



## Risky Online Dating Behaviors and Their Potential for Victimization

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Over the past ten years, young adults have begun transitioning from traditional forms of social interactions to those which include an online component (Lenhart, 2014). This population is increasingly relying on social media and dating applications (apps) to meet new people, make friends, and/or seek romantic and sexual relationships. Specifically, mobile dating apps have targeted this population, resulting in a rapid growth in use among adults aged 18-24 (Smith, 2015).

Early stages of online dating or matchmaking platforms were characterized by personal advertisements and evolved into the use of proprietary mathematical algorithms (e.g., eHarmony; Rudder, 2013). The current progression of this technology has been to mobile-based devices that function through the use of GPS-based cell phone apps which rely mainly on the use of pictures, limited text, and most importantly, proximity. The most popular mobile-based dating app, measured through total downloads, is Tinder. Tinder, released in 2012, is currently available in almost 200 countries and claims over twenty billion matches since its creation (Tinder, 2018). Tinder functions by showing users pictures of other users. If a user likes the picture, they note this by "swiping" the image on the screen to the right. When two users mutually like each other's images, they are notified by the app. At this point, the two users can then message one another through the app. As opposed to online dating websites of the past, mobile apps base their success off the quantity, not quality, of "matches." The use of GPS-based technology in these apps is also meant to increase the ease in which these newly formed relationships can transition from online to offline.

Mobile dating apps have removed the structural constraints to traditional dating that college students may experience, including an inability to travel long distances, varied or busy schedules, and a lack of resources for more traditional dates. For these reasons, along with the lack of descriptive or background information about users, mobile dating apps appear to support brief sexual encounters with the promotion of increased alcohol consumption (Allison & Risman, 2014). Users are also exposed to exponentially more individuals, and therefore more potential offenders. Perhaps because of this, Tinder has a reputation as being an app where explicit sexuality is widespread and casual sexual encounters are encouraged (Alter, 2015; Beck, 2016; Sales, 2015). This encouragement to meet quickly may result in complete strangers sharing personal information or agreeing to meet at private locations with little security measures. Unfamiliarity, often combined with alcohol, inserts users into potentially risky situations.

Relying on data drawn from a sample of undergraduate students, the present report examined the potentially risky behaviors that mobile dating app users engage in along with these users' risk of victimization. This high-risk population, combined with apps targeting young adults, is hypothesized to see the highest increase in risk of victimization from offenders first encountered through dating apps. Both online and offline victimization was considered.

### Sample

Data were collected through in-person, paper-and-pencil surveys of undergraduate college students. Using a comprehensive list of course offerings in Fall 2016 for a Southeastern four-year university, 135 courses were randomly selected from all courses that were offered that semester at the university. In total, instructors in 47 of these courses agreed to have their students surveyed (response rate = 34.81%).

As the focus of this study was on the young adult population, all respondents over the age of 30 were removed from the sample ( $N=1,310$ ). Of the respondents under the age of 30, approximately one-third ( $n=423$ ) reported they had ever used an online or mobile dating app. This report will focus exclusively on the sample of respondents under the age of 30 who ever used an online/mobile dating app. Comparisons between the full sample and those who have used dating apps are presented in Table 1. Males were significantly more likely to indicate they had used a dating app compared to the full sample (38.70% of the full sample was male and 47.98% of online dating users were male;  $\chi^2=22.51$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There was also a higher presence of Caucasian respondents who used online dating apps compared to the percentage of Caucasian respondents in the full sample (58.61% and 50.46%, respectively;  $\chi^2=21.78$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Online dating users were older on average compared to the full sample (21.40 vs. 20.50, respectively;  $t=-6.67$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Lastly, sexual minority respondents were more likely to report a history of dating app use compared to heterosexual respondents (42.15% vs. 31.05%, respectively;  $\chi^2=6.20$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

### App Use

Consistent with media reports (Alter, 2015; Beck, 2016; Sales, 2015), the vast majority (85%) of dating app users reported using Tinder. Over 90% of dating app users reported accessing their online dating profile through their cell phone. Only one-third of users reported they enabled the GPS function on their phone while using the apps, a requirement of Tinder. This discrepancy in the respondent's perceptions and the requirements of the app may indicate that users are

unaware of how the app actually functions along with the amount of information they are sharing.

