WHY TALK WHEN YOU CAN SWIPE?

A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF COLLEGE HETEROSEXUALS
USING SMARTPHONES TO HOOKUP AND DATE

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INTRODUCTION

Ewens (2016) of VICE News asked their millennial readership, “What happens when Millennials grow up?” Her answer is:

One image immediately comes to mind: a single 43-year-old burdened with mental-health issues, living in a shoebox apartment that costs $2,500 a month, scrolling obsessively through Tinder, and tweeting about the latest Palace drop to an audience of desperately lonely peers.

Ewens (2016) is not alone in her harsh characterization of Tinder users. Nancy Jo Sales (2015) went so far as to title her widely circulated Vanity Fair piece, “Tinder and the Dawn of the ‘Dating Apocalypse.’” Depictions such as these beg empirical questioning. What are the experiences of dating apps users? How do young people use these new media and to what end?

About 15% of heterosexuals have used dating apps (Duguay 2017) in the last five years, and Tinder has made more than 8 billion matches (Smith 2015). But little is known about how heterosexuals use dating apps from a social scientific perspective. Although many journalistic sources offer anecdotal evidence and tips on how to ensure success on dating apps, people’s lived experiences have mostly escaped systematic analysis. In this study I investigate how and why heterosexual college students use dating apps and what meaning they give to these experiences.

Tackling the question of how college heterosexuals use dating apps and make sense of their experiences requires the collection of primary data. In this study, I employ
qualitative methods to learn how college students download, use, and think about their time on dating apps. Given that my sample consists of current college students, it is necessary to situate dating apps within the broader context of hookup culture; specifically, the well-researched trend of non-monogamous sexual activity on college campuses. As such, this study is an examination of how dating apps are used within the wider cultural context of hooking up on college campuses. This study is, therefore, both an examination of dating apps and also an extension of the sociological literature on hookup culture.

Theoretically, I draw on the insights of Pierre Bourdieu (2002[1980]) and Stefanie Duguay (2017) to explore the ways that students use dating apps to engage in hookup culture in their everyday lives, often far away from fraternity parties or college bars. I find that smartphones are a constant for these students. For example, my respondents estimate that they check their phones between 50 and 100 times a day. If accurate, this means my respondents check their phones about every 10 to 20 minutes in a day where they are awake for 16 hours. This constant smartphone usage is consistent with the realities of a techno-cultural society (Duguay 2017). In other words, I argue that students derive meanings from dating app use in combination with constant technological interaction and culturally engrained habits.

In my analysis of students’ techno-cultural habitus, I question the image of dating app users cast be VICE News in the quote above. Certainly, I find that a driving force for using dating apps is an individual desire for love and companionship, but that is not the whole story. Instead, dating apps –like sex and hookup culture– are socially (and, at
times, collectively) experienced phenomena. Students occupy a techno-cultural habitus, and practice shared social meanings that go beyond an individualistic explanation (Duguay 2017).
Given that dating apps are new and constantly evolving, I provide a definition of “dating apps” below along with an explanation of their general layout. The definition is partially informed by my own learning process that occurred through downloading several dating apps and creating user profiles on my iPhone 6s, similar to how Duguay (2017) downloaded Tinder multiple times to learn its layout. The definition is also derived from my respondents who explained app use in ways that were new to me.

**Dating Apps**

The term “dating app” is a bit of a misnomer for two reasons. The first reason is because users download dating apps for purposes beyond dating, like hooking up or seeking friendships. Conversely, Tinder, which is regarded as an app for hooking up and casual sex, is used for dating. Many of my respondents used Tinder for dating while openly acknowledging the app’s popular reputation. The second reason that “dating app” is a misnomer is because many apps that are not explicitly designed for dating are employed for dating. In essence though, an “app” (short for application) is software designed for a specific purpose and installed on a smartphone, tablet or other electronic device. There are endless variations: exercise apps, news apps, and most important to this study, social media and dating apps. The most common third party apps my participants used either directly or indirectly for hooking up and dating, by far, were Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tinder. They used other apps, too, like OkCupid. Since traditional social media apps are not designed for dating, I consider them conceptually
different. Therefore, from this point forward when I say “dating app” what I mean is a smartphone app designed to help people find one another for the purposes of dating and/or hooking up.

Layout

Just as there are many dating apps, there are many different app layouts. However, Tinder established the general layout that many dating apps now mirror (David and Cambre 2016). Dating apps usually show one potential match at a time and prominently feature the potential match’s profile picture(s). The user then reviews the potential match’s photo(s), short autobiography (less than a few hundred characters), and other information the app includes. Common additional information that dating apps include are the geographic distance between users, age of match, and when linked through a user’s Facebook, mutual friends and shared interests between the viewer and the match. After reviewing the information, the user “swipes” either left or right by literally using one finger to drag and move the match’s profile picture to the left or right of the smartphone’s screen. Left denotes “not interested” and right is “interested.” In the event that two users both “swipe right” they are informed of the match and a separate function allows them to privately message each other through the app so phone numbers may remain confidential. Ansari and Klinenberg (2015) call this the “mutual interest requirement.” Presumably, then, the goal is to find mutually interested potential partners. This has led many users to comment that the app is “game like” (Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2016; Zhang and Yasseri Forthcoming), which is consistent with Tinder’s stated design goal (Duguay 2017). Because the apps are located on a user’s mobile device and
use the smartphone’s internal GPS to determine the distance between users, these apps have been called “location based real-time dating devices” (LBRTD) and “mobile dating applications” (MDA) (Stempflhuber and Liegl 2016; Zhang and Yasseri Forthcoming).

Although each dating app has unique features to distinguish itself in the competitive app marketplace, all dating apps tend to feature similar information and layouts. However, social media apps that are employed as dating apps, such as Facebook and Instagram, are used differently. Instead of “matching,” users employ the social media apps’ messaging feature on their own accord. Instagram is a social media app that is designed for users to share pictures with “followers.” Instagram’s layout is similar to a roll of film negatives, where a user scrolls through the people they follow who have posted pictures with captions underneath. Instagram users mostly follow their friends and celebrities, but can explore profiles or search for names and usernames directly. For example, Instagram also has a direct message (DM) feature that my respondents sometime use to contact people directly, similar to the private chat on Tinder, but without the mutual interest requirement. Respondents refer to this practice as “sliding into the DMs.” Social media apps are different in design and implementation from dating apps, but the key feature they share is the ability to exchange private one-on-one messages between users, circumventing the need to obtain someone’s phone number in person.
LITERATURE REVIEW

My coverage of the literature includes journalistic, empirical, and theoretical work. I begin by situating dating apps in the popular media. I then discuss the social scientific literature on hookup culture, online dating, and the growing research on Location Based Real Time Dating (LBRTD) and Mobile Dating Applications (MDA). Finally, I demonstrate how media studies and Bourdieu’s habitus are useful analytical tools to understand dating app users’ experiences.

Media Coverage

The heterosexual-targeted dating app Tinder, launched in 2012 and since then has exploded in popularity. Tinder reached its 8 billionth match in 2015, and is available in over 150 countries (Smith 2015). Tinder’s reach continues to grow by 26 million new matches every day (Zhang and Yasseri Forthcoming). Tinder is not the only dating app on the market, but is generally understood as the first heterosexual app (Grindr was the first dating app and its audience is gay men). Some other dating apps that entered the market are Bumble and Hinge. Bumble’s twist is that women must send the first message within 24 hours or the match will expire, while Hinge relies on mutual Facebook friends to find potential matches. Since the dating app boom many online dating websites have launched apps of their own, such as OkCupid and eHarmony.

Not surprisingly, the popular media have a lot to say about dating apps. Negative media have spun dating apps as sad and depressing, linked to a rise in STDs, or a
desperate numbers game (Curry 2015; Ewens 2016; Pearson 2016; Schwartz 2014). On the other side of the spectrum, journalists offer guidance on how to craft profiles that guarantee notice (Daeta 2016; Tierney 2016). Others comment on the overarching effects dating apps have had on the app economy and society writ large. Wells (2016) reported that dating apps now seek older clients who are more likely to pay for additional services. Meanwhile, Beck (2015) noticed an increase in “dating app fatigue” and Sales (2016) wrote a second article on dating apps when Hinge began charging its customers in an attempt to rid itself of the casual sex connotation these apps carry. Whether or not Tinder and its contemporaries are in fact ushering in “the Dating Apocalypse” as Sales (2015) famously argued, is irrelevant for my purpose. My purpose, rather, is to investigate the relationship between dating apps and hookup culture on college campuses. Some of the ways that hookup culture expresses itself through dating apps are not surprising given the previous social scientific findings on hookup culture. But I find there are distinct differences, too, especially considering the image of lonely, desperate, dating app users (Curry 2015; Ewens 2016; Pearson 2016; Sales 2015).

