Looking for Love: Motivations of Dating App Usage in Millennials

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LOOKING FOR LOVE: MOTIVATIONS OF DATING APP USAGE IN MILLENNIALS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY
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For anyone who has ever felt frustrated by dating apps.
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ABSTRACT

Dating applications (apps) have become a popular method for young adults to make romantic connections. The apps themselves are easy to use and sometimes are created to be “game-like” to entice people to want to utilize them. People can “match” with other users and strike up conversations. Extensive research has been conducted on motivations for dating and using the dating app Tinder. This study looks at users’ reasons for using Bumble, where little research has been done. This study focuses on millennials aged 26-42, whereas most other studies have focused on college students under 23. This study uses a mixed approach, looking at Bumble profiles to analyze what people marked as “Looking For” to determine their motivations for being on the app. I also conducted a thematic analysis on the profiles’ About Me sections to see if it matched or added additional context to their “Looking For” section. This study looks at men, women, and nonbinary millennials. This is the first study found to emphasize nonbinary individuals as a significant sample. The results of this study indicate that men are more likely to indicate they are looking for a relationship (64%) versus something casual or even marriage, compared to women (57%) or nonbinary people (47%). Men are also more likely to have their "Looking For” motivation match their About Me motivation (89%), indicating they may be more direct or upfront in saying what they are using the app for. Nonbinary people are more likely to be open to more than one outcome from their interactions on dating apps (33%), indicating they want to form a community in multiple ways with other users.
CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Dating apps have become one of the most common ways people make romantic connections in the modern age (Essig, 2019; Castro & Barrada, 2020; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2016; Katz, 2016; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center (Brown, 2020), 31% of people surveyed (N=4741) have used a dating app. Instead of relying on friends, family, or coworkers to make mutual connections and introduce them to potential romantic partners, they can meet through an app. Online dating was created in the 1990s and early 2000s as a new way to meet people romantically (Essig, 2019). It originally had a stigma attached to it; it was as though you were unsuccessful in meeting people the “normal way,” and you looked desperate for having to rely on the internet to match you up with someone (Katz, 2016). Today, there is less stigma attached to online dating or dating apps, and it has become more normalized, especially since COVID-19.

Dating apps on smartphones became popular in the 2010s (Katz, 2016; Essig, 2019). Grindr was the first popular dating app to be created in 2009, and it targeted gay men who were located near each other (Essig, 2019). Tinder was built in 2012 and was the first app to modernize and shape how future dating apps would be based (Essig, 2019). It was created to be “game-like” to make people addicted (Thomas et al., 2023). The ease of use and swiping components made using Tinder more fun than traditional online dating sites (Thomas et al.,
People were able to swipe left (not interested) or swipe right (interested) in a “Hot or Not” type of way. If two people swiped right on one another, they would “match” and then be able to chat with one another. Tinder (and most dating apps) emphasize pictures (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Your photos are the first representation of you that other people see. I believe this emphasizes a person’s looks more than their personality or interests. One benefit of dating apps is that they are an efficient way of meeting people. All you have to do is create a profile, and then you can chat with other people almost immediately. Rather than going out into the community, you can talk to people without leaving home (Hobbs et al., 2016). However, you have to put in a decent amount of effort to make a good profile. You must have exciting and enticing photos and prompts to interest people.

**Personal Rationale**

I used Tinder a few years after it was created. I was in college, and it was an activity that was fun for me and my roommates to try and learn how to use together. We all started using it as a joke, but then we actually enjoyed it. Only one roommate met and went on a few dates with someone from the app; the rest of us just chatted with guys through it and then would be awkward about it when we ran into them in real life because we just found it fun to swipe and chat; we did not want to date any of the guys we talked to. We then deleted the app after about a month when we got bored.

However, years later, dating apps became the most common way for me and my peers to meet new people to date (especially during and after COVID-19). I have decided to study dating apps—specifically, people’s motivations for using dating apps—because of my personal experiences. I have had many instances where a man will indicate he is interested in a
relationship and will date me exclusively for several months. Then, all of a sudden, he decides he
does not want a relationship after all. It made me wonder, “What were we doing this whole time,
then? Did I misread their desires and intentions from the beginning? Is there something about the
apps, in particular, that made this happen?” I have also encountered dozens of men on dating
apps who indicate they want to start the relationship with something casual but are open to
continuing into something more serious. This feels like a Catch-22 – they want something casual
with no attachment but are open to feelings developing later. How are you supposed to act or
accommodate their emotions if you are unclear about what they want? This has also made me
wonder about the mismatch between men’s and women’s desires on dating apps. I know several
people who have had success and gotten married because of dating apps, but I also know several
people who have had less success and are still struggling with them. I hear about these struggles
regularly, pretty much any time the topic of dating comes up in conversation. I believe there may
be a fundamental difference in motivations on dating apps, which makes it difficult for people to
find a good match.

There is a lot of data about love and dating in general. (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004;
Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987; Clark et al., 1999). There is also a fair amount of data on the
usage and motivations of Tinder, the dating app (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Sobieraj &
Humphreys, 2021; Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Katz, 2016; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016). There is
only one study on the motivations of people using Bumble to see how that compares to Tinder
Menon, 2024). However, it focuses on India, so I am filling the gap with data from the United
States. Because there has only been an examination of one dating app in the United States, it
would be beneficial to add to the research on dating apps by exploring another. Some of the
studies on Tinder and other dating apps have been separated by gender (men and women) (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Castro & Barrada, 2020; Katz, 2016; Sumpter & Vandonbosh, 2019; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). I have not seen any data on the motivations of nonbinary people on dating apps, so studying this group to see how they compare to men and women is essential. I am interested in furthering this research by examining what people mark as what they are “Looking For” on Bumble. I also compared the “Looking For” with what people wrote in the “About Me” section.

