

**From suitors to swipes: How uses of dating applications reflect  
millennial views of love, sex and relationships.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how mobile dating applications have reflected the changing landscape of dating culture among millennial users. Usership among the mobile dating applications Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge has skyrocketed in recent years. Through the lens of uses and gratifications theory, this study analyzes primary and secondary sources in order to better understand how and why each application has been successful in its ability to reach its respective audience bases. Findings show that each dating application serves a different purpose within millennial dating culture.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This is an explorative study of millennials and their use of mobile dating applications. By collecting existing information from published interviews and conducting brief case studies, the purpose of this research is to uncover how attitudes and social norms surrounding dating have been altered by the existence of mobile applications. Through the framework of uses and gratification theory, three popular dating applications –Tinder, Hinge and Bumble – are analyzed in order to better understand how they serve their millennial consumers.

For the purpose of clarification, this research classifies the millennial generation as those born between the years of 1981 and 1997. At the time that this research is being conducted, the millennial generation is between the ages of 19 and 35.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For young adults throughout the last century, dating has been considered the main social norm as a means of beginning an intimate relationship between two partners. But recently, with the rise of what some call “hook up culture,” tradition has taken a step to the wayside as a shift has infiltrated the lives of emerging adults throughout the Westernized world (Garcia, 2013).

To millennials, the phrase “hooking up” serves as a catch-all for everything from intercourse to spooning. Journalist Amanda Hess suggests that this phrasing is used specifically to help mitigate the gender-based social pressures and stigmas attached to sexual relationships. Today’s culture is one where young women are still shamed for going too far and young men are shamed for not going far enough. In a sexist sexual

climate, ‘we hooked up’ could be the great equalizer (Hess, 2011). Hook up culture is now a term deemed so significant that the American Psychological Association has officially defined it as, “brief uncommitted sexual encounters between individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other” (Garcia, 2013), but the concept is nothing new.

Sociologist Kathleen Bogle (2008) researched relationships on college campuses and sexual behavior among students in her book, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*. Her findings reveal that traditional dating has become almost obsolete on college campuses and suggests that increasing undergraduate enrollment rates play a large role in the demise of traditional dating (Bogle, 2008). To further understand why this is and how culture has evolved, Bogle offers a timeline of “eras” in order to compare each era’s “social script.”

A social script is how sociologists refer to the way a person behaves in any given social setting based on learned societal and cultural norms—similar to an actor following a script. Bogle’s proposition is further supported by classical sociological studies by John H Gagnon and William Simon (1973), which have shown that sexual behavior is learned (Bogel, 2008).

### **The Calling Era**

For the first decade of the twentieth century, it was considered most respectable for young men to “call” on young women at their home. A young woman and her mother arranged the call as a team. The mother would play a major decision-making role in where the relationship was headed or if it would continue at all. When men were “called

upon” into a woman’s home, rigid guidelines were followed. Parental supervision was nearly constant, and gatherings may have consisted of intellectual conversation in the parlor (Bogle, 2008).

It is important to note that traditions and practices during the calling era were only accessible to middle and upper class social circles, thus leaving the practice unattainable for lower class families who lacked the resources to entertain a male caller. This led to young adults from lower social classes to meeting up for romantic gatherings outside the home, and referring to the rendezvous as a “date.” Soon after, the term was used to refer to occasions when a man was given sexual favors from a lower-class woman (Bogle, 2008).

### **The Dating Era**

Dating, as we understand it today, emerged from upper-class youth who began to appreciate the freedom that came with spending time with a love interest away from parental supervision. The boom in the automobile industry and novel entertainment venues in the 1920s also played a tremendous role in the popularity of dating. As Bogle wrote, “Young men’s access to cars made the idea of taking a woman ‘out on the town’ increasingly possible” (2008, p. 14). Dating in the 1920s and ‘30s was also quite competitive. A young man or woman might date as a means to climb the social ladder and to strengthen his or her own popularity. At this point in history, it was seen as better to date one person than to date none at all (Bogle, 2008).

