STUDENT ESSAY

To Fish and Be Fished: A Tinder-fied Game of Love
Kellie Coppola

Human relationships are increasingly shaped—or mediated—by our reliance on technology. Thanks to advancing networks and fancy apps, everyday interactions have migrated to online environments. In the following essay, Kellie Coppola explores how a popular dating application, Tinder, has influenced the first steps of romantic involvement. She describes specific procedures in finding a personal "match" (or many matches) on Tinder, but more importantly, she digs into some culturally entrenched beliefs and fears related to choosing a potential romantic partner. Coppola is an International Studies and Professional Writing major at Miami University.

The opening relies on a common comparison between dating and fishing.

Just as humans fish for survival, we also fish for companionship, the innate need to care about another and have another care about them. And we don't just want any fish, we want THE fish. So we cast our reels—sometimes at a bar, sometimes at a singles cruise, sometimes unexpectedly—and begin the toil of catch-and-release, looking for our elusive Moby Dick amongst guppies. If love is like fishing, the world is a vast, unpredictable ocean— huge and hard to navigate, where assumptions about gender roles, attraction, and dating etiquette create waves that make it easier for some fishermen than others. Some of us find our whale; some of us will take the biggest one luck will afford; some will drop the fishing rod entirely.

The comparison gets extended to reveal a fresh way of thinking.

The comparison gets extended even further.

In 2012 technology brought us Tinder, a dating application that revolutionized the online-dating industry by taking it to a mobile phone. To extend the fishing narrative, Tinder allows you to pare down the ocean to a pond of your preferred kind of fish, and puts each fish on display for you to examine before swiping right (the equivalent of "yes, I want you"), or left (the equivalent of "no, thank you"). If both users (on either end) swipe right, conversation can be initiated, if not, nothing happens. To make an account, users simply download and open the app, upload information and up to five pictures from their Facebook profile, set their parameters for the age range, gender, distance from their location of the profiles they'd like to see, and start swiping.

The specific how-it-works information helps to show the inner workings of the relationship.

While Tinder has become popular in recent years and a catalyst for many mobile dating apps, it has certainly prompted plenty of backlash. Words like "desperate" and "creepy" get thrown around to describe Tinder users. It's also common to see "I'm willing to lie about how we met" written in Tinder profiles. But if Tinder is a dating app and plenty of romantic success stories have surfaced— people meeting their significant others, and even husbands and wives on Tinder— then why is it so problematic to have a relationship originate on Tinder? Does Tinder generate a certain type of relationship, one worthy of all the suspicion?

This acknowledges some tension surrounding the relationship.

The questions set up the focused examination to come.

HOOK, LINE, AND...

To begin answering this question, we have to look at love before Tinder. I'm talking Disney and Hallmark movies, which go like this: guy meets girl, "love at first sight", the "getting to know you" phase, they fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. Add Valentine's Day and we've got a culture of unrealistic expectations for how a relationship should work, and, consequently, the obsession with being desired by others and the fear of being single, sad and unloved. The fear of rejection is insurmountable. Thus, meeting people and forming relationships can be terrifying and exhausting. People want their fairy tale. If a girl doesn't find her prince, she's not the princess, meaning no "Happily Ever After." Likewise, if a man isn't princely (rich, charming, and handsome), princesses won't want him and he can't have "Happily Ever After" either. The fairy tale perpetuates itself in people's hopes and fears. Any deviation from the ideal makes for many frustrated hopeless romantics.

The allusions help with public resonance: they help to characterize the broader problems with dating.

Tinder manages the frustration. It mitigates the emotional blow of rejection by reducing the first meeting to a faceless and emotionless interaction, a judgement free of consequence.[1] Tinder is a computerized platform open to everyone with a smartphone and users can start and stop the app whenever they feel like it. Compared to real-life expectations, "rejection" on this app is innocuous, which means fewer blows to our fragile, socially-crafted self-esteem. This is especially true because there isn't any direct competition: instead of experiencing all the self-loathing that comes with seeing your friends

This puts the Tinder relationship in context.

So here's what keeps the Tinder-fied relationship going: the need to protect fragile self-esteem in the dangerous world of dating.

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[1]It is important to note that much of this analysis comes from my own experiences on Tinder; therefore, some of the assertions I make are qualified by the demographics I put on my profile and my preferences. I set my profile as a female seeking exclusively males, with an age range of 22-29, with a maximum distance of 5 miles from my location in Oxford, Ohio.

