Becoming a (Gendered) Dating App User: An Analysis of How Heterosexual College Students Navigate Deception and Interactional Ambiguity on Dating Apps

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Abstract

Scholars have worked to understand how people use dating apps as this new technology changes sexual interactions. While previous scholarship has examined how people interact with one another on dating platforms, less attention has been paid to how people decide to adopt dating apps for personal use. This study analyzes interview data with 27 heterosexual college students in order to examine this process by asking, "how do heterosexual college students come to define dating apps as a normative dating practice?" The findings in this study suggest that both men and women work through ambiguous and deceptive online interactions. As they work through online interactions, they establish themselves as normative dating app users by aligning their experiences with their perceived potential of dating apps. The findings suggest that initially, many dating app users see the apps 'fun' or as a 'game.' Eventually, through a combination of experience and technological tools, students came to define dating apps as more convenient than in-person dating and relatively safe to use for sex and dating. The findings also suggest that while both men and women confront deception and ambiguous social interactions, gender-specific concerns strongly influence how students use dating apps. This gender difference is particularly pronounced regarding the perceived relative safety of dating apps. Specifically, men define dating apps as fun albeit superficial, whereas women define dating apps as potentially dangerous.

Keywords Dating apps · Tinder · Online dating · Social interaction · Ambiguity · Heterosexuality

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Introduction

Research on the growing trend of dating apps has shown that technological design and social factors shape user experience. Scholars have studied the increasing trend of dating apps and online dating (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), the technological affordances of dating apps (David and Cambre 2016), and the ways in which people present themselves on internet dating platforms (Toma et al. 2008; Ward 2017). The presentation of self is of particular interest for social scientists given the relative anonymity online dating services offer users. Scholars have shown that users worry about people misrepresenting their appearance, their social location, and their intentions or desires (Toma et al. 2008). Research also suggests that the anonymity of dating apps allows people to send sexually explicit photographs and messages with impunity (Hess and Flores 2016; Waling and Pym 2017). Given the challenges of verifying authenticity and sorting through sexually explicit images and messages, it is worth investigating how and why people choose to use these technologies in the first place. This article examines the social-psychological process of heterosexual college students deciding to use dating apps.

Early research on dating websites tended to focus on individualistic explanations that privileged a "marketplace metaphor" to make sense of users. By framing individual users as rational actors with desired criteria, this scholarship theorizes that online daters are capitalizing on the technical efficiency of online dating (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). To some extent, this framing is true even for people who use mobile dating apps (Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017). However, scholars have also noted that Tinder and other swipe-based platforms are more ephemeral than dating websites (David and Cambre 2016). The "swipe-logic" of many dating apps keeps individuals entertained by the app functionality itself, rather than relying on users trying to find better matches based on psychometric criteria. In other words, dating websites emphasized that a "better" match could be *determined* whereas swipe-logic apps suggest a "better" match can be *discovered.* The shift from criteria-based matching to place-based sorting is a significant shift in online dating culture. A shift which I argue, suggests a need for reexamining the way these new technologies are adopted by users. If users are less interested in the apps for their ability to leverage technical efficiency based on psychometric sorting, how do users come to define these location-based dating apps as part of their dating experience?

This article extends previous scholarship of online dating and dating apps by tying the interactional issues of self-presentation and online anonymity to the ephemerality of contemporary dating apps. In doing so, it suggests that how students navigate deception and ambiguous interactions is critically important in their adoption of dating apps for personal use. The driving research question of this study is, how do heterosexual college students come to define dating apps as a normative dating practice? To answer this question, I rely on qualitative data from an interview study of heterosexual college students with experience using dating apps. My findings show that students begin with a normative understanding of

dating that does not include dating apps. Thus, in order to justify using a dating app, students work to redefine dating apps as normative. This process begins by first defining dating apps as a "fun" activity to do with friends. The fun of dating apps is eventually redefined as students realize that the technological convenience of the apps allows them to date more efficiently, not because of pre-set criteria, but because the apps are mobile and easy to use. As students begin to take dating apps more seriously, they then face a new interactional ambiguity—navigating safety with digital strangers. Students determine the relative safety of meeting digital strangers in ways that are technologically mediated, too. However, the narrative accounts of these men and women show that the importance of safety reflects gendered logics, with men viewing dating apps as superficial but mostly safe while women safeguard themselves against violence.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on dating apps has relied on social-psychological theories of the self because of their usefulness in conceptualizing how people choose to present themselves in social settings. Researchers have demonstrated that online presentations of self, in dating contexts, are in a double bind where users are trying to create attractive profiles while remaining authentic. Authenticity is important given that fears of online identity misrepresentation are widespread among online daters (Gibbs et al. 2011; Toma et al. 2008). In addition to the presentation of self in online profiles, scholars have also studied how people present themselves in online dating conversations. Scholars have shown that anonymous interactions can lead to gender-based online harassment (Hess and Flores 2016; Waling and Pym 2017). However, a less understood process is how people come to define the use of dating apps as part of their self-presentation in the first place. In other words, the question is not how people present themselves online, but rather, how do people come to understand themselves as someone who uses dating apps? The work of Erving Goffman and new media scholarship lends insight into how people come to see themselves as dating app users.

