

Is This What Love at First Swipe Looks Like: An Analysis of Impression Management
on Tinder

by

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Introduction

There are numerous dating apps and online dating sites that anyone over eighteen years old can use to find love or form any type of relationship they want. One of the most popular dating apps known as Tinder has impacted dating culture. Tinder is a location based dating app also known as an (LBDA) with an estimate of over fifty million users (Tinder). It has affected the way people communicate and present themselves to each other through the use of impression management. Impression management is a process by which people control the impressions others form of them. Online apps such as Tinder allow users to create their own profile and manage the impressions they want to give out to others in order to successfully gain a match. This paper will explore impression management, specifically within the dating app, Tinder. Many people who use online dating apps manage their impressions they put out for other people. These impressions users formulate are important because they serve as a way to find a partner and as a way to have validation for themselves through an amount of likes and matches. If the number of likes and matches are low on one's profile, one can conclude that their impression is not a positive one and he/she/they may need to be altered to attract more matches. On the contrary, if there are many matches the impression that is made is favorable and popular. Tinder users manage their impressions starting with choosing their profile pictures to showcase and creating a short five hundred character limited biography about themselves. Tinder is ultimately used as a means to manage impressions in order to make a connection with someone. Impression management will be evaluated through several qualitative interviews as well as an interpretive analysis of Tinder interviewees profiles to see how their impressions are managed on the app. Specifically, five SUNY Purchase

students who actively use and engage with the online dating app Tinder will be interviewed. Their Tinder profiles will be looked at in close detail. This paper will contribute to existing literature in the field of communications because there are many studies on impression management as it relates to online dating. Online dating uses social media and other media tools to affect and play a role in an individual's life. We are living in a digital age where it is very easy to connect with others with the help of technology. Online dating apps specifically Tinder can help or hurt a single individual's chance of finding a significant other through the impressions they manage. My research will help myself and others learn more about impression management on Tinder, and any success or failure associated with it. Impression management dictates how online dating has affected the way people communicate, what they communicate about themselves to others, and how. Tinder can be used as a powerful platform to manage impressions with an attempt to form a relationship, whether it be long-term or fleeting.

Literature Review

Many recent studies have focused on online dating and impression management. This literature review will explore impression management within the dating app Tinder and help me further understand how people present themselves to others while on Tinder. Impression management dictates how that has effected the way people communicate, what they communicate about themselves to others, and what they choose to show or not show on their profile. A brief history of online dating and Tinder profiles will be looked at in close detail and how impressions are managed on the app Tinder.

Introduction to Online Dating

According to Online Dating Magazine, nearly twenty million people visit at least one online dating site every month. 120,000 marriages every year take place, at least in part, due to online dating. Online dating changes the way modern day relationships are formed and how people are connecting with one another with a swipe or a tap. Tinder, an online dating app created in 2012 with approximately 9.6 million daily active users changed the way people meet online with a simple swipe left or right of the finger on a mobile device (Grant, 2007).

Tinder

Tinder is a location based dating app also known as an (LBDA) with an estimate of over fifty million users. It is a free downloadable application for a smartphone that is quick and easy to use. In order to swipe on someone you are interested in you swipe right on your smartphone screen. If you seem uninterested in a person you swipe left. It is all with one swipe of your finger to determine who you would want to connect with. According to Tinder's website, their mission and purpose is to empower users around the world to create and develop new connections that otherwise might never have been possible. Tinder emphasizes that people do not need to feel rejected if they do not match with someone because the swipes are anonymous until a match is made. Tinder's motto is, "Any swipe can change your life". This tag line denotes the possibility for presumed intimacy and tensions between the types of moments and new future a user might experience. Many people enjoy using this dating app because they feel like the power is in their hands. With just a tap or a swipe they can determine who they are attracted to and have access to meeting others that they see themselves being with. As visual dating apps

such as Tinder gain popularity, people are beginning to self-produce images and adopt conventions of advertising and self-branding.

Impression Management

According to Sociologist Erving Goffman, impression management is a conscious or subconscious process in which people attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person, object or event by regulating and controlling information in social interaction. This is a process by which people control the impressions others form of them. People that use the online dating app Tinder engage in impression management. Impression management begins on this app with choosing one's profile photo. In a scholarly article called, *What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app*, it states that for people to engage in self-presentation, they must monitor at one level or another, how they are being perceived and evaluated by others. Tinder users do this knowing that they are being judged on their appearance solely within the app (Ward, 2017). The impression one is looking to create can be manipulated based on what they wear, who they are with, what they are doing, where they are located and what attributes they choose to highlight as the most important to represent themselves. Simultaneously, Tinder users are assessing not just the presentation of themselves, but the expectations and portrayal of potential matches. Tinder is a powerful platform since users are able to control and filter how they want to represent and express themselves. Impression construction is used on this app for choosing the kind of impression to create and deciding how to do so. However, whether or not this impression created is accurate and truthful can either help or hinder a connection.