**Hookup Culture**

“Hooking up” is an ambiguous phrase that is roughly conceptualized as sexual activity between two people with no expressed commitment to an exclusive relationship prior to, or following, the interaction (Adkins et al. 2015; Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Bogle 2008). Several studies have nuanced this definition further, showing that the “vague” parameters of what “counts” as hooking up serves a purpose (Bogle 2008; Kalish and Kimmel 2011). Vagueness conceals the specific sex act thereby
shielding slut stigma from women and simultaneously building up men’s sense of sexual prowess (Bogle 2008; Snapp, Ryu, and Rosen 2014). The vagueness is a double-edged sword though, as both men and women feel social pressure to hookup more since they over estimate the actual frequency of hooking up on their college campuses (Barriger and Vélez-Blasini 2013; Wade 2017). Additionally, hookups are alcohol fueled, providing a potential for consensual ambiguity since the hookup appears spontaneous and can be, if later regretted, chalked off to drunkenness (Barriger and Vélez-Blasini 2013; Bogle 2008; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Orenstein 2016; Wade 2017). Consequently, scholars have found that the hookup script –vague, drunk, and in the moment– has a mix of positive and negative outcomes for men and women.

Females and males purport to prefer long-term relationships to casual sex (Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville 2010) and yet students continue to hookup on college campuses because of changing sexual mores and college students delaying adulthood (Bogle 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, and Merriwether 2012). Estimates vary, but Adkins et al. (2015) find that 63% of college students hookup during their time in college. The same study found that the chances of a hook up including sexual intercourse are 39%, and that the average number of hookup partners for a student is 3.13 with a standard deviation of 4.27 (Adkins et al. 2015). For comparison’s sake, Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) found that of students who had hooked up, they averaged 10.8 hook ups during their time in college with a standard deviation of 13.61. One reason for the widespread occurrence of hooking up is that many college students perceive their college years as the ideal time to hookup. Students feel that during college self-development (i.e. getting a career and
not having a child) should be prioritized over emotional investment in relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013). Students that participate in hookup culture during their college years do report some benefits other than delaying adulthood. For instance, Owen and Fincham (2011) found that men and women both reported positive emotions after a hookup, albeit with women being more likely to report negative emotions than men.

However, scholars tend to agree that hookup culture can mask serious negative outcomes. Negative outcomes include sexual assault against women in the alcohol-fueled party environments that are common on college campuses (Bogle 2008; Littleton et al. 2009), less sexual pleasure for women (Armstrong et al. 2012; Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010; Backstrom, Armstrong, Puentes 2012; Orenstein 2016), slut shaming, and the sexual double standard (Allison and Risman 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Paul and Hayes 2002). Despite the potential emotional and physical harm women and some men face, they sometimes hookup hoping that it will lead to a committed relationship and are disappointed when it does not (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017).

Another problem is that hookup culture is so pervasive that it disadvantages students who desire to not participate (Freitas 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wade and Heldman 2012). Students who wish to remain virgins or only have sex in committed relationships are left on the sidelines of their university’s party environment (Freitas 2013; Wade and Heldman 2012). Students do not experience hookup culture universally by class background or race, either.
Students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to view partying and hooking up as irresponsible and therefore are excluded from the social scene on campus (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). And as Spell (2016) found, black women and Asian men are disadvantaged in hookup culture since hookup culture privileges racialized constructions of attractiveness that favor white women. Non-white students are also less likely to participate in hookup culture altogether, as are many gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (Brimeyer and Smith 2012; Wade 2017). But even for non-white and LGB students who want to hookup, their prospects are often thwarted (Wade 2017). At this point, trans students and their experiences with hookup culture have not been studied, but as Wade (2017) argues, it is likely that they too are excluded from the heteronormative, white, upper middle-class hookup culture that dominates college campuses today. The ability of hookup culture to simultaneously exclude groups by class, race and sexual orientation, as well as subject those who participate to binge drinking and sexual assault is worrisome; but, perhaps not quite to the level of moral panic that some media outlets have concluded. Despite hookup culture’s prominence, conventional dating has not been replaced.

*Dating and Long-term Pairing in the Age of the Internet*

In 1937 Waller described dating as the newest form of romantic interactions between heterosexuals on college campuses. Similar to how he found college campuses to be the hotspot for dating, college campuses later became the center of hookup culture. Despite shifting sexual practices on college campuses, some research shows that college students do not have more sexual partners than previous generations (Monto and Carey
A reason for this is that conventional dating is still valued. Evidence for dating’s continued relevance lays in the growth of online dating. Men still report meeting potential partners and going on dates that follow “traditional” sexual scripts for romance and dating (Bogle 2008; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003), but an increasing number of people are moving online to date and find long-term love (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Rudder 2014). For example, Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) estimate that over 20% of new heterosexual relationships formed online in 2010, up from less than 10% in 2000. People’s reasons for going online vary, but a major draw to online dating is the ability to sort through people by user-set criteria (Davis et al. 2006; Race 2010; Race 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Rudder 2014). Additional benefits include ease of communication and the ability of someone to communicate across space while being aware of their geographic proximity to potential partners (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016; Sumter et al. 2017; Wagner, Stempfhuber, and Barth 2015).

Presumably, the efficiency of internet dating and Western society’s overall emphasis on coupledom would have resulted in an increase in the number of couples, but contrary to this expectation the rate of couples has remained stable (Budgeon 2008; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). The lack of growth in overall relationships is partially due to individuals who wish to remain single in opposition to the social expectation of pursuing a committed relationship (Budgeon 2008). But, presuming that online dating is only for long term relationships is dubious, since many online dating websites and apps are also used for casual sex and hooking up. Particularly, a large number of users on
MDAs like Tinder and Grindr are seeking brief sexual encounters (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; David Cambre 2016; Race 2015).

*Mobile Dating Applications*

The amount of scholarly work on MDAs is sparse and focused mostly on gay men. Work in this area has examined how Grindr and websites like GayRomeo.com serve as mechanisms for connecting gay men (Davis et al. 2016; Gudelunas 2005; Licoppe et al. 2015; Stempfhuber and Liegl 2016). Other work shows how Grindr structures gay men’s online hookup culture (Race 2015), and their criteria for finding partners such as “serosorting” (filtering partners based on HIV status) (Davis et al. 2006; Race 2010). Beyond this, some communication scholars have started to look at dating app usage quantitatively (Sumter et al. 2017; Zhang and Yasseri Forthcoming) while others have commented on its popularity (David and Cambre 2016). An additional limitation on smartphone hookups is that the few scholars working in this area are primarily based in Europe (Sumter et al. 2017) and Australia (Duguay 2017; Race 2015). Taken together, previous studies demonstrate that we lack a sociological understanding of heterosexuals who use dating apps in the United States context.

What is known is that like gay men, college heterosexuals are hooking up and that college campuses are ripe with technology students can use for dating, especially personal computers and smartphones (Rappleyea, Taylor, and Fang 2014). Of particular importance are people’s personal smartphones (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). And although most college students report they would prefer to find their partner face-to-face rather than online, many heterosexual men and women still use these apps during
emerging adulthood (Hobbs et al. 2016). Heterosexuals often report that online dating is stigmatized because it reflects an inability to find partners in the normative way, in person (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). More recently however, dating apps seem to have taken on the additional stigmatization of casual sex (Sales 2015; Sales 2016).

Nonetheless, empirical evidence of heterosexual college students’ own perceptions of dating apps is lacking. To better understand how hookup culture, dating, and technology interact to shape heterosexual college students experiences with dating apps, we need to ask college students themselves.

Techno-Cultural Societies, Bourdieu, and Media Studies

I take as a starting assumption that college students live within a techno-cultural society (Duguay 2017). This assumption stems from emergent literature showing that smartphones, computers, and other technological inventions have become commonplace in Western society, and influence almost every facet of our lives (Dover 2007; Dover 2012). I argue that what makes the techno-cultural society sociologically relevant is that this is an embodied experience, a salient habitus for college students.