The Presentation of Self in Online Spaces

Social scientists have applied Goffman's (1959, 1963) dramaturgical analysis in order to make sense of social interactions in a variety of settings. A driving thread throughout dramaturgical analysis is that social actors respond to, and deliberately present, select versions of themselves such that social interactions run smoothly. That is to say, people judge the norms of a given social interaction and play their appropriate role. Central to the dramaturgical approach is the co-presence of social actors. By being physically present, people can read each other's body language as they attempt to square what people are attempting to present with what they are actually "giving off." When social interactions are not smooth, it may the case that what a person is attempting to convey is different from what they are "giving off."

For example, someone in a job interview may think they are acting professionally but their audience (or interviewer) sees their behavior as unprofessional. Thus, a dramaturgical analysis helps to make sense of how two or more people within one interaction can have different interpretations of the same event.

The ability for people to define the same interaction differently has been a consistent point of interest for scholars who study high-stakes interactions. Research has shown that in high-stakes interactions, such as gynecological exams or airplane travel, social actors exert a great deal of interactional work and emotional labor in order to preserve the social order (Emerson 1970; Hochschild 2012). In these high-stakes interactions the definition of the situation can easily slip from normative to non-normative because small but ambiguous actions can be interpreted variously. In the case of a gynecological exam, a routine professional medical examination can be redefined as sexual with only a slight shift in the language used, the body language, or what a medical provider "gives off." Thus, interactional ambiguity is purposefully resolved in advance by the constant assertion of professionalism (Emerson 1970). In high-stakes interactions, co-presence is key because attention to small and subtle details helps to align what a person is presenting with what they "give off." However, as internet technologies become more popular, more opportunities for interaction arise that do not share co-presence. This possibility raises questions about how people interact online as compared to in-person.

Scholarship on the presentation of self in online spaces has examined social media at length since these platforms present an opportunity for people to create formal self-presentations which reflect, accurately or inaccurately, an almost endless array of personal information (Carr and Hayes 2015). Social media scholars have shown that people consider a range of issues when making their profiles and when posting online content. For example, some people consider their friends and family as their primary audience while others imagine the tens or hundreds of thousands of followers they have as their audience (Marwick and boyd 2012). Many users post to social media with an emphasis on showing the "fun" they are having and see social media as an opportunity to have fun online (Duffy and Wissinger 2017). Given that dating apps also rely on the construction of personal profiles there are some parallels in how people understand their online self-presentations with the added motivation to find a sexual partner (Ranzini and Lutz 2017; Ward 2016, 2017).

When building their dating app profile users attempt to craft an attractive but accurate presentation of self in order to attract other users. A central concern of dating app profiles, much like social media profiles, is the selection of attractive photographs which present someone's physical features (Duguay 2017; Ward 2016; Ward 2017). In addition to photographs, many users also report body measurements as part of their profile. Since users are attempting to make attractive profiles, the inclusion of body measurements is an opportunity for people to provide misleading information. Often falling along gendered norms, women tend to misrepresent their weight and men misrepresent their height (Toma et al. 2008). Importantly, while some deception occurs, it is far less than people *perceive* as occurring (Livingstone 2008; Toma et al. 2008; Ward 2016). Further, the perception of the extent of deception is *also* gendered in that women and men read each other profiles with gendered suspicions (Ward 2017).

   Latent in the desire to make attractive profiles is the assumption that users want something "out" of dating apps. That is, people make dating apps for a reason. One reason, particularly among lesbian, gay, and bisexual users, is that dating apps expand the pool of potential matches thus introducing users to new people. Heterosexual women and men tend to report different desires, with men being more likely to seek casual sex and women more likely to seek long-term relationships, or even non-sexual ends like forming friendships or talking to people on the apps for self-validation (Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017). Most often though, regardless of sexual orientation or gender, users report wanting some form of "success" which *usually* means either a sexual or romantic partnership for a night, a lifetime, or somewhere in-between. The ability to expand one's network while seeking romantic and sexual relationships has led researchers to wonder whether dating apps demographically shift partner homophily across social categories such as political orientation and race (Anderson et al. 2014; Curington et al. 2015). Researchers have found that while dating apps can expand one's personal network, the effects on partner homophily are less clear. So far, it appears that people still tend to date intra-categorically in terms of race and political orientation. However, scholars have also uncovered that what some seek from dating apps is not "success" in these terms but rather, the ability to exert dominance over digital strangers.

