Swiping, Matching, Chatting
Self-Presentation and Self-Disclosure on Mobile Dating Apps

Janelle Ward, Erasmus University Rotterdam

People have long used rituals of self-presentation and self-disclosure when looking for a romantic connection, whether they seek a passionate love affair, a spouse or a casual encounter. Mobile dating applications like Tinder have exploded in popularity in recent years. On Tinder, impression management begins with choosing one's profile photos and viewing and assessing the profiles of potential Tinder matches. Self-disclosing to matches begins in a technologically mediated environment. This article provides an overview of literature that has focused on self-presentation and self-disclosure on dating websites and raises questions about whether and how this literature can be applied to new digital matching mobile apps like Tinder. It highlights two current research projects on Tinder users recently conducted in the Netherlands.

Keywords: dating apps, impression management, mobile technology, self-disclosure, Tinder

The radio
And the telephone
And the movies that we know
May just be passing fancies and in time may go

But oh my dear
Our love is here to stay

–Frank Sinatra, *Our Love is Here to Stay*

The search for romantic connection is an age-old quest, defined by rituals of self-presentation and self-disclosure. In many cultures the first date signals the meeting of two people romantically interested in each other, where they spend time together and share personal information. Ways to connect with others expanded with the arrival of mass media, but as Frank Sinatra croons in the above lyrics, the underlying desire for love is here to stay. Personal advertisements – text advertising oneself to a potential mate – were placed in newspapers beginning in the late 17th century. As technology progressed, those seeking love or companionship could create ads via telephone voice links or television text pages. Eventually photographs were added, and the image replaced written descriptions of physical appearance. Then internet dating came along: Match.com was born in 1995 followed by many others, most claiming matchmaking success via compatibility algorithms.

Whatever the method the strategy is the same: self-present in a way that makes you attractive to others. Once a connection is made, begin the process of relationship building through self-disclosure. We are living in the era of mobile dating apps: Now you can start this process on your smart phone. Tinder, one of the most popular matchmaking mobile apps, was launched in October 2012 and has achieved global popularity.

Tinder profiles are quick and easy to make and consist of select Facebook photos and an optional brief self-descriptive text. Once you've created a profile, you choose who you're interested in – men, women, or both – the geographical proximity of potential matches, and an age range. Tinder finds users who match with your selection criteria, and presents them to you in a seemingly random order. Then, you simply 'swipe left' on those you don't like, or 'swipe right' on those you do like. If you swipe right on someone, and that other person also swipes right on you, it's a match! Tinder then allows matched users to chat within the app (see Figure 1 for a visual example).
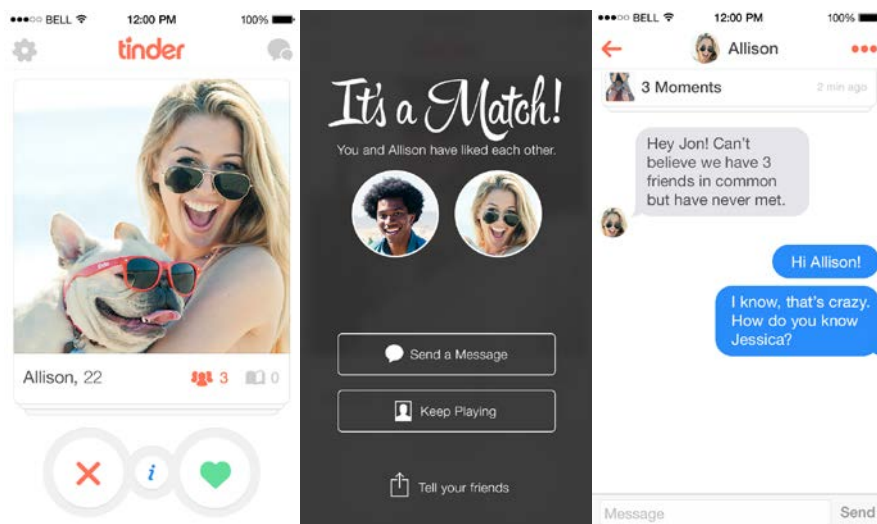

Figure 1. Main screen showing an individual profile (left), the "It's a Match!" screen (middle), and in-app chat (right). Images courtesy of Tinder's press kit.

