Why play the Tinder game? An ethnographic investigation of dating app usage among members of a predominantly queer community at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Abstract

Millions of college aged students worldwide use dating apps like Tinder, Hinge, Bumble and Grindr. However, the reasons as to why so many people use them are unclear, considering that dating apps have a bad reputation among older generations, and even people who use dating apps seem to not like them particularly much. Why, then, do people use them at all? My personal curiosity regarding this question led me to search for answers in my own living community. I conducted detailed ethnographic interviews with eight other members of my living group, a predominantly queer community at MIT. I found that most people use dating apps to widen their social networks, and to meet people that they do not think they could have crossed paths with otherwise. I also found that my peers' individual experiences with dating apps differed significantly depending on the apps they used, their races, and their sexualities, and that users are exploiting dating app technology to perpetuate certain toxic and exclusionary behaviors.

Introduction

As of May 2017, there were 54,350,000 single individuals in the United States. Of those individuals, over 90% had tried online dating at least once (Statistic Brain 2017). The magnitude of these statistics are surprising, and for many years, online dating has been a market ripe for the taking. The idea of computerized dating has been around since the advent of the Internet - and even before, exemplified by programs such as Operation Match, Dateline, and Com-Pat I - , but the rise of the iPhone in the late 2000s gave birth to a new type of online dating: the dating app (Hicks 2018).

The first dating app to achieve widespread popularity was Grindr, which was launched in 2009. Grindr was arguably the first app to use the geosocial networking feature, which allowed the app to show the profiles of other app users nearby. This proved to be wildly popular, and Grindr hit four million users in 192 countries within three years of its launch.

In an echo of how the gay nightspots of the sixties inspired the singles bars, Tinder was launched on Grindr's heels in 2012 (Schwartz 2016). Tinder's functionality is essentially the same as Grindr's, but it introduced a feature that has since become iconic in modern culture: the swipe. Expressing interest in a potential partner became as easy as a quick swipe right on a phone screen. The simplicity and low activation energy of the swipe cannot be understated; this factor, combined with a large market, caused Tinder to become one of the most popular dating apps worldwide. The basis of a double opt-in system; in other words, ""no matter who you are, you feel more comfortable approaching somebody if you know they want you to approach them", seemed to be the reason why apps like Grindr and Tinder became popular so quickly, and Tinder in particular went from an experiment conducted on a few college campuses in 2012, to winning TechCrunch's "Best Startup of 2013" award, and then to breaking a billion swipes a day in 2014 - about 12000 swipes per second.

However, just like all new technologies popular among a young demographic, Tinder has its naysayers, the most prominent of which have a particular flavor of complaint: that Tinder

usage causes certain negative outcomes, such as increased rates in STIs, increased infidelity, the "ruin of dating", and the enabling of sexual harassment and stalking. These claims have not been empirically proven, and it is unknown if it is possible to do this at all. Another faction of people believes in the "Tinder effect"; the phrase, coined by professor business psychology Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, encapsulates the belief that Tinder is a result of the times and is driven by modern social needs. These two facets of opinion represent an important point of contention in the field of media studies: technological determinism versus social constructivism. Adherents of the former believe that technology is the direct cause for certain changes in society, while supporters of the latter emphasize that the state of society lends to the formation of certain types of technology.

Academics quarreling over technological determinism and social constructivism may pull dating apps into their arguments and try to make certain points about them, but - to coin a phrase - what about the kids? What about the young adults who make up a majority of the dating app user base? What do they think about the rapid convergence of technology and dating? How do dating apps make them feel with regards to their own agency over technology? These are all questions that will be explored in this investigation.

More specifically, the actual question that this paper will be exploring stems from a strongly held view of my own: that dating apps are untrustworthy and violate every principle of stranger danger that I learned as an elementary school student. Furthermore, I find it questionable that an algorithm can choose a group of people that it thinks I should date. In short, I consider dating apps indubitably 'sketchy', and I am curious as to why my peers - who were born and raised in the same time period and undoubtedly received the same programming - use these apps. Furthermore, while my peers have changed several of my strongly held views, they have not managed to convince me of the merits of dating apps.

The question I will be asking, finally, is as follows: why do other members of my living group - a predominantly queer college dorm known for its counterculture tendencies - use dating apps, and how do these apps make them feel about their own lives and dating choices? To answer this, I will conduct a series of ethnographic interviews with other members of my living group to gain insight into their dating app usage and how it makes them feel, in a broad sense, about the effect of technology on their dating lives.

Background

My interest in this topic is multifaceted; first and foremost, as an individual who finds the concept of a dating app strange in and of itself, I want to know why the people around me use dating apps and how this usage makes them feel. While a great deal of my opinions regarding sexuality and relationships have changed significantly since moving into my living group, I still maintain that dating apps are a strange social construct and I personally do not believe in using them myself. I find this interesting because I would think that opinions on sexuality and relationships are more immutable than opinions regarding a dating app.

In the past, I hadn't really analyzed why I hold this negative opinion towards dating apps so strongly. Upon some self-reflection, I think that I find them distasteful on a surface level because of the hours of stranger danger training I received in elementary school and generally distrust people on the Internet. On a deeper level, however, I think that I would rather have agency over this aspect of my life and not leave my romantic prospects in the figurative hands of an algorithm.