Impression Management on Tinder

Communication professor Joseph Walther created a theory called the hyperpersonal model. The hyperpersonal model, states that in an online environment individuals have increased control over self-presentation. When a person uses Tinder they operate in a reduced cue environment, where cues are static and not dynamic.

Communication is asynchronous and it cannot rely on nonverbal communication cues, which are harder for individuals to control. Thus, users can more easily adapt their self-presentation in an online environment like Tinder as compared with face-to-face communication (Kallis, 2017). Tinder reduces self-presentation cues further. Since the initial social interactions between people within the app are not happening in person, people are unable to accurately gauge another person's body language, tone of voice, eye contact and the amount of time it takes to respond to a communication. However, Tinder users construct a desired impression by picking which photos they want to present and are limited to a certain number of characters to write a synopsis about themselves or other information they wish to share. Typically photos as well as the words chosen are pitched in a desired way to attract or repel particular potential partners. While users also have the ability to include video content where they can demonstrate their body movements and facial expressions, the content they wish to include within their profile is selected and controlled. It also is adaptable in the sense where if they no longer like something they have on their profile, it can easily be manipulated and changed. Filters are also being used on photographs in order to change brightness of photos, remove acne or whiten teeth, which in turn can make the person on Tinder look more physically appealing and

gain them more matches. Following sociologist Erving Goffman, everyday life photographs, populating the enormous dating/hook-up data bases are considered part of a learning process of self-mediation, training users in the editing, curating, and construction of a pseudo self-authenticity (David, 2013). A Tinder user is creating their ideal self and profile with the use of photo manipulation, what they chose to show and not show, and creating a bio to attract a match. Users themselves can track the pattern of their match rate success by experimenting and changing their profiles every so often. A user typically will keep what they find to work best. More specifically, a user can draw conclusions of what works best based on the feedback they receive from others when they begin to match and chat. Tinder allows users to comment and react to individual pictures shown on another person's profile as a form of feedback and interest. Once this feedback and response is received, an individual is able to conclude what is most likeable and what is not.

Impressions of Tinder

Tinder is often perceived as a “hook up app” in blogs, news, the app store, and multiple popular media sites. To some Tinder has a negative connotation. There are even Instagram accounts chronicling the disasters that have happened from Tinder in the form of screenshots called, “Tindernightmares” with a current 2.1 million following. A student who was interviewed by The Huffington Post shrugged off the nightmare stories saying, “People don't think of [Tinder] as online dating, they think of it as a game” or “as a beauty contest plus messaging,” while others see it as a “judging app” (David, 2013). Tinder has irretrievably altered the digital dating scene processing more than “a billion swipes left and right daily” (Bilton, 2014). The popular attitude on the subject appears to

conclude that the Urban Dictionary Online's top-rated definition for Tinder states, "Dating app. Tinder is the McDonalds for sex" (Urban Dictionary). This comparison demonstrates that like McDonalds Tinder is fast and easy. It also shows how it is inexpensive, accessible to many, a guilty pleasure, international, addicting, and not healthy if incorporated everyday. A scholarly article known as, *Screened Intimacies: Tinder and the Swipe Logic* explains that many people view the app as "a way of shopping for partners" (David, 2013). Users are able to eliminate whom they want based off the profiles they see. Tinder's website emphasizes the fact that people do not need to feel rejected if they do not match with another user because the swipes are anonymous until a match is made. In an interview with Tinder's CEO Sean Rad, he celebrates the effect of selecting matches by swiping left or right, telling journalist Grigoriadis, "It's a casting session and you're in the director's chair . . . At the end of the day, it's just one big party, and you're just sitting there saying, 'Yes, no, yes, no' (GQ, 2019). Depending on the person, Tinder can be shown in a positive light or negative light depending on the success of failures that may come with using the app. More specifically, someone's portrayal of themselves on the app can be completely different from what their true essence is, in person. People may connect more easily through the use of messaging on Tinder and develop a connection. Off the Tinder app that same person may have a more difficult time connecting with their match and may not feel the same connection they have felt when they first met online. The dynamic of a relationship can shift when it changes from being behind phone screens to being in person.