The concept seems to have taken off: Tinder has more than 50 million global users in 196 countries with 9 billion matches since its inception. In September 2015, Tinder had approximately 9.6 million daily active users. Globally, Tinder users log in an average of 11 times a day

and spend between 7 and 9 minutes swiping (either approving or reject-ing a potential match) during a single session. Women browse profiles for 8.5 minutes at a time versus 7.2 for men (Bilton 2014).

There is a great deal of research tying psychological perspectives of self-presentation and self-disclosure to technological paths to romance. So far, though, little research has been conducted on matchmaking mobile apps. Yet apps like Tinder offer abundant possibilities for psychological study: Do, you, as a Tinder user, present yourself in a different way on a mobile dating app? Given that you only get a couple photos and minimal text to present yourself, do you spend more or less time constructing an image for others to evaluate? What is the process you go through in select-ing a match? What do you look for in a potential partner? What about after a match – how do you go about disclosing yourself to this person, and how do you use technology to aid you?

From my base in the Netherlands, I am currently working on two qualitative research projects that explore self-presentation and self-disclosure in the dating app environment. In Dutch society the concept of meeting a romantic partner online is well known. According to Statistics Netherlands, between 2008 and 2013, 13 percent of Dutch people met their partners online, and half of these met on dating sites (Kooiman & Latten 2014). For the remainder of this piece, I will detail the concepts of self-presentation and self-disclosure and share some findings from my research.

Self-Presentation on Dating Websites

Your Tinder profile should be realistic. There's nothing more annoying than someone saying 'I expected you to be different'. (Erwin, 34, Tinder user for 10 months)

Self-presentation is ubiquitous in social life: individuals try to control or guide others' impressions by manipulating setting, appearance and behaviour (Goffman 1959). Leary and Kowalski (1990) define two key

processes in self-presentation, or impression management: impression motivation, the degree to which people are motivated to control how others see them, and impression construction, when people build the impression they want to create. If you are a Tinder user, you have a motivation for downloading and using the app: it could be a search for love, sex, or simple connection. You also engage in impression construction when deciding which pictures and text to include in your profile.

Goffman's initial work on self-presentation focused on face-to-face communication, in a world not yet accustomed to electronic interactions. Since then, numerous scholars have adapted Goffman's ideas to such environments. How does it work on a dating app? Location-based dating apps may facilitate users meeting face to face and potentially forming a relationship: Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (2015) found that Grindr users (an app for gay men) are looking for local or regional matches.

Face-to-face communication incorporates contextual, visual and auditory cues. Dating app users operate in a reduced cue environment: cues are static and not dynamic (Walther 1996). In other words, the information you provide on your profile is selective and under your control. As a Tinder user, you provide a limited amount of information to potential partners, namely a number of photos and optional text. Deceptions also occur in this environment. Toma and Hancock (2010) recruited online daters and asked them to identify deceptions in their online dating profiles, then separately evaluated the profiles. They found that the lower the online daters' attractiveness, the more likely they were to enhance their profile photographs and lie about things like their height, weight, and age.

Yet, deceptions are rarely extreme, especially in an environment geared toward potential romance. Desired impression is one's perception of what the audience values. A large body of research confirms that people mold their image to the perceived value of others (e.g., Gaes & Tedeschi 1978). In the context of mediated dating environments, users are highly

motivated to control the impression they create (e.g., Toma, Hancock & Ellison 2008). Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) discuss how online daters are able to optimize their self-presentation and establish creditability in this environment by balancing "accuracy with self-promotions and desir-ability" (430). This motivation is due to the high potential of meeting matches face to face. Therefore, it's better to appear realistically attractive on a dating profile.

I recently did a study (under review) where I explored the impression management of Tinder users via interviews (Ward 2016). On Tinder, impression management begins with choosing one's profile photos and, simultaneously, assessing the expectations of potential Tinder matches. I was interested in the 'pre-match' impression management practices of Tinder users, thus before they chatted with their matches. In the fall of 2014, I created two profiles on Tinder – one male, one female – in order to recruit users in the Netherlands. For both, I created a profile photo that contained the university logo and a request to interview along with a dedicated email address for contact (see Figure 2).

Tinder Study

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An interview study about Tinder

A research team at Erasmus University
Rotterdam seeks women and men to
participate in a study about Tinder. If you are
interested please email us at
tinderstudy@eur.nl

Figure 2. Invitation to participate.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with 11 men and 10 women, who had used Tinder between two months and one year, with most being active users at the time of the interview. We discussed their motivations for using the app, their process of choosing profile photos and text, and how they

select potential matches. Results show users' motivations for using Tinder range from entertainment to ego-boost to relationship seeking, and these motivations sometimes change over time.

