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A Dating App Autoethnography: Presenting Myself as a Researcher and User

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Abstract

Matchmaking mobile applications, or dating apps, have become hugely popular in recent years, with millions worldwide swiping through potential romantic partners. The literature on technologically mediated dating has explored how people manage impressions but has rarely taken an autoethnographic perspective: How does the author, both a researcher of dating apps and a user herself, experience self-presentation? In this paper, I first introduce a theoretical focus on impression management on dating apps. Next, I explain the choice of autoethnography as a method. Drawing from various source materials like personal journaling and chats with matches, I present two autoethnographic pieces: one focusing on my self-presentation as a dating app researcher, and the other on my own dating app use. I follow these by analyzing my motivations and impression construction in the dating app environment, keeping in mind theoretical insights. I conclude with a discussion into the challenges of an autoethnographic approach to impression management.

Keywords
Autoethnography, Dating Apps, Impression Management

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Presenting Myself as a Researcher and User

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Matchmaking mobile applications, or dating apps, have become hugely popular in recent years, with millions worldwide swiping through potential romantic partners. The literature on technologically mediated dating has explored how people manage impressions but has rarely taken an autoethnographic perspective: How does the author, both a researcher of dating apps and a user herself, experience self-presentation? In this paper, I first introduce a theoretical focus on impression management on dating apps. Next, I explain the choice of autoethnography as a method. Drawing from various source materials like personal journaling and chats with matches, I present two autoethnographic pieces: one focusing on my self-presentation as a dating app researcher, and the other on my own dating app use. I follow these by analyzing my motivations and impression construction in the dating app environment, keeping in mind theoretical insights. I conclude with a discussion into the challenges of an autoethnographic approach to impression management. Keywords: Autoethnography, Dating Apps, Impression Management

Embracing Autoethnography: My Research Path

It was early 2014. I was an academic in a media and communications department, contemplating a new research focus. I was also single, and I had a smart phone. When I heard about the popular matchmaking mobile application, Tinder, it seemed logical to download it— for research purposes, I told myself half-jokingly. Tinder has a minimalist design and with a few selection criteria, it matches users seeking a romantic connection. The last time I had participated in a dating activity was a speed dating event. Now I was swiping on an app: swiping left to say "no" and right to say "yes" to a match. It didn't feel real: Swiping through people on Tinder was a bit like transferring money on a banking app. Is it really money if you cannot reach out and touch it? Were these real people I was selecting or rejecting? It was hard to classify swiping: Was it meaningful? Was it meaningless? The ambiguity also made the stigma less prominent. It turned the seriousness of sitting behind a computer and answering personality questions on a dating website into a lighthearted swipe through a sea of faces, and it was all the rage in the Netherlands and globally.

I was immediately hooked. I remember sitting on my balcony on an unseasonably warm day, swiping through strangers and being in awe at the wonder of it all. I suddenly realized that I wanted this to be my new research focus. I needed a change from my previous topic, and this was it. I did not know it at the time, but my professional life and my love life were about to become one big, messy undertaking.

Then I started thinking "like an academic," pondering my theoretical focus. When I first became interested in researching Tinder, my attention was on the concept of self-presentation: how people manage others' impressions. I wanted to add to the research that has taken this approach in regard to dating websites (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Manning, 2014) and dating apps (e.g., Dunguay, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016; Ward, 2017c; Wu & Ward, 2018).

Goffman (1959) says that individuals attempt to control or guide others' impressions by manipulating setting, appearance, and behavior. When I first downloaded Tinder, an early step was to create a collage of pictures to make myself look attractive and interesting. I started swiping. Then I began to wonder how other users crafted their own profiles. Some of my wondering stemmed from admiration ("Wow, I should really add some photos like that!"), some from disbelief ("Why would someone ever put a picture like that on a dating app?"), but I was mainly driven by curiosity. The curiosity was both a personal ("I can use this information to make my own profile more desirable!") and academic query: "How did people go about the process of presenting themselves on Tinder?"

Goffman (1959) argues that the person an individual is interacting with is also attempting to obtain information and form impressions about that individual. So I was not the only one evaluating: potential matches were also evaluating me. I thought about my sometimes-harsh judgements in the seconds before I swiped left, rejecting another user, and I became increasingly reflective about my own profile. What did people see when they came across me on the app? How were they perceiving me? Because I wanted to pursue this interest academically, these personal questions were pushed aside. I would need to take an objective position, ignoring my own experiences. I would need to focus on others' experiences.