Constructing a Tinder Profile

When creating a profile, Tinder users are allowed to display up to five photos. They are able to select which sex they are interested in, set their distance within 0-100 miles of where they would like their ideal match to be located, and change the desired age range. These preferences allow for users to customize their expectations and curated experiences. When two profiles match, the users are able to chat with each other within the app. With new advancements made to the app since it was first created in 2012 users are now able to send GIFs in order to begin or contribute to conversations. Every Tinder user must construct an impression. And yet, Tinder profiles are not static. Like other social media platforms, changing photos and text is possible and people who use this app often take advantage of this opportunity. A number of people describe their profile changes as experiments. Some people often use their own Tinder matches as sources of inspiration for what they chose to post or not post. As their knowledge of how the app worked, people became expert on how they should present themselves, based on what they like and do not like about themselves. People on the app Tinder carefully choose what photo goes first and which photo may go last in order to construct a certain impression. According to Sociologist and Online Dating Expert Dr. Jess Carbino she states that research shows when people are evaluating photos of others, they are trying to assess compatibility on not just a physical level, but a social level. They are trying to understand, “Do I have things in common with this person?” This can all be controlled through what words, emojis and photographs are included in a profile (Bilton, 2014).

Constructing a Desired Impression on Tinder

Impression construction is about choosing the kind of impression to create and deciding precisely how to go about doing so. As stated in a scholarly article titled, *Managing Impressions Online: Self-presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment*, on Tinder, whether one is using the app for entertainment, seeking an ego-boost, or an eventual relationship, success is defined by an attractive profile, validated through mutual right swipes. Dr. Steven Nakisher, a Chicago-based clinical psychologist and CEO of picture retouching service PicTricks, told the Daily News that online daters should take the take pride in their pictures and get a little help from Photoshop. He has been quoted to say, "Your profile picture is your personal brand, it is how you present yourself to the world" (Taylor, 2019). Through manipulation of photos people are perfecting themselves, creating impressions in order to attract others. On a physical level people have the ability to alter their raw photos. They can do this by slimming their face, changing their nose and lip size, eliminating blemishes, adjusting their teeth, changing their weight and overall body shape. People also construct a desired impression by showcasing the types of social activities they like to participate in and their values. When people do this on Tinder with their photos they are engaging in impression management because they want to give off a certain look and impression in order to gain matches. Tinder can be a competition between users to stand out from one another. Since there are many users on the app it is up to the individual user to differentiate themselves. Tinder's founder Sean Rad gave GQ magazine tips for constructing the perfect profile. He stated, "smile, keep your shirt on, and be yourself." He said these key tips are essential in order

to successfully gain a match and attract a potential partner. This can also eliminate what a person does not want (GQ, 2019).

Method: Qualitative Interviews

By taking a closer look at profiles from Tinder, how a profile is made, what pictures people choose to show help one better understand impression management on Tinder. These qualitative interviews provide rich and detailed information about individual's experiences. Five students at SUNY Purchase who use Tinder were interviewed and analyzed. The five questions asked during the interviews include: Can you tell me about your experiences on the dating app Tinder? How do you present yourself on Tinder? Do you manage your impression on Tinder? How is presenting yourself online on Tinder different than how people present themselves in person? What makes you swipe left or right on someone? The answers to these questions varied depending on the person and their own personal experiences. In order to protect the privacy of the people who were interviewed, they will be kept anonymous. Their age and gender will be revealed. Three college men and two college females that attend SUNY Purchase that were personally known were interviewed. Their ages range from 18-22. Common themes of hooking up, loneliness, disappointment, and personal gratification were brought up frequently during the interviews. The first person I interviewed was an 18 year old male who attends SUNY Purchase. When asked about his experiences on Tinder he had told me that he uses Tinder to find a serious relationship despite Tinder's impression of being a hook-up app. His bio mentions he is a hopeless romantic in a hook-up world in order to attract more serious matches. He is not interested in hook ups and wants a serious girlfriend and long-term relationship. The theme of loneliness was

brought up multiple times throughout this interview. He had told me he uses the app to escape the loneliness he faces.

“I have been on Tinder for two years. The first year I ended up meeting from the app and I dated her for six months but we unfortunately broke up due to her cheating on me. After that I decided to take a year off of dating apps. I became sad and lonely without a partner and I eventually decided to get back on Tinder. I made a brand new account and profile and started to match with a lot of girls who lived locally. Most girls I matched with wanted hook-ups, leaving me really disappointed and frustrated because I wanted a genuine relationship.”

