

# SWIPE

## Culture

THE INTERNET HAS BROUGHT US MANY THINGS: CAT MEMES, REACTION GIFS, STOCK PHOTOGRAPHS OF WOMEN LAUGHING ALONE WITH SALAD AND, OF COURSE, ONLINE DATING. BUT DO APPS SUCH AS TINDER AND BUMBLE PROVIDE THE BUSY WOMAN WITH A USEFUL SHORTCUT ON THE PATH TO LOVE? OR DO THEY INSTEAD ROADBLOCK ANY CHANCE YOU HAVE OF FINDING THE REAL DEAL? HILARY SIMMONS ASKED THE EXPERTS.

There has been a lot of recent (and not so recent) debate about whether the internet brings us closer together or pushes us virtually apart. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sea of dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, Happn and OK Cupid that claim to streamline the process of finding a relationship yet have led to the rise of 'swipe culture' – a slick term for the modern way of forming relationships through an electronic device; inevitably dehumanising and often creating an 'onto the next one' effect, where people become disposable. Obviously, not everybody wants to get into a conventional relationship or uses

online dating to find 'the one' (whatever that means); but even for those using dating apps to find a casual hook-up or poly partner, the use of technology makes it pretty tricky not to develop a blasé attitude towards dating and human interaction.

After all, apps such as Tinder are basically a 'numbers game', putting thousands of potential matches at your fingertips. How then can we foster genuine connections and prioritise in-person meets when we're staring at a screen with a staged selfie and there are literally hundreds of people who *could* be more compatible at the swipe of a finger?

"Dating apps provide an immediate source of others who are open, willing and interested in having a relationship, or at least having sex," says Melbourne-based wellbeing and relationship counsellor Jo Gniel. "It makes it easier to know who is looking for a relationship and available without too much emotional collateral. For those who are strapped for time, the efficiency of swiping right whenever we like the look of someone is appealing – but for others, the plethora of available options creates a paradox of choice. Instead of making a decision about dating, we find ourselves 'relationshopping'"



## TALKING HISTORY

Precursors to swipe-based dating apps began in 1965, when a team of Harvard undergrads created 'Operation Match', the world's first computer dating service. Users filled out a paper questionnaire which they mailed in for \$3. The questionnaires were then analysed by the machine (which was roughly the size of a living room) and users were sent a list of potential matches. It was a clunky system, but it was successful, with about ninety thousand Operation Match questionnaires received by the end of 1965.

Other computer-assisted matching services quickly followed in Operation Match's tracks, but classifieds and personal ads ruled the dating scene up until the 90s, when it became abundantly clear that the internet was about to change the way we approach relationships forever. Match.com

was founded in 1995, and by 2007, online dating had become the second highest online industry for paid content. FaceMash, Facebook's 2003 predecessor, presented a 'hot or not' game for Harvard students to rate people's attractiveness. It got taken down within days because Zuckerberg had populated the site with pictures that he'd hacked from the school administration's dormitory ID files, but by then of course he'd figured out that people like sitting on the internet checking out pictures of their friends and turned the site into Facebook.

The most dramatic change to the online dating landscape came when Tinder was launched in 2012. Today, the activity of swiping left or right to like or dislike a potential match has become so normal that it's hard to imagine a world without it, and it has spawned countless other apps that follow the same design.

## LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

But what is online dating doing to us psychologically in terms of how we perceive the value of relationships? Does the use of technology for dating and socialising lure us into a false sense of security and intimacy, yet ultimately leave us feeling more isolated than before? And how can you show in the online dating world that you're more substance than selfie? Are there digital rules you should follow to protect yourself?

"Tinder is the bullet-train of speed dating – relying on nanosecond impressions and purely visual information to make snap judgments, many of which reinforce biases or preconceptions we have about appearance and race," says Sydney-based psychologist and speaker Jocelyn Brewer.

"Tinder's design plays into our ever-decreasing attention spans. That said, there is plenty of scope to demonstrate who you are and express yourself so that you capture people's attention. I just recommend that you don't get into a habit of mindlessly swiping when bored. Mr/Mrs/Mx Right isn't likely to reveal themselves if you're not fully present.

Make time to actually look at each profile for a few seconds and recognise that each profile represents a real-life individual putting themselves out there (regardless of what they're looking for – sex or love)."

Tinder's creators say its superficial focus on looks mimics the social dynamics of the offline world, but maybe it's a bit more insidious than that. People can become addicted to the process of swiping just as much as they can to Facebook or Instagram. Because users can gauge someone's attractiveness with just a one-second glance, Tinder's interface is perfectly constructed to encourage rapid swiping. It's basically a video game disguised as a dating app – the more matches you rack up, the better you feel.

In terms of psychological conditioning, the desire to Tinder (yep, it's a verb now) is a learned response that comes from its variable ratio reward schedule, which ensures that potential matches are randomly dispersed. Users never know which swipe will bring the reward of a desirable match, and so they turn into serial swipers. Every now and again they receive the 'reward' of an attractive match or a promising message,

and it delivers a mini-hit of dopamine to their brains. Tinder is, in essence, designed to play off your brain's internal chemistry and keep you coming back for more, even if you no longer want to play.