The Tinder relationship relieves pressures related to gender norms.

surrounded by potential romantic partners while you're standing alone, success (or failure) on Tinder is private. It also shatters two presumptions about gender roles in dating: One, either gender can seek either gender. Two, both parties have the same amount influence in the interaction. In other words, both parties have to swipe right and both parties can initiate conversation (meaning, ladies, no more external pressure to wait for the guy to come to you).

Specific tagline examples support the point developing here and in the next paragraph.

Ultimately Tinder puts all users on an emotion-free, instantaneous stream of "first impressions," and provides the opportunity for a "getting to know you" phase. While all relationships start somewhere, Tinder puts the starting point into a formulated process that guides the relationship dynamic. When a profile comes up, the user sees a huge picture. You cannot see them, smell them, touch them or hear them, so what you see is the only indication of what you might get. Ultimately, the experience, before the swipe occurs, is like looking at an object, something to be judged with total disregard of any feelings. If users aren't sure which direction to swipe, they can tap the picture to see the other user's bio tagline.[2] In theory, the tagline should serve to nudge people to swipe left or right if they have not already made their decision based on the pictures. If the picture is a hook, the tagline pulls them in or breaks if the fish wills it to. For example, some people write their name, age, hobbies, and other baseline facts. Some explain what they are allegedly looking to get: "looking for a relationship" or "looking for a good time." Or some write messages with hidden meanings as a way of finding someone with a specific commonality. While there are infinite possibilities, the tagline serves as a filter and a potential platform for setting the tone of the conversation, should both decide to swipe right.

The heading suggests something amiss in the relationship!

SINKER

When I match with another user, I get a "congratulations" pop-up message as if I'd just done something worthy of celebration. Our relationship moves from person/object to person/trophy. He

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[2]For example, "Derek" age 22 (Derek, Tinder) shows up on my screen. He's shirtless and showing off a muscular body. I might be hooked if I'm solely looking for an athletic build that likes to show off (he's flexing). If I find the alpha-male show-off type obnoxious, I might pass. If I need validation of my perception, I might scroll to see more pictures. If he's trying to put off his body as his best foot forward, he succeeds—all of his pictures are essentially different versions of the same shirtless, artificially-tanned figure. I swipe left. However, I truly have no idea what his personality is like (or if that's even him).

becomes a self-confidence boost: regardless of how successful I am with the opposite sex, he, in theory, finds my profile attractive. However, it's unsubstantiated compliment because it was a hand-crafted profile, kind of like saying "You look really nice when you're dressed up and have full makeup on." In the Tinder experience, this is an achievement; however, it is merely a gateway for initial conversation and ultimately pretty anticlimactic, especially since you can do this with minimal physical effort. The congratulations window will show his picture and invite me to either message or keep swiping. Regardless, his profile is stored for recollection and I can click on it in the my "Messages" section.

The first big problem with the relationship explained in one paragraph.

At this point, should we decide to message each other, the dynamic can change from person/trophy to person/person. Each must now assess the situation and be compelled to put words together and send them to be judged by the other. The message initiates a mirrored lead-and-follow dance. I found the uncertainty exhilarating to a small extent: every move, a swipe of the finger, a tap of the touch screen in conversation, unveils something (provided both are being honest). However, out of the 200 matches I've made in the past month, I haven't messaged any of them first. Despite the relative ease, I am still stalled from messaging first, just like I won't approach a guy in a bar. I'm not alone. This experience compelled the creation of Bumble, a dating app like Tinder in which the female has to initiate conversation. Former co-owner of Tinder, Whitney Wolfe, created this feminist app. She explains, "If you look at where we are in the current heteronormative rules surrounding dating, the unwritten rule puts the woman a peg under the man—the man feels the pressure to go first in a conversation, and the woman feels pressure to sit on her hands. I don't think there is any denying it. If we can take some of the pressure off the man and put some of that encouragement in the woman's lap, I think we are taking a step in the right direction, especially in terms of really being true to feminism. I think we are the first feminist, or first attempt at a feminist dating app" (qtd. in Yashari).

Another inventive comparison (metaphor) that helps explain the nature of the relationship.

Another, more subtle, problem with the relationship: it doesn't really change the norms of dating.

An extended quotation to show what's possible in the relationship.

