

Understanding the motivations behind dating applications: Exploring future predictions

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Abstract

This exploratory research utilized focus groups from college students to learn how and why people are using current mobile dating applications to form and maintain relationships. Additionally, the author asked participants about their perception of a new mobile application that is still in the conceptual stages called Flick. The results revealed seven key themes to the gratifications people receive from mobile dating apps: (Theme 1: Dating Applications as Games and Entertainment; Theme 2: Perceptions of App Functions Vary by Gender; Theme 3: Dating Applications to Embrace Hookup Culture/Casual Sex; Theme 4: Dating Applications as the Lottery Ticket for Love/Relationship Seeking; Theme 5: Dating Applications as Self-Validation; Theme 6: Dating Applications for Social Means; Theme 7: Dating Applications as Trendiness) Lastly, the overall perceptions of Flick were very positive from all sessions. However, when it comes to the dating component of the application, the users were much more uncertain. Due to this finding, the author has decided to take the branding and purpose of Flick to only focus on the business and friend components.

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One Love Everybody

Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this to my niece, Ellenor Rose Marie. I woke up on May 2, 2018 to mentally prepare myself for my defense, and was welcomed with the news of your arrival to this earth. I couldn't be there for it, but you were in my thoughts the whole day. Welcome to the world baby girl.

Preface

I am absolutely fascinated with how quickly technology is evolving. Even more interesting than the development of technology is how it is influencing human relationships. When I was born in 1991, my grandmother had a bag phone in her car, my parents had beepers, landlines all had cords, and the internet was a new thing nobody understood very well. Fast forward to 2017: I'm working at Best Buy. I sold a family of four brand new iPhones worth \$800. This piece of technology enabled the family's capability of managing finances, watching full-length feature films in 4K, video conferencing people around the world, producing music, and, of course, text messaging and phone calls. Most surprising, the children were only six and eight years old and were completely literate on how to use their new cell phones that were more capable than most of the technology older generations used to run their personal and professional lives.

How does that influence people on a macro-level? How does having the ability to communicate with people, and find information instantly effect people? It has introduced new elements to human communication that has changed when we communicate, how we communicate, and even why we communicate. The children that I sold those iPhones to will never truly understand what life was like before the luxuries modern technology. This is why I feel I am in a unique position because I am one of the last generations of people who will remember a life when the internet was underdeveloped, and phones only made phone calls.

There are two people who also deserve credit for this project. The first, my life-long friend, Cameron Hecker. He gave me a call one evening on my way home from school and said he had an idea for a dating application called Flick. This new innovative strategy to connecting with people works differently than other dating applications in that you have to already be within

proximity of others, say like a public event of some type. One party would use their phone in a flicking motion towards another party which would send them a message. The other person could then see that profile and if they are interested, flick back at them. After the connection is made, they may have conversation through the app, but the purpose is for them to have it face-to-face. A simple solution is to meet in the middle from traditional dating and mobile application dating. There is of course much more to it, but that will be explained later in the paper. After explaining to me his idea for a new innovative way to meet people, he asked if I would partner with him to launch it. It was wonderful timing because I was able to use the idea to drive my graduate research project.

The second person is the inspirational woman I encountered at lunch in February 2018. After purchasing some food, I tried to find a nice place to sit down to eat it, but there were no available tables open due to it being peak business hours. I decided to walk back across the street to my office to eat when one individual caught my attention. She was sitting in the corner of a large booth that comfortably fits six to eight people, but what stood out was the note she had placed at the other end that read “Don’t worry. You can sit here, too.”

I stopped and looked around the dining area. There were actually a lot of big tables that only had one person sitting at them. Why did I think there were not any available seats? All I had to do was ask any of them, and I’m sure they would have welcomed me, but that didn’t register with me. Maybe it’s my own personality, or maybe it’s just a cultural thing because nobody else was asking to sit with others, besides this girl. I introduced myself and inquired about her little sign. She told me she sits in there often to do school work, and the booths have way more space than she needs. However, she feels like other people assume they can’t sit with her. That’s when I started to think about what social barriers exist that make it uncomfortable for

people to communicate with one another, especially college peers in a dining hall having lunch. Her sign single-handedly acted as a catalyst that broke down those social barriers.

I immediately knew from that moment on that I wanted Flick to be more than just some dating application. It wasn't long before I realized the same technology driving Flick could be used to benefit people in other areas of their personal and professional lives. That is when finding the best solution to help people manage their personal and professional lives become the primary mission for Flick. The only thing left to do was to decide was if I was going to marry all these components together, kind of like Bumble, or if I wanted to keep them separate in case the dating component was rejected by the public due how it functions.

Executive Summary

The current research tapped into what motivations and gratifications people have for using dating applications. The purpose was to reveal how using modern technology for dating is intrinsically influencing relationship formation and maintenance in large. The results were then used to determine the direction of a new application for connecting with people called Flick.

Three focus groups were employed which produced seven key themes for how individuals perceive dating applications

1. Dating Applications as Games and Entertainment
2. Perceptions of App Functions Vary by Gender
3. Dating Applications to Embrace Hookup Culture/Casual Sex
4. Dating Applications as the Lottery Ticket for Love/Relationship Seeking
5. Dating Applications as Self-Validation
6. Dating Applications for Social Means
7. Dating Applications as Trendiness

The research concluded by analyzing the responses given during the discussions which helped facilitate a conversation over the conceptual purpose and functionality of Flick. Overall, the participants loved the idea behind what drives Flick. The key differentiating factor for Flick is the way people can use their phone to quickly and efficiently transfer information (contact, business and more) to another person by simply flicking your phone in their direction. Participants stated that they would love to use an app like this for a variety of reasons like traveling, business, music interests, and other hobbies. Unfortunately, there were uncertainties when it came to making Flick a dating application. People were concerned for security reasons being as this application functions primarily on being within proximity of other people. These

concerns were understood and answered by explaining how the application is designed to protect that information. Yet, there was still an unexplainable hesitance that surfaced through conversation and body language.