Bourdieu, Habitus, and Smartphone Technology

Given my emphasis on culture and embodied practices, Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus is foundational in my theoretical framing. This is especially the case when considering that much of the media studies literature on smartphones are Bourdieuan themselves. Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus is a theory of practice, describing agency in relationship to structure (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1980; Bourdieu 2002[1980]; Lo and Stacey 2008). Importantly, the habitus is an embodied practice. It is not an
overbearing structure, but more rigid than free will or agency. One way to define habitus is as a “personal taste” that individuals derive from their structured positions, which flavors their interpretations, interests, and actions (Lo and Stacey 2008). Despite sociologists’ vast literature on embodiment, we miss that the techno-cultural society college students live in is an embodied experience, too.

Similar to Bourdieu’s theory of practice (the habitus) Katsikides (1997) coined “mad social determinism” to describe the progression of technology mediated by micro level user practices. Building from there, media scholars developed a particular theory to study how people integrate their smartphones into their everyday lives, ‘practice theory.’ Practice theory allows researchers to understand how technology functions for both manifest and social purposes (Christensen and Røpke 2010). Christensen and Røpke (2010) refer to these as the techno-function and the socio-function, respectively. They argue that the socio-function of smartphones has led to a “mobile phone culture” where a shared social understanding of how to use smartphones, how to talk about, and how to talk with smartphones has become widespread (Ardèvol et al. 2010; Luthar and Kropivnik 2011). At this point, we can empirically demonstrate the impact that mobile phone culture has had on spoken language (Christensen and Røpke 2010; Myles 2010). Well known instances of people verbally saying “lol,” alluding to the mobile phone abbreviation for “laugh out loud,” or the encroachment of text abbreviations into professional emails, serve as examples of how text speech has influenced formalized practices of speech.
Applying practice theory to dating apps allows researchers to understand how the sociolinguistic ties between mobile phone culture, dating apps, and the physical world are interwoven via the techno-cultural habitus (Christensen and Røpke 2010; Duguay 2017). We can study the practiced life of embodied smartphone usage, where certain key phrases and abbreviations signify that people are a part of the shared ‘sayings and doings’ in which these apps are understood and used (Christensen and Røpke 2010). One’s knowledge of the language and proper use of the terms become embodied practices in the techno-cultural habitus.

Because my theoretical framework borrows from media studies, I felt it best to use qualitative methods (Dover 2007; Dover 2012). My approach is therefore both social constructivist and interdisciplinary using sociological theory and practice theory. I see these theories not as mutually exclusive but as compatible insofar as both are treated as lenses for understanding different perspectives on a given social phenomena. Practice theory and the habitus, as I apply them here, make sense of the ways in which college students use dating apps and come to learn through interaction with their peers about how to navigate the problematic realities of their techno-cultural habitus.
METHODS

My investigation is geared towards two qualitative objectives. First, to obtain a “thick description” (Geertz 1994) of how heterosexual college students use smartphones to facilitate, instigate, seek, pursue, or entertain the possibility of hooking up with and/or dating another person. My second objective is to investigate the meanings heterosexual students attach to their use of smartphones to hookup or date, within the context of their techno-cultural milieu. To handle both of these objectives I rely on respondent interviews. This method provides me with an in-depth understanding of shared meanings by way of the stories and subjective experiences of my respondents (Baker, Edwards, and Doidge 2012; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Weiss 1994).

Sampling

My research population—heterosexuals who use dating apps like Tinder to hookup and date—is overwhelmingly comprised of college students (Adkins et al. 2015; Armstrong et al. 2012; Bogle 2008). Therefore, studying college students is not simply a matter of convenience, but empirically justified. I recruited students from a large public Midwestern university (referred to as “University”) with approval from University’s IRB. I approached students through several recruitment tactics. First, I emailed the undergraduate listservs of sociology, criminology, and biological science at University, with the help of undergraduate coordinators in each department (Appendix B). I also visited a number of sociology courses, both large lectures and small seminars, where I gave a short presentation and asked interested students to contact me via email. To be
eligible, respondents had to identify as heterosexual, be a current college student, speak English, have experience using a smartphone app to find partners for dating or hooking up, and be willing to complete a face-to-face interview. My recruitment methods yielded 16 respondents from online emails, and 12 respondents from in-class presentations. Although my respondents were not directly compensated, they were entered into a raffle for two $50 gift cards. Tables 1 and 2 list my respondents and their basic demographic information (Appendix A).

Confidentiality and Privacy Measures

In accordance with ethical human subjects procedures, I took multiple steps to protect my respondents. To protect confidentiality any names, locations, and specific details that could be used to identify the interviewees were de-identified upon transcription. I also physically separated the transcribed data from respondents’ personal information (e.g. Names, contact info) by keeping separate files in a locked cabinet. During interviews, I provided respondents the opportunity to pick a pseudonym, but in the event they did not pick a pseudonym I assigned one at random. All of the electronic files were password protected and stored on my personal laptop computer. Hard copies of data were kept in a locked file cabinet located in a secure office.

Interviewing

Understanding social experiences in-depth requires getting the “richest possible data” (Lofland and Lofland 1995:16). I conducted in-person intensive interviews using an interview guide (Appendix D). I also collected basic demographic information using a short questionnaire (Appendix C). Since I studied heterosexuals, I interviewed women
and men. For my interviews with women I was acutely aware of my status as a man and the effect that may have on discussing personal histories. But, as Lofland and Lofland (1995:24) say, “Ascriptive identity categories are, without question, realities—albeit constructed ones—and therefore need to be taken into account in planning your research. But they should not be *overemphasized*” (emphasis in original). Although there were instances where I felt women appealed to social desirability through enacting traditional gender roles, I do feel that women were on the whole, mostly candid and honest.

I followed a pre-established interview guide each time I sat down with a respondent, but I also allowed ample space for unexpected themes and idiosyncratic experiences to unfold. The general gist, however, was for questions to provoke respondents to reflect on past experiences with smartphone hookups and dates (real, attempted, or hypothetical). In this vein, respondent answers ranged from emotional states to physical acts. Further, I asked respondents to articulate smartphone hookups and dates from beginning to end to get an idea of what they felt were “typical” and what they considered non-normative. I also reserved a portion of the interview to talk about risks: physical, emotional, and sexual. I felt that discussing risk was valuable because it became obvious early on that risk was a salient aspect of using these apps for women and men.

The interviews were tape recorded on a Sony IC-Audio Recorder and ranged between 23 minutes and just over one hour, and were transcribed into verbatim text files for analysis. The mean interview length was 38 minutes.
Data Analysis Strategy

My analysis strategy involved three steps: inductive analysis during data collection, emergent code analysis, and focused analysis (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Weiss 1994). The first stage involved going over transcripts and searching for patterns that appeared across narratives during early stages of data collection. This primary analysis allowed me to inductively shift my interview questions and theoretically sample themes that started to emerge from the preliminary data for future interviews (Charmaz 1996; Weiss 1994). The second stage began after all the interviews were completed and transcribed. In the second stage of analysis I coded every interview for themes that emerged within interviews (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The second stage was done in the qualitative software program NVivo by using theme memos and code trees as organizational tools. The third stage of analysis, also done in NVivo, was a focused analysis where I looked for themes across the interviews. This final stage reduced the data by collapsing and merging themes, or in some cases, eliminating codes altogether.

Sample

My final sample has 28 respondents. Nineteen are women and nine are men. The ages range from 18 to 53, although most of them are between 18 and 21. Excluding Maggie who is 53, since her age is an outlier, my sample mean age is 19.3. Thirteen women and five men identify as white. I spoke with one Hispanic woman, three black women, one black man, and two Native American men. One woman and one man identify as multi-racial, and one woman identifies racially as other. (See Appendix A).
As for their time in college so far, I spoke with women and men who were in relationships while others were desperately single. Their majors varied from sociology to business, an aspiring philosopher, and some double majors made time in their busy schedules to come in for an interview. Some students are in their first semester of college, others are applying for jobs with graduation in sight. I spoke to a few religious students, partiers, and some from Greek organizations. Most students live on or near campus, but a few commute from far away. One woman lives four hours away, but couch surfs her way through dorm rooms and friendly homes during the school week. While certainly not generalizable, the students at University are diverse in their college trajectories. They have stories of embarrassment, disappointment, fear, and triumph. Their stories illustrate how college students navigate dating apps on a campus steeped in hookup culture.