More broadly, I think my interests tie more into the divide between technological determinism and social constructivism. While I used to think that the distinction between these two belief systems was akin to opposing political parties, I have since realized that most people don't really have an opinion that falls into either bucket. They are not fields of thought so much as they are weapons used in arguments between members of different branches of academia. As a current engineer in training, I would think that the people around me tend to believe in technology's power to change the world, and know for a fact that many do subscribe to this line of belief. This would place them, at least unconsciously, on the deterministic side of the debate. On the other hand, sociologists, anthropologists, and other people who study the relationships between people and society tend to claim that society shapes the technology that people create.

Because technological determinism and social constructivism are not well defined fields of thought, the literature on how having a certain point of view affects technology usage is somewhat lacking. I would hypothesize that having a more deterministic view of technology leads to less usage of apps that can exert some amount of control over one's life - such as dating apps. This is the opinion that I hold, and I am curious as to why my peers - the people who influence my viewpoints the most - don't share this opinion with me, and I wish to glean some insight into their feelings regarding their perceived agency over their dating lives.

Literature Review

Several bodies of academic literature have informed this investigation. Firstly, we will broadly investigate how opinions of society's agency over technology (and technology's agency over us) have changed over time. The technological determinism vs. social constructivism debate has been alive and well in the field of media studies since the 1960s. Academics have often used the writings of two well-known social theorists - Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams - to exemplify both ends of this spectrum. McLuhan is famous for his declaration that "the medium is the message"; the phrase was the title of his pioneering work in media studies, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* McLuhan was convinced that "particular technologies necessarily have specific impacts which are direct results of their form", and although he was certainly not the first social theorist to endorse technological determinism[1], he was the most vocal academic to do so in the last few decades (OpenTextBC). On the opposite end of the spectrum stood Raymond Williams, who argued in his extended critique of McLuhan that, "If the

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[1] More than a century before McLuhan, Marx wrote in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist."

effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural argument and let the technology run itself" (Williams 1974). Williams argues for a form of social constructivism, in which "the impacts of technologies are socially and culturally constructed by the ways in which they are employed by humans". In the decades since the debate between McLuhan and Williams, however, McLuhan's claims have remained marginally more relevant to popular society. Wired magazine, a tech publication "which explores various issues surrounding digital technologies from a pro-technology and pro-capitalist perspective", even declared McLuhan their 'patron saint' in the early 90s. In the present, however, we know that both McLuhan and Williams had somewhat oversimplified views of the relationship between technology and agency, and more recently, "there have been a range of approaches which attempt to construct alternative understandings of technology which suggest a form of soft determinism, whereby technology impacts and affects society, whilst society simultaneously affects and shapes technology (Bennett 2011, Terranova 2004, Steigler 1998, Braidotti 2013)" (OpenTextBC). Notably, Latour's Actor Network Theory is a well-used example of soft determinism. In the present, society's opinion of the relationship between technology and agency seems to have shifted to a soft determinist view, which is important to keep in mind as we continue our investigation.

Next, we will examine the claims that online dating apps are leading to a deconstruction of traditional relationship structures. This is not a new argument; in 2003, Zygmunt Bauman argued in his book *Liquid Love* that online dating is "symptomatic of social and technological change that transforms modern courtship into a type of commodified game" (Hobbs et al. 2016). Coming from Bauman, one of the most eminent social theorists of the 20th century, this argument carried a great deal of plausibility, and has proven pervasive in modern day opinion as well[2]. Indeed, a decade later, Vanity Fair published an article with the rather sensationalist headline: "Tinder and the dawn of the 'dating apocalypse'" (Sales, 2015a). The article pulls together interviews from many college students on how Tinder has 'ruined' the dating scene, and opinions from numerous psychologists that support this point. Specifically, the psychologists discuss how male users of dating apps perceive an increased supply of potential partners, and this leads to "[a] shift towards short-term dating. Marriages become unstable. Divorces increase. Men don't have to commit, so they pursue a short-term mating strategy. Men are making that shift, and women are forced to go along with it in order to mate at all" (Sales, 2015a).

The psychologists' clear bias towards technological determinism is not the reason I mention this article; rather, it is because of the student interviews it contains. Both male and female college students that use Tinder conclude that the app is the cause of the problems in their dating lives, but are markedly unwilling to actually stop using it. To take a line from Duguay's comprehensive analysis of mobile dating apps, one of the primary sources consulted during this

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[2] I must admit to sharing this opinion with Bauman and this is the primary reason that I find dating apps distasteful; however, whether other people in my demographic share this belief with me, and whether this affects their dating app usage, is what I intend to investigate.

investigation: "Stating that hookup apps cause STIs or loneliness is a technologically deterministic viewpoint that dismisses the practices and understandings of users and misses the ways that technologies (including the specific affordances (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2016) of particular apps and social practices and social practices evolve" (Duguay et al, 2016). Similarly, from Hobbs et al.: "some accounts of dating apps and modern romantic practices are too pessimistic, and downplay the positives of 'networked intimacy".

