Would Adam Swipe on Eve?

Understanding Christians' Mobile Dating App Usage

Mikayla Ickes

Messiah University

Introduction

There is an emerging body of research regarding online dating and mobile dating applications. Considering that 81% of Americans own a smartphone (Mobile Fact Sheet, 2019), there is a natural need to understand how technology impacts romantic relationships. In fact, a Pew Research Center study shows that 3 in 10 U.S. adults have used a dating app at some point (Vogels, 2020). While online dating has been around since 1994 (Sayej, 2016), the continuous development of mobile dating applications and rising numbers of users demands attention and consideration. Despite the popularity of dating apps and the growing research, there is a lack of information surrounding the influence of demographics on app usage. As a result, the present study is concerned with considering how Christians interact with online dating through mobile applications.

Literature Review

Tinder

For the sake of this study, the mobile dating application of interest is Tinder. With over 57 million international users and a yearly revenue of $1.15 billion, Tinder is the most popular dating app on the market. Founded in 2012 by Sean Rad, the app uses geographic proximity to match individuals with mutual interest (Iqbal, 2020). Users create a profile that can feature up to nine pictures and a 500-character bio. Individuals may also list things such as their age, job, and education, and they can also link other social media platforms like Instagram and Spotify to further share their interests. The app also has in-app purchase options to help boost their profile, expand their range to other countries, and see all the other profiles who are trying to match. While Tinder allows anyone ages 18 and older to create a profile, the app is most frequently used by those ages 18-24 (Iqbal, 2020). In 2018, Tinder tapped into this demographic with the

introduction of Tinder U, "a new feature that makes it easier to connect with other students around" ("Introducing Tinder U," 2018). By entering a university-based email address, users can add a school banner to their profile and will forefront other college students' profiles. To further engage users, Tinder also introduced an interactive, first-person adventure story experience called "Swipe Night" ("What is Swipe Night," n.d.). As Tinder has grown, they have continued to develop ways for individuals to interact with the app, keeping them engaged, and connecting them with others.

Motivations and Usage

Because dating apps tend to emphasize physical attraction, their high usage is often overshadowed by established negative social stigmas. Notably, dating apps are often thought to be superficial and perpetuate hook-up culture, rather than facilitate opportunities for genuine relationships. However, Rosenfeld (2018) argues that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Dating applications certainly may be used to facilitate casual sexual interactions or hookups, but they may also create opportunities for long-term relationships. Based on what an individual may want, these experiences can yield positive and desired outcomes. Furthermore, some individuals "may prefer nothing more than an occasional flirtation," which these apps can also provide (Rosenfeld, 2018, p. 103).

Research shows that dating applications tend to be used for more social needs as opposed to physical ones (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Litenberg, 2017). According to Bryant and Sheldon (2017), there are three driving motivations behind cyber-dating: having fun, developing relationships, and hooking up. While hooking up and desire for casual sex contributes to usage, they found it to be the least salient reason and argue that those who typically seek this interaction online may be less likely to do so in-person. Others may use

dating applications out of the desire to have fun or use platforms for a level of entertainment (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). Generally speaking, dating apps are social networking apps; users scroll through and evaluate the pictures and profiles of others, sometimes branching out from one's current social circles to meet others in a new way, as one may do with Facebook or Instagram. Individuals are also motivated to use such apps as a genuine way to develop potential romantic relationships. Although seemingly impersonal, the lack of face-to-face interaction may be more appealing to daters. The lack of nonverbal cues in private messaging may offer greater self-disclosure and easier communication (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). Regardless of motivations, dating apps create an environment of low risk with potentially high rewards.

While intentions and primary goals vary between people (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2018) more people are finding dating apps as an acceptable way to meet people and fulfill personal and relational goals. Popular media coverage of dating apps is often negative and eludes to "a kind of social doomsday scenario," however, the impact on the dating scene is not as severe (Rosenfeld, 2018, p. 103). Generally speaking, the idea of singleness is becoming a more acceptable and stable idea in America, and singles are having fewer dates and less romantic activity than before (Rosenfeld, 2018). Nonetheless, singles are still seeking connection as a recent study showed that 70% of individuals of Generation Z (1996-2015) feel motivated to find a long-term companion ("Singles in America," n.d.). There is seemingly a divide between personal desires and personal action. However, with the reasoning behind and rise of dating app usage, these platforms may help bridge the gap and become a more acceptable way to date.

Influence of Religion

Research shows that, while numerous social and economic factors influence the

development of romantic relationships, religion is often a key predictor in various relational developments and habits (Fuller, Frost, & Burr, 2015; Brimeyer & Smith, 2012). Specifically, research shows the influence of Christianity. For the sake of this research, Christianity "is defined as a belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God who died for the sins of all people" (Williams, DeFazio, & Goins, 2014, p. 548). The Bible serves as the guiding source for Christians, however, there are various translations of the book, and not all Christians agree on certain interpretations or principles. Therefore, not all Christians may agree on the Bible's guidance regarding dating, marriage, and sexual activity and have different opinions and experiences.