Additionally, most research on dating app usage focused on college students under 23, so I am looking at millennials since they have not been studied before. What are their motivations for being on the app? Are they looking for a relationship, to have sex, or are they just on Bumble for entertainment? Do their motivations match the historical motivations for going on first dates (such as relational escalation or having sex [Carpenter & McEwan, 2016])? Some evidence supports that men are vaguer in their relationship goals on Tinder (Ranzini, Lutz, 2017). Are men more likely than women and non-binary people to be unclear or contradictory in what they are “Looking For” on Bumble? These are some of the questions and experiences that made me want to pursue this topic for my thesis.

Dating Apps Overview

Online Dating Sites

Online dating sites were the precursor to modern dating apps. The first online dating site was Match.com, which launched in 1995 (Essig, 2019). It worked similarly to newspaper classifieds, where people posted blurbs about themselves and said what they sought (Essig, 2019). eHarmony launched in 2000 and was the first online dating site to use algorithms to
match people up based on compatibility (Essig, 2019). eHarmony and other dating sites also acted as online “matchmakers.” The algorithms connected people it thought would interest one another (Katz, 2016). Online dating sites allow anyone to message one another, whereas dating apps require you to “match” with a person before you can talk to them (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Online dating was initially looked down upon; it was seen as unsafe and as if you could not find a partner in “real” life (Katz, 2016).

Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) looked at the use of dating apps and compared them to online dating websites. They note that the difference between them is that dating websites focus more on personality compatibility, whereas dating apps focus more on geolocation techniques to find people near you. Dating apps also focus more on physical appearance because the main component is pictures, which may lead to more objectification of users (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). They found that young adults were the age group most likely to be on dating apps (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017).

**Dating Apps 101**

Over 200 million people use dating apps worldwide (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Up to 40% of single people use online dating or dating apps at a given time, and 25% of new couples meet online (Castro & Barrada, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2020, 35% of people in their study who reported using dating apps used them in the last year (Brown, 2020). 61% of people who met their spouse online met them through a dating site or app (Brown, 2020). Nonetheless, of those who used a dating app in the last year, 45% said it made them feel more frustrated, compared to 28% who said it made them feel more hopeful (Brown, 2020). 41% indicated that finding someone on a dating app looking for the same type of relationship was
somewhat easy, and 31% said it was somewhat difficult (Brown, 2020). Only 20% said it was very easy to find someone looking for the same type of relationship (Brown, 2020). These data indicate that dating apps are not always successful in leading to relationships and can lead to frustration for their users. Thomas et al. (2023) also stated that dating apps have been found to decrease well-being. There is a common misconception that social media use leads to decreased well-being. They noted this is actually not true, so there must be something specific about dating apps that reduces peoples’ well-being.

Modern dating apps, available on smartphones, use geolocation techniques to find someone within a specific geographical radius (set by the user) (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Modern dating apps emphasize pictures rather than personality traits or characteristics (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). One component that dating app users have to contend with is the struggle between showing their “best self” and showing their “authentic self” (Hobbs et al., 2016; Katz, 2016). This leads to what Hobbs et al. (2016) call “edited authenticity” (p. 281) – trying to show everyone the best version of yourself. Hobbs et al. (2016) found that only 55% of people use apps for relational purposes. This finding is striking because it indicates that almost half of all users are not using dating apps for dating. They also found that although their research subjects were on dating apps, 61% said they would still prefer to meet a partner in a traditional face-to-face encounter (Hobbs et al., 2016).

On dating apps, “matches” happen when two people “like” each other on the app. Matching allows the users to communicate with one another (Hobbs et al., 2016). Matches are a form of social validation – they make you feel good because you know someone finds you
attractive (Hobbs et al., 2016). However, if people are not getting suitable matches (in their opinion), they can feel worse about themselves (Hobbs et al., 2016).

Grindr was the first widespread, modern dating app to be created (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). It is still the largest dating app for men seeking other men and has over 7 million users (Essig, 2019). The app is known for enabling gay hookups, which is something the app advertises; some of their marketing says, “You may not find ‘the one,’ but you may find the ‘right one for right now’” (Essig, 2019). Tinder launched in 2012 and was the first popular dating app available for all sexual orientations. Over 10 million people are on Tinder worldwide (Essig, 2019). In 2014, Bumble was created by a former employee of Tinder, Whitney Wolf Herd, who had won a sexual harassment lawsuit against the company (Essig, 2019; Menon, 2024). It has a similar setup to Tinder, but the woman has to initiate the chat on Bumble for the conversation to start. It is seen as a more “feminist” app than Tinder because it gives women more control, agency, and power over the situation (Essig, 2019). Essig (2019) wrote, “Bumble successfully mobilizes the feminist impulses of early twenty-first-century culture and the older, more romantic impulses of homo romanticus” (p. 69). It keeps the “hopeless romantic” vision alive while allowing women to choose whether to start a conversation. Bumble keeps romantic notions alive while appealing more to modern women.

OkCupid is a unique app because it started as an online dating site, bridging old and new formats. It uses geolocation and images but has an extensive survey to determine compatibility. However, even so, its founder said, “Your picture is worth that fabled thousand words, but your actual words are worth…almost nothing” (Katz, 2016, p. 10). Even with their extensive survey, the founder basically admitted it was useless. OkCupid also found that the text on your page
makes up less than 10% of what people think of you (Katz, 2016). This means that pictures make the most significant impact, so dating apps are set up to emphasize their users’ photos.