With this mindset, I started my research on Tinder users. In late 2014, I recruited participants via a Tinder profile that advertised the study using the university emblem and a brief description of the investigation. My interview questions focused on how users construct their profiles and how they evaluate potential matches. I also kept in mind the technological dating environment provided by Tinder in order to illustrate a dating app defined by reduced cues and increased control (Walther, 1996), local proximity (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015), and a reduced filtering process (Best & Delmege, 2012).

I worked on publishing my findings, leaving out my own experience (Ward, 2016, 2017c). Studying dating apps would often provoke the question: "Do you use dating apps?"

"Well, yes, I do," I would say, watching the acquaintance, colleague, or journalist who'd asked the question struggle to hide their surprised reaction and their discomfort with placing me in the realm of someone also looking for love (Ward, 2017b).

Even while still conducting "objective" qualitative research, it seemed odd to separate my own experiences from those of my interviewees. I found myself speaking formally to interviewees while having more interactive, engaging discussions with friends, contacts, and audience members about my research. Something needed to change.

Somewhere in the middle of the publication process, I presented my research at a public lecture. I stood before a large audience, talking about my results. I reached the slide where I discuss my motivations for conducting the research. A photo of my personal Tinder profile appeared, and I talked about how my interest in the topic stemmed from my personal use of the app. My heart raced: I had just left the cloak of objective researcher behind and embraced subjectivity. The traditional academic part of me saw this as a blatant disregard for my training. The idea of revealing that I too was a dating app user felt like sharing too much, but it also felt necessary to position my research interest authentically. Not discussing my own experience felt like not acknowledging an elephant in the room (Ward, 2017a).

As I moved toward considering autoethnography as a method, I was struck by this observation from Tedlock (1991) who distinguishes between "participant observation" and the "observation of participation." She says,

> During participant observation, ethnographers attempt to be both emotionally
> engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of others.
> In the observation of participation, ethnographers both experience and observe
> their own and others' coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter. The

shift from the one methodology to the other entails a representational transformation in which, instead of a choice between writing an ethnographic memoir centering on the Self or a standard monograph centering on the Other, both the Self and Other are presented together within a single narrative ethnography, focused on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue. (p. 69)

The presentation where I showed my personal Tinder profile photo marked a turning point. Until that moment, I had only referred to my own dating app use in passing; while conducting interviews, I was careful to minimize my own experience. Since then, I discovered the method of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ward & Rocha, 2018), and I found a new approach to my research.

Embracing autoethnography came to mean acknowledging two aspects of my personal experience with dating apps. During the research process, I was presenting myself on Tinder as a researcher. I did so first with a text-based description of the research in order to recruit participants. I was also a dating app user, experiencing the same processes of self-presentation as my interviewees. As Tedlock (1991) puts it, I had learned the language and the appropriate behavior of functioning in this environment. These insights have resulted in this paper, in which I use autoethnography to explore two facets of dating app self-presentation: as researcher and as user. Before discussing methodological issues, I provide more detail into the theoretical focus that grounds this investigation.

Impression Management and Online Dating

Dating apps like Tinder (launched in 2012) have become increasingly popular. Although dating websites still account for the largest global market share (McGrath, 2015); in the Netherlands, there were an estimated 1.5 million dating app users in 2014 (Eigenraam & Zandstra, 2014). The concept of meeting a romantic partner online is fairly common in this country; between 2008 and 2013, 13% of Dutch people met their partners online, and half of these met on dating sites (Kooiman & Latten, 2014).

Tinder and other app-based matchmaking applications can be distinguished by how they highlight the location of potential matches. They also lack compatibility questions and detailed filtering techniques—features common to dating websites. In contrast, dating apps ask users to provide a few photos and an optional small amount of text (Blackwell et al., 2015; Gudelunas, 2012).

A user's first impression of a potential match is the main profile photo. A user can tap on the photo and see additional photos, a short text, and shared Facebook friends and Facebook likes. A user swipes left to reject and right to accept a potential match. If a right swipe is mutual between users, it's a match, and Tinder allows users to chat within the app. It is worth noting the constantly evolving nature of Tinder and other dating apps. Features have continuously changed since I started my research (e.g., Tinder now allows users to see each other's educational and work information and view others' Instagram profiles).