This was crucial information for the change in direction Flick is now taking. For example, Bumble has a “Bumble Friends” and “Bumble Biz” section of their app, but nobody in the focus group had used it or knew anything about it. Bumble, in the eyes of the participants, is a dating application that just happens to have extra features nobody uses. This is why Flick will be launched as an application for niche communities to assemble, and for easy information sharing between those individuals when they meet. Maybe in the future when the newness of proximity matching is better understood and accepted, a dating component can be introduced. Until then, the author finds using Flick for more effective networking to be more beneficial to society than just another dating application.

Chapter 1- Introduction & Background

The advent and adoption of the internet, social media, modern technology, and other characteristics of Web 3.0 has introduced new communicative dynamics among relationships and relationship formation at multiple levels. From how families communicate across distances to how brands interact with their audiences to how people search for romantic partners, the technological era of Web 3.0 has certainly added complicated factors to human life. On top of that, the technology is evolving faster than we can research or understand it.

Web 3.0 is the latest buzzword explaining the advancement of the internet. While Web 2.0 allowed for what Barassi and Treré (2014) referred to as “user participation” (p. 1273), such as social media where people are co-producers of information, Web 3.0 can be conceptualized as “users’ cooperation” where users not only co-create information but assist in forming new information and meaning (p. 1274). These new dynamics of technology have introduced new factors into how we communicate with people, the times we communicate with people, the content in our communication, and even how people balance and maintain relationships.

Project Focus

To fully understand contemporary romantic relationships, it is important to begin by briefly overviewing the history of intimate relationships and dating. It is by studying this complex, yet fluid, relationship between the evolution of technology and dating etiquette that this research may be able to not only create an understanding of the cultural phenomenon of current dating apps, but potentially uncover what ripples await in the wake of the future of modern online dating. Understanding the latter is the overall goal of this project. This information will be used to inform and refine development of a relationship-focused mobile application, “Flick”. More specifically, the aim of this project is to better understand the following:

1. How and why do college students use dating apps?
2. What encourages college students to transition from meeting online to meeting in person? (i.e., differences between dating apps vs. traditional dating approaches)
3. How are dating applications influencing relationship formation and maintenance?
4. How do college students feel about how Flick is conceptually designed to function?
Is there something appealing about adding a new proximity dynamic that encourages face-to-face conversations instead of simply swiping across a large dating pool with a low likelihood of ever meeting?

The Historical Revolution of Dating

To move forward with development of a new relationship-focused mobile application, it is necessary to first understand the history of relationship formation, specifically within the context of dating. According to Bailey (2004), the term “dating” (p. 23) was actually introduced in the early twentieth century in a women’s journal. As the language used for relationship formation evolved, so did the way it was practiced. Bailey (2004) claims that youth perceived dating as a man’s company and money equals the woman’s time. Then, with the influence of wars and societal changes like motor vehicles, there was a back-and-forth pattern of people dating as many people as possible for a popularity motivation, to people “going steady” (Bailey, 2004, p. 25) and trying to find a suitable marriage partner.

Soon, technology became capable of greater capacity and use which barred the first VHS video dating services in the 80’s and 90’s (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017). People were even using personal ad space in newspapers to help find a partner (Lee, 2017), as well as telephones and radio (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017). However, these alternative methods

faded away as the twentieth century began to turn and the internet became more easily accessible.

Although dating and its practice transformed with the adoption of new communication tools, nowhere has one medium allowed for people to receive and publish their own information at the rate at which the internet has. In 1996, pressure from the public and internet service provider (ISP) competition persuaded ISPs to introduce flat-rate internet billing, thus allowing unlimited internet access for Americans for the first time (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017). Now, people have the opportunity to communicate endlessly through instant message chat rooms, which gave birth to the first online dating website, Match.com in 1995 (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017). The concept of meeting strangers on the internet took a few years before the public let its guard down, but it wasn't long before that the stigma faded. By 2007, online dating became the second highest online industry for paid content (Lee, 2017), all while Apple introduced the first iPhone and revolutionized smartphone mobile devices forever (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017).

Online dating matures

Subsequently, new online dating sites were created that targeted narrower demographic audiences by ethnicity, sexual preference, city, religion, etc. (Lee, 2017). And since smartphones had become more common household items, some dating services transitioned from users needing a home computer and switched modalities to purely mobile devices. This brought to life the use of location-based, real-time dating (LBRTD) which increased the use of mobile dating app users aged 18-24 from 5% in 2013 to 22% just three years later (Smith & Anderson, 2016). The same study also found that in 2005 only 44% of U.S. adults agreed that online dating is a good way to meet people, compared to 69% in 2015.

In 2012, one of the most popular mobile dating apps, Tinder, was launched and became largely responsible for the spike in dating app users aged 18-24 (Summers, 2013). Yet, while it is clear that more and more people are using dating apps, what is still relatively unexplored are the various reasons why people are using them. One general concern that has appeared in popular news discussions is how swiping right and left on people in geographical proximity is superficial and creates a hook-up culture (Hoffman, 2017). However, there have been multiple academic studies that claim the motivations for LBRTD services like Tinder reach beyond simply hooking up (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Chan, 2017; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter, Vandenbosch & Ligtenberg, 2017; Timmermans & Caluwé, 2017).

Sumter et al. (2017) conducted a study in which they distributed an online survey to Dutch adults aged 18-30 ($N = 163$) to learn more about what motivates adults to use Tinder. They uncovered six motivations: Love, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, thrill of excitement, and trendiness. What is most interesting is that the love motivation appeared to be stronger than the casual sex motivation, suggesting that although some may use Tinder for hooking up with other people, Tinder “should not be seen as merely a fun, hook-up app without any strings attached, but as a multifunctional tool that satisfies various needs among emerging adults” (Sumter et al., 2017, p. 75). Other studies seem to reveal similar findings about motivations for mobile apps usage for dating including love (Bryant & Sheldon 2017), relationship and hooking up (Bryant & Sheldon; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017), and traveling, self-validation and entertainment (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

On the other hand, there is also research that reveals a disconnect between people and Tinder. Guo (2017) stated that the problem lies in that people turn to dating applications to solve a problem found in the real world: fear of rejection. This causes a spiral of disappointment when

men get “... swipe-happy on Tinder, women can get overwhelmed with attention, making them choosier. This makes men even more desperate, and even less discerning about who they like. So, the situation descends into confusion” (para. 8). It is precisely for this reason that this study finds an invitation for research.