A change came in the 1940s surrounding the onset and aftermath of World War II. Millions of men were being sent overseas and thousands never came home. The lack

of eligible men changed the tone of the dating scene, as both men and women became equally prepared to settle down and get engaged (Bogle, 2008).

### **Hooking up: A culture?**

By the 1960s, an increase of “dating” as a cultural norm gave way to a more permissive peer-influenced social-sexual script (Bailey, 1988; Stinson, 2010). Young adults became more sexually liberated with the growth of college party events and increased availability in birth control options (Garcia, 2013). Second wave feminism also contributed to a shift in American culture when it came to women entering the work force and choosing to pursue higher education (Burkett, 2015).

Today, young people are postponing marriage and getting married later in their lives more than ever before (Bogle, 2008). In 1960, 59 percent of adults from ages 18-29 were married. In 2014, only 20 percent of 18-29 year-olds were married (Patten, Fry, 2015). Additionally, a growing proportion of young people nationwide are spending several years of their young adult lives in college, and a greater share of millennial women have a bachelors degree than their male counterparts. From 1970 to 2000, enrollment in undergraduate institutions rose by 78 percent (Patten, Fry, 2015), thus making it an increasingly important setting for early sexual experiences (Bogle, 2008). This has resulted in a historically unprecedented time gap where young adults are physiologically able to reproduce, but not psychologically or social ready to “settle down” (Garcia, Reiver, 2012).

In 2013, *The New York Times* published an article titled, “The End of Courtship?” with the aim to further document the rise of hookup culture among young people. It

decried the current dating culture among millennials as, “spontaneous, commitment-free (and often, alcohol-fueled) romantic flings.” The essay also included an interview with Donna Freitas, author of, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy*. Freitas was quoted explaining that, “young people don’t know how to get out of hookup culture,” and suggested that millennials do not understand the basic mechanics of a traditional date.

Yet some researchers argue that is no solid evidence that suggests that young people are participating more in casual sex than previous generations. In fact, in a study of 681 college-aged participants, 63 percent of men and 83 percent of women preferred, at their current stage of life of development, a traditional romantic relationship as opposed to an uncommitted sexual relationship (Garcia, 2012).

In another survey with 500 students, all who had experiences with hookups, 65 percent of women and 45 percent of men reported that they hoped their hookup encounter would become a committed relationship, with 51 percent of women at 42 percent of men reporting that they tried to discuss the possibility of starting a relationship with their hookup partner (Owen & Fincham, 2011). The gender differences observed are modest, and point to the convergence of gender roles in hookup culture. But even though there are differences, it should not be ignored that the curves overlap significantly (Garcia, 2013).

In a recent interview with *Vogue*, sex researcher Zhana Vrangalova describes a trait known as “sociosexual orientation,” which measures how oriented a person is toward casual sex (Sciortino, 2015). Sociosexual orientation is believed to be partially genetic, and is measured on a spectrum between two extremes, unrestricted and restricted –with unrestricted individuals being more likely to engage in more casual sexual

relationships (Kanazawa, 2008). Alfred Kinsey first introduced the concept of sociosexual orientation in 1948 when he described the phenomenon in his book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. This supports the theory that a tendency to enjoy casual sex is not unique to the millennial generation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

According to data collected from the Pew Research Center, one-in-five 18-to 24-year olds (22 percent) now report using mobile dating applications; in 2013, only five percent reported doing so (Smith & Anderson, 2016). Additionally, 46 percent of college graduates know people who met their spouse online and 58 percent of college-educated Americans knew someone who used a dating site or application (Meyer, 2016). These numbers are significant because they demonstrate the substantial effect that dating apps have had on the millennial generation.

