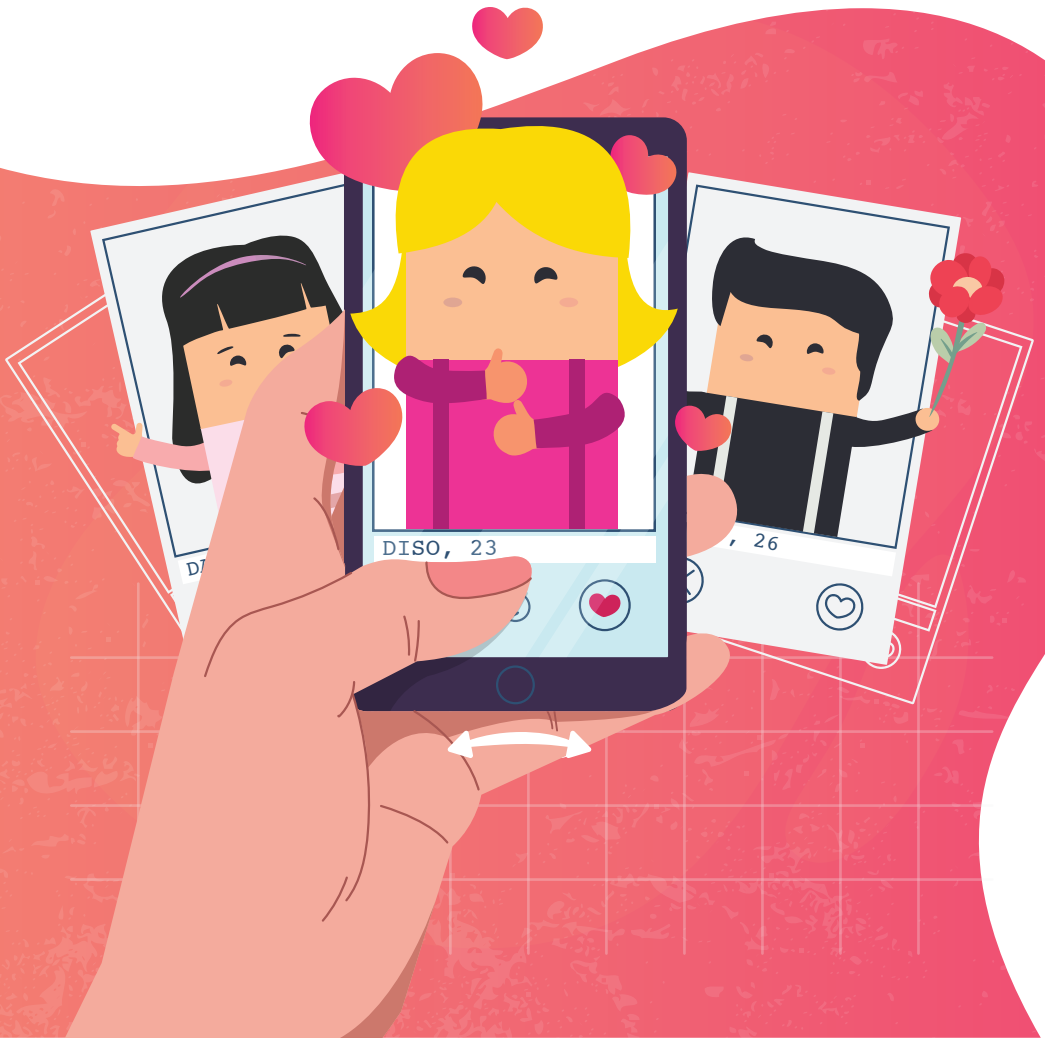
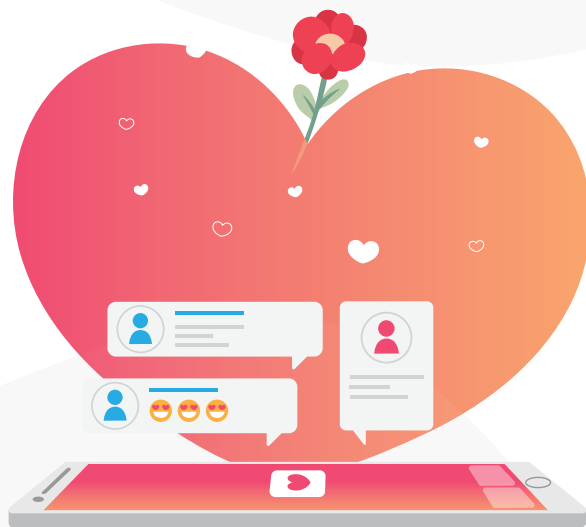