If so many people are using dating applications, yet, at the same time are displeased by them, there must be something worth capitalizing on that could lead to higher quality matches, ultimately satisfying dating app usage motivations.

A potential answer to this question could be in how people practice modality switching, or the act of moving from a dating app medium to a face-to-face (FtF) conversation. As mentioned previously, Tinder is highly superficial and influences people to make multiple swipes across a large dating pool, which ultimately leads to low quality matches that never go beyond the dating application medium (Guo, 2017). In 2014, Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, and Cole attempted to uncover the answer to this question by studying if the duration of time talking on a dating platform played a factor in FtF interaction outcomes. They found that there seems to be a tipping point in which relational outcomes are dampened when switching modalities from dating applications to FtF interactions. If people meet within three weeks of discovering each other on the dating app, there is a much higher likelihood the FtF interaction will be positive, but after six weeks, there is a higher chance it will negatively affect relational outcomes. This is potentially because people attempt to present their best selves on their profiles, and when people match they fill in the blanks between what they perceive and their expectations. This means that when partners meet earlier they “might be able to accept any minor differences between their expectations and reality, but partners who wait too long may experience increased uncertainty

when the person they interacted with fails to meet their well-developed expectations FtF” (Ramirez et al., 2017, p.110).

Collectively, this research planned to find out first-hand how young adults aged 18-30 perceive mobile dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hiddn, etc. Once the motivations are exposed, the next step was to open up a dialogue to find out the biggest strengths and weaknesses of the apps. Finally, the last stage of the study introduced a theoretical solution or alternative to mobile application dating services.

Flick: A Mobile Application

Flick dating

Flick is an innovative mobile application that is still in its conceptual stages. The idea began as a way for people to use their phones as a means to break the ice when around other people, primarily for dating. Location-based-real-time-dating technology will allow the user’s phone to detect other profiles when they are within about 100 feet from each other. However, unlike other dating applications, Flick doesn’t allow users to just swipe through profiles over and over. Instead, users are only given a limited number of “flicks” per hour.

The purpose is to get people to make meaningful connections with other people by allowing people the chance to talk face-to-face in a safe public setting. For example, a person could use flick during a sporting event, concert, coffee shop, dinner, or even taking a walk through the park. The app doesn’t allow other users to view the location of other users either. It is simply people living out their everyday lives, but now this application on their phone allows others to break the ice by saying hello with their phone.

It works by the user creating a profile that doesn't have to be linked to any social media. From there, individuals can create a username, upload some pictures of themselves, create a bio, enable their snapchat story, or whatever other information they would like to disclose. Due to people being able to see an individual's profile whenever they are within proximity, allowing user anonymity is very important.

When one Flick user makes the flicking motion with their phone, or with their finger on the screen, the app send a message to the desired recipient. The recipient can now see that this person flicked them and can choose to look through their profile. What makes Flick unique, though, is that the people also have the opportunity to see one another in real-time. The author feels that sometimes it's hard to know all the variables when it comes to how somebody will react if you approach them and say hello. It's absolutely possible the other person has a significant other, is out with family, has different preferences, or whatever other reason that would constitute them not being in a position to want to meet interested people. Having a Flick dating profile answers a lot of these questions, and if the person *is* interested, they can flick the other person back. From there, what's stopping these two from having a conversation. After all, they must have something in common if they are at the same place.

Flick Friends

Flick friends is another component of the Flick application. This is built off of the idea that Bumble created with their app. This section of the application will be completely user-generated. Flick users will create niche communities on the application that others can join. There, members can communicate with each other on a discussion board, sort of like a Facebook group. This can be used for school functions and for niche hobbies like traveling, music, festivals, etc. Everything else about the application works just as the dating component.

Flick Biz

Flick Biz aligns itself with an individual's professional life. Users can create their profiles on their, and even build interactive digital business cards. So, say there is a big academic conference or business meeting. Instead of everybody carrying around a bunch of business cards that they have to hand out, receive, categorize, and try not to lose, they can simply "flick" their digital business card to people they are networking with. Again, the rest of the application works similarly to the other two components.

Flick: Author's note

Although the author felt confident about this innovative approach, it is incredibly important to test the perceptions of others to see if there are any holes that need patched or attended to. Ultimately, this should answer what motivates people to use dating apps, to try new dating apps, and assist the refinement, development, and branding of Flick.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory (U&G) has been widely used to describe how and why people use particular media to satisfy their needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Particularly, the theory explains that a person's motivations and gratifications sought from media explains media sources regularly attended to. U&G has been applied to study the relationship between people and video games (De Simone, 2013), television (Lin, Chen, & Sung, 2018), smartphones (Soto, Almarza, & Wilkinson, 2017), social media (Ferris & Hollenbaugh, 2018), and the focus of this research, online dating (Sumter et al., 2017).

In fact, it's because of the uses and gratifications theory's ability to explain the relationship between internet technology and humans that the theory has been resurrected as a relevant theoretical approach. Earlier conceptions by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) proposed the following five basic assumptions of the theory:

1. The audience is perceived as active
2. The audience member is responsible for linking the need gratification and media choice
3. Media compete with other media for need satisfaction
4. Methodologically, the data can be extrapolated directly from the individual audience members to meet the goals of U&G research
5. Value judgements about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms (p. 510-511)

Ruggiero (2000) suggests that while it is important to note that the uses and gratifications theory does bear criticisms, the “assertiveness of U&G researchers to continuously critique basic assumptions suggests a dynamic and evolving theoretical atmosphere, especially as we depart the industrial era for the postindustrial age” (p. 26). Additionally, he notes that there are three assumptions that have evolved with the idea of an active audience which are:

1. Media selection is initiated by the individual
2. Expectations for media use are produced from individual predispositions, social interaction, and environmental factors
3. The behavior of an active audience is goal-directed (p. 11)

Recently, online dating has become a growing phenomenon and researchers have been employing U&G as a means of understanding it. Some of the gratification typologies that have derived from the results have been love, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, thrill of excitement, and entertainment (Sumter et al., 2017). In their study over motivations for using Tinder, they concluded that men were more likely to use Tinder for the thrill of the excitement, ease of communication, and casual sex more than women do. However, what is even more interesting is that their data supported the notion that the love motivation was stronger than the casual sex motivation, suggesting a counter-argument to the hookup/sex connotation, and that “Tinder should not be seen as merely a fun, hookup app without any strings attached, but as a new way for emerging adults to initiate committed romantic relationships” (p. 67).

