

# Swipe, Right? Young People and Online Dating in the Digital Age

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

### Abstract

As many as 1 in 10 Americans utilize an online dating service. A sizable percentage of these users are young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, Because this social phenomenon is relatively new, little research has been conducted to examine the impact that online dating has on youth culture. The purpose of this study is to explore young people's expectations and realities of online dating and mobile applications, whether they deem their experiences as positive or negative, to examine young people's experiences of deception and discrimination by others and to gauge the extent that their relational styles are shaped by their usage. To answer these questions, the researcher created an anonymous online survey based in attachment theory, social constructionism, and consumer culture theory. The survey was completed by 60 young adult participants recruited via social media. The findings of this survey indicate that: young adults do use online dating and they do so for many reasons; many believe they are discriminated against based on their appearance; many believe they have been lied to but few perceive themselves as lying; and overall, most perceive online dating as positive and a normal thing to do. Future research should be qualitative in nature to more thoroughly examine young people's experiences with online dating.

*Keywords:* online-dating; young adults; attachment; consumer culture; social constructionism

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank research chair Jessica Toft for her continual support and guidance throughout the clinical research process. Furthermore, this research was made possible by committee members Karee Bohman and Terra Sorg who offered their feedback and expertise. Without these individuals, this research would not have been possible.

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## Introduction

Humans have an ingrained, primal need to feel purpose and inclusion. Young adults, ages 18-25, are particularly driven to belong and often use their relationships with others as a way to shape their own identity (Allen, 2008). One way that people achieve this is through the acquisition of meaningful romantic partnerships. In this day and age, more and more young people are turning to online dating sites and mobile phone applications in search of love and intimacy. From the launch of the first online dating site in 1995, to the invention of modern social networking dating sites in 2007, online dating has grown into a billion-dollar industry with countless users (PBS, 2013). In fact, today nearly 2 billion people worldwide use some form of online dating (Finkel et al., 2012).

According to the Pew Research Center's Internet Project, in 2013, as many as 1 in 10 young adults had used an online dating site, with approximately 10% of American men and 8% of American women having utilized such sites (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Of these individuals, the majority were between the ages of 18 and 44 and had completed at least some form of higher education. Furthermore, about 11% of White individuals and 8% of Black individuals have utilized some form of online dating (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Mobile dating applications are gaining particular popularity amongst young adults. Tinder, described in more detail later, is just one of many mobile dating applications designed for use on mobile phones and boasts up to 50 million users, 53% of which are young adults aged 18-24 (Schacter, 2015). As many as 66% of these users go on to date individuals they meet online, and 23% form long-term relationships with individuals they meet on these sites (Smith & Duggan, 2013). As previously mentioned, utilization rates of traditional online dating sites are relatively equal between men and women (Smith & Duggan, 2013). This is not true of mobile

dating applications. In fact, surveys indicate that male users of mobile applications outnumber female users four to one (Hou & Lundquist, 2013). Because of the dramatic increase in popularity of these sites and applications, the social acceptability of online dating among young people has increased substantially over the past decade, taking it from a fringe activity to one that is central to romantic youth culture (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

As a growing number of individuals participate in online dating, issues unique to this method of finding partnership have developed. One such issue of interest is how online dating and mobile applications are changing and affecting the dating culture of the young people who use them and how young people perceive these experiences. It is possible that the popularity of dating applications is not only encouraging young adults to “date shop,” but also to select potential mates based on limited visual data versus connecting via conversation. Furthermore, forming relationships based on such limited information can also encourage users to make judgments about others based on biases. These factors have the potential to have long term effects on how individuals form attachments.

This issue is important to social work because, according to the Cohen (2003), social workers are quickly outnumbering psychiatrists and psychologists as therapists and mental health practitioners in outpatient settings. This is because companies providing managed care are being to recognize social worker’s as fully-competent and inexpensive alternatives to psychological services (Cohen, 2003). Given the pervasiveness of social workers as mental health practitioners and online dating usage among young people, social workers working with young adults or adolescents are bound to encounter this issue in clinical practice at some point in their career. Furthermore, according to the NASW Code of Ethics, the “Importance of Human Relationships,”

is recognized as one of the core values inherent in the field of social workers. Social workers, therefore, are ethically inclined to be concerned about human relationships (NASW, 2008).

Since very little research has been done on this topic yet, this research will explore young people's expectations of online dating and mobile applications, their realities, whether they deem their experiences as positive or negative, and to gauge the extent that their relational styles are shaped by using these applications. This paper will also, more specifically, examine young people's experiences of deception and discrimination by other users within online dating settings. I hope that this research will add to a body of literature within the social work discourse dedicated to understanding intimate relationships among young people and how they have come to intersect with technology in the modern age.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Evolution of Online Dating**

Before the modern era, arranged marriages were the norm throughout most of the world. Many romantic relationships began with marriage proposals arranged by family members in exchange for tangible benefits, such as monetary rewards, security, social standing, etc. Individuals who were unable to secure a spouse by their early twenties often faced social stigma (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). This began to change with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1685, which allowed for the first personal matchmaking ads to be published in newspapers throughout Western Europe (PBS, 2013).

