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Just a Swipe Away: A Media Effects Tetrad Analysis of Tinder

Introduction

In an ever-changing social world, the search for love is becoming more digital than ever before. Although the idea and practice of matchmaking has been around for decades, it wasn't until recent years that dating apps took off. App stores are now swamped with apps committed to helping singles find romantic connections, all of which hone in on specific audiences to cater to their ideal versions of love. Though there are many different dating apps on the market today, Tinder takes the top spot for the most notable, and popular dating app by far. Tinder was launched in 2012 by Sean Rad, Justin Mateen and Jonathan Badeen, and now helps over fifty-seven million users swipe right (or left) on potential love interests. Unlike many other dating sites, Tinder is centered around the journey of love, not necessarily love itself. Their mission is to “make being single more fun and rewarding by connecting people who may not have otherwise met in real life” (Tinder, 2022). Using the Four Effects model, I will explore how Tinder enhances, retrieves, reverses, and obsolescence aspects of communication and technology in a romantic setting.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan was a media theorist and scholar, known for his Four Effects model, or laws of media. This model essentially answers the question his famous saying, “the media is the message”, poses: what common, and sustainable conclusions can be drawn from all media?

His model is organized into tetrads, or “laws”, that all media follows. The different tetrads include enhancement, retrieval, reversal, and obsolescence. *Enhancement* touches on how a new medium expands or advances communication and technology, *retrieval* refers to the parts of communication that were previously forgotten that the new media has received or brought back, and *reversal* explains the unintended uses that the media taps into. Last but not least, *obsolescence* refers to the aspects of communication and technology that the new media will outgrow as a side effect of enhancement in other areas and aspects. McLuhan further divides these tetrads into two sub categories: *figure qualities* and *ground qualities*. *Figure qualities* (enhancement and retrieval), are qualities and characteristics that users are more likely to observe and enjoy when they are engaged with a medium, and *ground qualities* (reversal, obsolescence), are less-observable features of the medium that serve as framework. Regardless, each law works in combination with the others to form the full understanding of a certain medium.

Tinder Analysis: Enhancement

One of the most enticing features of Tinder is that it enhances the ability to meet romantic partners of your interest from virtually anywhere. On the app, you can filter people from a certain radius, showing you potential suitors from your city or from across the country or world. This feature helps curate potential connections in a way that is convenient to their users, something that meeting people organically may prevent at times. Additionally, Tinder utilizes “swipes”, which allows users to filter through their feed and pick and choose which people they would like to pursue. This feature expedites the process of finding love by filtering people users deem as incompatible, either physically or emotionally. The app also shows you when you have a match with another user, or a mutual attraction, and can allow users to “super like” other

users, which may further enhance potential connections by letting someone know they are interested before they even swipe on them.

Retrieval

Tinder retrieves our superficial need and want for validation from others. Just like social media platforms, dating apps like Tinder thrive off of our need for validation. On the app, users hand select pictures for their profiles and create short biographies to “sell themselves” to others. Though the app has a lot of great features, at its root, it relies heavily on first impressions and superficial aspects like attractiveness and appearance to gain attention from others. While dating apps do allow for a much more diverse dating experience, users may experience negative effects on their mental health. One survey shows that 49% of users with a pre-existing mood disorder report depressive symptoms triggered by online dating. Those who are more emotionally vulnerable and seeking external validation feel these impacts. Even if an individual is not dealing with pre-existing mental illness, these apps can potentially negatively impact anyone who's swiping (Acenda Health, 2022). The negative implications of dating apps may include heightened stress and anxiety, poor body image, insecurity, and lower self-esteem.

Reversal

Although Tinder's mission is to make being single more fun, the implications of the app can do the opposite for some unlucky users. “Catfishing”, or deceiving users with fake online profiles, is an unintended implication that Tinder and other dating sites unfortunately flip into. Catfishing has grown to be increasingly common in recent years, and is typically motivated by gaining money or other valuable personal information from a person. Though both men and women fall prey to catfishing, women are more likely to be victims, along with people with

anxious attachments (Psychology Today, 2021). Learning about the warning signs of catfishing and other dangerous dating app behaviors online can help reduce the likelihood of it happening.

Obsolescence

While there is not a lot of information on the ways people are meeting romantic partners, it can be inferred that more and more people are meeting online and through dating apps than ever before. Especially with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, people have had less opportunities to go out and meet people in person. This has caused people to get comfortable and familiar with dating apps and online dating sites, causing the number of users to skyrocket. Though meeting people organically in person will never be fully obsolete, I think that a decrease in couples meeting in an organic, natural way is a trend that we will see a lot of in the near future, if not already.

Evaluation

As someone who has grown up in a digital age, I can see how meeting people online is more normalized than ever before. Just like social media, dating apps like Tinder foster constant connectedness; something that people in a digital age crave. I also think that the pandemic has aided in the popularity and growth of online dating because the instant gratification and validation users get from “swiping” can fill the void of isolation and loneliness. Tinder has a reputation for being a “hookup” app, which may be a direct result of this extended period of isolation for some people; it is a quick fix to fill the void of loneliness. On the contrary, however, I do think that dating apps are not entirely a bad thing. They are a place where people come together in sight of one common thing: a romantic connection. When people meet in natural spaces and environments, it is unclear whether someone is looking for a relationship or connection; dating apps and online dating sites cut to the chase.

Conclusion

Tinder is a dating app designed to “make being single more fun and rewarding by connecting people who may not have otherwise met in real life” (Tinder, 2022). This paper analyzed Tinder by applying Marshall McLuhan’s Media Effects model to the popular dating app. Tinder enhances the ability to meet people from a wide scope of areas, and retrieves our human need for validation and affirmation. It has the reversal potential to mislead others on the site using “catfishing”, and may also lead to toxic hookup culture. Lastly, Tinder, along with other online dating sites, may have the potential to make meeting romantic partners organically obsolete for some, which could lead to less raw, genuine, human connection in prospective relationships in the future.

References

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