

Identity representation and attraction on Tinder

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Project Description

Online dating is now the second most popular way of meeting a partner, only second to one's own social network (Finkel et al., 2012). Recently, location-based dating applications such as Tinder have gained rapid popularity, with Tinder approaching 50 million active users¹. On Tinder, users see profile pictures of others depending on geographical location, age, and sexual preference. Users can choose to *swipe* the picture either left or right, with right indicating interest and left indicating no interest in the other. If both users like each other, they match, and they are able to send messages and, possibly, plan a date. This makes Tinder a relatively straightforward method of meeting new people (Schouten, 2014).

On Tinder, impression formation is almost exclusively based on the profile picture, because little other information is available. However, profile pictures also prominently feature on social networking sites, professional networking sites, and online dating sites (Tong et al., 2008).

Previous studies showed that profile pictures play an important part in impression formation. However, most research has focused on the role of physical attractiveness (Brand et al., 2012; Wang et al, 2010). For example, the study by Wang et al. (2010) shows that people are not only more willing to become friends with profile owners with an attractive photo than with profile owners with an unattractive photo, they were even more willing to become friends with profile owners with no photo at all than profile owners with an unattractive photo.

Besides the importance of physical attractiveness, we know relatively little about what information people derive from a profile picture that determines attraction. In partner selection, however, not only physical attractiveness is important in assessing attraction of a potential mate, similarity in lifestyle and demographics are equally important (e.g., Regan et al., 2000). Especially information about the social categories that people belong to, such as ethnicity and cultural group, affect attractiveness and romantic interest (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). It stands to reason that when users judge a profile picture on Tinder, they also try to derive information about the social categories that the profile photo owner belongs to from the photo. However, no studies up to date have investigated what information people use to form impressions of others based on online profile pictures, and what information determines if they like someone or not.

Therefore, the central question of this research project is: *“what information do people infer from online profile pictures and to what extent does this information affect potential interest in the dating partner?”* To answer the research question, two interrelated projects are proposed: One to assess the information that people infer from online profile pictures and another to assess to what extent this information affects dating choice. The projects will be explained in detail below.

Project 1: What we read into online dating profile pictures

The first project tries to answer what information people pay attention to when judging online profile pictures on dating applications such as Tinder. As said, online pictures not only convey information about physical appearance, but also offer information about other factors that may influence attraction.

¹ <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/10/30/fashion/tinder-the-fast-growing-dating-app-taps-an-age-old-truth.html>

For example, when a profile owner posts a picture with glasses, a beard and tight pants, they may be called a hipster. And a profile picture with a tropical beach may indicate similar interests. In short, much information may be derived from profile pictures based on more than physical attractiveness.

To investigate this, the research trainees will conduct a qualitative study in two steps. We will ask 20 single people to partake in the study, 10 males and 10 females, of varying age and from various cultural groups. The exact specifications will be discussed together with the research trainees. All participants need to have Tinder installed on their mobile phones.

In the first step, participants will be asked to use Tinder and start judging profile pictures using a think aloud method. Specifically, for each photo, the participant is asked to specify what aspects of the profile picture they paid attention to in order to determine whether they like the profile owner or not. The participant will continue judging profile pictures until no new information is uncovered. Both the mobile phone screen (i.e., the photos) and the conversation are recorded for our analyses.

In the second step, the participants will again be asked to judge profile pictures. The setup is similar to the previous step, only this time we will select certain profile pictures beforehand that differ in ethnicity, cultural group, attractiveness, and other categories that may be of importance.

After data collection, data will be analyzed using grounded theory in which the most important categories will be uncovered that determine people's matching preferences. The end goal of the study is to come up with a list of characteristics that people pay attention to when judging an online profile picture. This will serve as input for the second study in which these are put to the test among a wider sample.

Project 2: Swipe left or right: What attracts in online dating profile pictures

In the second project, the results from project 1 will be experimentally tested. The experiment allows to test which of the categories derived from study 1 affect attraction the most. Moreover, people may not always be honest in what they say influences their choice. For example, people may reject a person because of ethnicity, but may be unaware or unwilling to confess. The experiment will also allow us to test whether these categories affect people's assessment.

The exact setup of the experiment will be determined by the trainees on the basis of the results of study 1. An online application similar to Tinder will be developed using Qualtrics. 200 people will participate in the experiment. Each participant will judge a number of profile pictures. The categories that were uncovered in study 1 will serve as input for the experimental manipulations, together with any other categories that are deemed important by the research trainees.

After the experiment, the research trainees will write a research paper based on the results from both studies (see the project timeline and deliverables below).

References

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Project Timeline

The two projects described above need to be conducted consecutively. Both research trainees will work together on both projects. Together with the coordinators, the trainees will write a single research paper based on both studies. See below for the project timeline:

Table 1. Project Timeline.

Task	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Start project	█										
Theory development	█	█									
Project 1		█	█	█	█						
Data collection		█	█								
Data analysis			█	█							
Progress report					█						
Project 2						█	█	█	█		
Design & setup experiment						█	█				
Data collection								█	█		
Abstract for 'Etmaal'									█	█	
Paper for ICA & journal									█	█	
Presentation symposium											█
End project											█

Deliverables

The project will result in a joint publication by the two coordinators and the two trainees as well as one or more conference presentations. Specifically, the deliverables are as follows:

- ✓ Presentation of the project results at the symposium that is to be organized as part of the Research Traineeships Program in December 2015.
- ✓ Submission of an abstract to the 'Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2016', the annual Dutch and Flemish communication conference for about 350 people. The two research trainees will present the paper, if accepted. Deadline: November 2015.
- ✓ Submission of a full paper to the International Communication Association annual conference. Deadline: November 2015.
- ✓ Submission of a paper to an academic journal. Possible outlets are: 'New Media & Society', 'Cyberpsychology' and 'Information, Communication and Society'. Deadline: December 2015.

Research Trainee Profile

The research trainee is an excellent student with at least a 7.5 grade average. Both bachelor, master and research master students are eligible to apply. However, the combination of a research master student and a bachelor student with a clear interest in pursuing the research master is preferred.

Research trainees with experience in both qualitative and quantitative research methods are especially invited to apply. However, trainees should at least indicate a clear interest in both methods. Research trainees will not each be assigned to one of the projects, but will work together on both studies.

Application Information

Applicants should send a resume and motivation letter to both project coordinators. In the motivation letter, they should clearly indicate their interest in the topic of the traineeship as well as in combining different research methods. Please send applications to both:

- ✓ Dr. Piia Varis: p.k.varis@tilburguniversity.edu
- ✓ Dr. Alexander Schouten: a.p.schouten@tilburguniversity.edu

Please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions using the above email addresses, call us at 013 466 2971, or swipe us right on Tinder!