Whatever their motivation, profile photos were selected in an attempt to present an ideal yet authentic self, and chosen as an illustration of one's desirability. As in previous research, my interviewees frequently changed their profile photos and text in order to experiment with changes in response from matches. This happens too on dating websites, via a process called filtering: Online dating participants filter potential partners based on "…identity, including appearance, personality, sexual tastes and preferences, and risk management" (Couch & Liamputtong 2008, 273). Technologically this is possible on dating websites, because users can screen potential matches on height and weight (Hancock, Toma & Ellison 2007), race (Lin & Lundquist 2013), and education level (Skopek, Schulz & Blossfeld 2011). On dating apps like Tinder, users can select matches only through geographical proximity, age and sex. How is this related to self-presentation? Swiping isn't just about matching: my interviewees also searched profiles to figure out how to present themselves in order to attract similar others, and used these cues to align their own self-presentation.

> *I want guys to know I'm a student…you can see that I'm not wearing that much makeup or excessive jewelry or those brands that different people wear.* (Aya, 22, Tinder user for one year)

Goffman (1959) imagined face-to-face interaction and talked about a reciprocal influence on actions when in each other's physical presence. Yet it seems such influence also occurs on Tinder. Users are imagining who will see them, both those they want to meet and those they don't want to meet, and their desired self-presentation is important to tweak and maintain even though they may not necessarily meet their matches in

person. But what about after a match, when the concept of self-disclosure comes into play?

Self-Disclosure on Dating Apps

> *I said 'hi' to everyone on Tinder and he responded. Talked for a bit, basic info. The next day he asked for my number: 'Whatsapp is easier".* (Linda, female participant)

Once a match has been made, the time has come for interpersonal communication: in order to develop a further connection, the pair has to talk. On Tinder, this begins via chat rather than face-to-face conversation. Even in a virtual environment, self-disclosure is imperative to relationship development. Self-disclosure can be defined as "the act of revealing personal information about oneself to another" (Collins & Miller 1994, 457). Self-disclosure can consist of both descriptive information, like one's hobbies, and evaluative information, like how someone feels about a particular life event. Altman and Taylor (1973) describe the personality like an onion: People have an outer persona and as they get to know someone, they slowly reveal their private self, at the core. For a relationship to grow closer, self-disclosure increases over time and is reciprocal.

How does one decide to disclose to someone else, particularly in a romantic setting? An important factor for self-disclosure is physical attraction: people are more likely to disclose to others they find attractive (e.g., Brundage, Derlega & Cash 1976). Tinder operates through a principle of mutual attraction: conversations between users are only possible when both parties have indicated their interest by swiping right.

Mutual attraction, though a factor, is not enough. In their survey research on dating website users, Gibbs, Ellison and Lai (2011) found that participants use uncertainty reduction strategies like googling their matches to verify identity and appearance. Those who used such strategies tended to disclose more to their matches. Another technologically based form of uncertainty reduction is navigating through increasingly

intimate communication channels. For example, in their study on online dating practices in Japan, Farrer and Gavin (2009) found that users perceived computer-mediated communication as the least intimate, followed by text messaging and finally talking on the telephone.

This particular aspect of communication channel navigation is what drove me, along with a research master's student, to investigate how Tinder users navigate the period 'from match to meet:' the moment users match until they potentially meet face-to-face (Ward & den Hertog 2016). Once a Tinder match has been made, how do users employ technological channels in getting to know each other?

> *[I used Facebook to] see if she already has a boyfriend, what she looks like in a different context.* (Hans, male participant)

For this project, which took place in the summer and fall of 2015, we conducted 20 (11 males, 9 females) person-on-the-street interviews on a large university campus. For those who confirmed Tinder use and were willing to participate, we asked them to think about a memorable match on Tinder. Then, we requested they 'draw' their experience from match to meet. We provided them with an iPad and used the application Inkflow, which allows users to draw, write and insert emoticons (see Figure 3 for the template, which was the starting point for participants to develop their stories). This method originates from the concept of 'draw and write,' more recently developed as 'draw, write and tell,' where participants (usually children, but in this case, young adults) are able to explain their experience in a creative way (Angell, Alexander & Hunt 2015).