Online Dating

During Pandemic(s):
Tinder Passport & Cybersex Experience





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Introduction

Through various technological advancement, dating nowadays offers a much broader experience than before. With the internet, any individual can participate to be a part of the dating pool to search for prospective partners. Pew Research Institute found that around 30% of young adults (18-24years old), and 12% of older adults (55-64years old), are using online dating applications.¹

The report also stated that the majority of both online dating users and non-online dating users believe that online dating provides a much more convenient and efficient way of meeting future partners.²

Online dating applications and platforms such as Tinder utilising the geographical distance between users as the primary variable by which potential partners can be identified. Tinder differs from other online dating applications and platforms because of its ability to not exchange images on the app and the worldwide proximity it offers when users use Tinder Passport. Once users have configured their demographics of interest, the algorithm will recognise possible dates as similar to the same block or even building.^{3 4 5} These kinds of dating applications are also referred to as Location-based Real-time Dating (LBRTD) applications.⁶ The efficiency of finding potential partner on your fingertips before initiating “real dates” then becomes preferable for most people. They are able to know them virtually before knowing them in person. LBRTD then reinforced a specific reputation as the rising of informal, romantic, and short-lived relationships. The internet further reiterated this notion, preferring Tinder as the symbol of the hook-up culture.⁷ Therefore, LBRTD Applications users’ experience and relationships are expected to end in bed, not in an aisle.

Online dating applications, especially LBRTD apps, only act as a mediator of individuals to know each other virtually to meet in the real world. Meeting in the world might sound easy since they need to make an appointment and go out on a date, but in times of pandemic, where it is impossible to go out during quarantine, meeting our online partner becomes impossible. Thus, the online environment of a relationship will stay online until the pandemic is over.

In this nature of dating, prospective partners and partners who are separated by pandemic will apply the concept of Long Distance Relationship in any way possible to decrease or even eliminate physical contact. Prospective partners will try their best to stay connected despite their distance and their unavailability to meet. Efforts on maintaining online relationships have shifted into a harder challenge that every participating user is prohibited from seeing each other face to face without any media. Cybersex (sexual gratification using the means of technology) also plays a big role — the only role in fulfilling all gratifications of users in quarantine. The advancement of media and technology then brought ‘creativity’ for dating app users to keep in ‘touch.’



Tinder as an LBRTD Application

LBRTD applications like Tinder are taking advantage of social media. While Tinder was first launched as a general dating app, it was then known as the hook-app or sex-app. Tinder is one of the first dating applications developed exclusively as a mobile app, rather than an expansion of an existing dating platform. Therefore, they reflect a distinct form of online dating, with quite different communicative affordance than a website based dating sites: portability, availability, locatability, and multimedia.⁸ Tinder depends on those four communicative affordances. Smartphone and tablet portability enables Tinder to be used in a number of environments, from residential to semi-public, and public spaces. Smartphone and tablet portability enables Tinder to be used in a number of environments, from residential to semi, and public spaces. By comparison, conventional desktop-based dating platforms are mostly restricted to private spaces. In fact, mobile media's quality affordance of availability improves the app's spontaneity and pace of use. The affordance of locatability helps users to play, chat, and meet in near proximity — one of Tinder's main facets. Finally, the affordance of multimedia, although seemingly restricted to Tinder, the affordance depends on at least two contact mechanisms (texting and exchange of photographs). Tinder's limitation on the affordance of multimedia is anticipation to protect users from picture based harassment, which is why Tinder only provides text to communicate, not pictures. Even though Tinder is not a platform to send pictures, Tinder provides features such as profile media (both picture and motion picture) and an option to connect to Instagram.

Tinder profile owners are requested to show biases about the gender, age, and proximity of online dating partners. These habits are used when looking for potential matches. In fact, the software helps the user to find potential matches in near range via the GPS functionalities of the device. When selecting a potential partner, the user decides whether he or she is interested or not, depending on the profile picture and possible match interests. The user demonstrates his / her attention by swiping right or left (saying "like" or "pass"). If two users are 'like' each other, a 'match' is made, which means users can talk on Tinder with each other.

The theory of Uses and Gratifications (U&G) can explain why Tinder provides such options of liking and disliking. This notion stresses that people use certain types of media to fulfill specific needs and pleasure.⁹ Those needs and pleasure are explained can be unique to one's stage of growth or temperament. Although U&G theory has been introduced to research mass media, the theory has been extended effectively to explain why people use social media.¹⁰ In this context, the literature indicated that physical, social, and psychosocial gratifications increase users 'use of online dating apps.'^{11 12}

While explaining about physical gratifications in dating apps, Van de Wiele found out that physical gratifications do not only interpret as exercising or eating, but also sexual pleasure.¹³ Personal pleasure-related motives are likely to motivate the use of a dating app like Tinder, as previous work has identified similar motivations for other dating apps.¹⁴ Therefore users will end up complying with this physical gratification in any way possible.