As I previously stated, maintaining confidentiality is extremely important. Therefore, my results are tailored to provide accurate accounts while also safeguarding people’s privacy. I present many direct quotes, but precise details such as date locations, the names of cities, and other identifiers have been changed. All names are pseudonyms, and all of the respondents attend “University.” Other minor changes have been made at times, such as the removal of repeated words, so that the quotes are clear. But at all times I aim to maintain as much verbatim text as possible.
RESULTS

My results are in diachronic order, reflecting my interview guide and the general progression that most interviews followed. I begin with how students found themselves on the app, and then move through profile construction, matching, and some of the problems students encounter when using dating apps. I then detail how students decide whether to meet people in person, and if so, how they do it. I conclude with some of the worst-case scenarios and best-case scenarios my respondents experienced.

Getting on the App

When I asked students how they found themselves on a dating app I learned that the decision is rarely made as a personal choice. Some, like Steele Stanwick, a well-spoken and scruffy-faced freshman found himself single upon coming to University. “I got Tinder at the beginning of my college freshman year. Because I was in a long-term relationship and then you come to college, and then everything falls apart.” He continued to say that time is important because being a bio pre-med major requires a lot of time for studying. “I got Tinder pretty much because of the fact that I don’t have time to go out and meet people, cause I’m always doing something and that just, never stops.”

For some, feeling the sting of a recent breakup sometimes develops into revenge seeking via Tinder. Take Karen for example, a thoughtful and easy to talk to psychology and sociology double major with a faded hombre hairstyle who says:
He broke up with me and I was like really mad. I was like, “You know what? I’m just gonna go on a bunch of dates and I’m gonna have a good time and you’re gonna see it because I’m gonna post pictures all the time.” And then, I didn’t go on any dates.

Sydney, another revenge seeker and a sorority sister that majors in human development and family studies says:

My ex-boyfriend and I were not dating anymore, so when we came home to Out of State City, I knew his best friend was on Tinder. So I wanted him to think that I was on Tinder. So I literally went on it for the sole purpose, for like, his friend to find out to tell my ex.

Sydney laughs in retrospect when detailing her plans to make her ex-boyfriend jealous. For many of the students I spoke with, downloading dating apps with their friends was much like a joke. Haley, a quiet zoology freshman with glasses, came to the interview sporting a local NFL team scarf and furry boots. She told me that she and her cousin “were just bored” and “it was like two o’clock in the morning” so they made Tinder profiles “and we just talked to people, swiped, and laughed and had fun with it.” Another student, Jennifer, admitted to downloading Tinder with her friends because “it was kinda funny seeing people like, from the frats, or this guy we all know is like, on Tinder.”

For other students though, Tinder is serious business. Esmerelda, a daily dating app user who saves some of the conversations she receives so she can show people, initially made the decision to go online with her friends. “My freshman year, when I got
here, there’s a group of us and we’re all just kind of awkward and were like, ‘Hey, we’re all lonely, why don’t we sign up for a dating app?’” For Esmerelda and her friends, dating apps are a way to transcend their awkward personalities in hope of finding love. And just as some users want love, some students are just looking for a hookup. Justin, a junior botany major reflecting on his freshman year says:

   Alright, so when I first started using it, everyone said to get it. It was great for hooking up with people, you could just swipe, find people. And, that’s what I did my freshman year. I originally downloaded it just to find people, new people.

   Whatever the impetus for downloading a dating app, these college students share two things in common. They now have a dating app profile, and people know about it. Regardless of their reason, downloading is experienced as a social process: students sharing with their friends in the fun of seeing other people on the app, be being purposefully seen by an ex, or looking for some form of sexual partnership (Christensen and Røpke 2010). From the start my respondents are not the stock image of lonely singles desperately searching; they are using dating apps as a way of enriching collective experiences with friends. As I show below, the choices respondents make while creating a profile is strongly influenced by peers. Indeed, even if they are looking for a partner for themselves, peer input is of great importance.

   Making and Matching

   After telling me about why they downloaded apps, my respondents detailed how they made their profiles. Their decisions are made easier by the apps themselves since dating apps are often linked to a person’s Facebook account (Duguay 2017). Steele
Stanwick says, “I think they’re all linked through Facebook actually. So I can just go through my Facebook pictures and see which ones I like.” Jennifer’s profile pictures, also taken from Facebook, were vetted by her friends, she says, “because, you know, you wanna make sure the pictures look good.” Careful picture selection is a common theme for young women on dating apps. When Amanda and I spoke, she told me that she and her friends “work” on their profiles together, and that she strategically uses pictures from the summer. She explains:

Oh yeah, we definitely work on it. I have, all my pictures are me from the summer, cause I just think I’m more attractive when I’m tan. But I also used to be, I used to do boot camp a lot so I used to be really fit, so I guess, a majority of my pictures are me from when I was fifteen pounds heavier in muscle, and not 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, and I’m like, I’m not gonna change those.

As for the text information contained within the biographical section of dating apps, many students keep it simple, if they put anything down at all. Sarah, a first year bio pre-med major living in the dorms, says:

“For my bio I have my major. It’s my major, it also says ‘I spend all my money on food.’ I like to eat, yeah. I think that’s, oh, and the school I go to. University. And my [graduation] year, [20]20.”

Once students consult their friends and select their photos, they find themselves ready to start sorting through potential matches. Similar to how students make their profiles, the matching process is influenced by their friends’ opinions. How a student’s
friends react to and discuss potential matches is weighted as a factor in whether or not to swipe right. Once two people match, conversations are monitored and shared between friends in a group. This is not to say that the motivations for using dating apps are free from personal desires. Amanda explains that dating apps can help displace the discomfort of being single some days:

Well so I’ll, it sounds so bad, but I’ll get on Tinder if I’m not feeling, wanted, that day. Or if I haven’t seen a lot of people that day, I’ll just get on to keep me busy. And sometimes, like, hopefully, it’ll boost my confidence. So I’ll go through it and then I say like, “Oh this person looks really nice.” And I, I know Tinder’s not, this isn’t what it’s for, but I’ll go through their profile and I really take their bio seriously and like, “Ok well, could I date them?”

Typically though, with peer approval, students are seeking someone to meet in person either as a hookup, a date, or somewhere in the middle. Victoria, a junior with a calm demeanor and Midwest meets California surfer accent says:

Honestly at the time I wasn’t really looking for anything, I was just kind of with it. Like, whoever was there, fine. You wanted to talk, fine. If you wanted to meet up, fine. If you were looking to date, fine, maybe, we’ll see. Yeah, I didn’t really have a plan in mind, I was just kind of meeting new people and seeing what would happen.

Terrance, a tall and skinny philosophy major who met me after work still wearing his silver tie, also has a “go with the flow” attitude.

KH: What are you looking for on a profile to swipe right?
Terrance: Alright, to swipe right on Tinder. Well, she has to be attractive, of course.

KH: Mhm.

Terrance: It depends. Like, I, for the most part, I really don’t want a relationship right now so I try not to like, I look at the profile and see [what it says]. I mean, I don’t really just say ‘I just wanna hookup” either, you know, I really just wanna meet the person, see like, does it go with the flow?

Certainly, some students do approach dating apps with the strict intention of a long-term relationship. David, a tall freshman with feathered blond hair, says “I was looking to make sure that they weren’t like, just looking for a hookup or whatever. I wasn’t really wanting that.” And if the potential match indicates in their profile that, “I’m not looking for anything serious” David quickly decides “Nope.” But, a user’s desires are not totally shaped by their individual preferences. Friends serve as a “check” on potential matches in terms of physical attractiveness, profile biography, and the content of direct message conversations.

Women in my sample are more apt to take their friends input into consideration, relative to men. Amanda admits, “Oh God, it just, it shouldn’t as much as it does, but if my friends don’t find someone that I’ve matched with attractive, like I’ll un-match them.” A peer’s influence extends far beyond examining matches. Karen explains it as a “bonding experience.” She says “We throw HGTV on and we would just, go through and be like, ‘Oh look at this guy’ it’s like, ‘Oh I saw him the other day.’” And if their friends are not around, Caroline, a junior business management major with an asymmetrical bob
haircut, explains the utility of screen shots. “We would do that [talk in person], other times we would like, screen shot the message they would like, send us, and send them to each other. Yeah, we were kinda just getting laughs out of it I guess.” Although men do talk to their male friends about their dating app matches, it is in a different way than their female counterparts. As Marc, a tall, skinny, and clean-shaven biochemistry major describes it:

Marc: It’s kinda like, you tell your friends, your guy friends, “This chick, she’s pretty hot and seems like a pretty popular chick.” You know like, “I think I’m gonna go for her.” But that kinda like, it ends there. Everything else is kinda like, personal.