We asked participants to focus on their communication with a memorable Tinder match. Despite this instruction, only 12 of the 20 participants reported actually meeting this noteworthy match in person. They reported, in parallel, their uncertainty reduction strategies, for example checking on their matches via other platforms. As a Tinder user, you are not initially provided with much information about your matches, other

than a first name, age, photos, geographical distance, and optional profile text. (It is worth mentioning that Tinder's features have changed since this research project was conducted to now include optional education and work information.)

Figure 3. Inkflow template created for the "draw, write and tell" technique.

The people we interviewed reported that in the beginning stages of their communication, they often attempt to locate the Facebook profile of their Tinder match (see Figure 4 for an example). This helped to verify that the other person was indeed who they said they were. This strategy also functioned as a check on the match's self-presentation and perceived attractiveness, as pictures on a Tinder profile might differ from those posted on Facebook. Further, and in line with previous literature, our study suggests that moving through technological platforms with a Tinder match is a necessary – but not sufficient – step toward meeting face to face, and also leads to more intimate connections with those matches.
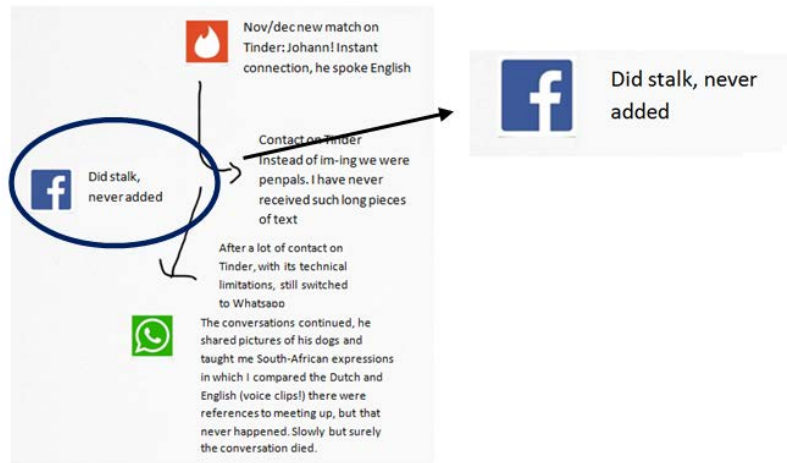
Figure 4. An example "draw, write and tell" illustration from Mary, a female participant.

Conclusion

Are you looking for love or companionship? Whether you're at a bar or on a dating app, you present and disclose yourself to others. In a virtual environment, you have more control over your self-presentation and self-disclosure to potential partners. Using the information others provide online, you can also use technology to reduce uncertainty about potential mates and form as accurate an impression as possible about them. Dating apps may lower the threshold for participation in technological coupling. Dating apps may also allow users to avoid the stigma about finding love online: If Tinder is just for fun, then there's no shame in swiping. Yet self-presentation remains a vital process in constructing an impression, as does self-disclosure for building a relationship.

In ongoing research, my interest has been in the initial stages of such connections: first, self-presentation, then selecting a potential partner, then how the first rituals of courting are carried out via technology. There is a myriad of research on the impact of technology on established

relationships, and it would be worthwhile to take this interest forward, perhaps via interviews with couples who met on Tinder.

Perhaps more intriguing: Findings so far reveal an assumption in the literature, and in this paper: Self-presentation and self-disclosure are promoted as two vital elements in relationship formation. They go hand in hand in finding a romantic partner. The premise is that individuals seeking an intimate relationship will be (mostly) truthful about their appearance, and will increasingly self-disclose to potential partners (Ellison et al., 2006). Even research that argues for a more cynical marketplace metaphor when describing online dating ('relationshopping') assumes the goal of a relationship (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs 2010).

So what about Tinder users who are simply there for an ego-boost, for whom crafting the optimal self-presentation is just a numbers game, measured through quantity of matches? What about Tinder users who never move their match beyond a technological environment? On dating apps, superficial approval of one's profile may be easy to obtain. Yet, this approval takes place in an environment shrouded in the potential for romantic love. Among other possibilities for future research, I'd like to explore why some Tinder users fail to connect beyond the superficial. Tinder's tagline is 'Any swipe can change your life.' Perhaps a swipe can be life changing, and for reasons we haven't yet considered.

Janelle Ward is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communication and Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research and consultancy expertise is in digital communication. She currently researches how people create and manage impressions on digital media, examining mobile dating apps like Tinder.

Contact: ward@eshcc.eur.nl
www.eshcc.eur.nl/ward

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