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TINDER RESEARCH AND THE SOCIAL SPHERE OF ONLINE DATING

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ABSTRACT— With the emergence of new technology, communication is now easier than ever. With popular dating apps such as the infamous social interactive platform, Tinder, forming romantic relationships online now offers individuals a new way to personalize their dating experiences beyond measures ever imagined. In October 2019, Tinder released their debut “Swipe Night” series which gave users fully functional interactive video episodes that allowed them to create and choose their own “apocalyptic adventure.” While there have been many findings on how these platforms have impacted society on a larger scale, there have been very few addressing the implications of interactive technology such as the “Swipe Night” feature and how they can aid in understanding a future projection of how human bonds are formed, in addition to how these apps perpetuate the idea of impersonal digital romantic selection. Additionally, due to societal interpretations of what these applications represent, several connotations may lead individuals to prefer one dating platform compared to the other for varying reasons. Therefore, this study reflects the experiences amongst focus group participants who gave individual perspectives from their experience using social networking sites and dating applications to pursue romantic connections. Fundamentally, the purpose of this report is to analyze these interactions that occurred amongst Generation Z (Gen-Z), and young Millennials (those born from 1981-1996), gain an initial prognosis and interpretation of how networking platforms, such as Instagram, and online dating applications, such as Tinder, play a vital role in the formation and structure of human interconnectivity.

Keywords: Tinder, human connection, social media, romantic relationships, Gen-Z, young Millennials.

I. DIGITIZING THE INTIMACY OF RELATIONSHIPS

As new waves of digital communication have seen drastic changes, so has society’s understanding of how we use these methods and the meaningfulness of interpersonal connection through them. For the past several decades, online communication has become a means to which most individuals find themselves the most accustomed. Traditionally, the word intimacy may allow individuals to feel as if one should be close or within a certain proximity to feel as if a

bond could potentially thrive. However, with the creation of social applications such as Instagram and, more specifically, dating applications such as Tinder, “intimacy” can now have several interpretations. Recently, human relationships and our interconnection with each other have been tested beyond reasonable measures for the past year due to the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19). These applications have provided a beacon to the flourishing of socializing beyond physicality. Additionally, according to a 2020 Emarketer report, adult Americans used social media 7 minutes more per day than in 2019, with Instagram and Snapchat benefiting the most (Williamson, 2020). Despite this, the article suggests that social networking sites such as Instagram have seen little growth since 2019, which was additionally confirmed by a more recent 2021 Pew Research article that compared its 2019 data to its 2021 data (Auxier and Anderson, 2021). The report also notes developmental interactive features that were created pre and post-pandemic, which may lead to a new way of garnering attention, increasing personalization, and defining community. This concept of “gamifying” social interactions in an engaging way has seen a large increase especially during the midst of the pandemic. As most individuals were locked inside, staying connected became especially difficult without meeting face to face. With the influx of usage, social platforms have been testing these new ways of interactivity for optimal retention of users. This has been seen often as a gaming/virtual reality aspect similar to those developed over the past year. VR headsets such as the Oculus allow users to connect to a Facebook account and visit chatrooms designed for people to engage with each other without having to leave their homes. The Itsme app also features a similar concept of using virtual reality and life-like avatars to simulate conversations in chat rooms and is mostly caters to a younger generation of users. In a Tinder press release reporting on their internal research findings of these features and pandemic dating, the company argued that “during the pandemic, Tinder emerged as

one of the few places young people could go for much needed human interaction.... 60% of members came to Tinder because they felt lonely and wanted to connect with people. And Gen Z specifically came to Tinder to meet *new* people to get them out of their echo chamber: 40% visited Tinder to see ‘new and different people’” (“The Future of Dating Is Fluid”). Emerging features including Swipe Night are key to how these applications structure and encourage human interaction on their platforms. Although the Swipe Night feature was introduced before the pandemic, it added an element that Tinder’s original design lacked: a connecting and shared experience. Rather than swiping based on geographical proximity, this feature allows users to match their choices with others who made similar decisions, allowing deeper insight into the match rather than being solely based on physical appearances. Even so, many users still may object to this idea, as Tinder has made a significant impact on how appearance and first impressions are critical components in the world of online dating.

II. METHODOLOGY

To gauge a sense of how users interact and communicate with others via the facilitation of these digital platforms, we conducted a focus group with users of these applications, aged 18-30, who gave user anecdotes and opinions of how these sites have impacted their lives. The initial recruitment process was challenging as most of the world was still on Covid lockdown restrictions. In efforts to practice social distancing, we created a short Google survey that gathered basic information about participants as a precursor to the actual focus group conversation. The objective was to gather enough detail to gauge and formulate our topics and questions to ask. For example, a question may ask how the participant felt about online dating and then may ask if they have ever used dating applications. After a thorough review of the information provided, we constructed main discussion topics such as social media-based vs.

dating app-based relationships. After narrowing down our selection, the focus group had three active participants who agreed to share their experiences. The conversation consisted of intimate details amongst the individuals as they gave their responses based on guided dialogue and discussed how social media, online dating platforms, and more specifically Tinder, are being used amongst themselves and their peer groups – Gen Z and young Millennials. Most of the discussion consisted of a series of questions that were asked and then an allotted duration of time that would be spent covering the topic. Through open-ended questions, we were able to gather deeper perceptions and what the participants felt worked and did not work in helping them form meaningful connections. For example, an open-ended survey question may ask “How has technology changed your experience with romantic relationships” and “Why do you prefer this dating application over another?” Once the focus group concluded, the responses were compiled into a transcription which we reviewed. The transcript offered us as facilitators an opportunity to review key information that was discussed and review material which we could decipher for deeper analysis. After strategically categorizing responses and comparing them to our previous research, the transcript was then fleshed out and provided us with common themes about how these users conceptualized digitized interactive engagement.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Overall, our findings suggest that users would prefer the applications where they make interpersonal and romantic connections to be innovative but also capture the true essence of togetherness. Our conversation brought out three key themes around how these participants viewed the affordances and features of dating apps and how they serve to build (or not build) interpersonal intimacy and connection.