Research by Ranzini and Lutz (2017) found six similar motives of use for online dating; hookup/sex, friendship, relationship, traveling, self-validation, and entertainment. In this study, men were more likely motivated by sex, traveling, and relationship seeking, whereas women

were more motivated by friendship and self-validation. Mirroring this study, Lutz and Ranzini (2017) used the same six motives to study audience privacy concerns and found that different motives “affect social privacy concerns more strongly than institutional concerns” (p.1). Lastly, Gatter and Hodkinson (2016) found that their data did not show any difference between online dating websites, and other online dating services that were uniquely application-based only. However, even if the motivations are the same for both platforms, Manley (2017) states that

...if you are to meet traditional love through Tinder, there becomes a stigma on that relationship. The application overall is superficially based, thus, it is hard for consumers to find true depth to it, unless they actually do. Also, most respondents stated that they can meet a potential partner on Tinder; however, they would still prefer to meet their partners offline. (p. 52)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) meets Uses and Gratifications

Social cognitive theory (SCT) is a theory of human behavior that “posits reciprocal causation among individuals, their behavior, and their environment. Within SCT, behavior is an observable act and the performance of behavior is determined, in large part, by the expected outcomes of behavior, expectations formed by our own direct experience or mediated by vicarious reinforcement observed through others.” (LaRosa & Eastin, 2004, 360)

While the U&G theory has been instrumental in studying traditional media, LaRose and Eastin (2004) have suggested that when it comes to the internet, it does not explain media exposure very well. One explanation for this dilemma proposed by Ruggiero (2000) is the internet functions with three components traditional media is absent of: interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity. It is within these new dynamics the internet offers that the social cognitive theory can be used as a lens to build upon the U&G theory.

For example, LaRose and Eastin (2004) explained that U&G explores gratifications and needs, whereas SCT focuses on behavioral incentives and outcomes. Where U&G has seen success in describing gratifications sought and received in the past, there has been a large variance unable to predict future gratifications. What separates U&G from SCT is that one particular strength of SCT is that it “assumes that outcome expectations are continually updated as a result of self-observation of our own experience and (vicarious) observation of the behavioral consequences that occur to others” (LaRose & Eastin, 2004, p. 361).

Additionally, self-efficacy and self-regulation are two mechanisms that are particularly important when it comes to how outcome expectations are updated. The former is the “belief in one's capability to organize and execute a particular course of action” (Bandura, 1986, as cited in LaRose & Eastin, 2004). As self-efficacy increases, so does the expectations that a particular outcome will be obtained. Self-regulation is comprised of three elements: self-monitoring, judgmental process, and self-reaction. According to LaRose and Eastin, people “monitor their own behavior (self-monitoring), judge it in relation to personal and social standards (judgmental process), and apply self-reactive incentives to moderate their behavior (self-reaction)” (p. 362). Oftentimes when there is a deficiency in self-regulation there is also an increase in media consumption and what is referred to as habits.

One particularly important difference between U&G and SCT when it comes to habit is that for U&G, habits are associated with “ritualistic gratifications” that imply still an active selection process by the audience (as cited in LaRose and Eastin, 2004). Yet, within the theoretical constructs of SCT, habit is the byproduct of the relationship between fixed cognitive processing and environmental factors. This pattern of automaticity is not an active selection process exactly, but an aspect of passive automatic media consumption. For example, checking

one's text messages in the morning is pattern of behavior that is triggered by environmental forces such as seeing the phone on the charger. Then, the execution of texting is done without much, if any, further self-instruction. Stone and Stone (year here) initially framed automatic media consumption as being once an active process of considerations, however, with time they are eventually forgotten (as cited in LaRose and Eastin, 2004). One is more careful and precise, such as when someone first started using text messages (i.e. learning T9 during the birth of texting, to deciphering between touch pad keys and emojis today). It is after a hundred or more texts, or when it comes more second-nature, that there is not as much self-monitoring. LaRose and Eastin phrase it well as, "habit is a failure of the self-monitoring subfunction of self-regulation. Through repetition we become inattentive to the reasoning behind our media behavior, our mind no longer devotes attention resources to evaluating it, freeing itself for more important decisions" (p.363).

So, what does this mean? The U&G proposes some motivations and gratifications are expected, but not necessarily obtained. By using SCT as a lens, the author will be more able to tell how online dating behaviors are being modified, and if that behavior is habitual. Online dating apps, such as Tinder, have been referred to by online sources as habit-forming (Raczka, 2014) and even addictive (Nelson, 2017; Hartmans, 2018). Academically, researchers have found that "to pass time" and "boredom" were motives for using online dating apps (Chan, 2017; Timmermans & Caluwé, 2017) which have been associated with ritualistic gratifications (i.e., habit).

U&G and SCT: Relevance to studying online dating usage

Uses and Gratifications and Social Cognitive Theories are appropriate umbrellas under which to study why and how people use dating applications. Understanding dating app

motivations and gratifications sought, as well as self-efficacy and self-regulation characteristics of audiences while using these apps, provides insights that allow strategic refinement of the proposed dating application, Flick.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Research Questions

1. How and why do college students use dating apps?
2. What encourages college students to transition from meeting online to meeting in person?
(i.e., differences between dating apps vs. traditional dating approaches)
3. How are dating applications influencing relationship formation and maintenance?
4. How do college students feel about how Flick is conceptually designed to function? Is there something appealing about adding a new proximity dynamic that encourages face-to-face conversations instead of simply swiping across a large dating pool with a low likelihood of ever meeting?

Method

Focus groups

The present research was fundamentally explorative; therefore, focus groups were employed to study the gratifications for internet dating applications. Urista, Qingwen, and Day (2009) note that focus groups are specifically good methods for learning about the perceptions, attitudes, and ideas of people who use new media. Quantitative approaches were not chosen due to their inability to provide deep and rich data that would be most suitable to effectively answer the research questions.