**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Full Sample (N=1310) and Online Dating Users (n=423)**

	Full Sample	Users	Difference
Age	20.50 (17-30)	21.40 (18-30)	$t = -6.67^{**}$
Sex			
Male	38.70%	47.98%	$\chi^2 = 22.57^{**}$
Female	61.30%	52.02%	
Race			
Caucasian	50.46%	58.61%	$\chi^2 = 21.78^{**}$
African-American	20.52%	16.51%	
Hispanic	23.89%	19.86%	
Other	5.13%	5.02%	
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual	90.74%	87.83%	$\chi^2 = 6.20^*$
Sexual Minority	9.26%	12.17%	
* p < 0.01; ** p < 0.001			

Reasons for using mobile dating apps varied among respondents. The most common response was for entertainment or “out of boredom” (49.17%). This finding supports Tinder’s design goal of appearing “game-like” and appealing to many individuals, even those who have no intention of using the app to pursue offline relationships (Stamper, 2014). The second most common use for dating apps was to find a casual relationship or sexual partner (31.59%), followed by pursuing new platonic friendships (21.85%), and pursuing a serious relationship (21.38%). Most notably, when exploring differences among men and women, male respondents were more likely to use dating apps for casual relationships or sexual partners compared to female respondents (41.58% of males compared to 22.37% of females;  $\chi^2=17.94$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Most commonly, respondents checked their accounts multiple times a day (29.69% of respondents), with female respondents more likely to engage in this behavior (33.33% of females compared to 25.74% of males;  $\chi^2=3.73$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Using the app for entertainment only or to find a casual relationship were most commonly reported among respondents checking their accounts multiple times a day.

### Communication Behaviors

A small minority of dating app users in the sample (7.60%) reported they did not engage in conversations through the apps. Generally, male users were more likely to initiate conversations compared to female users ( $\chi^2=37.63$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Males most often reported initiating messages with more than 10 people (26.23%) while females most commonly initiated messages with one to two people (27.85%). Female respondents were significantly more likely than male respondents to reply to messages instead of initiating, suggesting traditional dating roles may extend online. On average, female respondents initiated one to five conversations, but responded to six to 10 conversation requests ( $t=9.27$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Once a conversation began, many users proceeded to share personal information or set up an in-person meeting. Routine activity theory suggests that crime, and by extension victimization, requires likely offenders to converge with a suitable/vulnerable target in the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson,

1979). Approximately 70% of users reported meeting someone offline that they initially contacted through a dating app. Table 2 details how quickly these meetings occurred as well as personal information shared through the dating apps, with 12.83% of respondents meeting someone within 24 hours of the first message being exchanged, 23.27% giving out their phone number within 24 hours, and 1.19% disclosing their physical address within 24 hours of the first message being exchanged.

**Table 2. Time to Disclosure of Personal Information (N=423)**

	Phone Number	Physical Address	Meeting
<1 hour	3.80%	0.48%	3.33%
1-12 hours	12.11%	0.48%	4.51%
12-24 hours	7.36%	0.24%	4.99%
1-2 days	10.21%	0.71%	6.18%
Within 1 week	16.86%	2.38%	20.43%
>1 week	9.50%	4.75%	34.20%
Did not give out this information	40.14%	90.97%	25.65%

### Meeting Characteristics

To investigate the context of how users were meeting offline and to explore potentially risky behaviors, respondents were asked about their “typical” meeting behaviors, including where and when they usually meet, along with any precautions taken. The vast majority of users (71.86%) who chose to meet someone in-person did so in the town where they lived. This could arguably be safer, as respondents do not have to drive a long distance and may be less likely to be pressured by their date to stay overnight in an unfamiliar area. As mentioned previously, offenders seek suitable, or more vulnerable, individuals for victimization. A person may be more vulnerable in an unfamiliar geographic area. Further, remaining in a familiar area may increase an individual’s levels of guardianship.

It was most common for individuals to meet at public locations with the presence of alcohol (42.71% of “typical” meetings). This does not necessarily indicate that the respondent engaged in alcohol consumption as many restaurants sell alcohol. However, alcohol is frequently used during a first meeting as a coping mechanism based on the sexual undertones of many online dates (Sales, 2015). In addition, alcohol consumption by female daters has been shown to increase sexual miscommunication by men, increasing the potential for coercion and pressure to have intercourse (Flack et al., 2007; Franklin, 2011).

Meeting at a private residence for the first encounter was also common (38.64%), with these encounters occurring at the respondent’s residence (16.27%), the other user’s residence (16.61%), and private third-party locations, such as a party (14.24%). Private locations are not guaranteed to have attributes that discourage criminal activity, such as the presence of active bystanders, security precautions, or the ability of service workers to intervene. Furthermore, it is not possible for a user to know what awaits them at another user’s residence or third-party location. Of respondents who reported meeting online contacts in person, this most commonly occurred between 6:00–9:00 PM (49.49%), followed by meetings before 6:00 PM (35.59%), and meetings after 9:00 PM (21.69%).

Lastly, to measure in-person guardianship and potential target suitability, respondents were asked to report which precautions they

took prior to a face-to-face encounter. Female respondents were more likely than males to take some form of precaution when meeting in person. The most common precautions females took were having a fully charged cell phone (63.01%) or telling a family member or friend about their plans (61.64%). Female respondents also took significantly more precautions than male users (2.43 vs. 1.59 precautions taken, respectively;  $t=-8.52$ ;  $p<0.01$ ). Only one female user in the sample reported taking no precautions compared to 13 male users.