Ranzini and Lutz (2017) also studied how people presented themselves via the app. Like Timmermans and De Caluwé, they also looked at Tinder from a communications and media perspective. They argued that mobile media (apps) have four benefits: portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. Ranzini and Lutz (2017) claim that Tinder is more fun than dating sites because you can use it anywhere and share it with friends. They also recognize that using Tinder is more challenging than using social media because you are not representing yourself to people you know, like you are on social media (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). On dating apps, you must try to represent yourself to attract strangers, yet there is little room for creativity. The app’s formatting limits you because you have a restricted number of photos and text characters to utilize to try to show your best self.

According to AppMagic (2023), a site that tracks App Store and Google Play downloads in real-time, the top 10 most popular dating apps in the United States in 2022 were Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, Plenty of Fish, Paired, MeetMe, Badoo, Tagged, BLK, and Grindr. Tinder led with over 10 million downloads, followed by Bumble with 8 million and Hinge with 6 million. In 2023, Bumble led with more downloads in 2023 than Tinder, taking the lead as the most popular dating app in the U.S. (AppMagic, 2023). Because Bumble is currently the most popular dating app, studying it and comparing it to Tinder is essential.

**Men and Women’s Experiences on Dating Apps**

More men than women use dating apps (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Katz (2016) reports that the ratio of men to women is 4:1. Because of this, women get more matches on dating apps,
allowing them to be more selective and have more control over whom they interact with (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Some authors indicate that women use dating apps to have more control over their relationships and sexuality (Castro & Barrada, 2020) because dating apps allow them to be more selective in who they talk to (rather than waiting for someone to approach them in a public place).

At least one study showed that men were more likely to “Like” women on dating apps than women were to “Like” men (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). This indicates that women are pickier about whom they decide to “Like” and “Match with.” Sumpter and Vandonbosh (2019) wrote that men are socialized to date more people and have more sexual encounters, while women are socialized to invest their time in committed relationships. Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) also found that men respond more quickly to messages on dating apps (two minutes, on average, compared to women’s average of 38 minutes). However, women used many more characters in their texts with the men they talked to (122 for women compared to 12 for men) (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). This may indicate that women respond with more “quality” responses or may communicate better via text than men.

Interestingly, Sumpter and Vandonbosh (2019) found that men said they found it easier to communicate online (Tinder) than offline, possibly due to the heterosexual societal pressures they face. So, even if they are not saying much, they feel like they are having quality conversations. Men may be more likely to feel pressure to initiate conversations with someone they are interested in real life. Still, on dating apps, they can relax because women have an equal role in initiating and reciprocating conversations.
In *The Tinder Games*, Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) found that men and women tend to stick to stereotypical gender roles on dating apps. Katz (2016) quoted a study that said, “Traditionally men aggressively pursue sex in order to maintain their social identity as a masculine man, while women resist sexual advancements to properly manage their social identities as feminine women” (Katz, 2016, p.15). This may indicate that men and women show up differently on dating apps because of how they are socialized to date. Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) found women to be warmer and more submissive, while men were more aggressive in their approaches.

Ranzini and Lutz (2017) wrote that people expect authenticity when they are on dating apps; they expect people they meet from the apps to look like their pictures. They also found that women are more strategic about their visual appearance and are more likely to lie about their weight. At the same time, men are more likely to be deceptive about their relationship status and relational goals for being on the apps (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). This means men may be more likely to be misleading about what they look for on dating apps, whereas women may be more misleading about the images they choose for their profiles.

Men are more aggressive in their approaches because they aim to get more matches (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). According to the findings from this study, the “games” men play involve doing whatever they can to get more matches (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Men will often be on multiple dating apps simultaneously to increase their odds of getting more matches (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Sometimes, they will “suicide swipe,” meaning they swipe right (say yes) to every woman they see, to the point where the app will prevent them from swiping for a while because it thinks they are spam or a robot (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Women’s
“games” were making fun of people they saw on apps. Women will show their friends what they come across (either in person or by sending screenshots) (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). I think this might be a way for them to increase their self-esteem- if they make fun of the people they come across, they may feel less vulnerable about being rejected by potential matches.

Dating apps have negative connotations, just like online dating sites did; dating apps are sometimes stigmatized as “hookup apps” (Katz, 2016). Hooking up means casual sex, which could either be an ongoing casual relationship or a one-night-only situation. Essig (2019) found that millennials are more likely to have sex before a first date “perhaps as a way of determining whether or not they want to spend more time with that person or perhaps because that is the way hook-up culture moves bodies into relationships: first sex and then possibly a date” (p. 76). However, even so, she found that millennials were 30% more likely than those in other age groups to want a relationship. So, even though millennials may “hook up” earlier in dating, they are still most interested in a relationship. Menon (2024) wrote that emerging adults (aged 18-29) are more likely to engage in casual sex (it’s important to note that this age range includes both Millennials and Gen Z). Katz (2016) found that only 8% of users were on dating apps for casual sex. It is possible that Katz’s (2016) interviewees, when asked if they were using dating apps for hooking up, did not want to openly admit if they were using the apps for casual sex, which may account for this low percentage.

Interestingly, Carpenter and McEwan (2016) found that men were likelier to believe dating apps were meant for casual hookups. This may indicate that men think they should live up to the socialized norm of hooking up or that they may assume everyone on the app is interested in casual sex. Mongeau et al. (2004) stated that there are a variety of theories that support why
men may be more likely to be interested in casual sex (i.e., sociobiology, feminist, social role, evolutionary psychology, etc.); however, these theories, “although operating under considerably different assumptions, actually make predictions that are more similar than different” (p. 124). This means that all the various theories lead to similar conclusions – men are socialized to do this. Hooking up is stereotypical heterosexual male behavior, so this may be a motivation for men because they are (subconsciously) trying to live up to their gender roles. One positive thing about dating apps, though, is that people can be upfront if they are looking for a hookup (Hobbs et al., 2016), which is typically frowned upon in “real life” scenarios.