Gender and Technology

While the technological aspects of a medium determine some functionality, they cannot entirely predict how people choose to use the technology. In the case of dating apps, this means that while the technology has the manifest function of matching potential partners for romantic relationships and sexual encounters, it is also possible that the technological affordances produce other interactional possibilities depending on how users decide to use technology. An important part of Tinder and other "swipe" apps' design is their ephemerality. Swipe dating apps present one profile at a time, and users swipe left or right on the profile to indicate their interest and wait to see if other users swipe right on them (which indicates interest). This feature means that the interactions are often fleeting (David and Cambre 2016; LeFebvre 2018). For swipe dating apps this means that users quickly move through matches only looking at a photograph or two, which they often suspect is altered, and move toward meeting in-person based more on geographical proximity than psychometric criteria. Importantly, not all dating apps which use geographic sorting are ephemeral in the same way. Whereas Grindr has been likened to a digital gay bar because it shows *where* people are relative to the user, Tinder does not indicate precise location (Blackwell et al. 2015). Instead, Tinder only shows users one match at a time who fits within the users specified age range, gender and geographic *proximity*. Thus, Tinder in some ways combines the ephemerality of a purely location-based app such as Grindr with the criteria-based approach of online dating websites with an emphasis on the former. However, while dating apps are designed to match partners, their use is not overly determined. Users also play a role in adapting technology according to their intentions. Due to the ephemeral design of dating apps and

the anonymity of new media, this means that people can use the technology as a tool to digitally harass other users with impunity.

The way people use dating apps is partially an outcome of design, but it is also part of the culture in which people are located. It is no accident that dating apps are also sometimes referred to as "hookup apps" as they are often used by college students and other people seeking casual sexual encounters. Hookup culture, which predates hookup apps, is a combination of social structures which privilege brief sexual interactions on college campuses. Hookup culture has shown to be contradictory in that is upholds seemingly loose sexual standards while still holding women accountable to norms of feminine behavior (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Tolman 1994; Wade 2017). Further, hookup culture privileges men's desires over women's desires. In this context, heterosexual men's sexuality is normalized as violent, aggressive, and active which contributes to high rates of sexual assaults on college campuses (Hlavka 2014; Wade 2017). Scholarly evidence suggests that the ephemerality and anonymity of dating app interactions lends itself to practices which reflect a gender hierarchy privileging men's desires as well (Hess and Flores 2016; Vitis and Gilmour 2017; Waling and Pym 2017). This sometimes manifests as men sending unsolicited explicit sexual imagery and jokes to women with impunity (Vitis and Gilmour 2017; Waling and Pym 2017). But the apps do not technologically determine this behavior a priori. Thus, given the ways in which online dating and hookup apps seem to reflect rather than challenge or change the unequal norms of hookup culture, it is worth investigating how dating apps users come to see these practices as normative.

Methods

The data for this study comes from semi-structured interviews with 27 self-identified heterosexual students with experience using several swipe-based dating apps, Tinder being the most common app of choice. Following IRB protocol of the Midwestern university (referred to as "University") where this research was conducted, students were recruited for in-person interviews directly and by snowball sampling methods. As per IRB standards and qualitative research ethics, only pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the data and all data were removed of personally identifying information before analysis.

Sampling

Most interviewees were recruited through mass emails sent to all of the students majoring or minoring in sociology, criminology and the biological sciences at University's main campus. A few students were also recruited from in-class presentations in several upper and lower division sociology courses. For these presentations, I attended the class after obtaining instructor approval, introduced myself to the class and told them I was conducting a study on heterosexual college students' experiences with dating apps. To incentivize students, two gift cards for a local grocery

were raffled among all who completed the interview. Finally, all students were asked to recommend friends for the study as part of the snowball sampling strategy, which yielded two additional interviewees.

The sample demographics are comparable to University's public data on their student body but are not statistically representative. The sample includes 18 women and 9 men, which while limited for the representation of men, does mirror the over-representation of women at University and the majors sampled from. It also reflects the difficultly in attracting men to participate in the study despite repeated attempts. During the latter stages of participant recruitment when I went to sociology courses to recruit in-person, I included in the following statement in the presentation script:

> This is an ongoing project which has already had numerous people come in for interviews. While I am still interviewing both women and men, I would like to request that men who are on the fence please contact me with questions or concerns, as I have not had many men express interest in being interviewed yet, and I would be more than happy to answer individual questions you might have.