The primary strength of focus group research is contributed to its reliance on group interaction to acquire data (Kitzinger, 1995). More specifically, focus group participants build off one another's ideas and concepts to "explore and clarify their views in ways that would be

less accessible in individual interviews” (p. 299). In fact, Morgan (1996) states that the “synergy” that is created within groups allows the researcher to observe the agreements and disagreements amongst individuals (p. 139). The role the moderator plays is important in order to keep the conversation on track, and make the participants feel comfortable and open up. Yet, the process behind focus groups allows participants the opportunity to relate to what others have said, and respond to them directly, creating an organic dialogue amongst peers. This separates the moderator enough to observe more passively. Kitzinger (1995) supplements this concept by arguing the communication between participants offers a more natural everyday display of interaction that goes beyond what is afforded in other methods because it reveals information that is “not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to a direct question” (p. 299).

Unfortunately, the author did not have enough time to go further by conducting in-depth interviews with the participants. While one particular strength of focus groups is how they evoke a more natural dialogue between peers that yields valuable information, it is also a weakness. Some individuals could be saying or not saying certain things to save face. Hopefully the author can conduct these interviews in the future.

Subjects

Three focus groups were conducted that consisted of a total of 27 students from Kansas State University. There was one male session (n = 7) and two female sessions (n = 13; n = 7). Most of the sample was recruited from the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications department under Dr. Danielle Myers LaGree. The students were offered extra credit for their participation and cooperation. An alternative extra credit assignment of equal weight was also offered in the case students couldn't or didn't want to participate. Other

participants were obtained through word-of-mouth via convenience and snowball sampling from the university.

The three sessions were purposefully divided by gender in order to avoid uncomfortable situations between individuals which could have potentially led to lower quality participant responses. There is a likelihood that people would withhold information about how they use dating applications if they were talking amongst the very people they were interacting with on the applications. Furthermore, due to most of the participants being heterosexual, it only seemed logical to pair them with the same sex.

The focus groups, moderated by the researcher, were conducted in-person and lasted approximately an hour and a half. There were no restrictions on leaving, so students were allowed to dismiss themselves at any time if necessary. An additional session of males was unfortunately discontinued due to last-minute cancellations. It was not mandatory to have had any personal experience with online dating applications. While the research revolved around the gratifications and perceptions behind why people use these applications, the perceptions of the people who have never used these applications also held importance to informing app development. Even if participants had not used one of the applications, all of the participants knew what they were and had friends who used them. Therefore, the value of their opinions was equally important to understand how these dating applications influence relationships on a macro level. During the focus groups, the author simply described what Flick is to the participants and allowed them to ask questions. Afterwards, the author asked a few questions about what direction the application should go and what participants thought of current ideas. To view specific topics of discussion, see Appendix A for the focus group discussion guide.

Data analysis

The author audio recorded and took notes during the focus group sessions. For data analysis, he then listened to the recordings while focusing on specific quotes and transcribed relevant discussion points. By using past research, the author already had a good idea of potential gratification categories that could emerge, and used these categories to sort the information. Other relevant themes that were not specific to gratifications categories, but were relevant to the research questions, emerged organically and then were further refined by the author.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Analysis of focus group transcriptions revealed seven key themes related to the research questions. The ultimate goal of this research was to understand how and why people use mobile dating applications. Specifically, what encourages college students to switch modalities from mobile to in-person and how the presence of dating applications is influencing relationships at the macro level was also explored. Finally, overall perceptions and first impressions of Flick were evaluated.

It is also important to include that while the study's purpose was to learn about a collection of different applications, the only two that were elaborated on were Tinder and Bumble. Other applications were recognized, but few participants had any exposure to other applications, if any exposure at all.

7 Key Themes

Theme 1: Dating applications as games and entertainment

Participants expressed that a significant amount of their time spent on dating applications were for boredom or entertainment purposes. More specifically, it framed the applications as more of a game. The swiping feature keeps people coming back to the applications, even when they are not searching for a serious significant other. Instead of solely having a relationship objective, people just swipe through profiles for the entertainment value it offers as they are trying to burn a few minutes between activities.

- “You put pictures on there (Tinder) and a short bio, and you swipe either right or left on people’s profile. And that’s it. Game on” (Male)
- “I can see how it (dating applications) can be more fun and like a game instead of something serious” (Female)

- “It’s like a game. You can scroll and laugh together” (Female)
- “You can be serious on Tinder, but you can also be playful and more platonic” (Male)
- “One of my friends said she downloaded it [Tinder] to swipe on it before she goes to sleep” (Female).
- “I downloaded Tinder because I ran out of things to swipe on Instagram and Tinder. So, I decided to scroll through some dudes instead” (Female).
- “Boredom definitely” (Male).
- “I have a friend who uses it seriously because she just broke up with her boyfriend. Every other friend uses it for fun though” (Female)
- [When do you use dating apps] “When I’m on the toilet” (Male)
- “My friends were doing that last Friday during the national champion game... One was on Tinder and the other wasn’t because she was married. So, the married one took the other’s phone and just started swiping for her and sending funny messages” (Female)

Theme 2: Perceptions of app functions vary by gender

What is most surprising about this game-like attitude towards dating applications was how each gender described how they used it, or in other words, how they played it. On one hand you have females who say they are constantly bombarded by matches and messages from men. Some of the messages may be interesting and fun, but a majority of them are very mundane, surface-level, one-worded messages that quickly segue into an invitation to come over. Females then begin to adapt certain methods for dealing with the surplus of messages by being more particular with who they respond to.

On the other hand, the men in the study claimed that they do not have much success when it comes to dating applications like Tinder and Bumble. The matches are fewer than their

gendered counterparts, and of those matches they receive, they find it increasingly difficult to stand out enough to catch their attention. Not every profile has a bio description, so sometimes the only information to build conversation off of are from the select number of photos available. Males try multiple different strategies to obtain the attention from their matches, and even at times retaliating in rude ways when rejected.

What appears to be happening are that females are constantly being bombarded with matches and messages while men experience much fewer. To try to win the attention of the fewer prospective women, men either attempt rather unique messaging strategies, or simply result to just saying “hey”. This influences the females to build more of a firewall, or verification process, to whom they swipe or communicate with. Consequently, men are going impatient with their lack of success, and communicating in ways that are yielding seemingly counterproductive results. This symbiotic back-and-forth relationship reveals that females are pushing away the copious amount of men attempting at their attention, which influences the men to do the very things that causing women to reject them.