Matchmaking services continued into the modern era, but they never gained mainstream success in the U.S. or other Western countries (Finkel, 2012). The modern notion of dating as an activity separate from courtship was formed in the 1930's and 1940's (Stafford, 2008). During this time, it was popular for couples of the opposite sex to go on outings together without the

goal of eventual marriage necessarily. Dating was often perceived as a measure of popularity, and the number of dates one could procure was closely related to one's social status (Stafford, 2008).

As the 21st century progressed, societal changes such as less pressure to marry, an increase in workplace responsibilities, and increased social mobility began to take shape. These changes allowed individuals to marry later in life, often after their careers were established (Kambara, 2005). Busy professionals needed a way to meet partners on their own time. The invention of the internet in the 1980's satisfied this niche. Sites such as Craigslist allowed people to meet potential mates through personal ad databases and corresponding chat rooms (PBS, 2013). The first modern dating site, "[match.com](http://match.com)," was launched in 1995. Since then, online dating sites catering to every desire and demographic began to form (PBS, 2013). In 2007, online dating companies began to incorporate social networking into dating sites, such as OkCupid and Zoosk (PBS, 2013). These sites were unique because they connected people based on geographical proximity and mutual online acquaintances.

According to Forbes Magazine, there are over 2,500 online dating services active in the U.S. right now, and over 8,000 sites worldwide (Zwilling, 2013). A number of these sites, including Match and e-Harmony, are designed to appeal to the masses and are marketed towards the adult general public. Other sites target more specific user profiles. For example, sites such as JDate, Christian Mingle, Black People Meet, are based on shared group identity while others, such as Anastasia Date or Just Farmers are based on a desired demographic (Russian women or farmers respectively). According to Finkel et al., most online dating sites, regardless of their user base, claim to serve three main functions: connecting users to a large database of potential mates, facilitating communication between users who would be unable to offline, and using

mathematically or scientifically based algorithms to calculate compatibility between users (2012). These sites often gain popularity and create a user base by advertising that these functions are unique to online dating settings and therefore make them superior to offline forms of dating (Finkel, et al., 2012) The fact that online dating sites have the power to connect users to a large database of potential mates suggest that the way that people are shown or presented impacts how they are selected.

Another way online dating sites maintain popularity is through constant innovation. Approximately 1,000 new online dating sites are established and introduced to the public each year (Zwilling, 2013). The latest addition to the online dating market are mobile phone applications, or “apps,” (PBS, 2013). Apps are designed to be downloaded and used on individual smart phones. These applications are unique in that they do not rely on algorithms, but rather proximity to determine potential matches. One of the most popular mobile dating apps among young people today is Tinder. Founded in 2012, Tinder connects users via Facebook to other people in their desired age range based on geographical proximity (Schacter, 2015). After reviewing photos and a personal description, users can choose to swipe right to “Like” the person they see or swipe left to indicate disinterest (Schacter, 2015). If both users like each other’s profiles, a “match” is created and the users are given access to a chat screen and offered topics to begin their conversation (Schacter, 2015). Given Tinder’s popularity among the target population, it will be referenced throughout the paper.

### **Current Perceptions of Discrimination, Deception, and Danger**

**Perceived danger and social acceptability.** As the popularity of online dating increases, so does its reputation as a socially acceptable outlet for meeting potential partners. Research suggests that young adults, along with the general public, tend to perceive online dating sites and

apps as favorable and safe. In a study conducted by Couch, Liamputtong, and Pitts (2012), researchers sought to examine to what degree and in what way users of online dating services perceived online dating to be risky or dangerous. To do this, researchers used in-depth online interviews of 29 young people who use online dating in Australia. Researchers found that daters were worried primarily about the following things: online deceit, emotional vulnerability, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, violence, and the anonymity risks that the internet presents (Couch et. al, 2012). Overall, individuals did not, however, believe the internet was more dangerous than other avenues of meeting partners. This research showed how danger is conceptualized through the concept of the dangerous “other,” and perceived as something separate or foreign from oneself and feared because it is unknown. These findings seem to challenge notions that the internet is perceived as more dangerous than traditional venues of meeting partners, like bars, and illustrates how and why the social acceptability of online dating has increased over the years.

**Deception, discrimination, and gender.** Gender discrimination is an unfortunate reality in American society. Facing exclusion based on one’s gender can be particularly damaging during young adulthood, when many individuals are struggling to feel a sense of belonging and establish their identities. Sexism and gender-based discrimination are particularly pertinent in online dating settings. Previous studies suggest that female users of online dating sites and applications often report vastly different experiences than male users. For example, women are more likely than male users to fall victim to discrimination on online dating sites (Smith & Duggan, 2013; Guadagno, Bradley, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). According to Smith and Duggan, heterosexual women are over twice as likely as heterosexual men to face discrimination online by potential partners (2013).

Women are also over twice as likely to feel as though a partner severely misrepresented themselves online (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Women's experiences of being deceived online may be because men are, in general, less honest online than women are. Both Guadagno et. al (2012) and Hall et. al (2010) found that men are more likely to intentionally misrepresent themselves in online dating settings than women are. This difference is especially salient when men expect to meet a woman face-to-face versus via email (Guadagno et. al, 2012). In this situation, men tended to rate themselves as significantly more attractive when they thought they would never meet a woman they were talking to online in person (e.g. they would say they were a 7 when exchanging emails versus a 6 when they expected to meet in person) (Guadagno et. al, 2012). Hall et. al also found that, when administered a questionnaire to measure the likelihood that they would be deceptive about their economic status, their interests, their appearance, their personality, or their past/present relationship goals, men were significantly more likely than women to exaggerate their income level and personal assets (2010). These findings suggest that men utilizing online dating sites may feel pressure to adhere to cultural norms of desirability (e.g, "men must be rich") and thus resort to deception.