The age range of the students is 18 and 22. The ratio of white students to students of color approximates the diversity of University with 18 white students and 10 students of color, although the specific ethnic variation does not match University's reported demographics with Native American students being overrepresented and Asian/Pacific-Islander students underrepresented. Eleven of the students were in their first year of college, five were sophomores, nine were juniors and the remaining two were seniors.

Interview Procedure

Before being interviewed students were vetted to make sure they were eligible for participation. The criteria for eligibility were: (1) participants must be current students at University; (2) identify as heterosexual; (3) have experience using at least one dating app; and (4) be at least 18 years old. Because of both the sampling method and the eligibility requirements this is not a simple random sample as it required respondents to self-select into the study. However, despite this sample's limitations, the data align with the research questions well because users spoke at length about their personal experiences with dating apps specifically and their thoughts on dating apps in general.

After students were determined to be eligible for participation, each student was informed of his or her rights as an interviewee before written informed consent was obtained. Once students provided informed consent, the interviews followed a linear account of app use starting with the app(s) itself. This included questions about when the student got the app(s), which app(s) and why. As interviews progressed, I would probe on answers that were unclear or when students, quite frequently, would reference an app, cultural icon, or use slang I was unfamiliar with. This led to rich data for each interview, and because I kept track of where I was with pen and paper, none of my central questions were skipped. In addition to the standard set of

questions, I also probed students on the specifics of their experiences as necessary in order to get more detailed and concrete practices. Most of the interviews lasted about an hour, although two interviews were almost 2 h long.

The semi-structured interview protocol generated a wealth of qualitative data. However, interview data is limited without paired observational data (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). It is possible that people report certain behaviors in an interview, but without watching them in a social interaction it is impossible to know what people actually do in a given circumstance. However, what heterosexual college students actually do in terms of sexual behavior is outside of the scope of this article. Rather than attempting to predict sexual activity, what is more important here is the cognitive process wherein heterosexual college students interactionally resolve dating app ambiguity as they come to define dating apps as a normative dating practice.

Data Management and Analytics

The interviews resulted in two types of data that needed to be managed: interview transcripts and interview notes. The interview transcripts were audio recorded which made it easier to take notes during the interview. These notes included subtle cues such as body language, comportment, demeanor and emotions. The interview transcripts were all transcribed verbatim, removed of identifying information, and imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In addition to the transcripts, typewritten interview notes were imported into NVivo and paired with their corresponding interviewee's transcript. This allowed memos to be written which connected the emotional components of interviews with the verbal answers to questions. For example, when a student became excited about retelling something that had happened, their expression could be noted alongside of their accompanying quote. This level of detail is useful during data analysis because it draws attention to the points at which interviewees emphasized which aspects of their experience were more salient than others.

Interviewee confidentiality was carefully protected during the research process while also involving interviewees in the research process. To keep interviews confidential, I personally transcribed each interview verbatim. After transcription, I removed the names of the interviewees as well as the names of the people they mentioned and changed small details in order to preserve the intent of the quote without revealing who said it. For example, one student described meeting his match at a particular restaurant. While he named the restaurant, I changed the transcript to read "at a local fast-food restaurant." The use of pseudonyms also protected interviewees confidentiality, but I gave participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym so that they could read the finalized study and identify themselves. In some instances, interviewees elected to not pick a pseudonym, so I assigned one.

Once the data were transcribed and removed of identifiers, I began analyzing the data. While much qualitative analysis relies on an entirely inductive approach, which stresses the importance of emergent themes, I relied on a combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques (Lofland and Lofland 1995). My first round of coding was open, which generated more than 100 codes. After this, I applied a focused

coding technique which was sensitive to the ways in which students discussed their desires, fears, and points of uncertainty, confusion and ambiguity. In other words, I had two sets of codes, one generated inductively and another deductively based on the research question, how do heterosexual college students come to define dating apps as a normative dating practice? I hypothesized that the process of defining the dating apps as normative was likely tied to their desires and fears about dating apps as based on previous literature. I then compared the two code sets in order to collapse them into one set of codes. In comparing the codes, one code emerged which was not part of my initial hypothesis: frustration. In my analysis of the emotional components of the interviews, I found that women placed a great deal of emphasis in their general frustration with dating apps. Without the open coding in the beginning, this code would likely not have been central to the analysis. But the focused coding allowed me to organize the data around the specific instances at which students spoke directly about the ways in which their emotional responses were connected to their changing view of dating apps as part of their everyday practice.