Lastly, only a couple of the participants had used Bumble in the past, but still viewed it as an overall less risky application for more serious motivations. The feature that differentiates Bumble is that females are required to message first when a match is made. Otherwise, the match will expire in twenty-four hours. The male participants explained that this feature made it even harder for them to stand out to prospective matches because even if they did match, what were the chances the female was actually going to message them first. It reversed the roles of who messages first, which didn’t seem to persuade anybody to use Bumble over Tinder.

- “Nine times out of ten guys say, ‘hey’ or ‘hi’, and then ten minutes in they ask you to come over and watch Netflix.” (Female)

- “Guys typically give really bad pickup lines. Like... really bad” (Female)
- “It’s very doggish. Just the amount of hellos and everything. And if you don’t give them attention back they will say something like ‘you’re not that cute anyway’. They will try to play it real cool and then ask to meet, and then insult you if you don’t want actually meet them” (Female).
- [When asked about what to expect from dating applications] “A lot of nothing” (Male)
- “I’ll swipe right until it tells me I can’t anymore and that’s it. I get on it and run out of people and then just close it” (Male)
- “hard to be unique every single time when there is no bio, especially when most of the conversations end with one or two messages” (Male)
- [Bumble is] “less risky”, “safer”, and “more serious” (Female)
- “Tinder is shot-gunning and beer, and Bumble is drinking a big glass of wine” (Female)
- [On Bumble] “it’s like you are the hunted and not the hunter” (Male)
- “Yeah, a really picky hunter. They say they want to shoot you by matching with you, but they never actually want to take the shot. Why match me if you never wanted to start a conversation” (Male)

Theme 3: Dating applications to embrace hookup culture/casual sex

Since their birth, the stereotype of mobile dating applications is that they are used for casual sex and embrace a hookup culture. In fact, even though participants showed a variety of reasons as to why they use dating applications, predominately Tinder, they still felt the apps were mainly used for casual sex. One characteristic that stuck out specifically was that while multiple males made reference to actually hooking up with other people from Tinder, only one female made reference to using it for casual sex. These results match closely with that of previous

literature (Sumter et al., 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Overall, men seemed to seek out hookups more than women, and the more aggressive sexual behavior could be a contributing factor to why females build protective barriers even when they do match with somebody.

- “smash and dash” (Male)
- “Tinder is stereotypically a hookup app” (Female)
- [If Tinder were a person] “James Franco” (Male & Female)
- [If Tinder were a person] “John from John Tucker Must Die” (Female)
- “It’s a joke. It’s not real. I don’t see you really getting anything out of it unless you want to hookup. Don’t use it seriously” (Female)
- “Sketchy hookups and desperate” (Female)
- “I’ve mainly experienced hookups” (Male)
- “Tinder is a hookup app. Bumble is a hookup app with less dick pics.” (Female)
- “I used to not think of Tinder as more of a hookup app, but its proved to be the case” (Female)
- “I’ve had the best luck getting laid on Tinder” (Male)
- “I use Tinder when I’m horny at night sometimes” (Male)
- “I would use it on a personal level to meet somebody in that way (sexual) and satisfy myself” (Female)

Theme 4: Dating applications as the lottery ticket for love/relationship seeking

Sumter et al. (2017) studied what gratifications young adults obtained from Tinder and found that the “love” gratification was actually much stronger than the “casual sex” category, suggesting that “Tinder should not be seen as merely a fun, hookup app without any strings attached, but as a new way for emerging adults to initiate committed romantic relationships” (p.

67). The current research found similar support, and even a way to conceptualize this love feature. Yes, nearly all participants mentioned dating applications were mostly for hookups, but they also suggested that the possibility of finding love is present, but it's just rather low. In other words, it's like playing a risk-free lottery ticket of love. You play it like a game, just as people play the lottery. You don't ever expect to win (to find love), but if it were to happen that would be wonderful.

The participants mentioned either being in a relationship themselves from a dating application, or know of people who have; yet, they still don't think it's very effective when it comes to finding love. It very well may be that they are playing dating applications like Tinder as single adults just entertaining their boredom or sexual desires, and if a relationship were to transpire it would be welcomed.

- “Hesitant but still wouldn't be close-minded to it being a successful relationship”
(Female)
- [Finding love is unlikely but] “It's something people want to do because I think people do want love and for somebody to give us attention and affection” (Female)
- “Some people are super desperate on that app. But there some people who are actually looking for something” (Female)
- “it is a way to meet other people for relationships, either romantic or friendship-wise”
(Male)
- “I have two friends. They were each other's first significant other and everything and now they are married” (Female)
- “One of my friends did meet his significant other on tinder. At first I didn't get it but after I seen them together it was much better.” (Female)

- “My aunt and uncle just got married and they met on OK Cupid” (Female)
- “I see it more as open-minded. I have a friend who met her boyfriend on Tinder and they are getting married in July. I also met my boyfriend on Tinder.” (Female)
- “I have friends who are Bumble reps. And although I haven’t heard of anybody starting a relationship from it and I have on Tinder, I still feel like Bumble is a safer bet.” (Female)
- “I dated one person from Tinder for eight months” (Male)
- “You’re most likely not going to find love from Tinder. It’s not impossible, but it’s certainly not likely” (Male)
- “I know a friend that slept with a guy four or five times before she thought that she wanted to actually go on a date with him” (Female)
- “How did it become more than just a hookup? I’m kind of jealous” (Female)

Theme 5: Dating applications as self-validation

Another gratification revealed for using dating applications was for self-validation. Participants mentioned that they enjoyed using dating apps because it helped them with their self-esteem when they matched with somebody. This did seem to be more prevalent within females rather than males. Males reported being more eager to meet their matches but didn’t mention that they themselves use it to boost their confidence.