It's not just the 'luck of the game' when it comes to getting good matches, though. Tinder's creators admitted in 2015 that they limit the amount of daily 'right' swipes to around 100 for users who don't buy into their premium service, TinderPlus. And yes, women and gay men receive more matches than heterosexual men, but are more likely to feel disappointed when trying to follow up and have deeper conversations, according to a quantitative study conducted on Tinder in 2016. A 2017 qualitative study of motivations for using Tinder concluded that the fun users have while swiping may not always translate to the same kind of enjoyable experiences in real-world settings.

"Our phones are highly addictive and the allure of online interactions can be related to the ego and the subsequent hit to the dopamine pathway," says Danielle Cantlon, Lysn psychologist. "However, they lack the more fulfilling and sustaining serotonin and



oxytocin boost that you get from looking someone in the eye, physical affection and face-to-face conversation.

“Reflect on how fulfilling online interactions are for you and adjust your behaviour accordingly. If online dating causes you undue stress or anxiety, perhaps speak to someone about your attachment style, protect yourself from those who don’t have your best interests at heart, and take a step back. Women often undervalue themselves and must be especially mindful of the effect ‘swipe culture’ can have on their self-esteem.”

A new study about the psychological effects of dating apps was presented at the 2016 convention of the American Psychological Association. It found that people who frequently used dating platforms were more likely to think of themselves as sexual objects, to internalise societal ideals about beauty, to compare their appearances to others and to constantly monitor how they looked. So don’t swipe when you’re feeling lonely, sad or bored – and take a break periodically to reassess your personal objectives.

“The time spent online looking for love can be a bit of a binge to begin with, but I think we can all acknowledge that dating culture can get a bit soul-destroying regardless of whether you’re in the real or digital world,” says Brewer. “Creating checklists of what you want can be helpful in defining boundaries, but they work best when they’re character focused and values based.”

Finding love is difficult, online and off, and a perfect dating profile (perfect on paper) that provides a dopamine hit does not necessarily translate into a reciprocal real-life spark. New research shows that dating-app algorithms are effectively useless at accurately predicting romantic attraction, anyway. A study in the journal *Psychological Science* found that having access to data about people’s romantic preferences is good in terms of determining ‘likability’. But attraction? Not so much.

“Life is more complicated than checklists, plus good looks fade,” says Brewer. “Relationships should be more about how you relate, connect and resonate with someone. While a varying degree of that is about physical chemistry, overplaying the role of ‘looks’ and ultimately how photogenic people are can have its pitfalls. That said, people on dating apps (mostly the blokes) would benefit from knowing how to take a decent photo that captures

them without a motorbike, sedated tiger or ex-girlfriend in shot!”

“Success in online dating is ultimately about finding the balance between being Shallow Hal, combating FOMO and really investing,” adds Gniel. “Looking into the science of relationships, i.e., adding attachment style into the mix, means chances of success vary too.”

All this seems to suggest that the virtual nature of online dating means there can be no such thing as love at first swipe. There are obviously ‘success’ stories of people meeting their significant others on Tinder et al, but these stories in some sense begin after the relevant parties have met in real life and confirmed their level of interest in and sexual attraction to each other. Everything prior to that can be seen as the ‘prologue’ section of the narrative. There is, after all, no limit on how long it takes to get to know a person – although dating platforms would have you believe that one date should be enough to ‘decide’ lest you miss out on other, more attractive, prospects.

## THE THREE M’S

Ultimately, it’s vital to remember that having endless choices doesn’t make us happier – it makes us more stressed. To stay as safe and secure within yourself as you can in this age of screened intimacies, practise the three Ms of digital nutrition suggested by Brewer below.

» **Be mindful** – have moment-to-moment awareness of and responsibility over your actions; how they impact aspects of your life, and how they impact other people’s lives. Ask yourself: how do I feel filtering through these profiles? Why am I swiping mindlessly right now? Am I truly present in what I’m doing? How is this affecting my overall health and wellbeing (one swipe at a time)?

» **Be meaningful** – in other words, have a sense of purpose and clarity that stays at the forefront of your mind whenever you’re looking at profiles or reading and replying to messages. Be clear about your goals and

values, and your greater sense of purpose. Communicate in a straightforward way that aligns with the person you want to be (both online and IRL). Ask yourself: could this person contribute in a positive way to my life and overall sense of wellness? Do they appear to have similar goals or values to me?

» **Be moderate** – in that you’re able to regulate and temper your habits and app usage, and avoid it overhauling other aspects of your life. Use dating apps for moderated amounts of time, not just whenever there’s an ad break or you have a spare moment. That way, you’ll be able to maintain better emotional stability and balanced usage. Ask yourself: what will happen if I don’t respond to that person’s message immediately? How long have I been on here swiping through profiles? What strategies can I use to mediate my time here and ensure I don’t ‘overdose’? How will I know when it’s time to log off? ■