Findings

Here I present my findings which show how this sample of heterosexual college students resolved deceptive and ambiguous interactions as they came to understand themselves as dating app users. The first interactional ambiguity presented is the reason why students downloaded dating apps. Second, I show how students used the apps with their friends but also with people they met online. Finally, students come to define the dating app interactions as part of their dating process such that they move towards meeting their matches in-person. In this latter process it is shown that women's use of dating apps differs from men's in that concerns over personal safety drive the ways in which women define normative dating app practices.

Going from Offline to Online

The normative way in which people expect to date involves meeting potential partners in-person at work, at school, at a bar or elsewhere which meant that dating apps violate the norm. This normative expectation to date in-person is reflected in the majority (25 out of 27) of the students in this sample who said that prior to using dating apps they preferred to meet romantic partners in-person. However, when students described why they first downloaded a dating app they rarely discussed it as a way of meeting serious romantic partners. Instead, more than half of both men and women discussed downloading the apps with their friends as a "fun" activity or "joke." Haley said, "Well, I got it as a joke." Jennifer said, "So, we just kinda used it, not as a game, that makes me sound terrible. But just kinda like, you know, just for fun." Marc said, "It was just kind of a fun idea I thought I might try out in college." Being in a new context, such as University's residential housing or with friends made at college, pushed these students to engage in a new dating practice. By framing these apps as "fun" or as a "game" students were able to define the use

of dating apps as something they wanted to do. It was not, at first, how they wanted to meet romantic partners per se, but rather, as a fun activity.

For some students, using dating apps was a contradictory experience that having "fun" allowed them to resolve. Amanda said that using a dating app felt stigmatized and that she did not want to appear "desperate" to find someone. The audience to which Amanda refers seeming desperate to, is the people on the app who she often already knew. On a residential campus like University, many people she and other students saw online were friends, acquaintances, a friend of a friend, or a familiar face. In this way, the technical affordances of Tinder combined with the context of a college campus in that geographically based sorting matches people who already knew each other. This digital interaction is ambiguous as both users are digitally outed to each other as dating app users. Unsure if their match wanted to be more than a friend or not, students sometimes used humor to head off serious conversations. Sydney said this was fun, "I was messaging people [I already knew] with a joking manner…it was nothing serious." In addition to finding their friends on the apps, students also encountered situations where they matched with the same person. Humor was used in these instances as well. Justin and his friends "swiped and met the same people, we make jokes about it." By couching the apps as something fun to do, and the eventual matching with friends as an opportunity to make jokes rather than as a way of meeting partners, these students were able to frame their experiences as fun instead of as a serious form of matchmaking.

Digital Matchmaking

Although using dating apps started as fun, eventually most of these students did meet someone from the app in-person. Only two students in this sample had not yet met someone in-person. How students shifted their understanding of dating apps as something "fun" to do to a way of meeting partners often relied upon the technical convenience of the apps. In other words, the ephemerality of dating apps which made them appealing and fun was also a productive force in that it changed the how students understand their potential use.

In some cases, the instantaneous feedback students received from using the apps was a source of pleasure. Amanda said, "I guess I definitely like the instant gratification of, 'ok, so I don't feel pretty today so I'm gonna get on and just try to match with people who are really attractive….then I have the opportunity to message people, or just have a conversation with someone who I know is interested in me.'" Importantly, while the desire to find someone to match and speak with led to Amanda looking for gratification, it was predicated on the ease of logging into a dating app instantaneously. The ease of use was continually referenced by students when they described why they kept using dating apps. Christine said, "Well, first off, it's convenient." Brittany said, "I like the ease of it and the convenience of [it], I don't have a lot of time to go out and meet people." The ease of use in addition to the fun students could have made it such that dating apps were a way of overcoming boredom and daily tedious moments. Matthew said, "I mean…I'm bored and 'what's on my phone.' It's just easy and you can be lazy." Eventually, after using

dating apps long enough the convenience of meeting people online led to meeting people in-person and an accompanying shift in how these students thought about dating apps.