Castro and Barrada (2020) wrote that LGBTQIA+ people (especially gay men) were likelier to use Tinder for hookups than heterosexual people. However, Sumpter and Vandonbosh (2019) reported that LGBTQIA+ people’s motivations for being on the apps were more relational, indicating that they actually want relationships. LGBTQIA+ individuals are also more likely to use dating apps in general compared to heterosexual people; this is likely because of their ability to keep anonymity and have safety – they can be out on dating apps without having to be out in their real life (Sumpter & Vandonbosh, 2019). In 2016, 70% of LGBTQIA+ couples met online (Hobbs et al., 2016), much higher than the previously reported 25% of the general population (Castro & Barrada, 2020). Ranzini and Lutz’s (2017) research on Grindr showed that gay men only represent themselves accurately if they want a romantic connection. If they want a casual hookup, they will likely choose the best photos of their body.

In their final study, Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) used their newly created Tinder Motives Scale, which consisted of 58 items that relate to different motives for using Tinder. Respondents answered various questions on a 7-point Likert Scale from strongly disagree (=1) to
strongly agree (=7). They found men and women were more likely to kiss (M= 2.56) or have sex with (M= 1.56) someone they met on Tinder than have a romantic, intimate connection (M= 0.86); this means that people are more likely to have sexual outcomes than relational outcomes from their Tinder meet-ups. The second highest outcome after kissing was becoming friends with someone (M= 2.19), which again indicates that relationships are not a high outcome from dating apps. They also found that people who were on Tinder out of curiosity were less likely to meet someone from the app in person (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). This indicates that people who are more proactive and have other reasons for being on the apps are more likely to have success in reaching their relational goals.

They wrote, “People are not mainly – or certainly not exclusively – looking for relational or sexual intimacy on Tinder, implying that Tinder rather functions more as a ‘location-based screening/meeting application’ than a ‘mobile dating application’” (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017, p. 348). These results suggest that dating apps have many more added benefits than just finding romantic partners, so this might be something that dating apps could include in advertising if they wanted to expand their reach to more than just people looking to date. This evidence suggests that dating apps are almost more of a “meet up” app than a dating app. They make connections between people who might not have encountered each other otherwise. However, this means fewer people are actually on the apps for romantic purposes, so people going in with that motivation may end up disappointed.
Motivations of Dating and Using Dating Apps

Motivations of Dating

It is essential to look at the motivations for dating because nowadays, the first step in dating is often through dating apps. There are many reasons why people are motivated to go on a first date. Mongeau and Serewicz (2004) found that the four main reasons people went on a first date were uncertainty reduction (to get to know the other person), relational escalation (initiate the possibility of a romantic/sexual relationship), to have fun or find someone to do things with, and to have sex. This differs somewhat from two other studies studying first-date motivations. Roscoe, Diana, and Brooks (1987) found there were seven primary first date goals, which were recreation (to have fun), to get to know the other person, to increase their status, sexual experimentation or satisfaction, companionship (to find someone to do things with), to find a potential spouse, and intimacy (establishing a meaningful relationship). They discovered that of those, intimacy, companionship, socialization, recreation, and sexual activity were the most common reasons. Clark et al. (1999) also differed and reported that the primary motivations for initiating dates included love, sex, having fun, learning about the other person, impressing other people, and gaining access to a partner’s resources. Of those, they found love, sex, and learning about the other person were the most popular reasons for initiating a first date.

Another interesting thing to note is that people can and do have multiple motivations for dating, which can overlap (Carpenter and McEwan, 2016). This means that someone could be open to something more sexual or something more romantic, depending on the situation. Mongeau et al. (2004) wrote that goals and motivations could change within an interaction. That means that someone might be more interested in a romantic relationship overall. Still, they might
be open to a more sexual relationship with someone based on their conversations and interactions.

The findings of motivational goals that were in common for all three of these studies were to have fun, relational escalation, and to have sex. All of these were found to be popular reasons to date, but they did vary in importance for each study. Mongeau and Serewicz (2004) discovered that men were more likely to report having sexual goals, whereas women were more likely to have companionship goals. They also found that women’s sexual goals are tied to their intimacy goals; women desire sexual relationships as long as the romantic or intimate relationship goes well (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004). They also found that men view sexual intimacy differently from relational intimacy.

Mongeau & Serewicz (2004) included romantic potential as a category – people wanted to see if a relationship was possible with this person. They also split companionship into two categories to distinguish those who wanted friendship and those who wanted a partner to do activities with because they found those were two different motivations. Friendship involves some intimacy, whereas an activity partner is someone you do things with (but might not necessarily include an intimate friendship) (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004). They dropped the activity partner from their scale since this was not a relational goal.

Their third and final finding (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004) was that the person who initiates the date gets to set the tone for the relationship and, therefore, has more power. For instance, if the initiator invited a person to a keg party, that would have different connotations than a romantic dinner or a coffee date (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004). There is also sometimes a disconnect between the desires of the two people involved, but the person being asked usually
has to go along with the plans of the initiator (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004). It would be interesting to connect this idea to Bumble and see if a woman making the first move (via chat) impacts the potential relationship tone.

**Motivations for Using Dating Apps**

Many researchers have used the studies previously mentioned on dating motivations to study motivations for using Tinder specifically. Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) created the Tinder Motives Scale. They identified eight motivations for using Tinder – socializing, social pressure, social approval, entertainment, to pass the time, relationship-seeking, information-seeking, and sexual experiences. These motivations match the User Gratification theory or why people use other media types (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). This theory says that people who are active in their media usage and have their needs gratified by the media keep using it to satisfy their needs. This indicates that dating apps are more similar to social media platforms and are used similarly to social media rather than for actual dating. Sobieraj and Humphreys (2021) also did interviews and focus groups and found that most people joined Tinder due to friends’ recommendations or seeing their friends find successful relationships through them.