KH: Ok, so you don’t ask your guys for advice? Like if a girl says, like asks you a question or something, you wouldn’t say to your guy friends like, “Hey man, like, this girl just said this. What do you think I should I do?”

Marc: I mean, I’m trying to think cause it was mostly last semester. Not really.

The techno-cultural milieu these students occupy relies on a shared set of ‘sayings and doings’ (Christensen and Røpke 2010). Users might say downloading a dating app is for joking around or getting back at an ex, and their doings reflect this through patterns of communication between each other in person or through screenshots. But this pattern of behavior is practiced routinely. Eleven of my respondents use dating apps either “daily” or “multiple times a day.” Six use them “weekly” and the rest use them “monthly.” In other words it is deeply part of their techno-cultural habitus. Consequently, the user and their matches are not alone, and the potential relationship is discussed before, during, and
after swiping. Part of the reason that women share their dating app conversations and ask their friends for advice is also explained by the different experiences men and women report on dating apps. All but one woman commented on the crude sexual jokes and sexually suggestive GIFs they receive, often with great dismay. Men on the other hand, who are apparently sending these messages but rarely admit this, are not plagued with crude sexual jokes. The widespread receipt of unwanted sexual messages reinforces the taken-for-granted assumption that many men on dating apps are seeking casual hookups. Students colloquially refer to these men as “fuckboys.”

Handling Fuckboys

Lizzie told me that a reason she would un-match men was because “Some of them were like, too pushy. Like, I don’t know. They’d ask for pictures or something. And I’m just like, “Eh, no.” They just seem like, I don’t know. They just seem like a fuckboy.” Fuckboys in dating app parlance are young men who are only interested in hookups and pursue women online using crude and vulgar pick up lines. Fuckboys are plentiful on dating apps. Karen reports that, “My roommates and I kinda had, all weird experiences with really sexually aggressive dudes on Tinder.” Caroline describes her matches as “all pretty crappy to be honest with you” and many fuckboys requested nude pictures from her. As a response, having friends to share these messages with is a way for women to reclaim some agency in the face of sexist advances online. In describing how she and her friends react to receiving messages from men, Indigo Mars, a young and assertive woman who is in her third year as a sociology major says:
It’s the bouncing up and down, and the flapping of the hands, and the giggle, and acting like a bunch of girls. That’s usually how it goes. And if they’re rude, it’s cussing out and the name calling, and the dragging the person’s character through the dirt, that’s usually how it goes. It’s either one or the other. It’s rare that you get like an in-between.

Indigo Mars later explained that these messages made her feel that dating apps are, “literally in shambles, because people feel such a sense of entitlement [to sex].” Karen cited the crude messages as the main drawback to dating apps. “I was really, was not prepared for how many people were, like, sexually aggressive and crude” and “just waking up in the morning and, like, opening the app and seeing this message, and you’re like ‘Whoa, it’s eight a.m. on a Tuesday, like what are you doing at eight a.m. on a Tuesday that you needed to send this message?’” Zelda, a gamer girl with a streak of punk rock, reported that after receiving too many of these messages, she finally had enough. She says, “Yeah I went off on that guy, like ‘Sorry’ but it’s just rude.” As best I can surmise from my limited conversations with men, they do not view sexually crude messages as terribly offensive. Ralph, the only man who admitted to sending a sexually crude message says:

Like I just put stupid stuff, like “Taxation is theft.” Just to see what they react to, or I’ll do, like stupid jokes. Like, “If you had a donkey and it died, and I was a taxidermist, would you let me stuff that ass?”

Most women experienced many sexually themed messages, but not all app interactions are based on sexual jokes or direct propositions for nude pictures. More
conventional conversations took the form that one might expect two opposite sex
strangers to engage in, and in line with traditional gender roles, men tend to initiate these
conversations (Tolman 1994). As Jennifer explains, “Well it depends, usually on Tinder I
like, probably like 90% of the time I don’t message first, I let the guys do [that].”

From the conversation’s beginning, or “pickup line,” I found that a back and forth
exchange of basic demographic information was common. Since my respondents were all
students at University, school related topics were by far the most discussed. Gloria, a
short, soft spoken woman with braces with a flat but honest tone, told me, “I kinda just
try to get to know them first, I mean like, if around here they’re in college, it’s like, ‘Well
what are you studying?’” Given the sexual overtones dating apps have, conversations can
lead to sexual topics organically. Joanna is a timid freshman with gauge ear piercings and
when we met she had just joined a sorority. She disclosed that her current boyfriend who
she met on Tinder brought up sex on the app before they met. “And I mean, even like my
boyfriend, pretty sure [we] talked about sex, but he was like, nice.” Conversations that go
well require effective messaging, or what Sarah refers to as “good vibes.” Since most of
my respondents meet their matches within a month, many in only a week or two, it is
imperative that conversations be quick, instrumental, and interesting. If either party fails
to keep the conversation going, or they start “dry texting” then “ghosting” soon follows.

Dry Texting, Ghosting, and Good Vibes

I asked my respondents if they preferred to meet potential romantic partners in
person or online. Like Hobbs et al. (2016) find the majority of students prefer to meet
people in-person. Specifically, seven men and ten women in my sample prefer to meet
their romantic partners in-person, but continue to use dating apps. During my discussion with Indigo Mars about her preference I learned of a potential pitfall to dating app conversations. An undesirable outcome, “dry texting,” refers to a dull text-based conversation. As Indigo Mars explained to me:

        Indigo Mars: I prefer to like, meet somebody in person. I definitely do. Because it’s like, if I meet you in person I’m more likely to be, like really authentic and not like, I don’t know if you ever heard the term dry texting or like, dry messaging?
        KH: No, I’ve never heard that.
        Indigo Mars: You’re like, “Hey” and they’re like, “What are you doing?” And I’m like, “Nothing.” And they’re like, “Oh, ok.” And then, it’s like, the conversation is just so boring.

Should a conversation turn “dry” this is taken as a sign that the match is not going to lead to a real life meeting. The assumption is that if the match is boring in text conversation, they will be boring in real life. My respondents assume that smartphone conversations are part of a person’s techno-cultural habitus so intimately that personalities are discernable from text conversations. The shared techno-cultural understanding of texting mismatches demonstrates how significant it is that messaging goes well. So when dry texting occurs the conversation has to end. Usually my respondents end dry conversations by “ghosting.” Ghosting is when a user intentionally stops responding to messages from another user, which is sometimes perceived as abrupt, but is generally acceptable behavior.
Zelda: Like a lot of the people on my OkCupid, I remember I’ll, it’ll be like I sent the last message and it’ll be in the middle of a long conversation and they won’t answer back. And I’m like, “Ok.” It doesn’t bother me, cause I’m sure I’ve done the same thing.

KH: Ghosting?

Zelda: Yeah, I’m sure I’ve done the same thing.

KH: So ghosting doesn’t like, really both you?

Zelda: No. Because we don’t know each other so it’s not gonna bother me that much, like I said it’s not like I, “Oh man, I really wanted to meet this guy and be with this guy and now he’s not talking to me, and I’m super hurt about it.” I just don’t get like that.

As a special case, I note that Maggie’s conversations on dating apps are different from traditionally aged college students. Maggie, who is 53, had been messaging back and forth with two other men until she received a message from the man who is now her boyfriend. “We ended up talking on the phone the next day, and I actually reached out to the other two guys and just said, you know, ‘I don’t see a spark, gonna try something else, thanks, bye.’” Without more examples from older dating app users it is difficult to say if ghosting is only a millennial phenomena, but other research suggests that generational differences in dating behavior do exist (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015).

Ideally for traditionally aged college students though, a conversation avoids any dry texting or ending with phantomlike disappearances. Instead, users are looking for someone with “good vibes.” Sarah explains that, “With Jared, our conversation was just
better. We vibed really well, everything flowed. In a lot of my Tinder conversations things don’t flow. And it’s like, almost uncomfortably painful, like you have to ask a question and then they answer.” Someone who demonstrates “good vibes” passes to the next all-important phase, identity verification.