Next, we must consider the current state of research on dating apps, specifically Tinder. In the past three or so years, a majority of studies have focused on exploring the experiences of Tinder users, as well as the reasoning behind Tinder usage. These studies have revealed several interesting findings; a study done on Belgian Tinder users in 2017 revealed that "a user's swiping quantity does not guarantee a higher number of Tinder matches, women have generally more matches than men and men usually have to start a conversation on Tinder"; another study conducted in 2016 on Hungarian Tinder users led to the development of a "Problematic Tinder Use Scale", which "contains six items that cover Griffith's (2005) model of problematic use" (Timmermans and Courtois 2018, Orosz, Gábor et al 2016). A 2017 study conducted in the Netherlands "uncovered six motivations to use Tinder: Love, Casual Sex, Ease of Communication, Self-Worth Validation, Thrill of Excitement, and Trendiness". This study defined expectations by revealing that "the Love motivation appeared to be a stronger motivation to use Tinder than the Casual Sex motivation", but met expectations by concluding that "men were more likely to report a Casual Sex motivation for using Tinder than women". With regard to age, "the motivation Love, Casual Sex and Ease of Communication were positively related to age" (Sumter et al. 2017). All three of these studies were conducted by European professors of media studies or professors of communication, and strangely, this seemed to be a true among most other papers in the field as well[3]. We also cannot forget to mention Stefanie Duguay, an Canadian media studies professor. Her broader research "focuses on the influence of digital media technologies in everyday life, with particular attention to sexual and gender identity and social media", but she has made numerous contributions to the field of Tinder studies, including an extensive case study of Tinder and several other peer reviewed articles, as well as a few book chapters (Duguay 2016). In contrast to the aforementioned researchers, however, the purpose of this investigation is not to find out peoples' motivations for using Tinder, but rather reasons that they would not use it. This paper is positioning itself apart from most of the current dating app researchers by trying to uncover the opposite of what most of them are investigating.

Lastly, we will consider the methods that other researchers use to conduct these types of investigations. The most common types of data collection seem to be ethnographic interviews and large scale surveys - which are, respectively, qualitative and quantitative methods. These means are intended for slightly different ends. Ethnographic interviews, and the field of ethnography in general, are intended to shine light on the practices of a certain subculture. It is

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[3] I am not sure why the researchers studying Tinder are all concentrated in Europe, and I'm not sure how I could answer that question at all.

not necessarily the intention to draw correlations and conclusions from this data; rather, the data is meant to be holistic and stand on its own. There are several examples of researchers using ethnographic techniques in dating app studies. Braziel, in her exploration of how college students use Tinder, uses ethnographic interviews to argue "that Tinder changes this subjectivity of these college users through the way in which the app begins to condition users to see both others, and then themselves, as objects of desire" (Braziel 2015). Brubaker et al., in their sociotechnical account detailing the implications of leaving the dating app Grindr, drew from 16 interviews which had participants "[report] on the varied definitions of leaving, focusing on what people report leaving, how they leave and what they say leaving means to them". David and Cambre also use ethnography to "examine the sociotechnical dynamics of how users navigate the app and take up or resist the subject positions encouraged by the user interface feature of swiping" (David and Cambre 2016). Quantitative studies are also frequently conducted within the digital media studies field, as exemplified by several Tinder focused studies. Most quantitative methods ask users to rank certain opinions on a numerical scale. Orosz et al. used a 16 item questionnaire that asked subjects to rank each question from 1-7 to determine factors that related to problematic Tinder use (Orosz, Gábor et al 2016). Researchers also use surveys on Mechanical Turk to get a large, varied group of subjects. Sevi et al used a MTurk survey to determine whether Tinder users displayed certain amounts of risk-taking behavior and had low sexual disgust sensitivity using a similar ranking system as Orosz et al. Similarly, Ranzini and Lutz used MTurk to identify factors that motivated Tinder use among subjects.

For this study, I took a more qualitative, ethnographic approach. Since this research is my first step into the field of ethnography, I sought guidance on how to conduct these types of studies from works by well-known ethnographers. The first work that I consulted was by danah boyd, whose book *The Social Lives of Networked Teens* was based on around a decade's worth of ethnographic interviews with teens about their technology usage. She lays out her methods in a detailed paper, in which she describes the "four discrete components" of her "ethnographic study of teens' engagement with social media": "teen pop culture and subculture immersion, participant-observation and content analysis of teens' online traces on social media sites, participant-observation and 'deep hanging out' in physical spaces where teens gather, and semi-structured face-to-face ethnographic interviews" (boyd 2015). While boyd did not have the same time constraints that constrict the scope of this study, the first three components of her ethnographic method are somewhat redundant to this study, since I am a member of the ingroup of people that I am using as my subjects, and therefore need no contextualizing for the social practices of said group. As a result, I only utilized the fourth component: semi-structured face-to-face ethnographic interviews. I also consulted Tracy's "eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research" to guide the framing of my interview questions, as well as the structure of this project overall (Tracy 2010).

Methods

        To evaluate my peers' opinions and feelings regarding the relationship between dating apps and technology, I conducted several ethnographic interviews with members of my living community, East Campus. East Campus is a predominantly queer, counterculture living space for undergraduate students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a university known for producing leaders in technological innovation. As I mentioned previously: while this is an untested hypothesis, I would claim that students at MIT have implicitly deterministic views towards technology because many of them applied to MIT with the explicit goal of building technologies that can change the world. Keeping this in mind, I asked more questions that were framed to determine how the individual felt about dating technologies in their own lives rather than how they felt about technology affecting the world as a whole.