Carpenter and McEwan (2016) also looked at the users’ motivations for being on Tinder. They found that the primary motivations of people on Tinder were to form interpersonal relationships, have sexual activity, and for entertainment or fun (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016). They found that people use dating apps more often for entertainment than sex or romantic relationships. Carpenter and McEwan (2016) also found that Tinder allows people to form romantic connections with multiple people simultaneously, compared to “regular” dating, where people usually only get to know one person at a time.
Similarly, Katz (2016) cited a 2013 Pew Research Center study that found 32% of internet users agreed that “online dating keeps people from settling down because they always have options for people to date.” Katz (2016) wrote, “This reflects the notion that having infinite options of partners is detrimental to relationships because people will always be tempted by the abundance of unexplored choice” (p. 64). This is one negative part of dating apps, in my opinion. Dating apps show how many people are single near you, which might make you think something better is always out there. This could give people hope about finding their perfect match, but it could also make people pass up on “fine” people because they are always looking for someone better. Katz (2016) indicated that this is not a new phenomenon in dating generally, but this is the first time all the available single people can be found in your pocket, so this feeling may be more exaggerated.

To the best of my knowledge, Menon (2024) conducted the only research on Bumble in January 2024, but her research focused on users in India. She studied “emerging adults” (aged 18-29) and found the primary motivators of Bumble users were love, [socialization], ease of communication, distraction, trendiness, and sexual experience. Of these, love, socialization, and distraction were the most common motivators for emerging adults (Menon, 2024). Menon also believed that the dating apps the user chooses may change their motivations. Because of Bumble’s marketing and features, they may be attracting certain types of people (Menon, 2024).

Carpenter and McEwan (2016) also found that people who spend the most time on the apps sought casual sex. I believe these findings indicate that people who are on the apps for romantic purposes might be in the minority and might have trouble finding a good match. They wrote:
Men interested in finding a sexual partner may be frustrated if all of the women they can reach out to do not share their goals for using such apps. Women who see the app as an entertainment venue may be annoyed when men who they swipe right on immediately proposition them for sex. It may be useful for users to strategically construct their profiles in order to signal which goals they are most interested in. (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016, Discussion Paragraph 3)

Their research suggests that it is essential for people to signify on their profiles what they are looking for on the app to decrease their chances of having unsatisfactory experiences on the app. Because my research specifically looks at what people are looking for on Bumble, I hope it will add to Carpenter and McEwan’s research and show if this is helpful for users to find what they are seeking.

Timmermans and DeCaluwé (2017) found that a third of dating app users had never gone on a date based on a dating app or website connection. This indicates that either these people have not had any success in meeting new people, or it may mean that some users are on dating apps to waste time and be entertained. In interviews designed to look at motivations for using Tinder, Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) found that socialization was the number one motivation for being on dating apps; people want to make social connections, make friends, and discover new people to talk to. The second motivation they found was social pressure – respondents felt like everyone else was on Tinder, so they had to be, too (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Many also said they were on the apps for social approval; getting notifications that people like you all day is an ego booster (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Over half of all interviewees said they used it because they were bored and wanted something to pass the time. Only 44% of interviewees (8 out of 18) said they were on the apps for relationship-finding (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017).
Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) also found that people more likely to be active users of the app (i.e., on it more often) are motivated by relationship seeking, socializing, increasing flirting/social skills, getting social approval, getting over an ex, and sexual orientation. They discovered that those with a relationship motive are likelier to get romance from their app usage and less likely to use it for casual sex (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). This implies that, generally, people can find what they are looking for on Tinder if they are looking for a relationship.

Interestingly, there is one big difference between *dating* and *dating app* motivations. With dating apps, an additional “internal” motivator appears to be more present than in “real-life” dating. Some people are on dating apps to boost their ego or because they are bored. In real-life scenarios, however, people date for “external” motivators – getting to know the other person, getting into a relationship, etc. Dating apps can be used for both purposes—to decrease boredom and get to know other people. Carpenter and McEwan (2016) referenced the (personal) entertainment that some people seek on dating apps. They wrote,

> Some users may simply treat the app as a game and never intend to meet anyone face-to-face on the app. They simply rate people and perhaps chat with people because they are bored and see the app as a way to kill time. (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016, Paragraph 14)

In essence, some people do not want to meet up with others. It would be difficult for other users to weed out these people so they do not waste their time.

Ranzini and Lutz (2017) studied almost 500 people via a survey and found entertainment to be the most popular motivation for using dating apps. They also discovered that people are more likely to try to represent themselves accurately via their profile than to be deceptive (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). However, they found that people with casual sex motivations were more
likely to be deceptive, whereas relational-motivated people were more likely to be authentic (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

It is essential to continue studying dating apps and why people are motivated to use them to fill some research gaps. Most of the research mentioned above is about college students under the age of 23, so it is important to study different age groups and how they interact or think about dating apps. My study is focused on Millennials, which will aid in this research. Some of the research mentioned above was separated by gender (men and women), or the researchers kept their findings more general (not separated by gender). However, no studies specifically looked at or reported on nonbinary people. Nonbinary people are an essential demographic to study, so my research fills this gap. My research also looks at women who are interested in other women, which is another group that has rarely (if ever) been studied. Finally, none of the current research on dating apps from the United States uses Bumble. My research study incorporates Bumble to see if it is similar to or different from Tinder.
CHAPTER 2
DATA AND METHODS

Sampling

I wanted to study Millennials (ages 26-42) to determine their motivations for being on Bumble. I wanted to see if their motivations matched those of college students and also see if their motivations matched those of Tinder users. I was also curious to see if men were more likely to be vague or deceptive about their interests or why they are on the app. To do this, I completed a content analysis of Bumble profiles for my data analysis. First, I submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board of a Midwestern University. I was approved and deemed exempt from a full review because I used publicly available data and de-identified each person’s profile by cropping screenshots to eliminate their names or pictures.