*Exchanging Social Media as Means to Verify Authenticity*

Most dating apps require some form of authenticity verification, often a linked Facebook profile (Duguay 2017). Still, my respondents are hyper-aware of the possibility that a match might be a “catfish” or have an intentionally misleading profile. Other literature has previously shown that dating app users have some distrust in online dating, but Tinder helps mitigate these fears by being linked to Facebook (Duguay 2017). Even with Facebook’s verification, Haley describes her fear of catfishes. “I mean, it’s just, you never know cause they could put like, they could find, take pictures or they could say, you can say anything you want on the Internet and be different in person.” A catfish, by definition, is a completely fake profile initiated by the account’s creator for some malicious purpose, and research has shown fears are justified since some people will lie on dating sites about their height and weight (Toma, Hancock, and Ellison 2008). People who use fake profiles, and are caught, have been popularized in MTV’s reality television show *Catfish*. Several of my respondents referenced the show directly, but men had a particular fear of being misled rather than duped altogether. Men feared profiles that are “real” in the ontological sense, the person who the profile represents is in fact that person, but certain details have been *purposefully* altered. I call these *aesthetic profiles*. I ran my explanation of them by Michael to see his concerns.
KH: Cause they were like, you know, it might not, it might be that this person really did buy a cup of coffee, or really did buy this sweater, or did go on a hike or something.

Michael: Yeah.

KH: But, that the pictures they put online are not candid, they’re very intentional.

Michael: Mhm, yeah.

KH: In how they’re framed, and who’s in them and who’s not in them.

Michael: Yeah.

KH: And so, like, it’s not an outright lie, but it’s crafted.

Michael: Oh, yeah. Yeah! That’s exactly what I’m thinking.

It turns out that men’s fear of aesthetic profiles is not unfounded. Wendy, a student who transferred to University from a close by state college, admitted that with her friend’s advice, they would carefully alter the pictures that ended up on their dating app profiles.

Wendy: I would ask them [her friends] if like, the picture looked ok and they thought I needed to take, like, edit it more or like, crop it, or [if] there was something in there [that] was “identifying.”

KH: Ok. When you mean “edit it,” like, filters?

Wendy: Yeah, like filters.

KH: Instagram filters?

Wendy: Yeah.

Similar to how hookup culture scholars have pointed out that casual sex is not new to hookup culture, neither is photo enhancement new to dating apps. But, it is the
fear of matching a catfish or encountering an aesthetic profile in this context that is new. Accordingly, my respondents take deliberate precautions to ensure authenticity. By far the most common tactic is the exchange of Snapchat usernames, which extends Duguay’s (2017) finding that Snapchat user names are sometimes preemptively placed in Tinder profiles. Snapchat is a free third party app that allows users to send pictures that “expire” along with a short line of text. Unless the message is captured with a screenshot, messages expire in a few seconds. Messages are usually taken with the phone’s camera when users send them, as in, the photos are rarely stock photos on a computer’s library. Joanne provides better detail:

I, that’s, that is one thing. Cause a lot of people like, make themselves look better or just pretend they’re someone else. But, I don’t know. I like, didn’t even really think about that that much I guess. Mostly because, another thing is too, people would ask for is. I completely forgot about that. Cause that’s how I knew my boyfriend wasn’t a catfish, at the time, cause like, he Snapchatted me. And I was like, “Oh he looks like his pictures, solid.” You know? And, cause a lot of people put their Snapchats in their bios, and like, they would add you. And like, you know, in Snapchat you can get like a little profile picture, or whatever, so like, if someone added me but I didn’t add them back cause I wasn’t sure what they looked like or something, I’d look at their little profile picture on Snapchat and I’d be like, “Ok, they’re the same person.”

As Joanne’s quote illustrates, Snapchat has become an important part of my respondents’ techno-culture as they appropriate the app to fit their own verification
needs. To “Snapchat,” then has multiple social and linguistic meanings. As a noun it refers to someone’s personal Snapchat profile. Or, “he Snapchatted me” indicates that Snapchat is also a verb. Not only does Snapchat reduce the risk of finding a catfish, it is embedded in the practice of using dating apps. Collectively, dating app users have a shared expectation that a person’s physical appearance will need independent verification. This shared understanding goes beyond Snapchat, since other social media apps can serve this purpose, too. Not having another account for verification is problematic for dating app users who choose not to have other social media profiles, as Esmerelda explains. “And, so that, that one kid just kinda stopped [ghosted] after that cause he’s like, “I want to see your Facebook” all this other stuff, and I’m like, “I don’t have a Facebook.”” So, I think people thought I was a troll or something."

Once users are satisfied that the conversation “vibes” well and are relatively certain that the person they are speaking with is not a catfish, the match progresses towards meeting in person. This is a rare occurrence relative to the number of potential matches people receive. Three of my respondents still have not met any matches in person; Caroline has given up entirely. But for those who initiate face-to-face contact, there is considerable overlap in their experiences despite the varied expectations students bring to the encounters.

*Making Plans*

The amount of careful planning that occurs immediately prior to meeting in person is just as calculated as the actual matching process, especially for women. Sometimes, extra online vetting occurs without the match knowing. Amanda explains:
Yeah. If, basically, a lot of people I match with, me and my roommate will both get on[link]. We’ll look for their Twitters, we’ll look for their Instagrams. And then, Snapchat I guess is a little bit harder to find if you don’t know they’re actual name on there, but we’ll for sure go to Instagram and Twitter. And then I’ll have, this is so extra, I have her un-follow me and then follow them if they’re private so my name’s not linked to theirs, and then we’ll [look] through her profile [at the matches].

As to the actual meeting of two strangers recently connected through a dating app, there are decisions that have to be made according to anticipated outcomes. If the goal is a hookup then the pair will “Netflix and chill,” a lightly coded term for hookup. Lizzie, a sophomore sociology major in a co-ed fraternity, confirms the use of this term, although she herself did not say it:

KH: And, so where would you go? Would you like meet them at a party, or going out?

Lizzie: No. [laughing] Cause we kinda just, looking back on it, it wasn’t the best decision. Cause I was just, interested in like, the hooking up at that point. I was [not] trying to like, go on a date. So, he like, picked me up in his car, and then we, yeah.

KH: So like, Netflix and chill?

Lizzie: [laughs] Yeah.
Sydney invited a “booty call” to her house past midnight and employed the tactic of making her roommate stay up with her until her match arrived. Friends are informed about hookups, but even dates are bookended by telling friends the details of who, where, and what is happening.

First dates, and some hookups, intentionally start in a public meeting place to avoid various risks. Haley met her date at a mall for example, and took the extra precaution of bringing a friend. The most common practice is remaining connected remotely to friends. The same smartphone that connects matches through dating apps is a mechanism of safety. Indigo Mars explains:

KH: And, so then, if you like do go meet up with somebody, do you tell your friends where you’re going?
Indigo Mars: I share my location with my friends.
KH: Like the pin drop thing? [iPhone feature]
Indigo Mars: Yep. Yeah, I have an iPhone and like a lot of, most of my friends have [an] iPhone, so kinda just like, “Oh, here’s my location” and like, I’m sharing it to like, for an hour. So wherever I go for an hour, you have that.

Others, like Leah, maintain contact through pre-determined text check-ins. “And then, if it ever gets to the point of meeting up you know, I always tell somebody ‘Well, we’re going here, and there, I’ll text you when I get there, text you when I get back.’” What dating app users are afraid of that compels them to share GPS coordinates or detailed plans are worst-case scenarios.
Meeting your Match: Managing Fear and Emotions

When I asked my respondents what they were afraid of when going to meet someone they met on a dating app, I found women worry they might be raped and/or kidnapped. Rather than a bad date, or awkward encounter, about half immediately jumped to worst-case scenarios. Wendy calmly states, “Rape, I was really worried about rape. Just like, kidnapping.” Jennifer says, “Definitely like, assault or even like, rape, or something, is something I worry about.” The fact that many women express these concerns outright, and are less concerned about sexual risks such as STIs or pregnancy is indicative of the overall fear that pervades online dating (Toma et al. 2008). I was usually the one that had to ask about sexual risks, which Leah does admit to worrying about:

KH: What about risks like pregnancy or STIs, STDs?
Leah: Definitely.
KH: Do you worry about that, too?
Leah: Yeah, because something that you, you don’t know if, once again, people lie all the time. So, that person goes with, you initially meet up with somebody, a lot of my friends, some people I know, they don’t think about what could happen. You meet up with somebody, you sleep with them, what happens if you get a STD or STI or you wind up pregnant? That’s something that nobody thinks about … if the person you slept with is just somebody that was looking for sex that doesn’t mean that they’re gonna step up to the plate if you get pregnant.