The (Gendered) Dating App User

As students came to see themselves as people who use dating apps to find sex and partnership, rather than people who are using dating apps just for fun, they shifted the meaning of conversations from joking around with friends to serious inquires. Moving toward serious inquires meant that students actively tried to follow-through with their matches to the point of meeting in-person, which was a noticeably rare occurrence. The modal experience of a digital match for these students was that they would match with someone online, talk for a short period of time, but never meet in-person. Some matches would not talk at all, or one person would message a pickup line and receive no response. Students in this sample reported that frequently, they would be messaging back and forth with someone and eventually either party would lose interest and abruptly stop responding. Students referred to this practice as "ghosting." To be ghosted is to be the one who does not receive a message in return. For those ghosted, this ambiguous cue is taken to indicate that the other person is not interested in pursuing the match any further. Eventually though, most students did find at least one person they would be willing to meet and who was willing to meet them. Caroline said, "I mean, it kinda just shows you who's out there, and typically, if they ended up being nice I wouldn't mind meeting them in this area." Finding someone nice, or as Sarah describes, someone with "good vibes," would lead to meeting in-person for a hookup or date. Lizzie describes how her first hookup led to her rethinking how she could use dating apps. Lizzie said, "So I downloaded it, and it, it's kinda more like a game to me…but then, I hookup with someone, I was like, 'I can do this' and I just like, I guess I had the desire to do it again." As Lizzie notes, the first encounter is in some ways the most difficult as it forces a cognitive shift in how the students conceptualize their dating practices. Meeting someone off an app is no longer a joke, as the potential for and active pursuit of some form of romantic or sexual encounter becomes a reality.

The shift in thinking of themselves as someone who would use dating apps earnestly aroused a set of gendered concerns among these students. Specifically, men described worrying about whether or not the women they matched with were as attractive as their profile made them seem, whereas women expressed concerns about their personal safety. Accordingly, the detail in which women described their concerns were distinctly more elaborate than men in this sample.

In order to verify that a match was authentic many students would use additional technological means before meeting their match in person. Terrance always uses Snapchat as a way to verify who the person is because "it's easier, you know, to see body language." In addition to looking at their body language in an attempt to discern his matches were safe, he was also literally seeing their bodies. The men in this study repeatedly expressed concerns about women's bodies when describing what they feared could happen when they met a match in-person. Phil describes his

worst dating app experience this way. He met his date at a local fast-food restaurant. Based on her profile pictures he expected her to have what he described as a "white girl basic" look. Phil was dismayed when they met because she smoked cigarettes, had what he described as a "pop punk" aesthetic and was "a little chubby." Phil did not pursue this relationship further. Steele Stanwick insisted that women on the apps always asked him about "my height" while "always lying about their weight."

It is worth noting that men's concerns about bodily misrepresentation on dating apps is not totally unfounded. Amanda discussed crafting her profiles in order to present a version of herself that is attractive but could be read as misleading. Amanda said, "a majority of my pictures are me from when I was fifteen pounds heavier in muscle, and not like what I look like now. So, I guess in a way, it's not fake, you can see what I look like, but I'm definitely more fit." The selectivity that students employed when making their profiles likely leads to some incongruence between what their matches see online compared to what they see when meeting in-person. This is why social media apps such as Snapchat are useful for alleviating concerns regarding what someone looks like. However, the almost singular focus on women's bodies by men meant that threats to personal safety were absent of men's narratives. This is in contradistinction to women's narratives about using dating apps.

As the women in this sample came to understand themselves as dating app users looking to find partnerships and/or hookups they navigated a sexual field which privileged hookups, all the while reconciling deep-seated fears regarding technology and strangers. Karen discussed the overwhelming number of men looking for hookups this way:

> Tinder was a little bit hard to use at first…getting past all the people that just wanted to hookup and getting into the people who were looking for an actual relationship, which there were few and far between.

All of the women in this sample encountered some range of unwanted sexually explicit messages ranging from sexual puns to direct comments on their bodies. It was common that men would ask for "nudes," otherwise known as naked pictures. Lizzie described most of the men she matched with as "pushy" because they asked for nudes before establishing any form of rapport. Karen said she had many experiences with "really sexually aggressive dudes on Tinder." The women in this study, while not enjoying these experiences, said they were commonplace. In addition to experiencing unwanted explicit conversations women also worried about the intentions of the men they were talking to online. Specifically, even when men were not being "sexually aggressive" these women still worried about whether or not meeting a man they met on a dating app would be safe.

Women described their fear of meeting digital strangers in terms of the ability to vet one's intentions via their body language and subtle interaction cues. These women often suggested that by meeting in-person first it was easier to discern someone's intentions than it is in online spaces. In thinking about whether she preferred meeting people in-person or online, Gloria said, "at least you kinda see who they are better in-person, cause like, you can't really tell much about them over the phone cause it's just what they're saying." Notably, Gloria draws attention to what people are *saying* which draws a contrast to non-verbal information that is communicated in

offline interactions. Without being able to "see" the person, Gloria is reticent to take someone she met on the internet at their word. Leah also suggested that small physical cues say than words. Leah said:

> I'd rather meet a person in-person, that way I can physically see you, little things that you can't [see online]. I'd rather [meet] in-person because there's less of a chance that you can deceive me, online it'll happen regardless, but it's less likely to happen if I meet you in person.