For my content analysis, I specifically reviewed the “Looking For” area of the profile and the “About Me” section. On Bumble, the “Looking For” options are Relationship, Something Casual, Don’t Know Yet, Marriage, or leaving it blank (refusing to answer). People can write whatever they want in their “About Me,” but some people use it to indicate or specify what they are looking for (i.e., “Looking for someone to check out breweries with this summer!”). I only analyzed their About Me’s if they included relevant information about what they used the app for or provided additional context for what they marked as “Looking For.” The About Me’s without relevant information were ignored and excluded from this study.
One limitation of this method is that I could only see people interested in women because my profile is set as a Woman. I did not feel comfortable changing my gender on the app or creating a fake profile to see how people who date men or nonbinary people might differ from those who date women. This means that the only women I was able to view were women who date women; these women may have different motivations than straight women, which is a significant limitation. Another potential limitation was the functionality of the Bumble algorithm. Because I am a previous user of Bumble, it already has historical data based on whom it thinks I might like, so it may have shown me such people. So, there is a possibility the profiles were not entirely random.

My sample included 75 profiles – 25 men, 25 women, and 25 non-binary people. I used non-probability quota sampling to get 25 of each demographic group. I set my “preferences” on Bumble and limited it to these three groups, sampling each, one at a time (men, then women, then nonbinary people). Changing my preferences helped the algorithm and ensured I got enough profiles for each group because I could only see men, then women, then non-binary people. I Bumble uses an algorithm to show you the people it thinks you might like, so the profiles shown to me were not entirely random. It is unknown if my continued swiping left to get to every fifth profile might have impacted the Bumble algorithm and shown me different people. I set my age range to 26-42, the current age range of Millennials, according to the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019), and selected my geographic range for a 10-mile radius. I took a screenshot of every fifth profile that showed up. Using every fifth profile means I swiped through 125 profiles to get my final number of 25 per gender group. I did not swipe right, match, or communicate with anyone while I collected my samples. I then analyzed these screenshots by inputting their
“Looking For” choices and relevant “About Me” quotes into an Excel document. I then counted the Looking For choices and coded the About Me’s.

Coding

I coded the About Me responses into five categories: Casual Relationship, Serious Relationship, Entertainment or to Have Fun, Friendship, or Unclear. I also included a subcategory of Open to More than One Outcome if their About Me indicated they were open to multiple things (a combination of the previous categories). I decided on these categories based on the About Me responses. It took a few tries to make sure my categories fully encompassed everything, and I went through a few rounds of edits with my advisors. After a few rounds of edits, my advisors and I agreed on the final categorization. Table Three shows examples of how I determined how to code different About Me’s.

To me, a Casual Relationship is a relationship that lasts from a few dates up to a few months. Depending on the person or relationship, they may or may not be exclusive. Casual relationships could also be more sexual in nature and be indicative of hooking up, or they could be romantic (dates). To me, the meaning of a Serious Relationship is wanting to date for longer than a few months, up to as long as they desire. This could lead to marriage or a “life partner.”

Entertainment or Have Fun is someone to do something with. In the About Me’s, they usually indicated a specific activity they wanted someone to join them for (such as an upcoming concert).

On the other hand, friendship was coded this way if they were looking for a friend or someone non-romantic to do things with. Friends would be longer-term than the Entertainment or Have Fun category and would not be specific to one activity. I coded things as Unclear if their
response was vague and could be read in different ways. Their response is indicative of multiple meanings, but they all are a combination of the above categories. There were also several people whose responses indicated they were open to more than one outcome (i.e., friendship or a relationship). I coded their responses separately (because of this, there were more responses than profiles), but I included them in a subcategory of Open to More than One Outcome. There were two men, two women, and four nonbinary people who fit in the Open to More than One Outcome subcategory, so they were counted more than once (N in Table 4 referenced their number of responses).

Table 1. Coding Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About Me Quote</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Not looking for anything serious at the moment&quot;</td>
<td>Casual Relationship</td>
<td>I coded this as a Casual Relationship because they don’t want anything serious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Looking for a fit queen to go to the gym and farmers markets with, and laugh at my quirky jokes.&quot;</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>I coded this as Unclear. They could be looking for friendship, a person to do these activities in particular with. Or they could be looking for a serious relationship, and these are examples of the activities they imagine themselves doing with their future partner. Because it could have more than one meaning, I am coding it as Unclear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Wanna go for a walk?&quot;</td>
<td>Entertainment/Have Fun</td>
<td>I coded this as Entertainment/Have Fun because they have a specific activity in mind. There is no indication that they want this to continue into a friendship or some type of relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I want to fall in love but am not necessarily looking for that. Sex friends and art friends are nice too.&quot;</td>
<td>Serious Relationship, Casual Relationship, Friendship (subcategory of Open to More than One Outcome)</td>
<td>Their first sentence was pretty vague (they want a serious relationship, but also they don’t), so I had considered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was looking for, in particular, the users’ motivations for being on Bumble. I used what they mentioned under Looking For and in their About Me to code and categorize them into Casual Relationship, Serious Relationship, and Entertainment or Have Fun. I also added an additional category, Unclear, because some responses were vague and could have indicated multiple categories. I also added a subcategory of Open to More than One Outcome because several people were interested in or open to various opportunities. I originally started by coding the responses into the three categories used by Carpenter and McEwan (2016), who studied the motivations of Tinder usage. Their study used Interpersonal Relationships, Sexual Activity, and Entertainment or to Have Fun. However, those three categories did not encompass everything I encountered in my sample. For instance, people did not outright say they were looking for sexual activity or a “hookup,” so I could not include sexual activity as a category. Instead, I used the Casual Relationship code, which could encompass hookups or dates. I also added Friendship as another category because it differs from Entertainment or Have Fun. In addition, I looked into

| "Let's go on a date!" | Casual Relationship | I coded this as Casual Relationship. They may be interested in something more serious but they are at least open to going on a date (and seeing what happens). |

Putting this under Unclear. But because their second sentence indicated they wanted “sex friends” (casual relationships) or “art friends” (friendship), I coded this as three things and am including it in the subcategory of Open to More than One Outcome.
ambiguity – some people’s About Me’s were vague on what they were looking for (these were coded as Unclear), and some of their About Me’s did not match their Looking For desires.