Creating a Tinder profile is all about impression management. People experience impression motivation ("Why am I using this app?") and impression construction ("Which photos/text should I use to represent myself to potential matches?"; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Theoretical references cannot give justice to the emotionally charged nature of this process. Novelist Elena Ferrante captures the essence of self-presentation in her 2013 book, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*:

> Preparing myself (this was the word) seemed to me to have something ridiculous about it. All that struggle, all that time spent camouflaging myself when I could be doing something else. The colors that suited me, the ones that didn't, the styles that made me look thinner, those that made me fatter, the cut that flattered me, the one that didn't. A lengthy, costly preparation. Reducing myself to a table set for the sexual appetite of the male, to a well-cooked dish to make his mouth water. And then the anguish of not succeeding, of not *seeming* pretty, of not managing to conceal with skill the vulgarity of the flesh with its moods and odors and imperfections. But I had done it. (p. 366)

In this quote, Elena Ferrante articulates the agony of decision, of choosing how to design one's appearance and hoping it is pleasing to the eye of the beholder. Her description is gendered—her narrator is a young female—but the sentiment holds a universality. She writes in a time before the existence of dating apps, yet the relevance to this paper's topic is uncanny. It is comparable to the decision-making process users go through in constructing their dating app profiles. The difference is that on a dating app, this takes place in a digital environment where people have more control over how they present themselves. They can choose which details they provide, as well as the distribution and longevity of this information (Walther, 1996).

Online daters have a high motivation to control the impression they want to create (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). How does this motivation look in practice? Here are a couple of examples. Women report a lower body weight and men report a taller height and a higher income level (Feingold, 1990; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Toma & Hancock, 2010). In the context of this high motivation, users construct an impression in particular ways. Leary (1995) classically elaborates on self-descriptions, attitude statements, social associations, and deception. On a dating app like Tinder, users construct an impression via profile photos and text. In other words, and in Goffman's (1959) terms, Tinder provides the user a stage where she or he can perform.

Though substantial, the literature on impression management and self-presentation on dating websites or apps has focused on the users, and the users are almost never simultaneously the researchers. I began to realize the same insights about impression management applied to my experience as a researcher interviewing Tinder users. Even more obviously, I realized that these insights applied to me as a dating app user, too. These autoethnographic pieces go beyond the scope of personal narratives (Denzin, 2015), connecting to the literature and conceptual thinking particularly related to impression management in similar contexts (Holt, 2001).

Method: Autoethnography

The purpose of writing this piece is to provide an autoethnographic perspective on dating app self-presentation. Here, I consider how the theoretical concept of impression management has impacted my research journey, from interviewing participants to being active on a dating app myself. As noted above, there is a broad body of literature examining technological dating experience. Few studies, however, have taken an autoethnographic approach to the topic (e.g., Faris, in press; Lindsay, 2015). Autoethnography differs "in how much emphasis is placed on the study of others, the researcher's self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context, as well as on power relationships" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para 17). It lets me tell a story, incorporating my own experiences as a dating app user, and allows me to draw on the insights I have gained in talking to a multitude of Tinder users over the past few years.

When I began my employment at Erasmus University, I confirmed that I would act in compliance with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice. For the social sciences, this code ensures adherence to a number of ethical issues, namely, underlying ethical principle, methodology, participants, participant consent, protection of personal data, and privacy. This was in lieu of an institutional ethics board review, which did not yet exist at the time I started my research.

Autoethnographic writing can take many forms (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and data sources used by autoethnographers have, in general, followed the traditions of ethnography (Wall, 2008). In terms of technologically-mediated dating, Lindsay (2015) examines the socio-cultural environment of two well-known dating websites, OkCupid and Match.com. Using Foucault's discourse analysis theory, she analyzes the visual and textual content of the websites and used reflexivity to discuss her experiences with online dating from an autoethnographic perspective. With a focus on an "insider perspective" that fuses the roles of researcher and research subject (Canagarajah 2012, p. 114), Faris (in press) produces an autoethnographic account of his experiences on Grindr, with a special attention to sensations, affect, and desire.