Much like Gloria, and many women in this sample, Leah suggests that deception is commonplace online. Of particular note is Leah's sentiment that "online it'll happen regardless" which further suggests that all digital conversations are framed as deceptive to a greater or lesser extent. Victoria put it this way, "either way you're taking a chance that's never really gonna be eliminated." For students like Victoria, Leah, and Gloria, they rely on their ability to determine from cues and gestures what technological affordances cannot provide: trust in a person's intentions. While Snapchat and other social media apps can help to comfort fears regarding what a person looks like, it is, in Leah's words, the "little things" that you "can't see online" that are more revealing of a person's authentic self and intentions. Thus, for the women in this sample, meeting the men they spoke with online was framed as a chance that could lead to a consensual sexual or romantic encounter. Or, it may lead to a dangerous encounter.

Several of the women in this sample reported personal experiences of being victimized in digital spaces and even offline. Amanda's friend met a man on a dating app who was lying about his entire identity: what he looked like, where he worked, where he lived, and presumably, his intentions with her friend. Although not all the women in this sample had been personally deceived, they all had a story about a friend who had been. The reliability of these word-of-mouth stories may be dubious, but nevertheless, what matters in this context is that these women defined them as real and thus incorporated that reality into their dating app practices and further, as part of how they personally decided to use dating apps. Acting on these fears, many women reported relying on their friends through phone calls and text "check-ins" during their dates to make sure that their dates and hookups were going smoothly. Even more worrying for women than deception was fear of bodily harm. Every woman in this study described with candor their worries about being sexually assaulted, raped, or kidnapped. Fears that were not unfounded, given that two women in this study were survivors of dating violence that came from matches they met online.

Victoria, Sydney, and Sydney's friend (who was not interviewed for this study) were all victims of dating app interactions that became violent. In Victoria's case, she hooked up with a man who began stalking and intimidating her for several weeks after their consensual one-night stand. Having that experience strongly shaped how Victoria used dating apps from that point forward. Victoria began communicating with her roommate if and when she met someone from a dating app via text message as well as by using her and her roommates' apartment whiteboard as a space to write down the details of who she was with, where she was, and when she would be back. By sharing her experience with her roommate, she also provided anecdotal evidence

which the roommate could incorporate into her own dating app practices. Victoria reports that after she started sharing this information with her roommate, her roommate likewise started using the whiteboard in a similar way. In Sydney and her friend's case, they met two men from a dating app at a bar who slipped an unknown date-rape drug into their drinks. Luckily, an alert bartender intervened before anything worse happened. However, like Victoria, Sydney incorporated this experience into how she defined dating apps in future encounters—potentially dangerous. Although Victoria and Sydney are cases of specific dating violence, all women in this sample cognitively struggled with these fears but ultimately accepted them as part of the risk of using dating apps.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article I have examined how a sample of heterosexual college students navigated ambiguous dating app interactions and eventually came to establish their dating apps norms as they increasingly saw themselves as serious dating app users. The findings in this study suggest that dating apps are not initially viewed as normative as they violate the expected norm that people meet their partners in-person. However, both heterosexual women and men see the game-like ephemerality of the apps as potentially fun. Eventually, the students came to see that the technological expediency of dating apps is useful for finding new partners, but also creates the potential for ambigious interactions. Further relying on technology, students attempt to vet the authenticity of the matches they are interested in dating or hooking up with. Successful and sometimes dangerous dating app interactions are used by students as social templates for how they should go about using dating apps. For the men in this study, this meant being cautious that the women they match with are authentically representing their bodies whereas women worked to ensure their safety. The ways in which these students came to understand their role in dating apps suggests that gender hierarchy shapes the ways in which these students defined high-stakes interactions. Specifically, men see these interactions as fraught because women may be lying about their body whereas women frame these interactions as potentially dangerous. In order to navigate these interactions men and women approached them according to heteronormatively gendered logics.

By applying a dramaturgical lens to the issues raised in this study we can see how social actors find themselves both creating and responding to dating apps as an evolving social context (Goffman 1959). Like any other social interaction, these students elect to portray versions of themselves that align with how they contextualize dating apps. Sometimes this means having fun, other times it means trying to be attractive. When having fun, students talk about dating apps as a joke, as fun, or as game like. By framing dating apps as fun students are able to overcome the perceived stigma of using dating apps to find romantic or sexual partners. However, in the creation of their profiles, students also acknowledged that they selected photos which were attractive. These students are making dating apps fun *and* serious. They simultaneously attempt to give off levity toward the fact they are on a dating app platform while also sincerely trying to look good