        To write my questions, I referenced Tracy as well as "Strategies for Qualitative Interviews" from the Harvard Sociology department. The questions are as follows, and will be referred to by their number in the paper from this point onwards:

1. Give me your demographic information - age, gender identity, and sexual orientation.
2. Very generally, what do you like and dislike about dating apps?
3. Tell me your opinions on the relationship between technology and the dating scene.
4. How do you think the dating scene worked before technology was introduced? Do you think you would have preferred that system, or do you prefer the technology-integrated system? Why or why not?
5. How do you think technology makes you feel with regards to your dating choices, more free or more constrained? Why?
6. How do you think that technology in the dating scene will look in the future?
7. What are some things that you wish dating apps did?

        I also took a leaf out of boyd's book and did no writing during my interviews. Instead, I took recordings of each individual speaking so that I could concentrate on engaging in the conversation.

Results and Discussion

1.

        Results: Eight people agreed to sit down and participate in interviews that lasted anywhere from 15 to 40 minutes. Five people identified as female, two identified as male, and one identified as non-binary. Subjects aged in range from 18 to 24 with a median of 19.5. Two subjects identified as bisexual or questioning, two as pansexual, two as males who are attracted to other males, one as a female who is attracted to other females, and one as a female who is attracted to males.

Discussion: While the subject gender ratio was skewed fairly female, the range of sexualities that subjects identified as diversified the range of experiences that were recounted. The subjects also skewed slightly young because most of the older students are struggling to finish final projects at the end of the semester and likely did not see these interviews as a worthy use of their time. While I do wish that I had heard more accounts from seasoned dating app users, I thought that all the responses I received were thoughtful as well as insightful.

2.

Results: There were five major themes that arose out of subjects' answers to question 2:
a. Many people dislike that most popular dating apps are heavily image based.
b. There is too much activation energy required to establish relationships with strangers.
c. It is a good way to meet people that you would not have met otherwise.
d. Many people expressed a 'many fish in the sea' mentality.

Discussion:

a. College students tend to gravitate towards Tinder, Hinge, and Bumble because they are popular among the college-aged demographic. However, all three of these apps utilize the swiping mechanic, which essentially requires users to make a snap judgment on somebody's appearance. Whether an individual would date somebody or not is boiled down to a single second of consideration that is entirely based on an image of a person, rather than the person's personality, character traits and flaws, or any other non-appearance based qualities that determine 'dateability'. Many interviewees expressed distaste for this particular aspect of image based dating apps for a variety of reasons that can be summed up by the following points:

  i. Implicit biases are stronger when you are making a quick, image-based judgment. Implicit bias is a well-studied field of sociology, and several studies have reported that it is well and alive in modern American society. A 2003 study found that résumés with stereotypically white names were a whopping 50% more likely to be called back for an interview than résumés with stereotypically black names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003). A 2015 study found that people tend to associate stereotypically African-American names with larger, more violent people than they do with stereotypically white names (Holbrook et al. 2015). Notably, the subjects in these studies were not provided with images; when provided with images, like users of dating apps are, the discriminatory effects of their implicit biases come into play much more visibly. One interviewee reported that when they had a picture with a white friend on their profile, they got significantly more matches than they did when they removed it. While this is beneficiary in some ways - if you are a person of color and somebody swipes left on you because of their own implicit biases, then you probably don't want to date

them anyways - it primarily serves to inflame the marginalization and veiled racism that most people of color express to various degrees.

ii. The culture that an image based system creates can be toxic as well as exclusionary. One interviewee recounted his experience using Grindr to me, describing the toll it takes on users' mental health. Grindr is well known for blatant displays of discriminatory behavior, ranging from overt racism[4] to body shaming. The interviewee also described a toxic strain of behavior that Grindr seems to perpetuate, in that having a stereotypically masculine body is highly valued among the gay community[5]. As a result, "people get more fit for Grindr, then have to get even more fit because other people are getting fit, and people just lose their minds trying to look good". The interviewee stated that he believes that dating apps - and Grindr in particular - create a culture that is heavily focused on presentation, weight, and race, and believes that these factors are given far more value in online dating than they are in in-person dating. While the link between Grindr and gay mens' poor mental health is not well researched, it is well-documented as a phenomenon. Jack Turban, a resident psychiatrist from Harvard Medical, wrote a Vox thinkpiece that discusses Grindr's use of variable ratio reinforcement, which is "one of the most effective ways to reinforce behavior, and it makes stopping that behavior extremely difficult. Slot machines are a classic example. Because gamblers never know when the next payout will come, they can't stop pulling the handle. They hold out hope that the next pull will give them the pleasurable sound of coins clanking against a metal bin, and they end up pulling for hours. Now imagine a slot machine that rewards you with an orgasm at unpredictable intervals". And while this is true for all dating apps, gay men in particular seem to struggle from extreme anxiety and depression from being in the closet[6], and the combination of poor mental health and an addictive dating app seems to only be leading to poorer mental health. This does not bode well for gay men in particular, and us as a society rapidly advancing in technology more broadly.

iii. Image based systems can take a toll on one's mental health and self-esteem. One interviewee reported a direct correlation between their dating app usage and a decline in their mental health, stating that the pressure to look a certain way and to conform to a certain beauty standard that was necessary to be considered desirable

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[4] Statements like "no rice" (no East Asian people), "no chocolate" (no black people), and "no curry" (no South Asian people) are apparently commonly found on Grindr profiles.