Social gratifications found in media material is for desires, such as building up new partnerships and seeking a love partner.^{15 16} As a characteristic of social relationships, young adults seek to create their first long-term, meaningful relationships and increasingly prioritise commitment.¹⁷ Social gratifications show how users will try to stay connected and create a deeper and stronger bond with other users they see fit.

Psychosocial gratifications refer to desires that derive from psychology which communicate with social variables.^{18 19} Psychosocial needs have been identified to understand how people use dating media.²⁰ For example, dating apps are used to stimulate and satisfy certain sensations.²¹ In addition, people use social media outlets to meet self-worth-related psychosocial desires, such as validating one's own personal attraction and feeling positive for oneself in general.^{22 23} Finally, computer-mediated communication work has consistently proposed that people use this medium to satisfy the need for (sexual) contact 'without' spatial constraints.²⁴

Looking at the three gratifications, drawing how Tinder could satisfy users needs to reach the pleasure of connecting and building relationships with other users before real-world interaction. Both explanations on social and psychosocial sound feasible to achieve only by Tinder's multimedia affordance, but physical gratifications might be hard since Tinder's feature on sharing pleasure-related multimedia is still limited. Not being able to share pictures, voice calls, and video calls have limited Tinder users to bring physical gratifications into a further level before asking any other personal contacts and meeting them in person. This then emits tinder users' creativity to bring their potential partner on the next level (e.g., adding the on other social medias and online messaging services), which is referred to as "cyber courting".²⁵ This concludes that studying online dating on Tinder has to reach real interpersonal participation inside the whole environment of online dating.

Utilising Virtual Ethnography

As the case study shows complexity, a brief and simplified method calls for blending the traditional ethnography and virtual ethnography. By using this method, it will be the best way to understand how the pandemic of COVID-19 has reconstructed online dating, especially on Tinder. Virtual Ethnography gathering the rich data that are needed for this qualitative study. Ethnographic research could define the daily interaction of online dating environments thoroughly.

“Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.”²⁶

Brewer's definition of ethnography showed that the 'fields' is where the researchers need to discover meanings through natural social activities by getting involved deeply inside the field to obtain social data. Ethnographers seek to discover detailed knowledge of the multiple dimensions of real-life within the studied social environment and aim to deeply understand the constructed assumptions and rules. Kathy Charmaz then further explains how Grounded Theory could use the images or photographs as evidence on the internet.²⁷

“A major way of using texts is as objects for analytic scrutiny themselves rather than for corroborating evidence. Archival records and written narratives, video and photographic images, Internet posts and graphics may give you insights into perspectives, practices, and events not easily obtained through other qualitative methods. Nonetheless, all these texts are products. The processes that shape them may be ambiguous, invisible, and, perhaps, unknowable. A close investigation of the text helps you to study it.”²⁸

As a Computer-Mediated Communication, the internet emits discourses through images on the screen, which could be analysed and perceived as a community. Hine's further finding on virtual ethnography as a method of research explains that the internet is embedded, embodied, and every day (E3). The explanation on embedded, embodied, and everyday emphasises on how the internet reflects everyday life on a whole other level. This notion means that the internet has become mundane and a platform of discourse.²⁹ Hine acknowledges that Ethnography has become embedded in the academic culture as an appropriate way to investigate deeply how people make sense of the possibilities that the internet provides them.³⁰ The study of online society as 'cultural artefact' and 'culture' itself, is a development from an anthropological approach to this contemporary form of mediated society.³¹ Ethnographic approach on the internet provides a distinctive and beneficial way of examining the environment of the internet, which allows developing a deep understanding of the textures of social experience that arise as people engage with the various technologies that comprise the contemporary internet.^{3 2} Therefore, studying Tinder's dimensional environment by being a user itself will draw insights and deeper understanding of Tinder users.

Tinder and Cybersex in Pandemic

While using Tinder during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the researcher faced an interesting feature on Tinder. Tinder activates its "passport" feature so that users could pick their location to search for potential partners. This "passport" feature was not free until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 came. This free feature then intrigues the researcher to go within beyond proximity to make sense of the online dating environment during pandemics.

This research has gathered around 50 "matches"³³ (Some are underage users who fake their age) within proximity and beyond proximity in a week. The researcher initiates the conversation by mentioning "How's Quarantine" to draw out their feelings about quarantine life in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Most of the respondents answered "bored," "I'm doing great," and emphasising on "wanting to go out."