### Victimization among Dating App Users

Experiences of stalking, cyberstalking, and sexual victimization by someone the respondent met specifically through a dating app were also examined. Stalking was measured as behaviors that made an individual feel “frightened, concerned, angered, or annoyed” such as following or spying and unwanted communications. As the measure of stalking did not specify “repeated” behaviors, stalking is measured as an individual experiencing two or more stalking behaviors. For this reason, it is possible that stalking is underestimated in this sample since the measure did not include multiple or repeated forms of a single behavior. Cyberstalking included “repeated” electronic harassment, threats, or sexual advances. Since these behaviors were specifically noted as “repeated,” respondents only had to indicate experiencing one type of behavior to have been classified as a cyberstalking victim. Lastly, sexual victimization was measured using the Sexual Experiences Scale (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) which asks respondents if they have experienced any of ten behaviorally specific scenarios encompassing sexual coercion, substance-induced sexual actions, unwanted sexual actions, attempted rape, and rape.

Among respondents who used dating apps, 7.83% ( $n=33$ ) experienced cyberstalking victimization and 5.23% ( $n=22$ ) experienced stalking victimization from an offender met through a dating app. Most of these individuals ( $n=20$  or 4.75% of the total individuals that had used dating apps) experienced both cyberstalking and traditional stalking from an offender initially met through a dating app. Lastly, nine respondents (2.14%, or 3.05% of respondents who indicated meeting another user in person) reported experiencing some form of sexual assault victimization from an offender they first met through a dating app. These numbers are similar to those reported in Koeppl, Smith, and Bouffard’s (2013) findings that relied on a smaller sample of undergraduates. On a campus of 20,000 students, 2% of students reporting sexual assault facilitated through dating apps easily becomes a cause for concern. Due to victimization measures and potential hesitancy in reporting victimization, it is likely that these are conservative estimates of the frequency of victimization occurring as a result of online contacts.

### Conclusion

The current study explored the potential risk of victimization facilitated through dating apps. As the pool of dating apps increases, it is quite possible that mobile dating is not simply a trend among the young adult population, but a new lifestyle. While this option for building relationships may be viewed as more geographically and financially convenient for this already high-risk population, it may also expose users to more potential offenders who have unprecedented access to an individual’s personal information. Not only are individuals sharing more personal and identifying information online, findings suggest they are interacting with potential offenders in private locations with varying degrees of

precaution. This is not to say that dating apps are inherently dangerous, but that they may be used in risky ways by potential offenders that may increase the victimization risk for other users.

Regardless of the form that dating apps take in the future, the potential risks they present will remain. Research on victimization facilitated through online and mobile dating apps has been relatively recent in the United States. However, comparisons may be drawn to work done in the United Kingdom, which recently conducted a six-year study on sexual assault facilitated through online/mobile dating apps (National Crime Agency, 2016). This U.K. based study found from 2009–2014 an over six-fold increase in sexual assault facilitated through online dating apps. According to this work, victimization was more common when initial meetings took place at a private residence compared to public locations and within one week of the first message being exchanged compared to when a user waited a longer period of time before the initial meeting. These risky behaviors were also reported in the current sample.

It remains unclear how law enforcement should address these cases or whether it is the responsibility of the app service provider. Often, when law enforcement becomes involved, they are limited to suggesting the user delete their account or block the offender (Powell & Henry, 2016). This response is shortsighted—the strategy of deleting accounts serves to punish victims and places responsibility for fixing the problem on the victim. Training for criminal justice professionals on how to recognize and respond to victimization that is facilitated through online platforms is also necessary.

Universities in Texas have seen an increase in the number of cases of victimization linked to online or mobile dating apps, including Sam Houston State University (SHSU) and Texas A&M (Sam Houston State University Police Department, personal communication, 2018; Texas A&M University Police Department, personal communication, 2018). According to the SHSU University Police Department (UPD), commonalities in these cases mostly pertain to the profile of the victim, with victims being ages 18–21. Interestingly, the department has found no consistent window of time for these cases and alcohol was typically not involved. SHSU’s UPD has reported that cases occurred during the day on weekends, early in the morning, and late at night. In most instances, the victimization took place in the victim’s dorm room after having several conversations with the perpetrator through the dating apps or text messaging. According to Texas A&M University’s Police Department, their university offers programming to educate students on the dangers of dating apps and safe computer usage. Such programs target incoming students and new employees, with the university implementing mandatory training on sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, and other related topics. SHSU does not have educational programs pertaining specifically to the dangers of online/mobile dating but mandates training on safe internet use, sexual assault, and alcohol use for all new students and employees. Together, there is room for continued research and training on this topic.

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