For the authoethnography presented here, I turned to a variety of written sources produced during the period I was using dating apps (April 2014 – February 2016). These sources include personal journaling and chats with matches. My personal journals were written throughout the research process and provide reflections and insights about my interview experiences with Tinder users and on my own online dating experiences. I also drew on texts from chats with my own matches, both on Tinder and those that took place on Whatsapp.

I chose these sources when I realized the written mementos could create a deeper understanding of my research topic. For example: "Why had I chosen this topic?" "Why had I chosen to research a phenomenon I was also involved in?" "What were my motivations for both?" Reading and re-reading about my experiences made the process of exploration more systematic. When I first began to study my sources, I saw them as separate phenomenon: the researcher on one hand and the dater on the other. As I dove deeper into my analysis, I began to see how they related to each other. I was not simply taking notes post-interview to improve my qualitative analysis of the transcripts; I was exploring my own feelings and reactions to the interview process, perhaps even trying to better understand the perspective of my own Tinder dates (as a researcher-dater). Through this analysis, it seemed most relevant to write a story that illustrated my internal dialogue while conducting an interview (see Part I). Similarly, I was not simply keeping a diary of good and bad dates and saving Whatsapp messages from dates to better understand what I was looking for in a romantic partner or how best to attract the kind of person I wanted to find, I was also working to comprehend the phenomenon of online dating (as a dater-researcher). Through this analysis it seemed most relevant to write a story that addressed the unknown other, the Tinder user who was viewing my profile and deciding which way to swipe (see Part II).

Drawing from these sources, and putting this in the context of autoethnographic research, I used systematic sociological introspection, "The process of thinking about thinking and feeling about feeling in a focused way in order to examine the lived experiences of the self" (Ellis, 2008, p. 853) and emotional recall (Ellis, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For the first piece, I focused on my experience of playing the role of academic researcher: Instead of perceiving the interview process as a means to an end to gather qualitative data, I examined my lived experience of presenting myself as an academic researcher and my emotions that shaped the experience. For the second, I turned to my lived experience as a dating app user: Leaving my academic identity behind, I recalled the process I went through in choosing the most optimal self-presentation on my Tinder profile. I chose the above sources because of their evocative potential: "[the sources'] ability to either open the researcher to deeper reflection on relevant

experiences and relationships or to evoke compelling images, emotions, or understandings in other readers" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2015, p. 68).

In Part I, *Interviewing Reinout*, I examine how I present myself as an expert in order to interview dating app users. It is an autoethnographic take on what I focused on in my interviews with Tinder users, namely, a better understanding of impression management (Ward, 2017c). Part II, *Please Swipe Right*, focuses on the researcher as dating app user: How I experienced self-presentation on Tinder. This autoethnographic short story (Jago, 2015; Wyatt, 2005), focuses on my Tinder profile, which was active from 2014 until early 2016. The stories below are followed by an analysis of motivations and impression construction in a dating app environment.

Part I: Interviewing Reinout

I arrive at Amsterdam Central Station, and head toward a recently opened coffee place. I position myself at the entrance inside the station, hiding from the cold October air. My stomach is churning, and I try to warm my hands inside my coat pockets for the inevitable handshake. Why am I so nervous? I've done this before, haven't I? I'm a pro.

I see someone standing close by. He looks 10 years younger than I and 10 inches taller. Is it my interviewee? I ponder whether to approach him. What could I say? "Hi, are you here for the interview about Tinder?" What if I'm wrong? He'll think I'm crazy. That sounds like some wacky pickup line. I stand for another 5 minutes. He's still waiting. I decide to go for it. I approach him.

"Hi, I'm Janelle, are you here for the interview?"

"Yes!" He looked puzzled. "I saw you standing there, but you're not, well, what I expected. I'm Reinout[1]."

I shake his hand and resist the urge to ask him what he meant. One of the anxieties about meeting people offline for the first time is the other person's assessment of your appearance. His comment sounded positive, but it was left deliberately ambiguous. But I can't ask. It would be normal banter if this were a date. But it isn't a date. It's an interview, and I'm the interviewer.

Reinout ushers me to a nearby student bar. We sit down and order beers. Wait…should I have ordered a beer? Drinking alcohol is like a nod toward lowering inhibitions, and that's definitely not what I want to do. The bar is loud, I prepare the audio recorder on my phone and hope the microphone is powerful enough.