He values the impression he puts out on Tinder and believes it plays a big role on who he swipes right or left for. He mentioned that all his pictures he has on his profile are recent. There are no old photos that are being used. He showcases his true identity.

“I put the impression out there that I am a family guy. I have a picture of me with my grandma, my cousins, and my sister. I want to show that I am the boy you bring home to mom and dad. I love my family. I think the way I present myself on Tinder is the way I would present myself in real life. I am always honest on first dates, I want to dress and smell nice for a girl in person, and put out the impression that I am looking for something more serious. I am least likely to swipe right on girls who feature drugs and alcohol on their profile. I am not interested in those things and I am really looking for a partner who doesn't do those things. I am more attracted to girls who don't drink or smoke.”

After interviewing this participant he made it clear he is not interested in hook-ups and that the profile he puts out there is the best impression and features the most current

photos of himself. He is looking for a partner with similar interests and believes his profile construction was created to give off the impression that he is the stay at home type. He does not edit his photos and wants to put out his truest identity in order to receive a match and set realistic expectations of who he is. He told me that on the app he saw a lot of girls using Snapchat filters and he did not like swiping on girls who manipulated their photos. While it was easy for him to tell if photos were edited, sometimes it is not always as obvious.

“I want a girl who is honest and real and sometimes that’s hard to find on the app. A lot of girls on the app edit their photos and I can easily tell. I am least likely to swipe on a girl who uses filters on her photos.”

According to Singles In America, statistics show that 61% of online daters think the most attractive photos are natural and unenhanced (Fisher, 2019).

The next person I interviewed was a 19 year old male who also attends SUNY Purchase. He said he uses the app primarily for his own entertainment. He had told me he manages his impression on the app through the photos he posts.

“I am constantly managing my impression by changing my profile photos frequently and putting the best photos of myself first. The first picture on my profile is me on stage acting in a play. The second picture is with my baby cousin. The third picture is me in Disney world. All these pictures are recent photos I have taken. I never post old photos on Tinder. I think photos on Tinder profiles are important. If a girl has a bad impression of you from the start based off of any photos you post, she’s not going to match you or want to talk to you. I like to look at girls first and last photo when swiping on her profile. Sometimes a girl can look

better in the first photo and look completely different in her last photo. It's crazy to me."

Photos on a Tinder profile often go along with a person's impression they formulate. Carefully choosing what pictures you want to post that showcase your personality plays an important part in getting a match. According to the Association for Psychological Science, studies have shown that women take about 1/10th of a second to form an impression of someone in a photograph (Wargo, 2006). Therefore, first impressions are created very quickly. Ways people manage their impressions on Tinder have a lot to do with profile photos, picking and choosing which photo comes first and last, and pictures that showcase their true identity and personal interests.

He likes to swipe on girls that have similar music tastes as him he usually looks at Spotify that is connected with the profile to see what kind of music the girl listens to. He said that it's pretty common to be talking to someone on the app maybe even have a good thing going and then completely stop talking. He believes that not a lot of girls on the app are looking for something serious. He uses the app when he is bored and lonely.

The next person that was interviewed was a 20-year old female who attends SUNY Purchase. She told me she met her last two exes via Tinder and her two sexual partners before that were also from Tinder. She has been on and off the app for three years. She manages her impression by presenting herself on the app as funny and outgoing. A lot of pictures she has are with her friends and she even has a picture of herself riding a unicycle.

"I consider myself a clown and I'm looking for a guy who can make me laugh. I enjoy random conversation about books, tv shows, and music. I personally only

swipe on guys who have funny and creative bios. Tinder has developed its own language since the beginning. GIFS really opened a gateway between awkward openers and bad jokes that weren't there before. I noticed that there seems to be less of a time limit on things. Either people unmatched after a week, or you can message them up whenever you want. The match does not expire and can be returned to at any point in time, even if it was months after matching. You might have trouble reaching out to them because of how long it's been but its still worth a shot. I manage my impressions through the photos I post. I want my matches to see that I am a funny and outgoing girl so I posted pictures of me and my friends out at a bar. I am always having a good time.”

Another person interviewed was a 21 year old female who attends SUNY Purchase and uses the Tinder app daily. She told me she has had positive experiences on the dating app Tinder and her impression she put out on her profile helped her receive more matches.