Analysis

Of the 75 profiles analyzed, 62 users marked something for the “Looking For” section, while the rest left it blank. Twenty-one men, nineteen women, and twenty-two nonbinary people filled out that item. It is interesting to note that women were most likely to leave this section blank. I also looked at whether users intentionally left this blank – if they filled out other relevant items in this section (such as their height, zodiac sign, or political affiliation) but skipped over the Looking For dropdown. Women were likelier to leave this intentionally blank (4 women compared to two men and one nonbinary person). Perhaps they skipped over this dropdown because they did not know what they were looking for, or maybe none of the categories matched their desires. Interestingly, though, women were also more likely to mark “Don’t Know Yet” (although the difference between the genders was minimal).

In the About Me section, many fewer people filled out the section with something that reiterated what they were looking for. The About Me can be used for whatever the user wants, so only 31 out of the 75 indicated something relevant for this study. That being said, it was a tiny sample size. Only nine men, ten women, and twelve nonbinary people filled out something relevant in this section. Because of the small size, findings only apply to these profiles in particular and should be assumed to represent all of Bumble About Me’s as a whole.
Findings

“Looking For” Section

Table 2. Bumble Profile "Looking For" Percentages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men (N=21)</th>
<th>Women (N=19)</th>
<th>Nonbinary (N=22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>57% (12)</td>
<td>47% (9)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something Casual</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know Yet</td>
<td>29% (6)</td>
<td>42% (8)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Answers Provided</td>
<td>n=21</td>
<td>n=18</td>
<td>n=22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages are based on the number of responses, not the number of users

In the “Looking For” section, 57% of responses from men indicated they were looking for a relationship, and 5% indicated they were looking for marriage. 47% of responses from women indicated they wanted a relationship, and 0% said marriage. Only 41% of responses from nonbinary people indicated they wanted a relationship, and 0% said marriage. This suggests that more men want a serious relationship (or marriage) compared to women and nonbinary people. 10% of responses from men indicated they wanted something casual, and 29% indicated “don’t know yet.” For women, 5% of their responses said something casual, and 42% said they “don’t know yet.” 27% of responses from nonbinary people indicated something casual, and 32% indicated they “don’t know yet.” These data suggest that nonbinary people are more likely to want something casual than men or women.

Interestingly, women were more likely to indicate they “don’t know yet” than the other demographics. Men were actually least likely to indicate this. This may suggest that men are more direct in saying what they are looking for on their Bumble profiles than women and nonbinary people. It is also possible that women prefer to get to know someone on Bumble...
before deciding what they might want from a relationship with that person. Interestingly, 28% of responses from women left the Looking For item blank, compared to 16% of responses from men and 12% from nonbinary people.

“About Me” Section

Table 3. Bumble Profile About Me Percentages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men (N=9)</th>
<th>Women (N=10)</th>
<th>Nonbinary (N=12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual Relationship</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
<td>21% (3)</td>
<td>21% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious Relationship</td>
<td>36% (4)</td>
<td>36% (5)</td>
<td>26% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/have fun</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>7% (1)</td>
<td>11% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>21% (3)</td>
<td>32% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>14% (2)</td>
<td>11% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of Responses</td>
<td>n=11</td>
<td>n=14</td>
<td>n=19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to More than One Outcome (subcategory)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td>33% (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages are based on the number of responses, not the number of people. People’s responses were coded into multiple categories.

In the About Me section, men were likelier to indicate they wanted a romantic or casual relationship. 64% of responses from men (27% casual, 36% serious) indicated they wanted a relationship, compared to 57% of responses from women (21% casual, 36% serious) and 47% of responses from nonbinary people (21% casual, 26% serious). The percentage of responses from men and women in this study related to this option was higher than the previous Hobbs et al. (2016) study, which found that 55% of people were on the apps for relational purposes.

Interestingly, responses from men and women were related to those who wanted a serious relationship (36% each). However, 27% of responses from men and only 21% of responses from women indicated they wanted a casual relationship. This may suggest that men and women want a serious relationship equally, but more men want a casual relationship than women.
32% of responses from nonbinary people indicated they were open to a friendship relationship, compared to 18% of responses from men and 21% from women. Nonbinary people are much more likely to desire a friendship. Since this study is using queer women, I was surprised that queer women’s responses were so similar to men's (21% vs. 18%) because previous studies (Sumpter & Vandonbosh, 2019) have shown that queer people use dating apps to find a community.

Interestingly, 22% of responses from men, 20% of responses from women, and 33% of responses from nonbinary people indicated that they were Open to More than One Outcome. This, along with the finding that 32% of responses from nonbinary people indicated that they were interested in a friendship, suggests that nonbinary people are on the app for community building. They are open to both friendship and romantic dates. This supports previous research (Sumpter & Vandonbosh, 2019) that found dating apps to be a safe place for queer individuals to meet other queer people to form a community.