The first theme we found in our participants' responses was that *they found it difficult to make "real" connections* through online applications. For them, a "real" connection was one characterized by being more open and personal. Part of the difficulty of making real connections was that they felt applications like Tinder were built for instant gratification rather than getting to know someone. In essence, some noted that though Tinder has allowed an easier way to get an instant sense of interest in a romantic/sexual connection, the functionality of the app and its social reputation suggests that these connections are not meant to be deep. Many pointed out that Tinder is often thought of as a platform where individuals do not necessarily want long-lasting relationships, but rather fleeting connections built on Tinder's main association: "easy, quick, and hot attractions." This concept of instant gratification that Tinder allows has a tendency to alter its users' perspective that "traditional" romantic relationships would not be as feasible. In addition, some participants noted that Tinder contrasts with the *idea* of dating that they held, where individuals have to learn more about one another before saying they legitimately "like" someone.

The second theme we found was that *they held stereotypes about different apps* and what kinds of connections they could facilitate. For instance, multiple participants brought up the idea that Tinder was seen as a place for hookups. Additionally, some argued that though dating apps like Tinder were designed to give users more romantic elements, they found that their best connections happened on social media sites that were not intentionally designed for dating specifically. As one participant said of Instagram, "I'd have to choose Instagram [for meeting people], largely because I usually am talking with people I already had a personal connection to, which makes texting w them more fluid vs tinder since we kinda already know each other." Having an existing relationship of some kind was seen as a helpful foundation for building

intimacy than starting from scratch on an application meant to connect them with strangers who could serve as potential romantic partners. Moreover, sites such as Instagram and Snapchat provided a realm, one in which gave context to users lives outside of their initial profile picture, and users can interact with each other before suggesting the intention of romantic interest. One participant even separated their relationships by app, basing them on how they viewed the app's ability to provide a "serious" relationship or rather for the joy of interacting: "I personally try to separate my relationships between serious and non and I use my apps to separate them as well...my Instagram is a lot more private than say Snapchat...I made a new friend. We talked but there just wasn't a romantic or sexual aspect. We're now great friends."

Our third theme was that participants believed that *features and design changes like Swipe Night could help dating apps better serve their intended purpose*. Many of these features like Bumble's *Night In* or Tinder's *Hot Takes* were implemented during the pandemic when most people did not feel safe meeting up with strangers and were designed to help people get to know each other without having to go on dates by providing conversational prompts or other things to facilitate deeper connection. One participant even suggested that adding features similar to non-dating social sites could provide an affable touch to dating apps as they felt that they lacked authenticity: "I think if I could, I would add more social features because when you're on Instagram it's like projecting a real-world scenario, where you could go out and meet someone at the store... People share different things [compared to social media sites], rather than on dating apps where people are only focused on just having the sexiest [pic], they can [get]. And, you know, all you have to do is just swipe right."

The *appeal* of Tinder's functionality was also discussed primarily when the participants noted an overarching societal view on dating apps. One participant noted that, "since a lot of

people shed dating apps in a bad light, this causes the large group of people who are maybe looking for an actual long-term relationship [to see dating apps negatively]. If dating apps were simply seen as another messaging app, this would allow those that want that long-term relationship to have a better chance at it, vs. just ‘that’s a beautiful person lemme start a quick convo to see if it works.’” Thus, this leads us to conclude that though dating apps can provide easy accessibility and a seemingly-selective, curated selection pool over traditional social media sites, they lack a positive reputation due to the negative societal oversight that the applications have. However, we propose that with the emergence of new user face technologies, these interactive experiences will create a new perception around the app’s performability.

IV. CONCLUSION

As the second season of *Swipe Night* airs, with a new story called “*Swipe Night: Killer Weekend*,” Tinder hopes to achieve the same success they had in 2019 when they saw over 20 million users engaged with the app after season 1’s debut and thus expect an increase of users by 26%. An article exclusive from *Variety*, stated that the site will be “...adding more storytelling finesse to the series in its second outing as the digital brand experiments with narrative content to drive membership and usage.” The article then suggests that to up the antics, Tinder will be providing an added feature called “Fast Chat” which users can use to aid in the second season murder mystery plot, connecting users and enabling them to “share clues and theories without having sparked a formal match.” In comparison to this, our study suggests that Gen-Z users on dating apps feel as if there is a lack of interpersonal connections that can be made online. Apps like Tinder offer users the ability to build bonds and relationships in a fairly quick and easy way. However, this idea has also been one of its downfalls as it makes some users feel overwhelmed with endless swiping and the constant feeling of uncertainty. Based both on experience and the

connotations society associates with different apps, establishing connections may lead individuals to feel uninterested and that the connections are superficial. Most people want an app that caters to their desires for interpersonal connection and intimacy. Improving user experience and design will fundamentally aid in the curation of more personalized content and thus leading to more users feeling comfortable with using the app and less short-term relationships. The development of interactive features may offer people a more meaningful basis for connections and are a good investment for dating apps to make. Additionally, as a direct result of changing the way a new generation of users can interact online, sites have popularized the use of these interactive components to target a wider and newer audience. This will not only be beneficial to those who have actively used the site but towards a future projection in which we may achieve boundless communication.

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