Many dating app users worry about sexual risks, rape, or being kidnapped, but very few discussed their worries with their matches before meeting. Brittany does not talk to her
matches about her fears. “No. I think I have that conversation [STDs and the use of birth control] with them if the time comes because I don’t wanna introduce something to them.” Brittany worries that if she brought up sex then her match would expect sex, and she is not ready to commit to having sex so early. Given these fears, it is not surprising that meeting a match in real life is stressful. Still, 25 of my respondents overcame their fears and meet up with at least one match in person.

Gloria says that the moments right before meeting a match are emotional:

Like at first, it’s like, I’ll be nervous. What if this person is someone completely different or like, what if they’re like, secretly a serial killer or something like that? What if they’re going to try, I don’t know. I feel like I get nervous about things…Then as the time goes on I’ll just try to kinda like, calm my self down like, “Ok, I’ve thought about all these terrible things that are gonna happen, that might happen, but they’re probably not gonna happen anyway.” So like, when it doesn’t go that badly I’ll be like, “Well, it wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

By occupying herself with the worst possible scenario of meeting a serial killer, Gloria is better equipped to handle the more likely outcome, an awkward first date. In comparison to being physically or sexually harmed, a bad date is tolerable. However, worst-case scenarios do happen. Three of my respondents personally knew a catfish victim, one woman narrowly escaped rape when her and her friend’s alcoholic drinks were drugged, and another woman feared a match-turned-stalker.
Worst Fears Realized

Michael’s sister was a victim of a catfish. In this particular case, someone stole her photos and used them for their fake profile.

Yeah, cause my sister, she had a catfish. She didn’t get fooled by one, it was like, something, stalking her. She like, the person stole, when she was on Facebook a couple years ago she had a catfish stealing all her photos, someone pretending to be her and all that, and she had to delete her Facebook because of that. Because, people were extending to like her job, her friends, and like, that fake profile was saying some real mean, nasty, vulgar things that my sister would never say. So, she had to like, delete it out of her life and it took her awhile to explain to everyone like, “That wasn’t me.”

Michael’s fear of catfishes is understandable given his personal experience of watching his sister deal with identity theft. A woman in the sample, Sydney, was the direct victim of a sexual predator. Sydney told me that she and her friend went together to meet a Tinder match at a bar over winter break, back in her hometown. Once there, “long story short, my friend and I basically both got roofied.” “Roofied” is the slang term for when someone places the date rape drug Rohypnol into someone’s alcoholic drink. Luckily, the bartenders realized Sydney and her friend were drugged or at least too drunk to consent to leaving with her match, and some police officers contacted Sydney’s mother to come get them. Sydney’s friend did go to the hospital that night, and “she’s okay” according to Sydney.
Another worst-case scenario began with a hookup and then became threatening. Victoria met a man through Tinder, hooked up with him, but feared the hookup had become a stalking situation.

Victoria: Yeah, so then, now it’s been like months and this guy is contacting me and he’s like, “I need to meet up with you in person, I can’t tell you why.” I was like, “Ok, you’re gonna tell me why or we’re not meeting up” like, I’m not stupid. And so I pressed him and pressed him, and then he told me that he needed a fake ID, this guy is, way older, you know, than a person who needs a fake ID for juvenile reasons.

KH: Right, like getting into a bar, or whatever.

Victoria: Yeah, so like, “Ok, this guy did some stupid shit or he’s about to.” You know? So I was like, “I don’t even have one myself, I don’t know who to talk to.” Even though everybody knows one person to talk to, this is University. And that was his point in asking me, but I was like, “No.” But, for [a] couple weeks after that I was really scared that he was just gonna find me… so I was like, “We’re not going on runs, we’re not going out with friends, ok we’re on like, lockdown for a week.”

Thankfully, Victoria did not encounter the man again and has returned to her regular habits.

It is important to note that, in my sample, worst-case scenarios are not the norm. Instead, dating apps users usually face a bad or good hookup, an awkward date, or maybe a great first date. Afterwards the question is, “What do we do now?”
Congruent with what scholars have found when studying hookup culture, whether good or bad, most dating app hookups do not progress into committed relationships (Bogle 2008; Orenstein 2016; Wade 2017). Many of the hookups have a particular tinge of “weirdness” following the encounter. Jennifer details her one and only dating app hookup.

Jennifer: But I did meet with one guy. He lived over in like, the Upper Class Dorms. So, I just went over there and we watched a movie. We just like, made out, but I mean nothing happened at that point. I didn’t think he was, he wasn’t as attractive as I thought he was in like, the pictures. So it was just kind of like, not a good experience. Like, I didn’t have any fun, there was no attraction there, so we just kinda watched the movie, I left.

KH: Sure.

Jennifer: Immediately when I left I blocked his number, un-matched him, just because I was like, “Ugh, this is weird.” I didn’t like the feeling of it, because I was uncomfortable. Like, I’ve never met him before and now like, [I’m] in his bed and we’re cuddling and then we’re making out, and it’s just, it was just like, an odd situation.

Even hookups that go better than Jennifer’s tend to only happen once or twice. Since hookup culture privileges uncommitted sex, and students’ techno-cultural habitus has elements of hookup culture woven throughout it, students do not seem to approach these encounters with serious intentions. Sydney explains that a match was, “a one time deal,
haven’t talked to him since. I don’t even have his phone number saved in my phone.” For students looking for more than a hookup though, the vetting of vibes is not a full proof strategy for successful dates. Phil says:

Phil: And they were just not at all what they, what their profile had led me to think.

KH: Like physically? Or like, what they [were like personality wise]?
Phil: Both? The picture, she looked a lot, she kinda looked a little bit taller and a little bit skinnier in her pictures and she had like one of those, I guess typical white girl looks. You know?
KH: Basic?
Phil: Yeah, basic. Like, UGGs, leggings, and she always took like, filter pictures with Snapchat and Instagram. But when I met her she had to go like, I met her at some fast food place. Cause I was gonna help her with, I was gonna tutor her in a homework subject, I think it was English.
KH: Ok.
Phil: Was our first, we were going on like a date there. It was to help her with English at first, which was really lame looking back on it. It’s so lame. But, when I got there she was very short. She had to have been like 4’10” or 4’11” [and] kinda chubby. And she was, was not white girl basic at all, she was kind of like pop punk you could say.
Phil and his date never met again. Alternatively, taking a risk sometimes goes well, further demonstrating that online vibes are not the best measure of how a date will go.
Sarah’s friend “was really attracted to the guy but their conversations were absolutely horrific, like, didn’t flow at all, didn’t get a good vibe from it” but once they met “they hit it off in person.” And six of my respondents have found someone to be with long-term.

Justin does not feel that he approached meeting his current girlfriend differently than any of the other women he met on dating apps:

I kind of went about it the same way. Just talked to her, get to know her. And then I actually found out that I lived in the apartment right below her, so I just invited her down. We hung out. And we were friends for a really long time after that, like a couple months and then we realized we like actually got along, we matched, and we started dating.

Wendy also approached meeting her boyfriend John the same way she approached other matches and realized upon meeting their compatibility almost instantly.

Well like the other ones, like, yeah we had a good time but when I went to meet him the first time, like, I don’t know we just never stopped laughing. It was just a really good time. We actually ended up hooking up, and I left, but we had been talking for like a week, maybe a little bit over a week now that I think about it. But like, we had a lot in common… and I don’t know, it just felt different. It felt like, it felt right.
DISCUSSION

The college students I spoke with have fully incorporated smartphones into their lives. They share with their peers a techno-cultural habitus, through screenshots, Snapchat, and dorm room conversations. Today’s college students face a hookup culture that is mixed with ubiquitous smartphone use. Wade (2017) briefly mentions Tinder, but previous literature on hookup culture either excludes dating apps altogether or precedes their invention. As dating apps have risen in popularity, so has the stereotype of the lonely dating app user silently swiping away. But this image is not an accurate one; rather, students swipe together and have developed their own frame of reference for solving the problems they encounter when using dating apps. I find students face issues similar to the problems found in hookup culture, but there are unique challenges, too.