Comparing “Looking For” to “About Me”

It isn’t easy to compare the Looking For and About Me’s because they were measured differently. However, 62% of Looking For responses from men indicated they wanted a “romantic relationship” (Serious Relationship or Marriage), which is pretty similar to the About Me’s, where 64% of responses from men indicated they wanted a romantic relationship (Serious or Casual Relationship). Women, on the other hand, had a higher variance between these sections. 47% of women’s responses indicated a romantic relationship in their Looking For, while 57% indicated this in their About Me. Similarly, 41% of nonbinary people indicated a romantic relationship in their Looking For, while 47% indicated the same in their About Me’s.
These results may suggest that men are more direct – their About Me’s tend to “match” their Looking For. Women and nonbinary people may be more indirect – they are less clear on what they desire from their time on the app. Another critical point is that perhaps the Looking For options are not expansive enough to cover what women and nonbinary people are motivated by.

Comparing this on an individual level, 89% of the men who wrote a (relevant) About Me had their motivations in their About Me “match” their Looking For. Women only matched these 47% of the time, and nonbinary people only matched these 42% of the time. These results indicate that men are more direct and straightforward about what they want, which differs from previous research on the subject from Ranzini and Lutz (2017), who said that men were more likely to be deceptive about their relationship goals. However, based on the Open to More than One Outcome subcategory, we saw that nonbinary people were more open to various dynamics from their interactions than men or women were.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSION

There are many studies on dating motivations and dating app usage (Mongeau & Serewicz, 2004; Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987; Clark et al., 1999; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021; Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Katz, 2016; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016). One previous study by Mongeau and Serewicz (2004) found that the four main reasons people went on a first date were uncertainty reduction, relational escalation, having fun, and having sex. Clark et al. (1999) reported that the primary motivations for initiating dates included love, sex, and learning about the other person, which are also the primary motivations for going on a first date. Dating apps are often the first stage in the modern-day dating process, so it would make sense for dating motivations to match dating app motivations.

Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) identified eight motivations for using Tinder: socializing, social pressure, social approval, entertainment, passing the time, relationship-seeking, information-seeking, and sexual experiences. Carpenter and McEwan (2016), on the other hand, found that the primary motivations of people on Tinder were to form interpersonal relationships, have sexual activity, and for entertainment or fun.

My research helped fill the dating app gap by focusing on Bumble instead of Tinder. My study is the first research from the United States to focus on the motivations of Bumble users. I found the main motivations of Bumble users were to find Serious Relationships, Casual Relationships, Friendship, and Entertainment or Have Fun. Some people were also open to a
combination of these categories, while others were vague and unclear. I found that men were more likely to desire a romantic relationship than queer women or nonbinary people. Men were also more likely to be more transparent and upfront on what they were looking for – most men who answered the About Me section had their About Me match what they marked in the “Looking For” section. I also discovered that about a quarter of all dating app respondents were motivated by more than one outcome and were open to multiple possibilities from their interactions on dating apps. Nonbinary people, in particular, were most likely to want friendship or a relationship.

The first research question I wanted to address was, “What are Millennials’ motivations for being on Bumble?” I found that 50-55% of Millennials indicate they want a relationship from their Bumble profiles. This compares to the research by Hobbs et al. (2016), who stated that 55% of people on dating apps are interested in a relationship. I also found that the external motivators for Bumble are very similar to those for Tinder, so these apps are alike, after all. The second research question I addressed was, “Do Millennials’ motivations match the historical motivations for going on first dates?” Their results were pretty close to the most common first-date motivators. I found Serious Relationships, Casual Relationships, Friendship, and Entertainment/Having Fun to be the main reasons for being on Bumble. This compares to the first date motivations of Having Fun, Relational Escalation, and Having Sex. My final research question was, “Are men more likely to be vague or contradictory in what they are looking for on Bumble?” I found the answer to be no: men are actually more likely to be more direct on their dating profiles. However, one important thing to remember is that my sample size was relatively
small, especially for the About Me analysis. My findings are related to the Bumble profiles I looked at in particular and should not be assumed for all Bumble users.

Ultimately, dating apps might not be the most efficient way to find a romantic partner if only about 50% of people want the same outcome. If you are more open to multiple connections coming from dating apps, this would be a great way to meet people and see where things go. Perhaps people should not take dating apps so seriously—they should expect them to be a way to make general connections that may or may not lead to something more. Because so many people either leave the “Looking For” section blank or select “Don’t Know Yet,” I suggest Bumble edit the “Looking For” options. They should remove Marriage (since only one person in my sample selected it) and replace it with Friendship. They should also change the functionality so people can choose multiple options. That would allow users not to feel forced into these categories and would be more realistic for other users to determine their motivations. I would also suggest that Bumble allow people to narrow their preferences and only show profiles with the same dating app interests. I believe their premium version enables you to do this, but this should be a free option for all if they genuinely want people to find their perfect match.

One area that could be looked into further is whether what people write on their profiles is what they truly desire or is just what they are writing or saying publicly. Perhaps interviews or focus groups with a profile content analysis would be helpful to see what people's true motivations are. This would allow the researchers to compare what they write publicly with what they truly desire. This would also enable researchers to examine the internal motivators I could not study. I would also suggest using a larger sample size in future iterations to ensure the above trends are accurate for a broader audience. My sample size was very small, so it should not be
assumed to be true for all Bumble users. My research only used queer women, so it would be crucial for future researchers to include straight women. Perhaps they could compare straight and queer men and women to see how they compare to one another. I also think it would be interesting to conduct a similar study on Tinder or Hinge, other popular dating apps, to see if they get similar result.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Mel Ekins graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Loras College in May 2015 with degrees in Sociology and Spanish. She completed her Master of Arts Degree in Women’s Studies and Gender Studies from Loyola University in May of 2024. For her employment, she has worked as a Manager on the Public Benefits Access and Capacity team at Feeding America, focusing on helping people access SNAP and other public benefits nationwide. She hopes to get her research published and continue to use her data analysis and feminist learning style in her career going forward.