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Course: HG2052 - Language and Technology

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Assignment 1 - Analysis of a medium of communication

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Tinder as a means of Online Communication

Tinder is a mobile dating application (available on Android and iOS devices) that allows users to view other user profiles and send instant messages to each other. Users link their *Facebook* accounts to their *Tinder* profiles, which confirm that they are a real people, displaying their age, *Facebook* likes, and their photos. Users are also allowed to write a short synopsis of what best describes them, all for other users to see. *Tinder* relies on the satellite function of mobile phones, adopting a location-based approach in choosing which profiles users get to browse. This means that users get to communicate with people in close proximity to them. When users browse profiles, they are given the option to swipe to their left if they are not interested in the individual they are viewing, or to their right, to signify an interest. When two users swipe right to each other's profiles, a *Match* occurs, thus opening the option of allowing users to send instant messages to each other. Which profiles users get to browse depends on the location of the user at that time.

Tinder is one of the many online dating options available out there in the market (Match.com, JDate, eHarmony, OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, Manhunt, and Christian Mingle). However, what makes *Tinder* unique is its *Match* function which only allows users with mutual interest for each other to begin a chat with each other. Traditionally, online dating websites open users' profiles to the public for everyone to view and begin conversations with. This creates a setting whereby users either have to be proactive and make the first move to approach, or be passive and wait to be approached. This leads to users getting unwanted messages from people that may be undesirable, or they may also leave users waiting for other parties to make the first move as they fear rejection. However, *Tinder's* unique *Match* function overcomes these traditional barriers, creating an environment in which both parties can openly begin a conversation as mutual interest has to exist initially before the chat option can become available.

Tinder began in September 2012, starting with only a few hundred of the initial target market, which were college students. However, according to appmtr.com, a website that tracks *Facebook* application usage, the popularity of the application has had a rapid increase in the past 2 years, totaling up to close to 15 million monthly active users in the fourth quarter of 2014. The steep increase can be seen in Fig. 1.

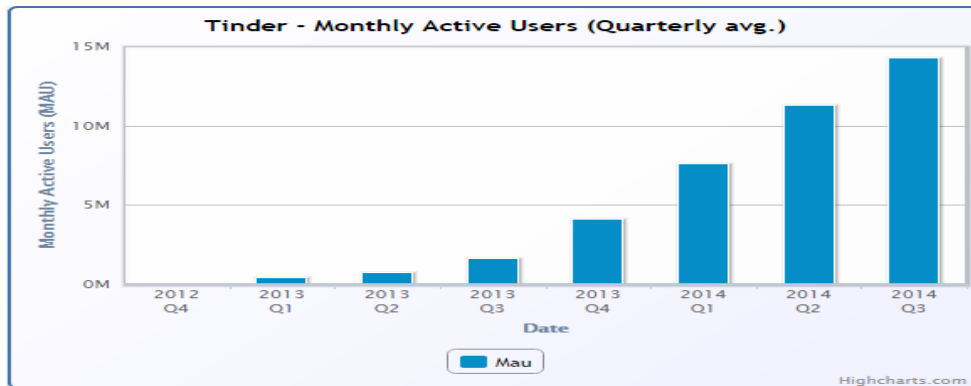


Fig. 1 (taken from <http://www.appmtr.com/facebook/app/464891386855067-tinder/>)

This number is impressively high as in comparison to other online dating sites, which are older and have larger databases of users, *Tinder* would rank third in its monthly visitors, with only 2 years of operations. As seen in Fig. 2, the top two most visited online dating service in the world, Badoo.com and MeetUp.com, have visitors of 19,918,291 and 17,215,560 respectively. *Tinder's* second quarter of above 10 million, projected into this chart, would rank it third on this extensive list.

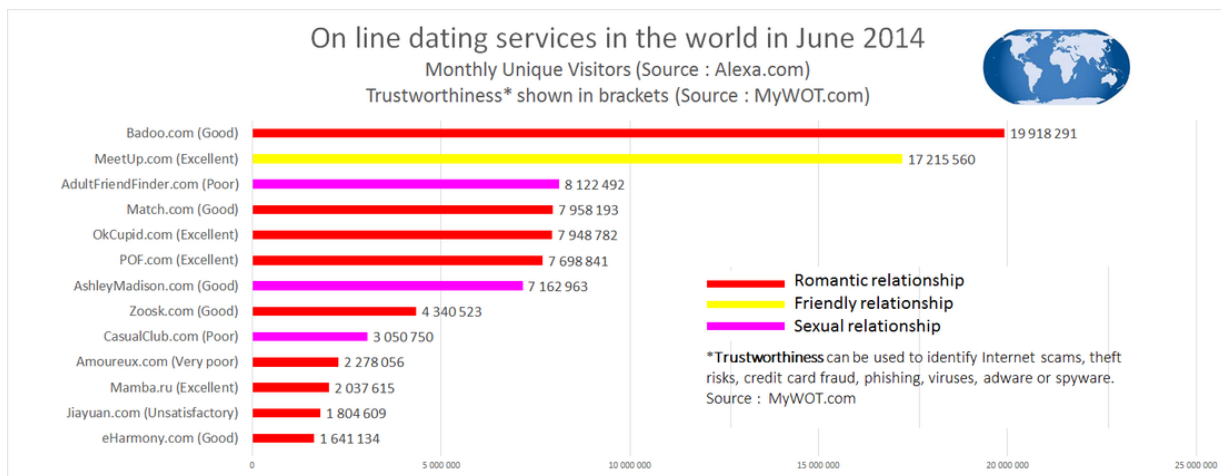


Fig. 2 (Taken from Alexa.com)

Tinder is also rapidly garnering an international user base. There have been reports of 670,000 people from the Netherlands downloading the app, making up 4% of the country's total population. The app has notably been rated highly on app ranking charts in Norway, New Zealand and Brazil, being the first, third and fourth overall iOS app in those countries respectively (J.J Colao 2013).