For this study, uses and gratifications theory will be used in combination with brief case studies and secondary research in order to decipher how Tinder, Bumble and Hinge provide a response for specific needs in the dating lives of the millennial generation. Early theories of mass communications viewed the mass media as having a uniform and immediate influence on individuals, whom they perceived as easily susceptible to influence and unable to form their own opinions. The goal of uses and gratifications theory is to characterize the audience as active, discerning, and motivated in their media use and consumption. The focus of this theory is on what people do with the media rather than what the media does to the individual. By viewing the audience as actively choosing and using media in response to specific needs, the foundations for



examining gratifications obtained from the media are put in place (McQuail & Windahl, 1993).

This study chooses to focus on Tinder, Bumble and Hinge because they are the most popular dating applications among millennials (Mosendz, 2016). A snapshot of user demographics from Survey Monkey Intelligence taken in June of 2016 showed that 63 percent of Bumble users, 52 percent of Tinder users, and 49 percent of Hinge users are between the ages of 18 and 29.

Brief case studies will be used to determine what each dating applications offers to the current landscape of dating within millennial culture. This study will utilize uses and gratifications theory to discuss how and why users choose to interact with each application.

Credibility of secondary sources was determined on a case-to-case basis by the researcher. Factors such as academic reputation, expertise of subject matter, and history of the publication were considered when determining credibility.

Data for this study were collected from Survey Monkey Intelligence (SMI), a data collecting service trusted by many major corporations such as Disney, Yelp, Nike and Nintendo. SMI track downloads, revenue, usage and demographics of thousands of mobile applications.

The following research was collected through the SMI free Starter plan trial to access SMI data collected between September 27<sup>th</sup> and October 27<sup>th</sup> of 2016. The estimates were derived from a panel of smartphone users in the United States, and exclude application usage on tablets, traffic from mobile browsers, and smartphone users under the age of 13.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Tinder: What are you doing tonight?**

In 2012, a group of friends including CEO Sean Rad, Jonathan Badeen, Justin Mateen, and Whitney Wolfe were inspired by the path of Facebook to create a digital space for coeds to meet (Stampler, 2014), and Tinder was created. The group started marketing their idea at colleges and universities known for their parties and social scene, with a focus specifically on social influencers within sororities and fraternities. After accumulating about 200 users, the group took to marketing their app at fraternity and sorority houses around the country where they leveraged the “hotness” of their 200 users to gain a larger following (Witt, 2014).

A Tinder profile can be created in seconds by linking the app to the user’s Facebook page. Once activated, the user receives a series of people based on their current location. Each profile is presented one at a time with a picture, name, and age. The user shows interest by swiping left for no or right for yes. This is all done anonymously, to bypass any feelings of rejection. If user A swipes right for user B, but user B doesn’t swipe right for user A, user A will never know. Matches are only made when both parties show interest.

### ***Uses and Gratifications of Tinder: Play***

Tinder pioneered millennial dating applications by entering into a fossilizing industry where most dating companies had established themselves before the creation of smartphones (Witt, 2014). Tinder revolutionized ‘swiping’ as a means of navigating

through potential romantic partners. As this type of interaction can only be utilized on a touch-screen device, this method of filtering partners is unique to the twenty-first century (Witt, 2014).

While conducting a series interviews with Tinder users, Emily Witt of *GQ Magazine* found that many used the verb “play” when referring to using the application (2014). Speaking more to its game-like reputation, Time magazine called Tinder an “addiction” and it’s users “obsessed” (Stampler, 2014). At its peak, Tinder users were logging into the application up to 11 times per day. Female users were spending as much as 8.5 minutes swiping and men spent 7.2 minutes swiping per visit. All of this added up to 90 minutes of usage per day (Bilton, 2014).

Even CEO Sean Rad admits, “Nobody joins Tinder because they’re looking for something. They join because they want to have fun” (The Dating Apocalypse, 2016). So despite the popularity, many millennials feel as though they can no longer rely on Tinder if they are looking for more than a ‘hook up.’