[5] The interviewee stated that many gay men feel the need to be hypermasculine in order to make up for the masculinity that they feel they have lost by being homosexual. I am led to believe that this is a well documented behavior.

[6] I feel like I have a lot more to say about this, but in the interest of not getting too derailed off of my research topic, I will point you to an article recommended to me by Sam Nitz called "The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness".

was crippling. Another interviewee expressed a concern for their own mental health, as well as the mental health of all dating app users, regarding the fact that they are constantly being judged primarily on their appearance. Dating apps are highly gamified, and - to briefly dip into game studies - this can create what is generally referred to as a 'magic circle' of play. "Within the circle of the game, etiquette and rules and regulations of regular life don't really apply (Huizinga). Things that once held little significance, like "swiping right," are now an integral part of the mechanics of the application. This could account for the bizarre, explicit, and borderline harassing messages that are exchanged through the Tinder app. In real life, many people would not say many of the things that they're willing to send strangers via Tinder, but because of the magic circle, they feel little to no repercussions for their lack of courtesy." Receiving demeaning messages based solely off of one's appearance is clearly harmful, especially to those who feel societal pressure to conform to a certain Eurocentric beauty standard.

b. Most of the people that an individual will match with on dating apps are complete strangers who share few mutual interests at most[7] and a single mutual interest[8] at least. Many interviewees expressed that they found the process of establishing communications with a complete stranger to be frustrating and time consuming. One interviewee mapped out a rough process of forming a relationship with a stranger for me; as she put it, most people seeking relationships have to go from strangers to acquaintances, acquaintances to friends, and then friends to potential romantic partners, but she believes that it is difficult to make it past the acquaintances phase on most dating platforms. Notably, all the interviewees who expressed this frustration answered that they prefer a more 'traditional' style of dating in question 4. A possible reason for this was expressed by the aforementioned interviewee: that most people an individual meets in person are through some sort of network. This could be through a shared club, living group, workspace, or a friend's network - but normally, an individual will have more in common with the people they interact with in real life than with people they meet on dating apps. In other words, people met through a common network are normally not complete strangers, and it is not as difficult to start a relationship with them. Furthermore, relationship building on dating apps is complicated by unreliable responses to messages. 'Ghosting', or abruptly cutting off text communication with somebody, is prevalent on dating apps. Even more prevalent is a complete lack of response to a message sent to a match. The ability to completely avoid speaking to somebody online is both a blessing and a curse; on one hand, unlike 'real life', you can block people who harass you to ensure that they never speak to you.

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[7] Some apps like Hinge and Bumble allow users to view a short list of interests before making a swiping decision.
[8] This is the mutual interest in each others' appearances, of course.

On the other hand, unlike 'real life', you cannot hold people accountable for not responding to your attempts to form a relationship. All of the interviewees who expressed frustration over ghosting experiences also stated that they preferred a more 'traditional' style of dating in question 4.

c. The one positive aspect of dating apps that interviewees mentioned was the power to meet people from outside one's social network. Several interviewees expressed the desire to interact with people from outside their 'bubble'[9], and said that dating apps had enabled them to meet people from other colleges and social contexts who are "really cool". Tinder in particular is almost a universal force among college-aged students in that everybody knows about it, and a large percentage of people are users themselves. This guarantees a fairly large pool of people to interact with in some capacity, and for people who wish to meet people outside the extents of their social network, dating apps are a good way to do this. In particular, many of the interviewees who identified as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual stated that technology is an excellent way to meet other members of the LGBTQ+ community; in real life, since people who identify as LGBTQ+ are a minority, it is far more difficult to meet other members of the community through location based social networks, such as those found in the school or workplaces. Since gay bars are no longer as popular as they were in the pre-technology era, members of the LGBTQ+ community must seek out other queer communities, and nowadays, many of these of communities have found their home on technology platforms[10]. An interviewee also expressed that technology has made it much easier to deduce whether an individual is a member of the LGBTQ+ community; revealing social media posts, online group memberships, and other identifying factors are far easier to find online - plus, frankly, it is much easier to stalk a Facebook profile than to ask somebody if they are gay.

d. Many interviewees expressed a 'many fish in the sea' mentality with various levels of concern towards the attitude. Some interviewees said that they appreciate the large pool of possible dating candidates that dating apps allow for because if a budding relationship doesn't pan out, "there are always more people out there". Other interviewees expressed that there will always be at least one person that they find attractive on dating apps simply because of the huge pool. However, other interviewees expressed discontent towards this attitude, stating that it made people 'lazy' and less likely to form lasting relationships exactly because "there are always more people out there". The result of having dating apps as a fallback is discontent with "settling" for a relationship. An interviewee expressed the compulsion to take advantage of all the options that were presented to them, and it caused them distress when they felt like they weren't getting

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[9] The 'bubble' is a phrase commonly used to refer to the insular nature of the MIT campus and community, but can broadly refer to any social network.

