



Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:  
The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

## **CONTROL AND REWARD IN ONLINE DATING PRACTICES – A STUDY OF USERS’ EXPERIENCES OF TINDER**

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### **Introduction**

This paper is based on a study of users’ experiences and practices of meeting potential new partners through the use of the mobile dating service Tinder. While previous studies on the design of online dating systems to a large extent have focused on the discrepancy between meeting romantic partners online and face-to-face, the use of Tinder as an application for finding sex partners (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Zytko et al., 2014); and the role of online dating in everyday life (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Smith & Duggan, 2013) our study explores how the design of online dating applications form users’ dating experiences. The aim is to explore how users experience design features and functionalities for online dating practices. By exploring the experiences of specific

Poikolainen Rosén, A., Lundmark, S., Jonsson, F., & Håkansson, J. (2017, October 18-21). *Control and reward in online dating practices – a study of users experiences of Tinder*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

functionalities and features in the location-based mobile application Tinder we offer a broad understanding of the relationship between designed functionalities, users attitudes towards dating practices and their own experiences of dating.

The analytical approach is based on use qualities connected to the users' experiences (Löwgren, 2006), theories on self-representation (Goffman, 1959), and gamification and rewards (Hamari & Koivisto, 2014; Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004). These approaches are used for an in-depth understanding of the users' experiences of the designed features and the dating practices in which they are engaged. For example, Tinder was among the first online dating applications to use specific designed features such as a location based and swipe-centered function for users to mutually match with potential partners. These features are particularly interesting in our analysis as they have gained a broad implementation in several other online dating services and were also addressed as important for the experiences of dating by the participants in our study.

The empirical material presented in the paper is drawn from a study conducted in 2015 and 2016. We use a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2014), combining an initial observational study (N=7), an online survey (N=244), and three focus group discussions (N=9) with Swedish participants. By using a mixed method approach we gained a broad understanding of online dating practices and experiences of Tinder. The empirical data from the online survey and the focus group discussions were analyzed through a thematic analysis based on a card sorting method, which resulted in the themes for our analysis and highlighted the specific functionalities addressed by participants.

### **Control and reward - experiencing Tinder**

Four specific designed functions are highlighted in our empirical data: the connection with Facebook, the profile cards of users, the swipe-centered mutual match function, and geographical proximity. These functions contribute to specific user experiences of *control* and *reward*.

Our findings indicate that online dating practices include an interplay of being in and out of control. In Tinder, the authentication through Facebook plays an important role in controlling self-representation as it is harder to fake a Tinder profile when an additional social media connection is needed. Accordingly, the connection to Facebook is by the respondents stated as a reason for potential partners being perceived as real or authentic and thus creating a sense of control regarding that persons are who they claim to be. Further, the profile cards function of retrieving information from social media along with the editable profile text gives the participants a sense of control over what information they present about themselves. These functionalities afford a standardized and reliable form for self-representation (cf. Goffman, 1959) and facilitate the fast navigation and decision making on the application. The specific feature of the match function, i.e., that a match occurs only when both users agree, add another element of perceived safety and control among the participants, as the risk of being harassed is reduced. The mutual match function further eliminates a risk factor of being exposed or embarrassed as there are only two possible outcomes of the function: either both parts like each other and a match occurs, or only one part likes the other which is not indicated in the application and thus has no social consequence. Further, the location based functionality affords that potential meetings can be casually arranged, but also

easily interrupted if one wishes. The possibility of physical interaction means that users are less likely to lie in their profiles or behave in ways that they would not in face-to-face interactions (Ellison et al., 2006), which leads to an increased sense of control over the dating situation. Further, Tinder affords simplicity and speed in use, which made the respondents describe a fun, easy and casual dating practice in which they understand, the functionality and thus feel in control. However, the simplicity afforded unanticipated consequences as several participants reported using the application so fast that they lost control over their actions, for example, declining a person they would have wanted to accept or accidentally liking a person. Lack of control also concerns feelings of insecurity for online dating practices in general as you never know if a match occurs, and are in no control of who you will be presented to. The same feature also works contrariwise, implying that you are in no control of who will see your profile, as it is completely public.

Our findings also indicate that mobile dating practices on Tinder include various forms of reward mechanisms beyond the obvious reward of finding a potential partner or friend. The mutual match function enables rewards in terms of self-affirmation and instant gratification when a match occurs. This was perceived as a positive enhancement of the dating experience and to some users, it was a goal of its own, disconnected from the dating practice and viewed as a pastime. However, the match function could also create feelings of boredom and distress among the participants, as the act of swiping through a massive amount of potential partners became monotonous and the decision could be rationally calculated as in a game (cf. Hamari & Koivisto, 2014) after a longer period of use. Finally, a cynical attitude towards mobile online dating was observed, as participants employed market metaphors to describe their own online dating experiences in terms of “the meat market” or being “treated as a commodity”.

To conclude, this study suggests that online dating practices are formed by an inseparable interplay of design functionalities, users’ attitudes and the use of specific mobile applications that taken together contributes to overall online dating experiences.

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