Tinder's profiles has garnered a succinct usage of language. As users have to write a brief synopsis of themselves to get the attention of possible matches, the use of short but to the point descriptions are used. This is mirrored by the phenomena of personals ads. Person adverts are used to encourage marketability and commercialization of one's self (Coupland 1996). Studies on personal adverts have found that textual construction of an individual's self and other identities are used to develop new relationships and sell themselves to other people (Coupland 1996). These studies have also discovered certain gender trends. It has been shown that men market their financial and occupational capabilities more often, while women tend to focus more on their physical appeal and attractiveness (Davis 1990). These trends of personals ads can be seen in *Tinder* use as well in the synopsis that they write, however, this is further emphasized by pictures used by users to sell an image of what they feel best represents themselves. For the women, pictures that emphasize their body and face are used. As for the men, pictures that show off their athleticism or cars tend to dominate their profiles.

Although *Tinder* has been commonly judged for being a hook-up app, there are other functions of *Tinder* as well. *Tinder* has given rise to opportunities for people to seeking to practice language use. Several articles written by *Tinder* users themselves have narrated their successful attempts to use *Tinder* to speak in foreign languages. There is the American exchange student in France who uses *Tinder* to speak to the locals in their colloquial discourse. This is something she could not have discovered or learnt in a classroom setting with formal educational structures of language classes. *Tinder* provided a safe environment for her to practice her language use without the difficult navigations of face-to-face communication (Orenstein 2014). Another *Tinder* user, a girl in New York, talks about her selectivity in choosing individuals to speak to on the application. She only swipes right to people who are foreign or possibly exchange students, and also speak the languages she wishes to develop in (Yagoda 2014). In such a metropolis, where many different cultures and race come together, *Tinder* serves as a user-friendly platform

to get individuals connected in this sense where it may be difficult to do so randomly on the streets.

Tinder users also report that the casual nature of *Tinder* is really different as compared to other online dating sites where by users have carefully crafted profiles which provide long monologues of descriptions. *Tinder* is compared by one of the users to “how you would go about things at a bar, ... You look at people, pick one who looks nice to you, then try to talk to him.” (Witt 2014) This casual setting can be compared to emulating dating in real life, where by you get to meet and judge individuals based on their looks first, then what they talk to you about, without having to reveal too much like other dating sites require.

Ultimately, *Tinder* relies on the medium of instant messaging to allow users to communicate with each other. In the recent years with the rapid development of technology, instant messaging has come a long way, originating as immobile multi-user operating systems like Compatible Time-Sharing System (CTSS) to the current convenient usage of real-time instant messaging applications that are integral in the majority of smart phone users today. This shift in convenience has allowed for communication between participants to take place at anywhere, at any time of the day. This coupled with how instant messaging has revolutionized the way written text is exchanged today, opens up to a whole new cultural trend. Due to the fast paced relaying of messages between participants, the short text messages composed closely resemble that of normal verbal speech, also described as “written speech” (Maynor 1994). These to attributing factors have given way to the new trend of the hook-up culture. Online dating now can now lead to a hook up with just a few short exchanges. Terms like “seek?” stand for a shortened version of asking a user what they are looking for on the application. Abbreviations such as “NSA”, no strings attached, and “NPNT”, no picture no talk, are also some terms coined from online dating discourse. This is not uncommon as abbreviations and shortened words are characteristically features of “Netspeak” (Crystal 2001).

Instant messaging has several features which contain both text like and speech like characteristics that David Crystal (2006) introduced. Instant messaging is spontaneous, time bound and space bound. As instant messaging occurs between interactions of two people, a conversation can only occur when both of the participants are present on their devices. Delayed

responses can attribute to a slower paced conversation; however, the discourse is still going to be heavily influenced by the response time and response rate. The spontaneity of the exchange is also time bound as there is a direct addressee the user is trying to address and can only occur when the other individual is present. Instant messaging is also space bound as although the text may not be read immediately, it is still stored in the inbox of the *Tinder* user and can still be read anytime later. References to prior messages can also be easily accessed by scrolling up, effectively making the text in instant messaging permanent. That being said, users can choose to purposely delay their messages. This would give them time to craft their responses, a feature used often in dating apps in order to portray different messages. One *Tinder* user reports that she does not reply any messages that come at 3 a.m in the morning as she knows that there is a high chance the message is coming from lonely individuals with sexual ulterior motives which are not in line with her own motives on being on *Tinder*, thus choosing to reply only the next morning.

Instant messaging is also loosely structured and visually decontextualized as it allows for a casual conversation style in short messages. However, as there is no actual face-to-face presence, the communication is decontextualized and certain intonations or nuances of the words might come across wrongly or be missed upon the interaction. However, something *Tinder* introduces is the ease of exchange of images. This could actually create new prosody in conversations as images themselves express a whole different range of prosodic nuances. Images could be provocative or they could also be conservative. These images can give users an idea of who they are speaking to as opposed to only have one aspect to look at a person in face-to-face speech.

Applications like *Tinder* are changing the way society views online dating. It's bringing a casual and not so serious outlook to the online dating option and is only going to be more prevalent in the near future with the rapid increase in mobile usage around the world. With more connectivity and lesser boundaries, language change is inevitable. Perhaps someday in the near future, people would rely much more on online dating and eventually have poorer abilities to interact to people on normal dates.

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