### **Bumble: Social pollination**

Whitney Wolfe, an original founder of Tinder, created Bumble in December of 2014. Furthermore she insists that the application “is not a dating app, it’s a movement” that she hopes will “change the landscape” of dating (Milligan, 2016). For Wolfe, the key to changing the landscape of dating is by putting women in control of the experience. “This could change the way women and men treat each other, women and men date, and women feel about themselves,” says Wolfe (Milligan, 2016).

Since its creation, Bumble has been widely regarded as a “feminist” dating app. Language on their website’s FAQ page directly addresses this, responding to the hypothetical question, “Isn’t your app sexist because of the ‘girls go first’ idea?” with the response, “We designed Bumble to correct a lot of the common problems with apps that include the ability to chat. We based our concept on the feedback from tons of women who were tired of being spammed with annoying messages... We’re really sorry if you’re upset or offended in any way by the app’s concept. This is our move in attempting to counter the age-old and often outdated ‘guys always have to make the first move’ idea!” (Bumble, 2016).

Bumble and Tinder have a lot in common. Both use “swiping” to filter through partners, both connect to Facebook as a means to collect user information. The one difference is that heterosexual, female-identifying users are responsible for initiating conversation with the male. The woman has 24 hours to initiate after a match is made or the partner disappears from her inbox. For same-sex partners, each user has a 24-hour window to act.

### ***Uses and Gratifications of Bumble: Women in power***

In an interview with *Vogue*, Wolfe describes the current dating scene as a “broken system,” and wants Bumble to disrupt the social norms by creating a dating environment that will attract a specific type of user. “You’re not going to go on a dating app where women make the first move if you don’t respect women,” she says (2016).

Bumble attracts the type of users who appreciate an unapologetic attitude toward female empowerment. Lauren Milligan, news editor for *Vogue*, found through her own

personal research that heterosexual women found men on Bumble tend to be “generally handsome and self-assured,” and added that they are “very comfortable with being approached by a woman – but are also, crucially, confident that this is likely to happen” (2016).

Within traditional dating scripts, it is exclusively the man’s right to ask a woman out on a date. Women could decline the invitation, but could not initiate a date without risking their reputation as a respectable young woman. Bumble was the first major dating platform to actively work toward reversing gender scripts and changing the status quo originally affiliated with dating.

Bumble’s brand identity has resonated with millennial men and women, making it the most gender-equivalent dating application out of the three studied (48 percent female, 52 percent male). SMI data shows that average sessions per day and average time spent per day for Tinder users and Bumble users have been roughly identical.

Bumble user data also show that 95 percent of Bumble users live in urban areas and 48 percent have at least an undergraduate degree, 65 percent are between the ages of 18 and 29, and 48 percent are female. This suggests that the average female user is educated, young and metropolitan.

Elizabeth A. Armstrong, a sociologist at University of Michigan who studies young women’s sexuality says that women at elite universities are choosing hookups because they see relationships as too demanding and potentially too distracting from their goals. Armstrong also believes that women want to wait and see how men turn out as they advance through their twenties (Taylor, 2013). These users may benefit from

Bumble because it allows the woman to maintain power over the communication while also providing a quick way to meet people to help satisfy her desires, on her schedule.

### **Hinge: The relationship app**

Hinge was founded in 2011 and launched in 2013 by Justin McLeod. At the time, both were powered by Facebook profiles, and both prompted users to make quick yes-or-no decisions about people based on short profiles. The application experimented with different features such as timers and expirations (akin to Bumble), and pre-made personality qualities that users could paste into their profiles (Bonos, 2016).

In 2015, Hinge decided to rebrand and market itself to users as the application that has “swiped left on swiping left” and “closes the door on casual dating to focus on serious relationships.” All in the aim of specifically creating a market for people who are “ready to be treated like a person, not a playing card” (Hinge.com). Since the 2015 update, profiles on Hinge are more detailed, and matches are made based on mutual Facebook friends and friends of friends. After initial download, the user has invited to partake in a 3-month free trial, after which users pay \$7 monthly.