Although men are more likely to misrepresent themselves in general, studies suggest that women also feel the pressure to culturally conform in online dating settings (Hefner & Kahn, 2014; Hall et. al, 2010). Hall et. al found that women on online dating sites do more self-monitoring than men (2010). As a result, women are more likely to feel pressure to misrepresent their weight and appearance online (Hall, et. al, 2010). In another example, researchers Hefner and Kahn (2014) used a questionnaire to measure gender role internalization and rates of media consumption. They found that the more media an individual consumed, the more likely they were to adhere to gendered notions of romance (2014). These individuals were also more likely

to indicate the existence of an “ideal” partner and favored individual profiles that they deemed perfect. Since the majority of consumers of romantic media are women, the media’s conceptualization and portrayal of “ideal” disproportionately affects them. These findings suggest that ideal internalization may play a crucial role in determining who is perceived as normative and who gets stereotyped as the other. This also reinforces gender stereotypes, which are a component of gender discrimination, that suggest romance is more important to women than men (Perrin et. al, 2011). These findings suggest that online dating sites are a place where women believe they have to adhere to traditional gender stereotypes in order to get matches or dates.

**Racial discrimination.** Previous research suggests that young adults may be particularly likely to participate in and experience racial discrimination. For example, when interviewing high school students, Fischer, Wallace, and Fenton (2000) found that the majority of adolescents of color reported numerous instances of perceived racial discrimination from educators, civil institutions, and peers. These instances were correlated with high levels of anxiety in anticipation of future oppression, as well as lower self-esteem scores (Fischer et. al, 2000).

Online dating institutions may perpetuate racial discrimination, too. Numerous studies suggest that racial profiling plays a significant role in date selection in online dating settings (Alhabash, Hales, Baek, & Oh, 2014; Glasser, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2009). Most online dating users are prone to “homophily,” meaning they select mates from the same racial group (Ken-Hou & Lundquist, 2013). Young adults who are seeking acceptance within social groups, may be particularly prone to homophily. In a study conducted by Alhabash et. al (2014), researchers examined the impact that visual cues on online dating profiles can have on racial stereotyping, profiling and mate preference. Researchers utilized previous findings about stereotypes to create

white and black stereotypic profiles, including interests, educational and occupational backgrounds, and biographies for each profile. Students were asked to rate the attractiveness of a hypothetical user that was either pictured as white or black, and had either a white stereotypic profile or a black one. They found that students rated individuals with white stereotypic profiles as more attractive than black profiles. Both of these studies indicate that stereotypes about white individuals are held to higher estimation than stereotypes assigned to individuals of color by the dominant discourse. This type of stereotyping is particularly salient and relevant in instances of online dating not only because of the profound effects it can have on young people, but because it illustrates how judgments are made on limited visual and textual information. It may be that online dating sites promote racial social segregation.

### **Young Adults and Online Dating**

**Attachment.** For decades, researchers studying attachment have examined the importance of proximity between child and their caregivers (Seigel, 1999). Securely attached children seek proximity to their mothers or other caregivers and use them as a secure base from which to explore the unknown (Seigel, 1999). Young adults, who are typically seeking individuation and independence from their caregivers, often rely on peers to serve as attachment objects and regularly seek proximity to them (Allen, 2008).

The internet, and online dating in particular, serve as yet another outlet for young adults to seek meaningful attachments to peers. In fact, research suggests that young adults may feel a false sense of security when they meet people online based on proximity alone. For example, Quiroz (2013) explored the current state of online dating and how it is shifting to represent more proximity focused cell phone applications like Tinder. Quiroz claims the popularity of these applications is made possible by the fact that they create an illusion of “thin trust” (2013). Quiroz

defines thin trust as the assumption that because an anonymous other appears similar to you and shares your extended social circle, they are trustworthy. Many individuals on these applications begin to believe that if thin trust is present, it will be easier for “thick trust” to develop and a meaningful relationship to form (Quiroz, 2013). Applications based on proximity, therefore, may create a false sense of security and attachment for the young adults who use them.

On the other hand, Merkle and Richardson (2000) argue that more traditional online dating sites actually reduce the need for proximity between potential partners. In this study, researchers compared computer mediated romantic relationships with those that began face-to-face. Researchers compared the two types of relationships across four categories: relationship formation and ending, self-disclosure, conflict, and infidelity. They found that internet dating reduces the need for physical proximity. Their findings suggest that the reduced need for physical proximity between partners in computer mediated relationships is made possible by an increased need for intimate self-disclosure (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). These findings suggest that when physical proximity is compromised, individuals must compensate with emotional proximity in order to satisfy attachment needs. Their findings also suggest that young adults may seek the lack of physical proximity that online dating provides because it alleviates them from having to mediate their relationships as much or solve conflict that comes more readily when a couple is face to face (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

**Online anonymity and fidelity.** Young adulthood is a time when most individuals seek belonging and acceptance. Online dating offers an ideal outlet for young adults to explore alternative relationships anonymously and without the sting of rejection. For example, research suggests that individuals experience the greatest feelings of loss when they invest highly and expect a favorable outcome in something that fails (Dijk, Zeelenberg, & Pligt, 2003). One way

people can avoid being disappointed is by having low expectations for outcomes of their actions (Dijk et. al, 2003). Mobile applications, like Tinder, are likely so popular among young adults because they allow users to talk to members of the opposite sex and make sexual passes without as much fear of rejection. The anonymity of online allows for what Schacter called the “low investment, low stakes” attitude that many young adults adopt on online dating (2015).