- “I was talking to somebody recently, and they were saying how they like got on Tinder specifically, so guys would like message them and give them compliments and then wouldn’t message them after that” (Female)
- “that could be a common thing where people just swipe right and then be like I’m good. I don’t want to pursue anything” (Female)

- “some people use them just to collect and see how many matches they can get” but didn’t mention anybody specific” (Male)
- “I feel like a lot of people (mostly girls) use them for attention. Just to get people to swipe on them” (Female)
- “I would just get on to see who complimented me. It’s a boost of self-esteem” (Female)
- “Whenever I go through a breakup I get on Tinder to distract me” (Female)
- “I like it when somebody talks to me. It means somebody likes me.” (Female)

Theme 6: Dating applications for social means

Another motivation behind dating applications is to enhance an individual’s social life, either by making friends or simply having a conversation with somebody for conversation’s sake. Bumble was again reported to be motivated by more serious intentions. However, Tinder was accepted as a way for meeting new spontaneous potential friends. The participants mentioned just having the capabilities to communicate with other people and network while traveling were important reasons they used Tinder. Ultimately, there are social incentives for using dating applications.

- [I use Tinder] “because people are more sporadic like ‘hey let’s go do something or hang out. Nothing serious type of thing.’ Bumble is more of a demographic of people who want something more serious” (Female)
- “I met who is one of my best friends when I moved here on Tinder” (Female)
- “I went to Chicago and met somebody who gave me Lollapalooza tickets because of Tinder once” (Female)
- “some people use it to get a lot of matches and others are using it for more of a social aspect” (Male).

- “It is a way to meet other people for relationships, either romantic or friendship-wise” (Male)
- “The automatic swipe right doesn’t mean I want to meet you immediately. Especially not have sex” (Female)
- “I met this guy on Tinder. We talked over text for about two months. It was a good connection and some good dates, but I moved overseas. I’m back now and we are still really good friends” (Female)

Theme 7: Dating applications as trendiness

As predicted, the popularity of the mobile dating application indicated a motivation behind why some individuals used them. This seems only logical because who would want to use an application that is based on matching with other people when there are no other people to match with. Additionally, whatever a person’s friends are using also contributes to whether or not he or she will use it as well. Young adults like to stay ahead of the game when it comes to modern technologies and trends

- “I feel it’s about what your friends have. It’s like a game. You can scroll and laugh together” (Female)
- “it’s [Tinder] the most popular one” (Male)
- “The more popular it is, the greater chance of hot chicks” (Male)
- “I downloaded it because my friends told me to” (Female)
- “It was the new cool thing to do whenever it came out. That’s why I originally downloaded it” (Male)

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implementation

Using Focus Group Results to Develop Flick

The aim of this exploratory study was to understand how young adults in college are using mobile dating applications in order to understand the larger implications of the internet and how it influences relationship formation and maintenance. While mobile dating applications have acquired stereotypes for being hookup apps, this research supports that they do have a sexual component underlying within them, but people use them for a variety of reasons other than hooking up. One participant explained,

I don't know if it has made our society more promiscuous, but it has pulled out that side of people that has been deemed taboo for so long. People talk about it more and it has become more common. It's not as weird to hear 'oh hey I'm hooking up with this guy. There is more sexual freedom (Female).

Moreover, it was also revealed that mobile dating applications are more generally accepted today, yet they still hold a stigma that some people are uncomfortable accepting. The findings suggest that men are more open about their promiscuous behaviors, as is supported by previous research (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). One limitation to this finding could be that the moderator was a male. Being of the opposite gender could have influenced the responses given. Participants could be using face saving strategies due to the more personal nature of dating applications. Future research should consider the gender of the moderator if doing qualitative research like with focus groups.

An additional finding suggests that people use mobile dating applications for entertainment or boredom purposes, and although finding a suitable partner would be nice, participants showed little hope that gratification would be obtained. One potential explanation to

this finding could be that the participants were all students. College students are in a transitional period where they move to a new city for four years and then usually migrate somewhere else afterwards to start their life. It could be that mobile dating app users who are out of college and in a steadier phase in their life would have a greater motivation to find a long-term relationship. Future research could benefit by studying people of different age ranges, as well as different geographic locations.

Major Conclusion: Flick: “It’s not a dating app.”

The participants really liked the idea behind using proximity matching in order to meet people who may have similar interests. However, something about Flick being used as a dating app raised red flags to a lot of the participants. One participant said it most efficiently when she said, “I really like the idea because I heard it from you (the moderator) and like the concept behind it, but I feel that there is just something that the general public will be afraid of” (Female). Participants asked a lot of questions about the general safety and security of the application like “how do you know that person will not stalk you if you don’t flick them back” (Female), “will they be able to see where I am and what my name is” (Female), “is it linked to my social media” (Male), etc. All the questions were answered to the best of the moderator’s ability in a way that protected users and their information as much as possible. Participants both in and out of relationships did mention the attractiveness of being able to match with potential friends who have similar interests. Unfortunately, there seemed to still be that one “thing” that made participants unsure about Flick in the practical world. It could just be that using that technology for dating purposes brings with it a fear for people’s safety.

These findings completely changed the way Flick will position itself in the market. The participants had no doubts about using an application like Flick for business and meeting people with similar interests but were on the fence about it being a dating application specifically. Flick is not like other dating applications and trying to make more like them could serve as the death note to the entire application. The participants had a difficult time explaining why they were unsure about the dating function of Flick. It could be that the idea is too new and hasn't had time to be accepted yet, or maybe Flick just isn't supposed to be a dating app. There is a possibility after some time finding its niche, more components like dating may be introduced, but until then Flick will not be a dating application. To conclude this paper, one participant's suggestion may be a potential slogan for Flick: "Flick- it's not a dating app."

On the bright side, the participants unanimously agreed that they would be really interested in using both the friend and business components of Flick. Some potential uses are plentiful with those two alone. (i.e. small-town businesses, real estate, traveling, music, or any other hobby or business professional for that matter).

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Appendix A - Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Hello, and thank you everybody for making it out for today's focus groups. There are snacks and drinks provided so please feel free to help yourself. In front of you is an informed consent paper that contains textually everything I'm going to explain verbally. If you're not very familiar with what a focus group is, no worries. This focus group is just a conversation amongst peers about mobile dating applications and the motivations behind using them. Although I have a discussion guide to direct us through the key points, the strength of this research method is to allow you all to build off each other in conversation. So, feel free to speak freely.