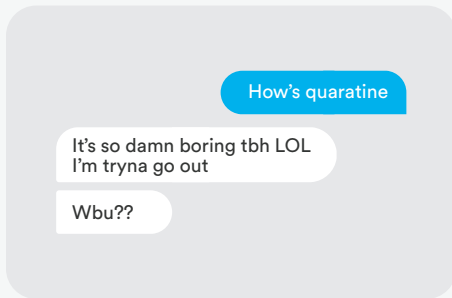


Image 1. Tinder Conversation A

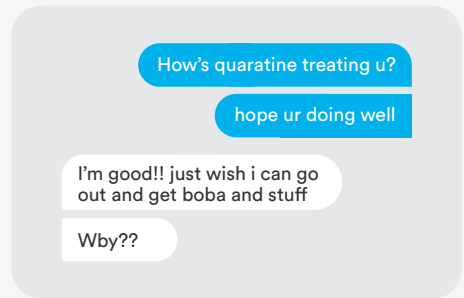
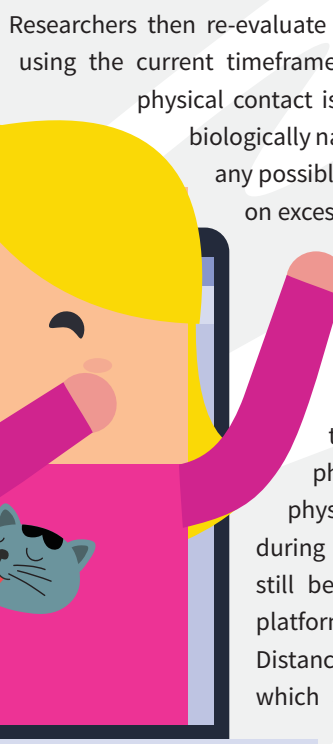


Image 2. Tinder Conversation B

From the conversations attached, it can be seen that users want to go out and do their daily routine outside. In image 1 and image 2, both users are asking back about the initiator's condition in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to keep the conversation going. The researcher then tries to follow the flow of conversation to initiate "cyber courting." Following the concept of virtual ethnography of being another user without putting any biases on the research, the researcher only initiates "cyber courting" to several "matches" that are "desirable" for the researcher. This significantly dropped down the number of subjects into around 15 (Some look different from their Tinder profile picture) within proximity and beyond proximity.

After the "cyber courting," some of the subjects perceive this as an action for exchanging more photographs that Tinder does not provide. Moving from Tinder to platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Whatsapp, and iMessage enables the affordance of multimedia on the online dating environment. Not only that, potential partners can transmit texts, calls, and video calls; they could also exchange photographs and videos. This exchange of photographs and videos might be perceived as "friendly photographs." However, the pictures that are asked to be shared are images that are "desirable" for physical gratification — in other words, sexual images.

Sexual gratification as a part of physical gratification then becomes "less physical" because it is mediated by online social platforms that allow the affordance of multimedia. Mediated sexual gratification through the internet is also referred to as "cybersex".³⁴ Cybersex has been studied for a period of time and considered as problematic and a form of hypersexual disorder.³⁵ Consequently, fulfilling sexual desires that are mediated and have "less physical" attributes on the activity is perceived immoral and abnormal — taboo.



Researchers then re-evaluate the old concept of cybersex tabooess by using the current timeframe (the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020) where physical contact is prohibited. Sexual desire is considered as biologically natural, where people will fulfill their desires in any possible way.³⁶ It could not be denied that the study on excessive sex is considered as a sexual disorder — addiction, but when the activity is done in "proportional" manners, it is considered as normal.³⁷ The study of cybersex then could then be questioned since it is the only possible way of fulfilling desires during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, where physical interaction is not allowed. Since physical gratification cannot be obtained entirely during pandemics, social and psychosocial could still be obtained even more using online social platforms. This experience resembles the Long Distance Relationship communication manners, in which are very common even for people in the traditional relationship.

Ways Forward: Solving Limitations of Complex Distance Relationship

Concluding the study about Online Dating During Pandemic(s), there are some ways forward on solving the current limitations on research regarding Online Dating Environment. The virtual ethnography method that this study utilised has brought way forwards on the theoretical level and practical level, in which, offer some ways forward for future research:

Theoretical Level

By assessing at theoretical level, more ethical academic framework on reaching a better concept. Societal change could occur when it is integrated with knowledge and perception.

- **Re-thinking Cybersex**

The study of cybersex should be more in-depth into the intentions and ethics of cybersex itself, rather than questioning its morality and normativity.

- **Constructing a Better Online Dating Environment**

An online dating environment should be defined as a safe consensual place where potential partners could dive in without being skeptical or afraid of getting unsolicited multimedia (texts, pictures, and videos).

Practical Level

- **Receive Picture Settings**

Inventions to alleviate users' experience on online dating such as "enable or disable contact to send pictures and videos" in every social media platform.

- **Strengthen Identity Verification**

As the research stumble upon users that faked their age and profile picture, a more thorough verification is needed to ensure users are safe and not being on risk to deal with fake accounts.

Looking at these ways forward, future research on online dating environment and or cybersex experience may consider these aspects to explore this underresearched area.

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