Research also suggests that the anonymity created by online dating sites influences notions of fidelity between romantic partners (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). For example, in their comparison of computer mediated, versus traditionally mediated relationships, Merkle and Richardson found that because individuals in computer mediated relationships may not be in close enough proximity for sexual infidelity, concepts of infidelity are often redefined in these relationships. These findings suggest that couples who meet online may have different relational patterns than those who did not based on how they met (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). This redefinition of infidelity online is reflected in youth culture. For example, if intimacy is gained mostly through sharing personal information through online conversations with a partner, then talking to another individual on Tinder besides your partner may be considered a form of infidelity by young adults using dating apps.

**Consumer-based youth culture.** Another reason online dating has become so socially acceptable among young adults is that companies profiting on these sites have created a billion-dollar industry by making dating online appeal to the masses. To study the impact that this amorous and technological phenomenon is having, Kambara (2005) examined online dating from a business perspective and measured how sites used online social processes for economic profit. She argues that online dating is a business made possible primarily by advances in computer technology (Kambara, 2005). Societal changes such as reduced pressure to marry, increased

work pressure, and increased social mobility have also “opened up” singles to the possibility of meeting partners online (Kambara, 2005). Through an ethnographic examination of daters on three different sites, the researcher found that users employed a number of strategies online such as date collecting, demographic seeking, misrepresentation, and what she terms “mate shopping” (Kambara, 2005).

Most users reported using these strategies out of fear that “someone else is out there,” (p. 13) and that in order to find the best possible partner, one had to constantly keep looking and frequently move on to the next potential mate (Kambara, 2005). Furthermore, satellite dating apps allow people to develop and seek their fantasy of a perfect mate (Quiroz, 2013). Users have an endless supply of individuals at their fingertips and if they are disappointed once meeting a person, they can just move on to the next available individual with anonymity and ease (Quiroz, 2013). These findings seem to reflect how online dating is a function of a larger, consumption based society, a society that is never satisfied. It is reasonable to suspect that the larger society’s orientation towards consumption influences and drives the actions of young adults participating in youth culture. This medium, which is particularly popular among young adults, promotes increased consumerism with regard to potential partners and interfaces with the simultaneous human drive to form intimate partner relationships. This market-based influence within the realm of building human relationships may be problematic.

### **The Current Study**

According to the research, online dating is so popular among young people because of the opportunities it offers them for proximity seeking, how it is interwoven with youth and consumer culture, and the anonymity it provides, despite perceived danger or risks of deception or discrimination. This current research addresses gaps in previous research by examining how

young adults perceive their experiences on online dating sites. Specifically, the research questions for this study with regard to these dating sites are: how are young adults using the sites, how well do they believe they were treated and to what extent do they represent themselves honestly. Answering these questions will serve to further explore youth culture, intimacy, and how the two intersect and are affected by technology.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

#### **Attachment Theory**

The theoretical background for this study is based partially on attachment theory. According to Seigel, attachment “is an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant caregiving figures” (p. 67, 1999). In other words, attachment is a connection forged between infants and their primary caregivers in the early stages of life. Whether infants are securely or insecurely attached affects the manner in which they experience future relationships, and the world around them (Seigel, 1999). Attachment theory has also been applied to adolescent and young adult development (Allen, 2008). According to Allen (2008), adolescence is a time where young adults begin to separate and individuate from peers. As a result, young adults form attachments to their peers, and eventually their romantic partners (Allen, 2008). Therefore, examining this topic through an attachment-based lens may shed light on how and why young adults form attachments to partners via online dating and what, if any, problems they might experience in forming attachments this way.

#### **Consumer Culture Theory**

Another way to understand the online dating phenomenon amongst young adults is through consumer culture theory. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), consumer culture

theory consists of “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings,” (p. 868). In essence, consumer culture theory, or CCT for short, examines how the products that people buy and the larger culture they participate in shapes their identities and self-concepts (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). This feedback loop is cyclical, and the culture at large is, in turn, also shaped by the consumption patterns of individuals (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). Looking through a CCT-informed lens, the online dating phenomenon can be explained by viewing online dating services as market products and users as consumers. In fact, as one research study discovered, as online environments continue to gain popularity, more and more individuals are identifying themselves based on how and what they present online (Schau & Gilly, 2003). These findings suggest that online users can form a sense of self based on a media product (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Under this assumption, it is possible that online dating has achieved such a high level of popularity because it is a product of our larger consumption based society. Examining online dating from a consumer culture perspective could illuminate how our culture is formed and changed by the products and services (like online dating) that we purchase and use.

