from being on the app.

Compliments

Compliments were a popular way to begin a conversation on Tinder and contributed to an increase in self-esteem. For Bryan (20, M, gay), he often began with compliments because he knew that was a way for others to feel good about themselves, and in turn gave him a better chance of receiving a response. Beginning with compliments stroked users' egos and allowed them to continue developing a relationship.

Tiffany (30, F, straight) said about 75% of her matches began by writing, "hey, you're cute. My name's so and so." Gina (35, F, straight) had a similar experience, saying men usually communicated initially with a compliment, such as "You're beautiful." Demi (30, F, straight) adds to this by revealing men usually remarked how beautiful her smile was. Sabrina's messages were similar. "Most of the ones just start off by telling me I'm gorgeous and stuff like that,"

she said.

Participants on the receiving end of flattering messages said they enjoyed the sentiments and were more likely to respond. Dana (21, F, straight) said for compliments she was “more willing to keep talking to them. I’ll take compliments any day.”

Discussion

Results of this study reveal the use of Tinder can lead to a heavy focus on appearance, but can also allow users to feel confident engaging on the app for romantic reasons. The swiping, matching, and messaging processes led to user hesitation as well as fluctuations to self-esteem.

First, LBDAAs tend to be visually dominant (Chan, 2017). Participants referred to this as negatively contributing to their experience. The visual dominance can place too much emphasis on physical appearance and lose the importance of connecting based on shared personality traits or interests.

Interestingly, Tinder users also made predictions on what might happen if they put their picture on display. de Vries (2016) argued self-esteem can be impacted even when no interactions or responses are received from potential romantic partners. de Vries’ (2016) study focused on heterosexual women’s experiences creating an online dating profile. Results also extend to this study which featured gay and straight men and heterosexual women. The current study found the mere thought of imagining what others will think of one’s photograph can impact self-esteem.

Second, Tinder users engaged in other processes that helped them to feel confident. Participants mentioned the matching process as helping to protect them from a loss of self-esteem. Particularly, users enjoyed not being notified of someone swiping left. They also noted the large pool of daters as being a positive aspect of the app.

Additionally, many participants hypothesized that women used the app for an ego boost and relied on the visual nature to attract heterosexual men. This hypothesis held true as many women participants revealed they enjoyed receiving compliments from men on the app.

Third, users revealed concerns that ultimately made them hesitate swiping or messaging someone. Hesitation occurred when users pondered whether a match was truly a conscious match or if the other swiped right on everyone (see LeFebvre’s 2018 study on Tinder), thus degrading the meaning of a match. They did not want to experience embarrassment or decreased self-confidence if they

messaging a match who actually swiped right on everyone, and therefore was not interested in chatting. If the interface on Tinder could adjust to prevent rapid swiping, users may be more confident of their matches and be more inclined to initiate communication with them.

It is also assumed that initiating communication online can be less intimidating than offline methods. Fox et al. (2013) found communicators developing relationships via Facebook felt less potential rejection messaging over the platform. This outlook did not hold true for Tinder users. Users were hesitant about messaging others because they were unsure if the other person was genuinely interested. While it was enjoyable for users to spend hours swiping through profiles, in turn these actions led to employing more caution before attempting to initiate a serious interpersonal connection. One reason for this result is Tinder's brand caters to people looking for romantic and sexual connections, placing more emphasis on potential rejection. Facebook is not generally viewed as a place people go to start a romantic or sexual relationship. It should be noted though that Tinder is not necessarily the cause of users' apprehension. They likely experience confidence issues in many situations, but in this case, Tinder brings out those feelings of concern.

Overall, participants ruminated over messaging and swiping on others. This relates to de Vries' (2016) research on anticipated reactions from online dating and is an area rich with further exploration.

Fourth, participants explained how Tinder use decreased self-esteem. This differs from a previous study on online dating, where only two of the 34 participants felt negative impacts to their self-image (Heino et al., 2010). Reasons for participants' negative experiences are Tinder's heavy focus on physical appearance and users controlling the matchmaking, not an algorithm. Unlike traditional dating websites that also include an in-depth biography and personality portion, Tinder places utmost importance on photographs. Users described Tinder as a visual platform and many said they based their swiping decision on others' pictures, not the written portions.

Some participants would not swipe on attractive users because they were afraid the match would not be reciprocated. Some were intimidated by others' photographs and felt the other person would never like them back, so they did not even attempt to match. There is support for imagined interactions altering self-esteem, which stems back to traditional research on self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

A suggestion given by a participant to curb these negative experiences is to create sub-divisions of Tinder, similar to clothing sizes (e.g., Big and Tall; Curvy). Another approach is having users upload a photograph of themselves in real-time. This may help encourage everyone to present more accurate and less filtered portrayals of their physical appearance. Finally, Tinder should consider removing the commodification of matches. This suggestion is made in relation to Instagram considering removing the number of public “likes” on photographs in support of users’ well-being (Leskin, 2020).

The fifth and final theme that emerged was increases to self-esteem through Tinder use. Although users, especially men, received bruises to their ego while using Tinder, other results showed that men and women also received a boost in confidence by engaging on Tinder. Similarly, Heino et al. (2010) found that many women experienced an ego boost from online dating.

The present study also found support for third person effects. Mutz (1989) wrote that third person effects transpire when people believe the media, communication, or a message has more of an impact on other people than themselves. While many male and female participants said they thought women used the app to increase their self-confidence, participants did not reveal the same about themselves when asked why they used the app. However, the idea of feeling good about themselves was a point of focus in many interviews. Being notified of receiving a message, making an abundance of matches, and receiving compliments were all ways in which participants felt an ego boost from using Tinder. This is unsurprising, as early research shows compliments and favorable messages lead to increased self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). While the commodification and process of quantifying messages and matches can deflate one’s ego, it is also shown that when receiving high numbers, confidence can increase. Clearly the app can trigger negative feelings with users, but also allowed them to gain confidence about themselves, especially regarding their physical appeal.

While these 31 interviews provide rich, thick descriptions of a diverse set of Tinder users’ experiences, limitations should be considered when digesting the results and conclusions. First, self-reports were obtained, not actual numbers of matches or messages, nor actual communication. Recollection can lead to inaccuracies in estimates and how one recalls situations. Second, users needed to be active on Tinder within the past year, so not all participants were currently using Tinder at the time of the interview. This could have clouded users’ judgment or memory. Third, 21 out of 31 participants were

using other dating methods along with Tinder. The most commonly reported methods of online dating aside from Tinder included OkCupid, Match, Plenty of Fish, and Grindr. It is possible that while recalling information, interviewees could have been remembering situations from other apps aside from Tinder.

Conclusion

Understanding Tinder users' experiences can provide information on the implications the Tinder process has on users' confidence, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. This study revealed the visual nature of the app as being concerning. However, users found confidence on the app because it allowed them to protect their self-esteem to a degree. Tinder provides opportunities for users to experience an increase or decrease in self-esteem based on the number of matches and messages received. Ultimately, many users made decisions based on imagined, not actual, scenarios of how daters would react to their pictures or messages online. Dating app users should be mindful of these occurrences while those engineering the facets of the app should continually tweak the interface to create the best experiences for users' mental and emotional well-being.

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