[10] Unfortunately, while this sounds good in theory, it has not proved to be so in practice, as we discuss in 2a.ii.

enough matches; another interviewee stated that they believed this mentality contributes to a 'hit it and quit it' attitude, particularly in men. More concerning are the implications of always having a huge dating pool available; to reference Jack Turban's Vox article again, a user Turban interviewed said that "when he and a boyfriend (he's gone through several) fight, his natural response is to open Grindr to "find an alternative" instead of working through problems". This is a truly concerning attitude to take towards relationships, which require open communication and honesty to thrive. It seems that dating apps are circumventing the need to communicate in a relationship by luring the individual back to the 'many fish in the sea'.

Overall, the general feel that I got from the answers to question 2 was that dating apps have far more flawed aspects than positive ones. While the desire to meet people from outside one's social circle is certainly a valid one, dating apps do not seem to be the best way to go about this. Unfortunately, given the time constraints that most normal college students are under, it is sometimes the only option available, and this seems to be the reason why most of the interviewees started using them in the first place, which answers my initial question as to why my peers are using dating apps.

3.
Results: There are three main points drawn from interviewee responses that merit discussion:
   a. Technology allows people to stay in touch and communicate even if they are not physically close to each other.
   b. Technology allows people to specify what they are looking for in a partner and facilitate the process of finding other people with similar interests.
   c. Technology feeds into a culture of instant gratification, which promotes a toxic form of hookup culture in which people don't feel like they have to 'settle' for a relationship.
   Discussion:
   a. Infrastructure for long distance communication has been in place since 550 BC, when Darius the Great ordered the construction of the Royal Road. We can extrapolate from this to claim that for all of modern human history, there has always been some means of facilitating long distance communication. In the present, this means happens to be technology, and personally, I think that the ability to talk to loved ones in real time - no matter how far away you may be from them - is perhaps one of technology's greatest merits. Most of the interviewees agreed with me on this point. When used properly, technology can strengthen long-distance relationships, and positively augment in-person relationships as well.

b. The rise of the general use dating app has inspired many niche spinoffs. From FarmersOnly[11] to FetLife[12], people looking for specific characteristics in a partner can find them on different flavors of social networking sites whose users all share a specific interest. For people who know what they want in a relationship, apps like these are a blessing. One interviewee - who happens to work at a startup that creates a dating app to match dog owners and dog lovers - stated that they believe niche dating apps are the future of dating technology. Another interviewee strongly disagreed, pointing out that it is difficult to get large groups of people to use new technologies, and the more niche an interest is, the less likely it is that an app centered around it would get much traction. I personally believe that there is a limit to how niche interests can get, but I personally do not think that we have quite reached that point yet. Another way in which niche dating apps are currently used is for race-specific dating sites, examples of which include shaadi.com[13], JDate[14], and BlackPeopleMeet. However, this has inevitably led to the creation of Where White People Meet, which sparked outrage and debate over whether or not this is okay. Because of the racist implications of white people using a white people only dating site are fairly strong, the site itself has not gained traction. It does lend to the question of what type of 'niche' a dating site can be without being discriminatory, and unfortunately, this is a question that I do not have the answer to.

c. Despite the merits discussed above, technology is undoubtedly contributing to a wide-scale cultural phenomenon: impatience. A few decades ago, it took hours to research what now takes us minutes and a few keypresses; it took weeks for packages to traverse the country, and now it takes us two days with Amazon Prime shipping. A study done by researchers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst showed that a YouTube video that took 40 seconds to load had already lost a third of its viewers by the time it started playing (Krishnan and Sitaraman 2012). We are accustomed to having everything at the click of a button, and now, this includes romantic and sexual partners. Several interviewees brought up that they believed instant gratification to be the prime contributor to toxic hookup culture - the hit it and quit it mentality, in other words. Why would you wait 40 seconds for a YouTube video when you can just click on another one? Why would you wait to develop a relationship with a dating app match when you can just swipe right on another one? The concept is the same.

From the answers to question 3, I gleaned that most of the interviewees seemed to believe that the technologies themselves had a direct effect on their dating experiences. The effect could

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[11] Exactly what it sounds like.
[12] Their website description is a "Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community. Like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me."
[13] Targeted at South Asian people; it has essentially become a way for parents to facilitate arranged marriages for their children, but is used by plenty of young South Asian people as well.
[14] A Jewish only dating site.

be positive, such as the ability to keep in touch with partners over long distances, or negative, such as the effect of instant gratification on people's actions - but the majority of interviewees displayed deterministic attitudes towards technology, which was within my expectations of what MIT students would believe. Only one interviewee expressed their belief that "it's not the technology, it's the people using the technology", which I considered to be indicative of a constructivist attitude.

4.

Results: Notably, most interviewees expressed that despite their dating app usage, they think that they still would have preferred a more 'traditional' form of dating, but they did not think that they would do away with technology entirely.