### **Social Constructionism**

The concept of racial and gender discrimination online is based on social constructionist theory. Social constructionism is defined as the belief that a subjective reality does not exist (Galbin, 2014). Rather, social construction postulates that all realities are created, or “constructed” through the social exchanges of human beings. This means that all “realities” are subject to change based on the context of the interpersonal interactions going on at any given time. This also means that no two persons’ perception of reality will never be entirely the same. When applied to gender and race, social constructionism indicates that the values we assign to

each race and gender are functions of the time and dominant cultural milieu around us, and they do not reflect an actual reality (Galbin, 2014). Societal phenomenon, like the internet and online dating, shape how classifications like gender and race are conceptualized. For example, a study conducted by Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson examined how current ideas of gender and race are shaped through the internet using language (2014). Researchers demonstrated how social media sites like Twitter allowed for the widespread use of slang like “hoes” (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). This charged language had the capability to create new discourses surrounding gender and race and illustrates how social media affects dominant and youth culture.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study utilizes a quantitative, cross sectional research design. Specifically, this study consisted of a one-time, anonymous online survey.

### **Sample**

The sample for this study was a non-probability convenience sample, comprising of voluntary users recruited on Facebook, a social media site. The sample consisted of participants ages 18-24, 75% of which were women. Most participants (91%) identified as European American/White; 6% identified as Asian American, 2% as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% as African American. 87% of participants identified as heterosexual, 9% as Bisexual, 2% as homosexual, and 2% as “Other.” Initially, the survey yielded 67 total responses. The researcher sorted through the responses to ensure completion (only completed surveys were counted) and proper age (participants older than 24 were excluded). The total number of viable responses ended up being 55.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

All participants were recruited on Facebook. An online link was posted to the researcher's Facebook page, along with the following script:

Hey everyone! I am currently working on a research project for my master's in social work at the University of St. Thomas. I am seeking participants ages 18-24 to take a brief survey regarding young people and their experiences using online dating sites and applications. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Please click the link below if you wish to participate, any help is greatly appreciated! If you have any comments about the study or questions for me, please contact me via email or phone. Thank you!

This allowed individuals to be recruited completely anonymously. If an individual chose to participate, they clicked on the link. The link directed them to an online consent form, which was presented to each participant at the beginning of the survey (See Appendix A for full consent form). This consent form described the purpose of the study, that participation is optional and can be rescinded at any time before the survey is submitted, that the survey is confidential, approximately how long the survey will take, and how information from the survey will be used. No identifiable information about the respondents was obtained. Respondents were required to acknowledge that they are at least 18 years of age in order to participate. In addition, the researcher's email, phone number, and the contact information of her corresponding research chair were provided in the consent form. Respondents were given the option to "Accept" the terms and continue, or to "Decline" and exit. If they chose to continue, they were redirected to the survey. If they decided to rescind their participation in the survey later, they could exit the survey at anytime up to the point of submission.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher collected data using Qualtrics, a university-sponsored survey creation software. The answers that participants provided using the Qualtrics survey were analyzed on the software itself.

**Instrument.** The instrument is a 13 question survey created by the author using Qualtrics (See Appendix B for the survey). The researcher created the tool based on previous research for this project specifically to answer the research questions. Each question falls into one of six categories: sites used, purposes of use, perception of treatment, perception of honesty, perception of the social acceptability of online dating, and demographic questions. All questions were multiple choice, including questions regarding demographic information. If participants had an answer not accounted for in the multiple choice options, they had the option of selecting “Other,” and writing in their answer in the blank provided.

**Process.** The researcher sent out the survey on Facebook, a social media outlet. Participation was voluntary and initiated by the participants themselves by clicking the link to the survey. Once completed, participant’s answers were stored in the Qualtrics system. The researcher analyzed the data using the Qualtrics results reporting feature.

### **Findings**

The research question for this study focuses on online dating sites and specifically addresses these questions: How are young adults using the sites? How well do they believe they were treated? Finally, to what extent do they represent themselves honestly? To answer these questions, the researcher performed data analysis on the collected survey data. Because this research is preliminary and largely exploratory, the research questions were answered using

descriptive statistics, specifically frequency distributions and percentages. These values were calculated automatically when responses were collected in Qualtrics.

### **Site Usage**

To answer the first part of the research question, how are young adults using these sites, the researcher created three questions: one about whether or not they have used an online dating site (if they had, participants were asked to list which), a second regarding why they started using the sites, and third, what they actually did with people on these sites, both online and in-person. The first finding was that the majority of respondents had, in fact, used some form of online dating in their lifetime. Overall, 65% of respondents ( $n=39$ ) indicated that they had used some form of online dating. Specifically, 40% ( $n=24$ ) reported using some type of dating app, 12% ( $n=7$ ) reported using a traditional online dating site, and 13% ( $n=8$ ) reported having used both types. Thirty-five percent of respondents ( $n=21$ ) reported never having used any form of online dating.

### **Popular Sites**

When asked to indicate sites/apps they had used, Tinder was by far the most popular app among respondents who had used online dating before. Specifically, 77% ( $n=30$ ) of respondents who had used online dating apps or sites before reported using Tinder. Traditional sites OkCupid (28%,  $n=11$ ) and Plenty of Fish (23%,  $n=9$ ) were second and third most common, respectively. Match (15%,  $n=6$ ) was fourth most common, followed by eHarmony (8%,  $n=3$ ) and Coffee Meets Bagel (5%,  $n=2$ ). Hinge, Grindr, Badoo, Zoosk, and Date Hookup each made up 3% of responses, with one user each. Thirteen percent ( $n=5$ ) of respondents selected "Other" and wrote in choices. Respondents indicated these other sites/apps as: Clover, Bumble, Positive Singles, Lovoo, MeetMe, and Hot or Not.