Perceptions of Dating and Marriage

For many Christians, dating is delayed until later in adolescence (Pedersen, 2014). As these relationships develop and teenagers enter emerging adulthood (ages 18-25), dating becomes less tentative and more serious. There tends to be a deeper level of intimacy attached to the pair, along with the evaluation of personal identity and values in relation to another person (Arnett, 2000). During this time, individuals may also undergo very transitional events such as entering college or the workforce. This may also entail leaving their homes and communities, gaining exposure to different ideas, and developing a desire to fit into their new environments. For Christians, this desire may challenge "students to decide whether they will remain committed to their religious values or renegotiate their stance," including their attitudes of relationships and behaviors (Williams et al., 2014, p. 558).

Perhaps one of the most controversial considerations Christians face is the idea of casual, premarital sex that is prevalent at colleges and is considered against the teachings of the Bible. For many students, their time at college may shape their opinions. Williams et at. (2014) studied

students from each year at a Christian university and found that freshmen were more likely to express a commitment to abstinence until marriage than seniors. Many senior students agreed that marriage is important in a sexual relationship yet believed that the choice should be left to the couple and not parental figures nor a religious institution's morals. Despite these beliefs, research shows that both male and female students who frequently attend church services have low desire to hook up and are less likely to form romantic relationships while at school (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016; Brimeyer & Smith, 2012). While Christians vary in their opinions regarding sexual behaviors, they tend to personally align with traditional principles and hold themselves to a higher standard than other non-religious students.

Considering the impact of religion on dating, further implications arise regarding religion and marriage. Overall, the adherence to extramarital sexual codes eludes to how serious marriage is viewed in a Christian context. For Christians, casual dating is not a common ideology, so when entering a dating relationship, there is often acknowledgment for potential marriage (Bryant, 2006). Furthermore, similarity is often at play. Generally speaking, there is value in marrying someone of the same religion and religious involvement (Fuller et al., 2015; Freysteinsdottir, Flalligan, & Knox, 2014). Considering Christians differ in opinions regarding certain aspects of various topics, namely relationships, finding someone of similar thought may prove to be crucial in relational and marital development. Not only do Christians want to find someone of similar stances, but they want to do so soon. A study by Fuller et al. (2015) reports that young adults often perceive ages 23-25 as the ideal age to marry. Specifically, those higher in religiosity feel as though getting married younger and sooner is ideal. In addition to previous research regarding emerging adulthood and dating, this seemingly creates a lot of pressure. Not only do individuals need to find someone they are compatible with, but they only have so much

time before it may lose its appeal. In this sense, it is almost as if Christians view marriage as a goal.

The Current Study

Despite the extensive research available on mobile dating apps and the Christian perspective on romantic relationships, there is a lack of understanding of how the two relate. Given the idea that many dating apps, especially Tinder, have been given a negative stigma of being solely for casual sex, one may assume that Christian values will deter usage. However, considering that previous research identifies numerous other motives, this demographic cannot be completely excluded from evaluation. Furthermore, young adults are in a stage of life where they desire romantic connection and long-term commitment, and, considering this age group is a target demographic of Tinder, they may turn to dating apps to begin the dating process. How then might Christian ideologies shape one's perception of dating? Does the desire for a relationship impact the likelihood of using Tinder? These ideas contribute to the larger question of how are young Christian adults engaging with mobile dating applications and why?

Methods

For this study, a qualitative approach was taken to understand the interaction between Christians and mobile dating applications and the potential influence on relationships and interactions. In order to understand individuals' firsthand experiences and thoughts, I approached the research through a phenomenological lens with an analysis rooted in grounded theory.

This research was conducted using participants at a 4-year, private Christian college in the Northeast. Considering the potential personal nature of this study and the negative stigmas often associated with dating apps, individuals were recruited through snowball sampling. All participants were sent an email explaining the study and asked for confirmation of their

involvement, although many of them knew about the research before through those recruiting. To participate, each person must have been currently enrolled at the school at the time of the study and was either currently using the dating app Tinder or had used it at some point in their college career. Furthermore, students selected were also between the ages of 18 and 25, fitting the category of emerging adults, and were required to identify as Christian, per the given definition previously stated.

For this research, data was collected through two focus groups and was thematically analyzed to identify emerging themes. Sensitizing questions were used to engage participants in addition to various questions regarding their motivations to get the app, their experiences, and their thoughts regarding marriage and relationships. Examples of questions include, "Why did you start using Tinder," and "What do you think the purpose of dating is?". Responses were recorded and then categorized through axial coding to identify common ideas.