Additionally, all names and identities will remain 100% confidential. The transcriptions will be made available if any individual feels they would like to omit information they said during the discussion.

The purpose of this research is to study the motivations for why young adults use mobile dating applications, like Tinder and Bumble. Online dating has been around for over twenty years, however, not until recently has it reached the record heights that it has. This makes studying the online dating phenomenon very interesting. To conclude the focus group, the moderator will propose a hypothetical prediction for a potential direction of online dating and online connections. The idea is to layout the current motivations of online dating and observe how participants react to a new online dating concept. The results may be used in the consideration of launching an innovated dating application.

- ICE BREAKER

1. If everybody would like to go around the room and introduce yourself. Feel free to tell us your name, and what three emojis describe you best.

- How and why college students use dating apps?

1. Imagine you and your best friend are talking about Tinder or Bumble, but your friend has never used or heard of them before. How would you describe it to them?
 2. Say you're out at lunch and strike up conversation with the person next to you who says that they met their significant other on Tinder, in three words what are your initial thoughts? Please write them on the piece of paper in front of you (Give time for writing and discussion)
 3. If Tinder were a person or a personality type, who or what type would it be? For example, the brand personality for ____ is
 - What about Bumble?
 - What about Coffee Meets Bagel?
 - What about any that I didn't mention?
 4. How do you choose one dating app over the other?
 - What characteristics helped you come to that decision?
 5. Could you describe a regular experience for you when using dating applications?
 - Where are you at (Home, work, travel, etc.)
 - What are you doing
 - Who are you with
 6. What is/are the best experience(s) you have had with online dating?
 7. What is/are the worst experience(s) you have had with online dating?
 8. (Back-up) What are you looking to get out of using online dating applications?
 9. (Back-up) What problems do you see with dating applications?
- What encourages college students to move from meeting online to meeting in person?
 Dating apps vs. traditional dating approaches.

1. On a scale from 1-10 how likely are you to meet somebody you have connected with through an online dating application. Write this on the paper in front of you
 - What reasons for or against? (some sort of prop like cards for people to show their scale... gives building blocks to compare answers)

2. On a scale from 1-10 how likely are you to approach somebody face-to-face in a public setting?
 - What are the differences between meeting somebody face-to-face initially and meeting them face-to-face after connecting on a dating application?
 - Fear of public rejection?
 - Ease and comfortability of using the phone?

• What motivates college students to consider and try new dating apps?

1. How do you choose one dating app over the other?
 - What characteristics helped you come to that decision?
2. If you were to create the perfect dating app, what would it do? What features would it have?
 - What features would you leave out that current dating apps currently use?
3. What factors do you consider when thinking about trying out a new mobile application? (imagine the last time you visited the app store, what app did you download and why. What interests were you attending to? How did you hear about it? What made you decide to actually download it?
4. What made you decide to download the latest dating application you currently use?
 - How has that made a difference?
5. (Back up)- Say you're out at lunch and strike up conversation with the person next to you who says that they met their significant other on Tinder, in three words what are your initial thoughts? Please write them on the piece of paper in front of you (Give time for writing and discussion)

- How do college students feel about how Flick is conceptually designed to function? Is there something appealing about adding a new proximity dynamic that encourages face-to-face conversations instead of simply swiping across a large dating pool without ever actually meeting them.

Final Topic Anecdotal Introduction

ANECDOTE

I feel that technology and new media has played a big factor in human relationships. More specifically, I feel like face-to-face interactions have become harder for younger people since so much conversation is mediated through technology.

During the end of February, I was walking through the cafeteria on campus with my Panda Express trying to find a place to sit and eat. Of course, there were people in pretty much every conceivable table, booth, and seat. However, one particular person stuck out to me. It was a woman sitting in the corner of a six-person booth. She had a sign on the end of the table that read “Don’t worry, you can sit here too”.

That’s when it hit me. Had that sign never had been there, I would have walked right passed her, without ever considering sitting in one of those five available seats was even an option. I’m even willing to bet a person could sit in that booth all day and not one person would ask to sit with them. People would leave or walk around until they found a completely vacant spot before they sat with a stranger. Why do people avoid interactions and connections like that?

1. What factors do you think stop people from approaching one another in public and interacting face-to-face?
 - a. Public Rejection?
 - b. Not Interested?
 - c. Too many people?

Let’s think of a hypothetical situation. Your friend tells you about this new dating app they downloaded called Flick. They tell you that this new dating app is different than Tinder, Bumble, Plenty of Fish, etc. because it completely does away with swiping. Instead of sitting at home and swiping through a large pool of potential daters, this app can only be used while around other people, like a public setting. This app differentiates itself uniquely by when you see another person you find interesting, you make the flicking motion with your phone towards that person. This then sends the other Flick user a message telling them that they have been “Flicked”. That person now has the opportunity to look at the person’s profile who flicked them and decide whether they want to flick them back or not. The app doesn’t tell people where others are, nor does it disclose any personal information. It is the same people doing the same things they would have been doing had the app never existed, however, with the app one now has the ability to use their phone to essentially say hello via their phone and see where it goes from there in real life.

- 1) On the piece of paper in front of you, what are the first three questions you would ask your friend about Flick?
- 2) In what social situations would you use an app like Flick?
 - a) Weekends?
 - b) Spring Break?
 - c) Concerts/Festivals
 - d) Casual outings with friends?
 - e) Coffee/Lunch
- 3) Say you downloaded Flick because of your friend during a nightly outing, or spring break “Flicked” you. Describe how you think that experience would go?
- 4) If Flick were a person or a personality type, who or what would it be?
- 5) Bumble is Yellow, Tinder is Red. What color(s) would Flick be?
- 6) Bumble, has created a Bumble Friends and Bumble Biz. How do you feel about these features and would you use them?
- 7) Describe Flick Biz/Friends/Travel/Music. How do you feel about these features and would you use them?
- 8) REPEAT QUESTION: After discussing all these characteristics about dating apps, would you again tell me what would be the ideal dating/connection app for you?
- 9) Is there anything else that you feel you would like to share about what we discussed today?
- 10) (back up) Describe Flick Biz/Friends/Travel/Music. How do you feel about these features and would you use them?
- 11) (back-up) How does an app like Flick separate itself from existing apps like Tinder, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, etc.?