The hookup script—vague, drunk, and in the moment—does not fully apply to dating apps although there are some similarities (Bogle 2008; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Snapp et al. 2014; Wade 2017). For instance, Wade (2017) finds that women at college parties rely on each other’s physical cues to determine if they should hookup with their dance partner. Similarly, my respondents rely on each other to determine whether or not they should pursue someone they met through a dating app. An important difference is the lack of alcohol. Aside from Sydney’s near date rape, most dating app hookups do not directly involve alcohol. By transcending the physical space of a college party into the virtual space of dating apps, alcohol is no longer a necessary “social lubricant” (Kalish
and Kimmel 2011). Instead, dating app users operate in a taken-for-granted assumption that people are on dating apps for sex.

As Wade (2017) argues, hookup culture prioritizes the detachment of meaning and sex. This is problematic for students seeking committed relationships (Bogle 2008). Similarly, my respondents use dating apps that are steeped in hookup culture and find themselves using apps that benefit people looking for hookups, but difficult for people wanting something more. Just as Wade (2017) finds that some students eagerly participate in hookup culture, while some are more ambivalent, I found that dating apps users have mixed desires, too. Since the assumption is that dating apps are for quick and easy sex, women are bombarded by sexually crude messages. Although they usually can be brushed off, this is discouraging for women who seek something more than a one-night-stand. But for students that are looking to “Netflix and chill,” like Lizzie, dating apps can serve that purpose. Disappointingly similar to hookup culture for some users, matches rarely transpire into a long-term relationship (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). An additional challenge is that the vetting processes students use to find people who embodies “good vibes,” can fail to provide anything beyond identity verification. As Sarah found, the assumption that people’s personality is mirrored by their text conversations is faulty. Thus, for students looking for more than sex, their techno-cultural habitus is not necessarily better than hookup culture in its normative form.

But there is no going back. Since college students use their smartphones for almost everything imaginable, their smartphones are now part and parcel with hookup culture. When students come to grips with the fact that they are willing to meet someone
from a dating app, they face new negative consequences on top of the already known problems with hookup culture.

The risks inherit on dating apps somewhat mirror the risks in hookup culture. Sexual risks, physical risks, and social risks can all occur. In addition, fears of catfishes, or aesthetic profiles are salient for dating apps users (Toma et al. 2008). And although I do not know for certain, I would argue that the orgasm gap persists in online hookups (Armstrong et al. 2012) since most meetings are one time encounters. To help mitigate these risks, students rely on each other. Even if downloading these apps is done in a joking manner, the techno-cultural habitus my respondents live in acknowledges that these risks are real. Thus, they rely on each other through text check-ins and iPhone pin drops. What users may lose in terms of their agency (e.g. taking friends considerations seriously when matching), they gain back in security. By thoroughly embodying dating app use, my respondents have taken hookup culture in a new direction.

Previous literature situated hookup culture on college campuses, fueled by alcohol, and practiced at misogynist themed dance parties (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013; Orenstein 2016; Wade 2017). In many ways that is still true, and my respondents acknowledged the prevalence of hookup culture on University’s campus. But there is a new piece. My respondents carry hookup culture with them in their pocket or purse. By using dating apps, they are able to carry potential matches along with them, and keep in touch with friends when they go to meet matches, too. Some of the same problems of hookup culture persist when students use dating apps, but it is important to examine dating app use within the broader techno-cultural habitus of students today. My findings
partially fill this gap, examining how college students use dating apps; how dating apps are experienced on a social as well as individual level; and how the risks associated with hooking up are both similar to and different from face-to-face hook ups.

**Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. As is the case with qualitative research using a small sample size that is not representative, my findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. Specifically, my sample and results suffer from two weaknesses due to a lack of diversity in the sample. My sample consists largely of white women, which makes analysis across gender or of masculinity difficult, as well as analysis of race. A future study with a larger and more diverse sample would allow for an examination of how race shapes users’ experiences with dating apps. A study that considers how men of color engage dating apps would be particularly insightful. Despite the weaknesses of this study, I feel that I have made a strong case that hookup culture, as it is experienced through dating apps, is best understood within the techno-cultural habitus of college students. Placing the experience of dating app users within this context allows us to see how students engage in shared meaning and language in their dating app practices.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES
# APPENDIX A

## DEMOGRAPHIC TABLES

### Table 1: Women

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APPENDIX B

EMAIL RECRUITMENT FLYER

Subject Line: Why Talk When You Can Swipe?

Hello,

My name is Ken Hanson and I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology here at Kent State University. I’m looking for people willing to talk to me about their experiences using smartphone apps to find romantic partners for dating and/or hooking up. If you are willing to talk to me, please reach out to me at khanson6@kent.edu or, if you can think of someone who might be interested in talking to me, feel free to forward this email along to them.

Some information you might want to know before contacting me:

- At this point in my study I’ll only be interviewing heterosexual students 18 – 25 years old

- If you agree to be interviewed you will be entered in a raffle to win a $50 gift card for Amazon

- I will ensure that all identifying information will be kept confidential

I hope to hear from you soon!

All the best,

Ken R. Hanson
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _________________________________  Date: __________________

Desired Pseudonym: _____________________  Race: __________________

Age: ________  Major(s): _________________  Gender: ________________

Class Standing (circle one):

1st year  2nd year  3rd year  4th year  5th year  6th year or beyond

Frequency of Dating App Use (Circle one below):

Never  Monthly  Weekly  Daily  Multiple Times a Day
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Phase 1

***Consent form distributed and collected, demographic sheet distributed and collected***

[Goal: Cover demographic information and get acquainted with participant’s college life and smartphone use]

Social Life

So to start, I’d like to talk broadly about your life here Kent State

1. Tell me about your social life at college.
   - How important is academics in your life?
   - What clubs and organizations are you a part of?
   - Do you play any college sports?
   - Do you belong to any fraternities or sororities?
   - Do you live in the dorms or off campus?
   - How often do you drink? Do you drink at bars, house parties, or frats?

2. Tell me about your friendship circle at college.
   - How do you know your friends? From home, clubs, sports, or frats?
   - Do you live with your friends, at home?
   - Describe the role parties play in your friendship circle at college.

Alright, now I’d like to talk a little bit about cellphones, too

Smartphones

3. Tell me about how you use your cellphone.
   - When did you get your first cellphone, first smartphone?
   - What are the different purposes you use your phone for?
   - What apps do you have? Do your friends have the same apps?
   - How many times a day would you say you check/use your phone?

Ok, great. So that covers the basic information, now I’d like to talk about hooking up.
Phase 2

[Goal: Cover participant’s experiences with using cellphones to hookup]

Hooking Up

Some people say that college is the time to hookup. What are your thoughts on that?
- How do you define hooking up?
- Would you say you participate in the hookup scene here at Kent?

Online Mediated Hookup

Run me through a typical hookup or date where you met someone using your phone.
- What apps do you use on your phone?
- How does it start? Where are you when you use these apps?
- What are you looking for in the potential matches?
- Alright, you match with someone, now what?
- What do you talk about? How long do you talk?
- Who suggests meeting? How often would you say a match leads to a meet up?
- Where do you take a Tinder date? What happens?
- How often does a Tinder date become a hookup? Same day? Later?
- Do you bring protection, like condoms, with you?
- What about after the hookup?
- What do you tell your friends?
- How do you reach out to the person you hooked up with afterwards? If not, why not?
- What are some unusual things that have happened to you using hookup apps?
- Why do you think some matches fail to transpire in anything happening?

So that covered the experiences you’ve had with smartphones and hooking up. Now, I’d like to talk a little bit about why you use smartphones to hookup.

Phase 3

[Goal: Understand why the participant uses smartphones to try and hookup]

Tell me about the good, the bad, and the ugly with using your phone to meet someone.
- What do you like about hookup and dating apps?
- What do you not like about hookup and dating apps?
- Do you prefer meeting someone online or in person? Why or why not?
- Why do you think other people use apps like these?
- Do you feel nervous when you meet people from it?
- How seriously do you take these apps?
- Do you think meeting people using apps is more risky than meeting people in person? Like as in, personal harm or contracting an STI.
- Can you think of a time you felt unsafe in a hookup or when meeting someone you met on an app? How did you handle that?
- How do you manage risk when meeting someone you met on an app? Is that something you think about?
- Have you had a conversation about risks with the person you’re meeting/met? Before meeting, during, or after you meet?
- How open are you about the fact that you use these apps with your friends and family?

Ok well, those were my questions. Do you have anything you’d like to add or any questions?

***End interview, thank participant***