Discussion: Many participants explicitly stated the reasons that they use dating apps. They are under time constraints as a college student and meeting people is difficult; it is difficult to meet other queer people through social circles alone; it is simply a fun way to meet different people. For most interviewees, however, these reasons did not seem to triumph over the idealized version of 'traditional' dating. Interviewees gave several reasons for this. One stated that they would have preferred a system more rooted in good communication. Another expressed that it is easier to befriend and develop relationships with those in your immediate social circles. Most, however, had more ambivalent opinions. One interviewee brought up the point that people would have had to be far more proactive in their dating lives; it was possible to see somebody once and never see them again unless further contact was arranged. Another stated that the low stakes text messages sent on Tinder gave them the confidence to say things that they would not have said in real life. Yet another stated that the culture around dating apps was simply too toxic and they would prefer anything except that.

It seems that most interviewees' negative experiences with dating apps led them to state that they would prefer a more 'traditional' form of dating, in which people met through in-person social networks, form relationships, and go out on dates. However, none of them said that they would do away with technology entirely, which may have to do with the reasons discussed in section 3a, but is perhaps simply indicative of our reliance on technology. While dating apps are one end of the spectrum, the opposite end requires far more proactive behaviors than most people were willing to participate in. It seems that for college students who desire interaction with people from outside their social circles, dating apps prove to be a necessity rather than a choice.

5.

Results: Three people directly expressed that they felt more free in their dating choices with the use of technology, and two people expressed that they felt more constrained by technology. Three people expressed ambivalence, stating that they felt both free and constrained in different ways.

Discussion: We can split the discussion into two main sections: a. why people expressed a feeling of freedom, and b. why people expressed a feeling of constraint.

   a. The interviewees who stated that dating apps gave them a sense of freedom all had similar reasons for saying so: that the ability to view and potentially chat with so many people is freeing. Dating apps - at least superficially - offer people the opportunity to expand their social networks beyond their in person ones. They give their users the chance to meet people that they would have never crossed paths with through non-technological means.

   b. Interviewees stated that there were various different ways in which dating apps made them feel constrained. A few interviewees suffered from choice paralysis; the sheer number of people they could view on dating apps overwhelmed them. Some said that the huge pool of choices caused them to try to over-optimize their preferences, and this severely constrained the number of people that they actually matched with. Others said that the compulsion to act on all of their matches caused them to spend far more time on the app than they could afford. A few interviewees also expressed concerns regarding the algorithms that run dating apps. Most were uneasy about the fact that a dating app algorithm determines who its user can view, and this decision in turn is calculated from metadata unknown and unseen to the user. One interviewee said that the diversity she experiences in real life is far richer than the diversity that she sees on dating apps, and that she feels like dating apps exclude a lot of people. Indeed, the reasons in 2a.i may explain why dating apps reportedly are far more effective for white people, and it is likely that people of color would feel less motivated to use an app that would not gain them many matches due to the implicit biases of others. Other interviewees expressed how dating apps have become a crutch for them when relationships go bad, and the fact that they consider dating apps a crutch at all makes them uncomfortable.

   I would hypothesize that a user's feelings of freedom or constraint with regards to a dating app is completely dependent on what ingroups they are in and the ways in which people outside that group judge that ingroup. Racial minorities will likely feel constrained by dating apps due to the implicit biases of others; white people will likely not feel constrained in any sense. Similarly, people who do not adhere to the beauty standards of the day will likely feel constrained by dating apps, and people who do will not. This is an interesting instance of social constructivism in play; the technology itself is not affecting how the users feel, but rather, the way that people are using the technology - and the biases that they have been socialized with - are affecting the users instead.

   6.
      Results: There were a few suggestions that I found interesting:

a. Dating will happen entirely in virtual reality, a la Ready Player One[15] or Sword Art Online[16].

b. Machine learning algorithms will do the matching on peoples' behalf, a la *Black Mirror*'s "Hang the DJ".

Discussion:

a. Virtual reality dating is a commonly used trope in fantasy and science fiction media. A future in which virtual reality becomes as realistic as our own realities is not here yet, but is rapidly approaching. Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* describes a virtual world in which users can interact with in-world objects and feel like they are touching them; is it possible that we will one day be able to replicate physical intimacy in a virtual world? If so, then people would be able to engage in online dating to the maximum - they could interact with others through avatars and never have to meet in person. While I personally think that this is unlikely to happen - at least within my natural lifespan - I also would not go so far as to say it is completely implausible. If reliance on technology increases with every generation, this is not an unreasonable forecast for the state of the dating scene. However, I personally think that awareness of technology abuse is increasing, and is a result, it is likely that society will never see a time where dating is entirely virtual.

b. In "Hang the DJ", an episode from British science fiction anthology *Black Mirror*, viewers are introduced to a dystopian society in which a computerized system called 'Coach' matches two individuals and gives them an 'expiration date' for their relationship. The premise is that by examining their reactions to numerous lengths and types of relationships, the system will be able to determine a 'perfect match' for everybody in the world. It is revealed at the end of the episode that our two protagonists are part of a simulation within a dating app, and that are protagonists were merely visual representations of data entered into the app. I personally think that dating apps are on a fast track to this particular future. While it is discomforting to think that machine learning could predict a 'best match' for us, I think that somebody will eventually figure out a way to do it. However, this raises the same issue that was brought up in section 5b: people do feel uneasy about an algorithm constraining the pool of people that they can see based on conclusions that some machine learning methods have come to.