"So." Reinout smiles at me.

"Oh, right," I smile back. Professionally. "Well, I'm interested in how and why people use Tinder. So, I am going to ask you some general questions about your use and then I want to look at your profile with you."

"Yeah, OK, that sounds good," Reinout says.

"Then we'll swipe a little bit too, to get an idea of how you choose your matches."

"All right, OK." He laughs.

"So, let's get started." I clear my throat and check my interview guide. "How long have you been on Tinder?"

Reinout leans back and grabs his beer. "For a year. It's had its ups and downs, sometimes I was just dating someone, and I turned it off for a few months. So it went off and on."

I continued. "How often do you use Tinder?"

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[1] Reinout is a pseudonym, and other identifying details of our interview have been changed.

"The last few weeks, a lot. Just, yeah, you get a match, try to set up a date and if it doesn't work out alright, next one, next one, next one, next one. But the thing is at first, I was really looking for a girlfriend. And now it's more like yeah, I just enjoy dating. It's fun to meet people and just see where it goes."

I'm starting to wonder how this is different from any of the Tinder dates I've had in the past year. The difference is, of course, that this is an interview, not a date. Or is it a date disguised as an interview? Or is it an interview disguised as a date?

It doesn't matter. The role I play is clear. I am an academic, conducting a research interview. I hold the authority position and must portray a certain detachment. Don't get too personal. Stick to the script.

It really is like a date, then.

The conversation continues. Reinout shows me his profile, explaining each photo and his philosophy on their selection. You have to show your face in the photos. The photos have to remind you of a happy memory. It's not just about what you imagine other people see. You have to like what you see, too.

Reinout seems sweet and yet straightforward. He professes a vulnerability about his search for love, even if it's hidden in humor. I start to doubt my earlier assessment. If this were a date, he'd never be so open. Would he? They never are. It's only my first interview and I'm starting to realize that this topic is about way more than self-presentation. This is asking people to discuss deep human longings for connection and partnership. Did I just choose self-presentation because it's a way to disguise an otherwise deeply vulnerable topic, to make my interviewees more comfortable talking about their dating app use, or to make myself more comfortable interviewing them? And why doesn't this happen with my real Tinder dates? Am I only capable of involving myself in these conversations when I can hide behind my academic identity?

As he speaks, I wonder: will some people see through this research topic I've chosen, the way I'm intellectualizing personal struggles and challenges? Will my interviewees see through it? This is a far cry from my graduate work interviewing political organizations about how they use the internet. I'm starting over and going much deeper.

I sit there, listening, nodding, and asking more questions, and I realize: Meeting for an interview about Tinder is almost exactly the same as meeting for a Tinder date. Except now it's blind. Neither of us knows what the other looks like. Neither knows what to expect. Both of us just hope the other has come with honest intentions.

Part II: "Please Swipe Right"

Welcome to my profile, fellow Tinder user. I know your visit is nearly random. No complex compatibility algorithm brought us together. But here we are, me presenting my best self, and you deciding whether to swipe left or right. You've paused on my first image. While you're here, I'd like to tell you something about the photo.

In this picture, I was feeling happy but awkward. Happy because I'd just purchased a used bike. Awkward because I asked the bike store manager to take my picture. To mark the occasion, is all. Asking a stranger—or anyone, really—to snap your photo is pretty uncomfortable. It reeks of narcissism. Don't you think? I do like a good picture of myself, but I can see my discomfort with this process reflected in my expression. I hope you can't. Because, fellow Tinder user, we both understand the importance of having quality photos of oneself, especially when active on a technological matchmaking service. If we're here, we have to play the game.

The manager took the photo and handed my phone back to me, his demeanor amused. I used a black and white filter. Somehow the filter added to the sophistication of a 30-something

clutching an old bike. I posted it on Facebook, and for a different kind of validation, uploaded it here, on Tinder. I decided to make it my primary photo. Why? My reasoning was twofold: one, to demonstrate my commitment to saving the environment and two, to provide the obligatory body shot. Displaying one's body is important, they say, in online dating circles. To be totally honest, I also see it as a rebellious choice. On Tinder, we are swimming in a sea of sexy selfies. But I can still get right swipes, even with my coat zipped up to my chin.