Is it important to note that there are numerous mobile dating applications available, however, Tinder proves to be the most popular in usage and revenue (Iqbal, 2020). There is also a significant stigma associated with this app regarding casual relationships and sex. Other mobile dating applications may carry other social associations, so this research is unable to generalize interactions and usage among all platforms. However, considering its popularity and connotations, it may be assumed that Tinder creates a general perception that projects onto other apps and directly affects one's potential for usage of any service. Therefore, this study selected Tinder as the dating app for discussion but identifies this limitation.

Results

A total of eight individuals were included in the study, with four males and four females. Between two focus groups, individuals engaged in conversation that allowed for an

understanding of how and why Christians are using mobile dating applications such as Tinder.

The findings of this study generate insight through common emerging themes and through

categorizing responses. This includes how Christians engage with Tinder and other individuals

as well as the factors governing usage and perceptions.

Engagement

With Tinder

All participants downloaded Tinder within their first year of college. Consistent with

previous research, participants were motivated to download the app to having fun, develop

relationships, or hook up (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017). The majority of individuals were initially

seeking either romantic or friendly relationships, especially after moving away from home to

college. Some participants spoke of how their friends had Tinder and encouraged them to get it,

and only one individual claimed he originally got it for hooking-up. Of all eight participants,

only two were still on the app at the time of the research. Most had deleted it because they were

currently in or pursuing a relationship. However, others said that they felt as though it was no

longer helpful as they were not developing any relationship nor interested in the people they

were matched with. Most participants acknowledged that they did not use the app consistently,

primarily when they were bored or to pass time.

With People from Tinder

All participants who previously used the app did meet up with at least one of their

matches once. However, the participant who still currently uses Tinder has yet to engage with

someone in person. He claimed that generating a conversation and engaging with people takes

effort. This was affirmed by others, saying that they were too lazy to pursue anything further

than a conversation. Of those who did go on dates, many of them knew the person before

matching with them either through mutual friends or school. Most participants did go on more than one date with an individual, agreeing that there was often a lack of connection and mutual disengagement. However, for two participants, Tinder facilitated a successful experience; at the time of the study, one was currently in a relationship and one was engaged.

Factors Affecting Usage and Perception

Social Influence

When it comes to developing ideologies about using Tinder to establish relationships, there is a social influence that helps shape such perceptions. Primarily, these come from family and friends. Participants segmented conversations surrounding Tinder and dating and even censored these topics depending on who they may be with.

For family, many participants identified that they do not feel comfortable discussing their dating life with their parents, especially when it involves Tinder. Many identified that their parents consider the app's primary use to be for casual sex and hookups, so they did not want their parents to assume that was the participant's motivation. Of those participants' parents who know, they were not happy with them being on Tinder but none of them required them to stop using it. While parents may not want their children to use dating apps, participants discussed the pressure that is often generated from families when it comes to dating and marriage. Many reported that their parents were engaged or married by their current age, but they are still single which creates some cognitive dissonance. Some individuals come from families with siblings who are engaged or married; one participant said that this generates many conversations around her relationship status and when she is going to start dating. Another participant discussed how he feels as though his parents are strict, so he feels like he needs to find someone they approve of. Generally speaking, many parents depict dating as a serious thing intended for marriage. As a

result, young adults are being fed certain messages not only on how and when they should be dating, but who they should be dating.

Friends also seem to influence individual perception and experience. In fact, many participants reported that they got Tinder because a friend either also had the app or encouraged them to join. While all participants expressed that they are willing to talk about their dating app usage, they agreed that it depends on who they are with; it is a topic that is not discussed with everyone. One participant said because of the negative connotation associated with Tinder, certain people that will perceive it as so and view the user poorly. This is partially why another individual chose not to use the app at college; she did not want people she frequently interacted with to develop the wrong idea about her, thinking she is okay with casual sex. While most individuals feel comfortable sharing their Tinder usage and dating experience with close friends or others who are also on the app, there is an awareness that using Tinder may affect one's social presentation.

Environmental Influence

Participants reported how environments influences their dating app usage and shapes their perception of relationships. When it comes to using Tinder, participants tended to use it in different places; while some preferred to use it at school, some preferred to use it at home. Those who primarily used Tinder at home said they did not want their peers at school to know they had it or simply because they felt as though they had more free time while at home to meet new people and hang out. Similarly, one participant reported using Tinder while on vacation with his friends to try and meet new people and casually hang out for the week. The individuals who primarily used the dating app while at the university said that they were interested in connecting with people on campus either to establish romantic and friendly relationships.