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[15] *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline details a dystopian world in which the 'real world' is a post-apocalyptic disaster, and "to escape the decline their world is facing, people turn to the OASIS, a virtual reality simulator accessible by players using visors and haptic technology such as gloves" (Wikipedia). The technology becomes so prevalent that children attend school and people have jobs in the OASIS, and essentially live their lives through the technology.

[16] Sword Art Online is a manga/anime series that details the adventures of a group of young adults in a virtual reality MMORPG. The catch is that if you die in the game, you do die in real life as well.

Most other interviewees expressed more ambivalent views on the future of technology and dating. While a few interviewees believed that dating apps will fall out of favor entirely, most agreed that while an absolute convergence of technology and dating is unreasonable, they will remain intertwined. A few even expressed hopes for the future, stating that perhaps people would find a way to subvert the toxic, self-perpetuated behaviors that dating apps seem to inspire.

7.

Results: While interviewees made several interesting suggestions for improving current dating apps, I will only be discussing the ones that I think would be easy to implement, as well as those that surprised me by not already existing in current dating app infrastructure:
   a. More filters on Tinder, including those that allow:
      i. Users to specify whether they are looking for hookups or a relationship
      ii. Users to specify whether or not they are transgender
   b. Algorithms to weed out racist or biased content, and perhaps profile moderation
   c. Incorporating scheduling widgets such as When2Meet or similar apps into dating apps
   d. Adding a feature that allows users to choose from a group of individuals rather than just swiping left or right on a single individual.
   Discussion:
   a. Quite frankly, I was surprised that neither of these features existed already on Tinder. Even though I have never used a dating app, it seems fairly obvious to me that people who are seeking a relationship should not be put into the same pool as people who are seeking casual sex. It seems like displaying this information could be implemented as a simple toggle button with three settings (seeking relationship, seeking casual sex, and unsure) in the app settings rather than as a throwaway line in a profile, and toggling the button should filter out people who have a different setting[17]. Similarly, the lack of ability to specify whether or not a user is transgender is perhaps indicative of Tinder's target audience: heterosexuals. However, this seems like an extremely simple feature to implement in the section of the app where users specify what gender they are and what genders they are attracted to.
   b. Content moderation is a tricky business; the invisible labor that goes into 'keeping dick pics and beheadings out of your Facebook feed'[18] is rooted in exploitation of the underprivileged residents of third world countries. Profile moderation on dating apps would likely go down the same dark route. However, perhaps a simple search algorithm that blocked common discriminatory phrases could be put into place. This would likely be a temporary solution, however, as social media users always find ways to circumvent

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[17] Unless the button is set to unsure, in which case they can probably just be shown everybody.
[18] Chen, "The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics Out of Your Facebook Feed," *Wired* (2014)

content blocking algorithms[19]. A more long term solution to eliminating toxic content on dating apps, particularly Grindr, would require eliminating the toxic culture that inspires the discriminatory content in the first place.

 c. Several interviewees complained about the difficulty of scheduling meetings with their matches; college students, especially at MIT, have severely limited amounts of free time. Implementing a scheduling widget similar to When2Meet, a website that allows multiple users to fill out times that they are free, would likely streamline this process for users who have matched.

 d. One of the interviewees who expressed concern for the implications of the swiping mechanic suggested a feature that allows users to pick a single individual from a randomized group of people. The interviewee said that this would alleviate the guilt she felt swiping left and right on people as a direct judgment on their appearances. While it is unlikely that any current dating app would ever implement this system - it would likely lose them users because it takes far less activation energy to swipe left and right on individuals than it is to put thought into picking an individual from a group - it would be an interesting idea for a new dating app.

Conclusion

 The answer to the question that was originally asked - why do other members of my living group use dating apps, and how do these apps make them feel about their own lives and dating choices? - is, as expected, multifaceted and complicated. In general, my peers picked up dating apps to meet people outside of their own social circles - people that they believed they could not meet otherwise. While some have stopped using dating apps, most continue to use them because, no matter their flaws, they are an effective method of meeting other people. However, my peers' individual experiences with dating apps differed significantly depending on the apps they used, their races, and their sexualities.

 With regards to my own opinions regarding dating apps: I do not think that my peers' testimonies altered them significantly. As somebody who is content with the extent of their in-person social networks, I feel no need to expand my networks using technology. My opinions of dating apps may have actually worsened due to my peers' numerous accounts of the toxicity and self-perpetuated bias that the dating app platforms perpetuate.

 I have also concluded that the technology itself is not inherently the cause of the problem, but when people bring their implicit biases and various racial socializations onto the app, it perpetuates toxic and exclusionary behavior. On this particular point, the research done for this project has, in fact, changed my opinion - while I would have blamed the technology for the problems its users faced previously, I now am convinced that the technology is inherently not at fault. This is perhaps my biggest takeaway from this project - learning that technology is simply

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[19] The best current example of this would be Tumblr users editing their NSFW content in various ways such that the algorithms are unable to catch them.

the gun that somebody is holding, and it is not the gun that kills people, but the person. We must remember, however, that the gun facilitates killing people, and as a society, we must find ways to refactor our technologies such that they cannot cause harm to others so easily.

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