You seem interested. Shall we continue? You've tapped on my profile, meaning my optional profile text is now visible beneath my photo. Currently I don't have a profile text. I used to state my height. For a while I had a Dr. Seuss quote: "It's fun to have fun but you have to know how." To my matches, that was often interpreted as a sexual come-on. Did I mean it that way? Perhaps. I took it down after a while. At one point, I provided a list of my interests and extracurricular activities. There was a time I contemplated using my profile text to say what I did *not* want to see when I swiped. No pictures with dolphins, please. Interesting how I've begun to perceive a picture with a dolphin as a character flaw. But that felt like I was trying to control how other people constructed their profiles, so I stayed silent. Now I just prefer to show myself through photos. Text seems weirdly intimate when addressing strangers. I don't know who's reading this.

You're swiping within my profile now and can see my second photo. This one has an interesting back-story. I did not consent to this picture being taken, so any accusation of narcissism is unfounded. I was speaking at a professional event, and the event organizers wanted to promote the event by taking lots of high-quality photos and posting them on social media. I was presenting, and a man with a giant camera walked in and started snapping away. Soon after, they posted it on their Facebook event page and I happily tagged myself. I look serious. Educated, even. For a blonde woman, this is important. I'm not smiling. I'm talking. I'm even gesturing. I like this image of myself. It helps weed out the men looking for a bimbo. I think.

In my third photo, I'm dancing in my living room. It was my birthday party, and the dance instructor hired for the occasion had just taken me for a spin on the hardwood. My girlfriends watched, cheered, and snapped this picture. The message is: "I dance." The message is also: "I dress up." It gives you another indication of my body type, should that be important to you. I'm guessing it is. This is Tinder.

My fourth photo is the standard headshot. I'm smiling. This was taken by a former OK-Cupid-date-turned-platonic friend. Yes, I was smiling at him, I mean, the camera. I was even smiling flirtatiously. I admit it. And it's a great picture. It's such a great picture, in fact, it's been my Facebook profile picture for more than a year and a half. As age continues its relentless march forward I fear a better photo of me will never be taken. I am frozen; I cannot remove this photo from my profile. Even after the photographer no longer speaks to me, and it probably irks him to see me still using it on Facebook and on my website and on Twitter. But that's how good it is. The discomfort of his wrath does not trump my fear of looking worse in my next profile picture. I had to put it on Tinder.

My last photo. The essential I-travel-to-exotic-lands photo. In the photo, I'm doing something that I'd guess you probably can't identify. Perhaps that makes you insecure. Maybe it intrigues you. Or you'll just think I like to travel to developing countries. And who doesn't like someone who travels to developing countries? But the presence of this photo is braver than that. It's not just about adventurous travel. It's bold because my image is far from perfectly crafted. My hair is a mess. I am without make-up. Go ahead, I dare you to swipe left on my mascara-less eyelashes. Swipe away the woman who exposes her un-airbrushed, un-powdered vulnerability. Be that guy. Or, be the guy who reads that vulnerability, sees my unarticulated longing to find love, and swipe right.

Maybe this is all a fantasy. Maybe you're like most of the men out there, and you just swiped right without even glancing at my profile, because you swipe right on everyone, in order to even the playing field. Women are picky, I've heard. Better to see who wants you first before making an actual decision.

I hope I don't sound bitter. I'm really not bitter. Let's start over. If you're still undecided, please swipe right. Odds are I'll probably swipe left on you. I am one of those picky women. Maybe, though, I will like your profile, and I will swipe right, my heart full of possibility. When I see that we've matched, my dopamine levels will soar, and I will start to compose a greeting, one that expresses my admiration of your Tinder presentation. You will do the same, and the rest will be history. After all, these moments of mutual admiration are what get us out of bed every morning, ready to keep swiping.

From Analysis

To analyze these authoethnographic pieces, I borrow from Ellis et al.'s (2017) format, "What's the Story all About?" to explain the personal significance to me as an academic researcher and as a dating app user and its relation to the theoretical insights uncovered in my research with Tinder users.

It's About Exploring Motivations

Impression management experts Leary and Kowalski (1990) describe impression motivation as an important part of impression management, "when people become motivated to engage in particular self-presentation behaviors" (Leary, 1995, p. 53). Especially in high stakes situations like interviews or dates, impression motivation leads individuals to strive to make a good impression.