and match with people they find attractive. However, when one considers that the digital nature of these apps increases students concerns over whether their matches are who they present themselves as, interactional ambiguity arises as an issue. Is the person a student matches with *really* joking or do they sincerely want to date their friend? Does the person *really* look like they do online, or have they chosen misleading photographs? In shifting from using the apps for fun toward using them sincerely, the ability to discern what their matches are "giving off" is diminished by the technological constraints of the app. Giving the high-stakes but ambiguity of these interactions, in other words, the ability to slip from a joking conversation to a sexual encounter, it is perhaps not surprising that only a few of these interactions resulted in an in-person date. The widespread practice of ghosting may suggest that, in absence of physical cues, every single phrase can be interpreted variously, and it only takes one mismatch between intention to interpretation to foul a possible romantic encounter.

The findings of this study may also suggest that men's concerns are privileged over women's in dating app interactions. The majority of the men in this study used dating apps in a way that aligns with the expectations of hookup culture (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wade 2017). They sought hookups and asked women to send them naked pictures. Even in cases where men were seeking dates, the physical discrepancy between what a women looked like in-person and what she looked like online was scrutinized (Ward 2016, 2017). These men primarily defined their success with dating apps in their ability to match with the women they found physically attractive. Given the interactional barrier that online anonymity provides, this meant that men could be direct about seeking casual sex and felt comfortable asking for naked pictures or engaging in explicit sexual talk without first establishing rapport with the women they matched with (Hess and Flores 2016; Vitis and Gilmour 2017; Waling and Pym 2017). By sending sexually explicit jokes, asking for naked pictures, and asking women to meet them in-person, men asserted their desires directly. However, given the ambiguity of dating apps in general, it is possible for men to move from one interpretation to another easily. In a digital space where norms are less defined, sexual explicitness can be read as both having fun and a serious attempt at hooking up with someone (Waling and Pym 2017).

While men enjoyed a range of discretion in their ability to send sexually explicit messages to women, the women in this sample often found the shift from fun to serious dating app as fraught. The women in this sample were more likely to be seeking long-term relationships than hookups (Ward 2016, 2017) and found the sexual field of dating apps difficult to navigate. Further, women had the double concern of trying to protect themselves from dating violence. Whereas men used Snapchat and other technological tools as a way to verify that their matches were physically attractive, women found these apps useful for knowing who they would be meeting in-person. Thus, the same technological space that creates a sense of mistrust between these heterosexual students produces a perceived need to technologically remedy gendered concerns. Men seek unedited naked pictures that confirm the women they matched with are attractive. Likewise, women desire visual evidence that the men they speak with look safe. This trade does not provide the same amount of certainty however, as safety from an image is more difficult than deciding if someone looks attractive.

As the women in this study said, meeting people in-person provides an opportunity to vet someone's authenticity by viewing the "little things." No matter how certain a woman can be that her match looks like his profile pictures, she cannot trust his intentions by words alone. This also might contribute to the high level of ghosting that students reported. Women, usually performing the emotional labor of upholding dating app interactions as potentially serious, may vet each sentence as a clue toward what their match really wants. Each word or sentence has the potential to "give off" something that may or may not betray what they say, but the risk is too high for women to chance. Perceptual misalignment in these interactionally ambiguous circumstances is all too likely, especially since the imperative to have "fun" overrides direct sincere conversations. Dating app matches always couched as, potentially, fun *or* serious make women reticent to meet someone they have even the slightest misgiving about, for reasons that are all too real given the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses. However, perhaps more at issue is the finding that this ambiguity is normalized, which in turn normalizes women's experiences with dating violence (Hlavka 2014). In becoming a dating app user, Victoria realized the potential for stalking when she experienced it and adapted her behavior to accommodate this reality. Men, perhaps unknowingly or uncaringly, reproduce a gender hierarchy in these digital spaces by not seriously working to alleviate women's concerns regarding deception and personal safety. Paradoxically, this likely leads to fewer sexual encoutners which men purport to desire.

Finally, this study's findings should be qualified by its limitations. As an interview study of self-selecting college students, it is not representative. While the logic of the analysis may be applicable to some dating app users there are likely a range of experiences that are not accounted for in this study. Primarily, dating app users who are not college students, not heterosexual, and not located in the midwestern United States may experience dating apps differently. Future research which takes into account a more diverse range of experiences would add to and extend this line of scholarly inquiry. Further, as scholars have demonstrated, race and political ideology are also key indicators of how people use and experience dating apps. This analysis does not fully incorporate these important social factors. Future work which does so is necessary. However, despite these limitations, this study provides a useful analysis for understanding the role of both technological affordances and interactional ambiguity in the social construction of dating app practices.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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