“I dated a boy from the app for a year and then broke up once I transferred colleges. I did not want a long distance relationship. After the break up I spent months on the app solely just for boredom, entertainment, and sexual gratification. I was sick of relationships and wanted hook-ups. I would only match with men who lived locally in my area and with men who were within my age range. My profile consists of pictures of myself at the beach, pictures of me at the gym, and pictures of myself at parties. I am always managing my impression of myself by picking out photos that best describe me as a person. You can tell a lot

about a person based off of the pictures they post. My profile shows that I am a social butterfly.”

She only swipes on guys who workout, are physically fit, and guys who don't want relationships or anything serious. She thinks Tinder is the place to go for hookups and has had no trouble finding that. Tinder provides her males who give her company she complained about being lonely on campus and made sure to put in her bio that she is not looking for anything serious and loves to cuddle. She wants to eliminate any guy who mentions they want something serious. Commitment scares her off and she loses interest quickly in guys who present themselves on the app that way.

The last person that was interviewed was 22, male and currently attends SUNY Purchase College. He told me he has been on Tinder for 4-5 years and has had some good experiences but also some very weird experiences.

He signed up for Tinder when he was 18 and started to match with people who were also at his college. He wanted to meet new girls and have a good time. He went on multiple Tinder dates and the dates consisted of going out for a cup of coffee or going to the movies. He told me he went on one of the worst dates ever.

“The girl I met up with from the Tinder app was apparently a dominatrix. I had no clue that she was a dominatrix and also didn't know what being a dominatrix was. I found out that she played a dominant role in BDSM. She was nothing like her profile and I didn't feel the same connection I felt with her online in person. I think Tinder is the place to go if you are in college and are just looking for a good time.”

He presents the most current version of himself on the Tinder app and manages his impression by doing this. He believes updating his profile pictures frequently that show off his personality and interests will increase his chances of finding a match.

“I don’t want to post pictures from four years ago and I often times see that girls do this on the app. I want to look my best in every picture, I always smile, and have pictures of myself with my face shaved and not shaved. I have always been honest and real on the app despite people tricking me. I only swipe on girls who have similar music taste, a girl within close distance since I don’t drive, and a girl closer to my age. I am 22 years old and I set my age range to 22-25. I also enjoy going out to bars and buying girls drinks and I’m not able to do that with a girl who is 18.”

He has experimented before by changing his age range lowest to 18 but found most girls to be too immature for him. He often changes his pictures and bio daily in order to receive new matches. He receives feedback on photos he posts on Tinder. Based off the feedback he is able to keep or delete certain photos on his profile in order to manage his impression. He manages his impression through the use of his photos he posts and the bio he has on his profile.

“My bio mentions my zodiac sign and I talk about how I am a Sagittarius. A lot of people put their zodiac sign in their bio. It is a way to show someone who you are. Many people on Tinder and in real life relate signs of their zodiac to their specific personality trait. It is a way I manage my impression it is also a great conversation starter.”

Findings

Overall, my findings showed that many people on the Tinder app aren't looking for anything serious. Three out of the five people interviewed use the app for when they are bored and want casual sex. Two out of the five people interviewed want serious relationships from the app and are opposed to the idea of hooking up. The theme of being loneliness was often brought up. Many people have dated previously from the app Tinder and decided that after their relationship has ended they were only interested in hooking up since they were unable to do that while in a relationship. The subjects interviewed always updated their profile in order to receive more matches and picked photos that reflected their personality. The bio they wrote for themselves was extremely important to them and was a way they managed the impression they wanted to give off such as "not looking for anything serious" to "no hook ups please." They often read other people's bios on the app and eliminated their matches based off of the photos that person would post. If another person's bio mentioned something they were not commonly interested in they would swipe left. Matching based solely off of others physical appearance was important to all interviewed subjects.

Conclusion

Tinder is ultimately used as a platform to manage impressions and other people's perception of who they are. Today, people manage the impressions they put out for others to evaluate in the space of online dating. Taking a closer look at profiles from Tinder, how a profile is made, what pictures people choose to showcase and what words they use to describe themselves all account for one's impression management. As a result of this, people are now able to have full control over the creation of their own version and

identity of themselves. These findings are important because it shows that today people are always managing their impressions in order to seek a partner as well as feel good about themselves. This is especially important for an online setting. Before people meet face to face they are able to manage their impressions online through the use of a profile photo and bio they type about themselves. For future research it would be interesting to conduct more qualitative interviews. Interviewing more than five people would provide more variety outside of SUNY Purchase College. Overall, these findings and research support that Tinder is ultimately used as a means to manage impressions in order to make a connection with someone.

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