From the perspective of dating app users, past research on dating websites has reported users are highly motivated to control the impression they create (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012), but they talk less about the *kind* of motivations users have for using the app. Recent research on dating apps has found there are complex motivations behind swiping, ranging from relationship seeking to casual sex, to ego boost and entertainment (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2016; Ranzini & Lutz, 2016).

Is Tinder really about finding love, or is it just about getting validation from other people? As a Tinder user, my motivations were as unclear and ever-changing as the literature suggests. In *Please Swipe Right*, I express a clear desire that my Tinder profile gets a right swipe. That right swipe provides the rush of realizing an attraction is mutual. It is gratifying to hear a notification ding and see my screen light up: "It's a Match!"

Does this mean Tinder is all about ego-boost? Not necessarily. In the end, like the vast majority of my interviewees, I was also open to the possibility of finding love. Although my potential matches were reduced to a series of photos, they were real people, and there was a chance to meet with some of them and begin a romantic attachment. As my Tinder use continued, my cynicism grew—that cynicism shines through clearly in the piece—but I never lost hope. Yet I did not express this hope on my Tinder profile or on dates; only through this autoethnographic piece was I able to briefly acknowledge it. This insight also came to me from my interviewees, who trusted my position as an academic researcher enough to share vulnerable motivations.

This mix of motivations was my experience using Tinder, and also what I heard from my interviewees (Ward, 2017c). One moment I was flying high because I matched with a beautiful stranger, and the next day I was depressed because, despite having dozens of matches, I was still single. In one instance I was an angry, defensive swiper; in the next, a particularly

charming stranger would return me to optimism. All this, from the comfort of my couch. Although on the surface, *Please Swipe Right* is a navigation through my dating app photos, it also hopes to capture the complexity of my own motivations for using Tinder, which ranged from entertainment to ego-boost to relationship seeking, and often changed over time.

Interviewing Reinout reveals a different take on impression motivation. On the surface, the boundaries of an interview are clearer. Both parties are expected to behave professionally; the agreement is a single meeting for the purpose of information exchange. The piece reveals my motivation to present myself as an expert researcher, yet the fact that I was also a Tinder user made the situation feel blurry. It also made me question my research focus. Perhaps the choice of topic meant that I was seeking answers to larger questions and was using both theory and my identity as an academic researcher to intellectualize my concerns.

It's About Isolation

The second process of impression management is impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). People choose the impression they want to make, and they also choose which methods to use in order to create this impression. On a dating app, this is primary done via the presentation of photos. My interviewees often said they did not think they could elaborate much on their profile photo choices, but this portion of the interview was always extensive (Ward, 2017c). In the process of writing *Please Swipe Right*, I did the same exercise with my own profile, and I also found it to be the case. Each photo's backstory revealed a great deal about my motivations (as discussed above), my personality, and even my insecurities.

Traditional dating websites encourage users to give information about themselves like height, weight, race, or education level (Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011). Tinder is different. Users provide just a few photographs and perhaps a little text. Presenting oneself to potential romantic partners on an app is a peculiar way to get acquainted with someone. There is no in-person meeting, at least not in the initial stages. There is no handshake, no eye contact, no special smile meant for the other person. Those who have used a swiping-based app know how fast it goes. This piece slows down that process. I explain my profile photos to a hypothetical, potential match. I address an unknown user, in order to circumvent the lack of pre-match communication. This technique also reflects the frustration I felt when I did not know the motivations of my fellow Tinder users. At least for me, it was not appealing to open my heart to a stranger who was only out for some light entertainment.

On Tinder, no interaction is possible until there is a match. As a dating app user, I must compose an image of myself alone, without explicit feedback from my intended audience. I must do a lot of guesswork to know how my profile is coming across. *Please Swipe Right* allows me to "talk" to a Tinder user about my profile, before that user has made the decision to swipe left or right. I saw this desire reflected with my interviewees too, as illustrated in *Interviewing Reinout*: They really lit up when they were given the opportunity to be heard (Ward, 2017c). While interviewing, I always felt a kinship with my interviewees when it became clear that we are all thoughtful about our self-presentation on Tinder. Using apps like Tinder can be isolating. Both pieces are an attempt to remedy this isolation.