Many participants pointed out that using Tinder and developing relationships at a Christian institution may be different than doing so at a secular school; there are different influences. They expressed that religion and traditional values are integrated into life at the university which creates specific expectations. For example, one individual discussed how many students enter relationships during their first semester at school. While many of them are short-term, this generates pressure if one is not in a relationship. In the same vein, six of the participants were seniors and talked about how many of their classmates are either engaged or married. Getting engaged by the end of senior year is such a common occurrence at the school that it has been titled "Ring by Spring." The senior participants expressed how this creates underlying pressure to either begin pursuing a relationship or consider getting engaged. One participant pointed out that this can force people to take a step in their relationship that they are not ready for, further claiming that she feels as though some may decide to get married quicker in order to have sex. Many spoke to how their friends who attend other schools are often taken aback when they discuss "Ring by Spring," and they all identified that it was certainly a unique experience and pressure brought upon by going to school at their university.

Religious Influence

All participants identified religiosity, specifically Christianity, as influential in how they view and establish relationships. Each grew up with religion integrated into various aspects of their lives whether by their church or parents. As a result, they each spoke to how their ideologies and opinions around dating were established. Consistent with traditional Christian values, all participants agreed that casual dating was never something discussed or affirmed; dating was talked about in the context of pursuing marriage. Many expressed that their religious teaching gave them a guide of dating in terms of what is right and wrong (e.x.: premarital sex).

One participant shared that her religious beliefs help her determine what qualities she values in a potential romantic partner. While most participants were not opposed to casual dating and would consider casually dating a non-Christian, they all agreed that religion is important in serious and long-term relationships. They all stated that they would want their husband or wife to believe in God and share similar values for the relationship to sustain.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how young Christian adults are engaging with mobile dating applications, namely Tinder, and why. Considering the previous research, the current results suggest these users experience the application similarly to others who are not Christian. Where they may differ is not how they establish these relationships, but how they develop. Furthermore, there is a greater apparent divide in how messaging around dating and marriage is structured within certain Christian contexts and how that may impact young Christian adults as they pursue relationships.

As the results show, young Christian adults use these dating apps to create connections with strangers but also within their social circles. As the app intends, people can meet people and genuinely engage online and sometimes in person. The lack of commitment required by the online platform means that users can disengage if they are no longer interested or feel as though it is not a good match. For those who primarily use Tinder for entertainment rather than seeking relationships, it almost takes on the role of a social media application; users engage within a community of people they may or may not know, evaluating their photographs, interests, preferences, etc. When it comes to personal social circles, Christians who use Tinder and other dating apps sometimes have a point of commonality with friends. It becomes a talking point or even a "social event" as friends share their experiences and profiles. Furthermore, sometimes the

people that match already know each other but have never interacted or romantically considered one another until they engage on the app. Either way, mobile dating applications like Tinder help facilitate interactions among new or pre-existing relationships.

Through understanding how young Christian adults use Tinder, there is a further understanding of self-development and emerging adulthood. Many individuals may grow up in a homogenous environment and culture; they are exposed to similar opinions and perceptions and therefore may have a set way of thinking – until they come to college. Young adults receive a plethora of messages from family, friends, institutions, media, etc. which may make it hard to discern what is right and wrong. Upon coming to college, individuals may have the opportunity to develop their own beliefs regarding things such as dating and marriage. They can develop a stronger sense of self and strengthen their convictions. For young Christian adults, even in a Christian college climate, many can develop their own stances on things and act according to their beliefs. In terms of dating, this seems to primarily be important when considering and pursuing serious, long-term relationships. While non-Christians may not have certain religious adherences, everyone seeks certain characteristics and values in partners to ensure relational satisfaction.

While this research intends to generate an understanding of young Christian adults and their mobile dating application usage, it does not intend to generalize all experiences. While Tinder is the most popular dating app, Christians may be inclined to use other platforms because of Tinder's negative connotation. Additional research should look at what applications are most commonly used among Christians and why. This research was also conducted with young adults at a Christian institution. To generate a broader understanding, a similar study could be done with Christian students at other colleges and universities, particularly at schools with no religious

affiliation, to further determine environmental influences. This would also help explain the

transitional shift from high school to college and whether individuals are more likely to uphold

prior convictions and beliefs or to develop new ones.

Conclusion

Establishing relationships is an inherent part of the human condition, however, everyone

pursues them in various ways. It is becoming more common for individuals to seek romantic

relationships online through mobile dating applications, and Christians are not an exception.

Dating apps like Tinder have generally been given a negative stigma and are viewed as an

unrealistic way to develop meaningful, long-term relationships. However, most people who use

dating apps find them helpful either to entertain themselves or to help facilitate interactions from

genuine desire; how relationships are perceived and develop is contingent on numerous other

factors outside of being initiated on a dating app. As a result, young Christian adults view Tinder

as an acceptable way to meet people without compromising their beliefs and values as they

establish relationships through mobile dating applications.

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