### **Reasons for Usage**

When asked why they chose to use online dating, the majority (71%,  $n=27$ ) indicated curiosity as a motivating factor. Fifty-eight percent ( $n=22$ ) reported using the site to go on dates and 42% ( $n=16$ ) to find short term romantic relationships. Thirty-four percent ( $n=13$ ) reported using to find long term relationships. The same number of people reported using online dating to seek sexual encounters or “hook up” with people. Twenty-nine percent ( $n=11$ ) of respondents reported using to meet friends or because their friends were doing it. Finally, 8% ( $n=3$ ) indicated using online dating sites for “Other,” reasons. When asked to indicate why, they wrote:

“Distraction from break up”; “To meet other cool and form a relationship whether it be romantic or a friendship”; and “Moved to a new state.”

### **Realities of Usage**

Finally, when asked what they actually did with the people they met on these sites, participants indicated going on dates as the most common response ( $n=21$ , 55%). Forty-two percent ( $n=16$ ) of participants indicated they developed short-term casual romantic relationships, 34% ( $n=13$ ) hooked up with people they met, and 29% ( $n=11$ ) reported doing nothing. Meeting new people and developing long-term relationships were less common responses, with 21% ( $n=8$ ) and 18% (7) of participants, respectively. Lastly, 11% ( $n=4$ ) of participants indicated having done “Other” things with the people they met online. When asked to specify what those things were, they wrote: “Nothing, all ads wanting money; Talked online; Met boy [sic] current boyfriend of two years! And; I only ever went on one Tinder date with someone, and ended up dating him for the past year.” These findings suggest that, of this sample, a sizable amount of young adults use online dating sites, particularly apps like Tinder. Furthermore, while participants indicated a variety of reasons for using online dating, curiosity and the potential for

dating were the most common. This is reflected by the fact that most participant actually went on dates or developed relationships with people they met online.

### **Discrimination**

To answer the second part of the research question, how well did participants believe they were treated on online dating sites, the researcher asked two questions: whether participants thought they themselves had been discriminated against on these sites, and why (for what reason) they believed they were discriminated against. Thirty-three percent of participants ( $n=12$ ) selected “Yes,” they did believe they were discriminated against on these sites, 36% ( $n=13$ ) chose “Maybe/Unsure,” and 31% ( $n=11$ ) selected “No.” Of those who answered “Yes” or “Maybe/Unsure,” the most common responses to why they believed they were discriminated against were: general appearance ( $n=7$ , 26%); weight ( $n=5$ , 19%); and gender ( $n=4$ , 15%). Less common responses were: age ( $n=3$ , 11%); race, income-level, and “I am unsure” ( $n=2$ , 7% each); and; sexual orientation and “Other” ( $n=1$ , 4% each). When asked to specify why, the participant who chose “Other,” wrote “My intentions.” Overall, the findings in this section indicate that two-thirds of respondents believed they either were or maybe were discriminated against. Most believed this discrimination was based on their appearance or weight.

### **Dishonesty**

To answer the third part of the research question, to what extent did users represent themselves honestly, the researcher asked four questions: whether participants believed matches had been intentionally dishonest on these sites; what they believed their matches were dishonest about; if they themselves had ever been intentionally dishonest; and if so, what they were dishonest about. Fifty-nine percent of participants ( $n=22$ ) indicated that they believed they had been lied to, 24% ( $n=9$ ) were unsure, and 16% ( $n=6$ ) said they had not been. Of those who said

“Yes” or “Maybe/Unsure,” the majority ( $n=16$ ) indicated that they believed they had been lied to about what a match was looking for in a relationship. Other responses as to what they believed potential matches were dishonest about were: their appearance ( $n=14$ ); their interests ( $n=8$ ); and their age ( $n=8$ ). Less common responses were weight or height ( $n=6$ ) and income level ( $n=2$ ).

Despite feeling they had been intentionally lied to by others, the majority of participants ( $n = 27, 70\%$ ) indicated that they themselves had not been intentionally dishonest to potential matches online. Seven (19%) indicated that they had, and 4 chose “Maybe/Unsure.” Of those that said “Yes” or “Maybe/Unsure,” interests ( $n = 5$ ), what they were looking for in a relationship ( $n = 3$ ), and weight/height ( $n = 2$ ) were common responses regarding what participants had been dishonest about. Less common responses were: income level, general appearance, and where participants lived ( $n = 1$ ). In summary, the majority of participants believed they had been deceived and denied intentionally deceiving themselves. These findings suggest that there is a disconnect between the percentage of participants who thought they were deceived compared to the percent that admitted to being dishonest.