Discussion

In this autoethnographic study, I provide a fresh perspective on the literature focused on impression management and technologically-mediated dating. The work done here joins a community of autoethnographic literature that uses personal narrative (Denzin, 2015) and a short story format (Jago, 2015; Wyatt, 2005), to provide a new perspective on the concept of

self-presentation. Mainly, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explain, autoethnography lets the writer use her personal experience to illustrate cultural experience and, in the process, the previously unfamiliar culture is made known. When I began researching Tinder, my aim was to contribute to the body of research that has examined self-presentation on dating websites (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006) and dating apps (e.g., Dunguay, 2017). With an autoethnographic focus, however, it becomes more difficult to unequivocally state how my research adds to this body of literature, or whether my findings can be generalized to other contexts. It certainly gives a different perspective on the concept of impression management. By taking a reflective perspective as an academic researcher and a dating app user, I hope to provide food for thought for other researchers pursing dating apps as a topic or self-presentation as a theoretical focus. A primary goal of (evocative) authoethnography, and my work here, is to evoke images, emotions, or understandings that are perceived as compelling to other readers (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2015).

On the podcast, "Strangers," host Lea Thau once described "the boundless possibilities of love and the boundaries of circumstance." In the age of dating apps our search for love takes place on the mobile phone. This process is both facilitated and specific to a technological dating environment, which is defined by reduced cues and increased control (Walther, 1996). In real life, if we approach someone we are interested in, we cannot just decide to change our outfit or our hairstyle. But on Tinder it is always possible to tweak our appearance. We strive, and struggle, to present an ideal yet authentic version of ourselves to attract others. I know I struggled, as did Lindsay (2015) to find an authentic way to present myself to potential dates, and to maintain my professionalism when conducting interviews.

Each study has its limitations. Leaving aside a critique of autoethnography in particular or qualitative research in general, I did have to choose which aspects of my experience to highlight here. I could have also chosen to focus on discussions I had about Tinder presentation with my Tinder dates. I could have asked one of my Tinder interviewees to engage in a co-constructed autoethnography, in order to gain a more holistic view of the interview experience. Here I chose to provide a snapshot of two important identities that emerged for me during the research process. Perhaps in the future these other perspectives can be explored in other work.

Another limitation emerged in the choice to conduct an autoethnography. The hardest part about the process of adapting to autoethnography has been embracing vulnerability, as a dating app user and a researcher. I had to become a vulnerable observer of my own experience (Ellis, 1999). I was an active dating app researcher and user for about two years. Throughout that time, I created multiple profiles, swiped through thousands of other profiles, and used my experiences and evaluations to modify my profile for perceived success. I also conducted many interviews and gave talks where I struggled to navigate the balance between acknowledging my own experience on dating apps and remaining an objective expert. These pieces reflect that struggle.

When I began submitting this article for publication, I identified *Please Swipe Right* as fictional. A reviewer called me out on this: What did I hope to accomplish by fictionalizing the writing? And if it was fictional, what was my source? I explained: What I mean by fictional was that it didn't actually occur. Given the format of dating apps, it is not possible to talk about one's photos in this way with a potential match. The photos were real, my description is my own, but the situation described in the story did not happen; therefore, it is fictional. After crafting this explanation, I realized my fiction claim went deeper than that. With autoethnography, I do not get to write about myself and then call it fiction in order to slide a veil over my experience. Autoethnography does not work like that. Removing this protective layer means accepting vulnerability. The researcher reveals herself. She cannot retract what she writes, and cannot control interpretations of the written work (Ellis, 1999).

Bochner and Ellis (2016) talk about being a vulnerable observer and a vulnerable writer. Behind this, they say, is an attempt to "form a personal connection between author and audience, which is rare in academic prose" (p. 81). Reflecting on one's personal experience in such a systematic way can be useful for academics, but also dating app designers, marketeers, and journalists. Seeking to understand the user's perspective is an important first step; reflecting on one's own experience within this process can add an extra later of authenticity and wisdom. Although this paper may not be generalizable in a traditional academic sense, it can be seen as research that "makes life experience come alive" (Walker, 2009, p. 26). Even if you are not a dating app user, or you have never used a technological medium to find love or sex or something in between, even if you have never interviewed others about their dating experiences, we have all experienced the intricacies of crafting our self-presentation, and the agony and bliss of searching for love.

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