Based on each unique user’s Facebook friends, Hinge recommends several people for users each day. The user will browse through the profile of their match and indicate interest by leaving a “like” or comment. The match will be notified of a new “impression,” and is given the choice to connect. If both users are interested, they can tap a “connect” button and begin a chat. Users also have the ability to skip to the next person, which helps Hinge’s algorithm learn more about the preferences of each user. A

“discovery” option is also available to users who want to browse outside of their prearranged matches.

### ***Uses and gratifications of Hinge: Looking for love***

McLeod ultimately made the changes to the app when he realized that the old model was “fundamentally flawed.” Despite the common belief that millennials are only interested in casual dating, McLeod insists that many are interested in finding potential romantic partners. “As long as there are single people in the world, they’ll come to Hinge,” said McLeod (Kokalitcheva, 2016).

When Hinge unveiled their new brand, they also unveiled a website called “the Dating Apocalypse,” in homage to Nancy Jo Sale’s 2015 *Vanity Fair* article “Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse,” a popular feature story that paints a bleak picture of young daters and their courtship rituals through a series of interviews with Tinder and Hinge users.

The website hosts a short animated film encouraging users to leave swiping apps behind and use Hinge instead, to the tune of *Heart*’s “What About Love?” It also cites statistics they found about their users that helped drive the changes to the app, such as: “81 percent of Hinge users have never found a long-term relationship on any swiping app”; “only 1 in 500 swipes on Hinge turn into phone numbers exchanged”; “4 out of 5 Hinge users can’t recall the first name of their last right swipe”; and “22% of men on Hinge have used a swiping app while on a date.”

In summation, Hinge caters to millennials who have been let down by Tinder and other swipe applications and are looking for a more serious romantic relationship.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research conclude that each dating application serves a different purpose within the current landscape of dating. The portion of the millennial generation that chooses to partake in hook up culture helped power Tinder to the top of the mobile dating empire. Since Tinder's original user base was formed and founded on college campuses across the United States, it is fair to conclude that the draw of Tinder—to find and connect with physically attractive people—is a result of the dating climate on college campuses. As previously explored, when women began to outnumber men on college campuses across the United States, men became a scarce resource, giving them power in their lack of numbers to determine a shift in dating culture (Bogel, 2008). This imbalance likely fueled the rise and popularity of Tinder, which quickly spread across the country as the addictive quality of the application shaped a large user base.

When Whitney Wolfe left Tinder to start Bumble, she created a shift in dating culture by implementing features to her application that were similar to Tinder but worked in favor of female empowerment. The creation of Bumble essentially functioned as a filter to eliminate male users who would not be interested in utilizing an application where women were in charge of initiating a relationship.

Lastly, Hinge's decision to remodel their application in 2015 reflects a third shift in millennial dating culture. By reaching out to a user base that has grown frustrated with the culture that Tinder helped create, Hinge creates a platform for users who do not want to participate in the hook up culture.



### **Limitations & further research**

The main limitation of this study was the constant fluctuation of user information associated with each application. Because numbers and rates related to applications are fluid, there is no way to correctly gauge information and expect it to stay accurate over an extended period of time.

Additionally, the limited window of information was the only available option for data collection because acquiring a larger time span of data (90 days, 180 days, all time) required a validated membership from Survey Monkey, which required an additional waiting period and a substantial monthly fee.

The applications explored in this study are in a state of constant flux and development. Follow up research would be necessary in better understanding how the changes implemented in each application effect the user base in terms of popularity and usage rates. Furthermore, access to data of usage applications over a longer period of time would be beneficial in getting a better grasp on all elements of user base demographics that were unable to be obtained for this study.

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