Besides addressing the research question, the researcher also included a number of questions designed to measure participants’ attitudes towards online dating and whether they consider their experiences overwhelmingly positive or negative. The results derived from these questions will be summarized briefly. These questions add dimension to the first research question whether and how young adults use online dating. When asked whether they consider their overall experiences with online dating as positive or negative, 50% of participants indicated that their experiences were either “Somewhat Positive” or “Very Positive.” Twenty-eight percent of participants characterized their experiences as negative and 22% said they were neutral. Furthermore, 58% of participants reported believing that online dating is a good way to meet

people, 82% believe that using online dating is a “normal” thing to do and 53% would recommend it to a family member or friend. Only 11% of participants, however, said they preferred meeting people online versus in face-to-face settings. In summary, young adults, regardless of whether or not they actually use online dating, view it as a fairly positive experience and believe it is a socially acceptable way to meet people. These findings suggest that online dating usage is relatively normalized amongst both users and non-users.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research regarding young people’s usage of online dating. For example, in this study Tinder was by far the most commonly used dating app. This is consistent with previous studies, which have found that approximately 50 million people per month used Tinder in 2015 (Schacter, 2015). This is likely because Tinder is well known among young adults and is promoted on a number of other social media outlets, including Facebook and Instagram (Schacter, 2015). In this study, however, participants reported using 16 other sites and apps, including several that the researcher had not even heard of before. This shows that although Tinder remains the most popular app, young adults are willing to try and do use other sites and apps that may be less well known, up-and-coming, or cater to a specific population. Based on consumer culture theory, the popularity of new apps is magnified by the novel excitement they offer.

The primary reasons for young people’s usage of online dating found in this study were curiosity and going on dates/finding romantic partnerships. This finding supports concepts of consumer culture theory, such as the idea that online dating may appeal to young people because they are low investment, low stakes, and offer multitudes of opportunities for date shopping (Schacter, 2015; Dijk et al., 2003; Kambara, 2005). In fact, previous research suggests that the

ability of online dating to satiate curiosity is no accident. Apps like Tinder can actually create an intermittently reinforcing reward system for users, giving it an almost addictive quality (Schacter, 2015). The addictive qualities of apps may be further enhanced by young adults' natural urge to form meaningful attachments with others.

These findings are also contrary to the popular notion that young people use online dating solely to "hook-up." In fact, a number of participants indicated that they found long term romantic partnerships on these apps. Furthermore, the majority of participants indicated that online dating did, indeed, serve the purpose for them that they wanted it too (e.g. if they used sites and apps to meet people, they did). Based on these findings, it is likely that an individual's expectations of usage heavily effect the outcomes of their usages, perhaps even more than the apps themselves.

Another fascinating finding was that a sizable number of individuals did indicate feeling as though they had been (or may have been) discriminated against by potential matches on online dating sites. This number is surprising given the relatively homogenous nature of the sample in terms of gender and ethnicity. General appearance and weight were the most common responses as to why participants felt they had been discriminated against, indicating that discrimination based appearance may transcend gender and racial boundaries on online dating settings. Or this finding may suggest that in the sampled population (largely White women), feeling discriminated against based on appearance is primary.

This notion is supported by previous research regarding social constructionism. It is possible that if the notion of woman as a distinct group is socially constructed, feeling pressure to prescribe to societal norms about appearances may be particularly oppressive to this group. Furthermore, so many individuals likely felt judged based solely on their appearances by

potential partners because contextual information is limited in online dating settings and most initial judgments are based primary on visual cues (Alabash, et al., 2014). This concept ties back to the consumer culture theory hypothesis that online dating allows users to rapidly “mate shop” using information that is limited and based solely on appearances (Kambara, 2005).

Perhaps the most fascinating finding from this study comes from the juxtaposition of participants’ perception of being lied to versus their perceptions of their own honesty. Fifty-nine percent of participants believed that others had been intentionally dishonest to them in online dating settings, yet only 19% admitted to being intentionally dishonest themselves. One explanation for this disparity is that participants over-estimated the dishonesty of others. Based on previous research on social constructionism, this is a possibility in online settings before trust is formed and the perception that others met online may be dangerous (Couch et al., 2012). Participants may have also been underreporting their own dishonesty for a number of reasons. This explanation may be less likely because there is little risk for social acceptability based in this study. For a variety of reasons, however, people often do not state the entire truth even in anonymous surveys, so participant underreporting must be considered as a potential explanation.

Finally, this gap may be because participants perceive their own behaviors online differently than that of others, that is, they may not perceive their own actions as dishonesty. Previous research on attachment suggests that in online dating interactions, attachment is built not by physical proximity but by emotional intimacy, and therefore, and fidelity and trust have had to be redefined (Merkle & Richarson, 2000). These findings suggest that individuals in online dating settings, in the absence of physical proximity, may hold others to a different standard of disclosure than themselves and perceive their own omissions as trivial and their partner’s as a major violation of trust.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has a number of both strengths and limitations. One strength of this study is its convenience. Because the survey was online, accessible via Facebook, and brief, more participants may have been inclined to take it because of the relative ease of participation. Another strength of this survey is that it consists of anonymous survey questions rather than a face-to-face interview. This may have made participants feel more comfortable answering questions about their romantic lives and online dating use. A final strength is that this research explores relatively “uncharted territory” given the popularity of these dating applications.

Although the anonymity and ease the survey offers are definite strengths, they may also inherently weaken certain aspects of the project. For example, although online surveys offer anonymity, they lack the richness of an in-depth interview, which gain information about experiences from participants’ own words. Also, because this survey is relatively brief to ensure participant interest, it is unable to answer all of the questions posed by the literature.

### **Further Research**

Based on the limitations of the current study, it is evident that further research is needed to fully examine the patterns exhibited by young adults regarding online dating. Beneficial future studies may be qualitative in nature. This would allow for individuals to relay their experiences on these sites in their own words and provide researchers with the detailed richness of information that can be obtained through personal narratives. Furthermore, because of time constraints the current study was unable to address all questions posed by previous literature. Further studies should build on this research and other existing literature. This would allow researchers to gain a better understanding of the nuisances of participant’s experiences to

examine in more detail how young adults form relationships online and the exact nature of these relationships.

### **Conclusion**

In today's society, online dating is a popular component of youth culture that continues to grow. This research aimed to add to the body of literature regarding young adults and how they use online dating. Using a theoretical framework based in attachment theory, social constructionism, and consumer culture theory, this study was designed to answer the following questions: how are young adults using online dating sites and apps, how well do they believe they are treated on these sites and to what extent do they represent themselves honestly. The findings derived from the survey suggest that young adults do use online dating and they do so for many reasons; many believe they are discriminated against based on their appearance; many believe they have been lied to but few perceive themselves as lying; and overall, they perceive online dating as positive and a normal thing to do. More research is needed to determine the exact details of this phenomenon, and it may be beneficial for future studies to be qualitative in nature. Studying social phenomenon, like online dating amongst young adults, is essential for gaining an understanding of ourselves and the changing landscape we live in.

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## Appendix A

**CONSENT FORM**  
**UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**  
**GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Swipe, Right?: Young People, Love, and Online Dating in the Digital Age**

IRB#-122-04A10-122-04

I am conducting a study about online dating sites and applications. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your age (between 18 and 24 years old) and based on your participation in social media. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate the study.

This study is being conducted by Kyla C. Flug, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is explore the experiences of young adults on online dating sites and applications.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following: complete a brief online survey as truthfully and completely as possible. This survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes and can be completed entirely online. The findings from this survey will be presented to my class as part of a quantitative research project and later presented at the Senior Research Seminar.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

This study has no risks.

This study has no direct benefits.

**Confidentiality:**

All of your answers to this survey will be kept confidential. As a classroom protocol, I will not publish any of this material. Research records will be kept in a password-protected file on my computer. My research professor will see your survey answers amongst others in a de-identified database, but because not identifying information will be attached to your responses, she will not know who you are. Findings from the survey will be presented to my research class and at the Senior Research Seminar. The data collected from this survey will be destroyed by May 15, 2018.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the survey at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher, St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Kyla Flug. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 715 220 3962 or my professor, Jessica Toft at 651-962-5803. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Appendix B

## Survey

1.) Have you ever used an online dating service or mobile application before?

Yes- I have used a traditional online dating site like Match, OkCupid, Zoosk, eHarmony, etc.

Yes- I have used a mobile dating app like Tinder, Grindr, Hinge, Badoo, etc.

No- I have never used any form of online dating

2.) If you answered "Yes," Please indicate which services you have used before (Select all that apply)

Tinder

Hinge

Grinder

Coffee Meets Bagel

Badoo

eHarmony

match.com

OkCupid

Let's Date

Skout

Zoosk

Plenty of Fish

JDate

Christian Mingle

Date Hookup

Other (Please Indicate)

3.) Please indicate why you chose to use an online dating service or mobile app (Select all that apply)

To go on dates

To find short-term, casual romantic relationships

To find a long-term romantic partnership

To meet new people in my area

To "hook-up" with people

To make friends or meet new people to hang out with

Because I thought it would be fun

Because my friends were doing it

Curiosity

Other (Please Indicate)

4.) Please indicate what you did with the people (or person) you met on these sites (Select all that apply)

Went on dates

Developed casual, short-term romantic relationships

Developed a long-term romantic relationship

Met new people in my area

Hooked-up  
Talked to people for fun  
Nothing  
Other (Please Indicate)

5.) When using these services, did you ever feel as though you were treated differently or discriminated against by other users/potential matches?

Yes  
Maybe/Unsure  
No

6.) If you answered "Yes," please indicate why you felt you were discriminated against (Select all that apply)

My race/ethnicity  
My gender  
My sexual orientation  
My age  
My disability  
My general appearance  
My weight  
My income level  
I am unsure

7.) Have you ever felt as though a potential match was intentionally dishonest about themselves to you?

Yes  
Maybe/Unsure  
No

8.) What do you feel they were dishonest about? (Select all that apply)

Their interests  
Their weight or height  
Their income level  
Their appearance  
Their age  
What they were looking for in a relationship

9.) Have you ever been intentionally dishonest to potential matches online?

Yes  
Maybe/Unsure  
No

10.) What do you feel you were dishonest about? (Select all that apply)

My interests  
My weight or height  
My income level

My appearance

My age

What I want in a relationship

11.) Overall, how would you rate your experiences on these dating sites/apps?

Very Negative

Somewhat Negative

Neutral

Somewhat Positive

Very Positive

12.) Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:

I would say my friends and peers have had overall positive experiences with online dating

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

I feel like the sites/apps I have used served the purpose that I wanted them to

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

I believe that online dating is a good way to meet potential partners

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

I prefer using online dating to meeting partners in traditional settings

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

Using online dating is a relatively normal thing for people to do

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

I would recommend online dating to a friend or family member

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

I tend to view online dating positively

Strongly Disagree

Somewhat Disagree

Neutral/Not applicable

Somewhat Agree

Strongly Agree

13.) Please fill in the following demographic information

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_