But it's not only women who ignore their matches. A survey from another online dating app, Whisper, showed that "66 percent of people have matched with someone on a dating app and then never messaged them" (qtd. in Weiss). The same article points to reasons such as not feeling like coming up with something creative, or being too lazy to formulate a response. While Tinder and real-life

Rather than summarize, the conclusion characterizes the most intense problem—failure—of the Tinder relationship.

pickup situations both include some risk and judgment during initial conversation, the lack of real-time pressure on Tinder may create its own failure. Here surfaces the paradox of innovation: Tinder road the wave and even lead a revolution in relationship norms and practices, and is supposedly freeing people of gender biases and rejection. It's fair to say that Tinder creates an artificial experience where sadness from rejection is freed from the equation. But the humanity and etiquette that take place in a real-life encounter are freed as well. Ultimately, shifts in societal norms will either normalize the online dating practice or debase it for a new trial-and-error. Meanwhile, we'll all still be Ahabs searching the sea.

A return to the opening comparison—and a subtle denial of Tinder's promise.

Works Cited

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WRITING STRATEGIES

1. What is Coppola's thesis? (Remember that thesis statements are sometimes *implied*—suggested but not stated directly. If you believe Coppola's thesis is implied, try to characterize it in a sentence of your own.)

2. Coppola spends several passages explaining how Tinder works. How do these passages help to support her thesis?

3. Consider Coppola's introduction—specifically, the fishing analogy. What initial ideas or tensions does it establish?

4. In the final paragraphs of her essay, Coppola refers to other online dating apps. How do these references relate to her main point about Tinder? How do they serve her thesis?

5. Coppola uses two footnotes in her essay. How do they function? In other words, what is the relationship between the footnotes and her main text?

EXPLORING IDEAS

1. Coppola says, "we have a culture of unrealistic expectations" when it comes to dating. How have you witnessed or experienced unrealistic expectations?

2. Do you think Tinder and other online dating apps increase or decrease unrealistic expectations?

3. Look up the term *heteronormativity*. Beyond Whitney Wolf's characterization in ¶8, how have you witnessed or experienced heteronormative behavior?

4. Would you suggest that your child, younger sibling, or best friend try online dating? Why or why not?

5. Finish this statement: Coppola's essay isn't simply about online dating apps. It's actually about _____.

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. What technological innovation (app, device, program, website) has become part of your intimate life? How has it influenced your self-image and/or your relationships with others?

2. What is the strangest or most risky thing you have done for the sake of romance? What does that suggest about you, romance, or your relationship?

If responding to one of these ideas, go to the Analysis section of this chapter to begin developing ideas for your essay.

INVENTION

Invention is the activity of discovering ideas, developing points, and thinking through a topic. For academic writers, it is a necessary activity, one that leads to vital and valuable ideas. In this chapter, the invention process will involve focusing on a particular relationship and exploring its possible meaning. The following sections are designed to help you through the process: specifically, to discover a topic (in Point of Contact), to develop ideas about the topic (in Analysis), to make those ideas relevant to a community of readers (in Public Resonance), to develop a focus (in Thesis), and to generate support (in Rhetorical Tools). The Invention Questions in each section are not meant to be answered directly in your final written assignment. Rather, they are meant to help you develop increasingly intense ideas for your project.

Point of Contact

When you hear the word *relationship,* you may imagine an intimate personal bond between significant others, family members, or friends. But consider the relationships that are less obvious, those that surround or define us but remain hidden by the patterns of everyday life. Imagine the intense, but also subtle, relationships that define life as we know it: between an old man and his backyard, among people in a corporate office, between a lake and a local economy, between pigeons and people in a park.

As you explore possible topics, ask yourself, "What is the nature of this relationship?" If you cannot answer the question easily, you may have a good topic—one worthy of continued thinking and writing. Use the following suggestions, questions, and images to begin exploring:

Jonas Jordan, USACE/U.S. Army

Hal Wilson/StockXchng

■ **Visit a Public Place**

—How do the people interact or depend on each other?

—How do the people relate to their surroundings? To objects? To buildings? To nature?

—How do the objects (buildings, tools, products, shops) relate?

—How do people or objects influence each other?

■ **Examine Your Own Relationships**
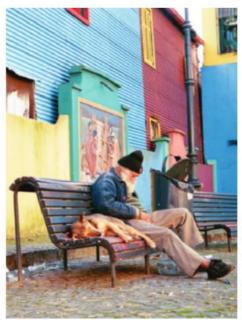
—Consider the groups or allegiances that you claim: Are you a smoker, a cyber punk, a metal head, a gamer, a comic book fanatic?

—What are the tensions, contradictions, or quiet associations that come along with that identity?

■ **Examine a Job Site**

—How do workers relate to their tools or equipment?

—How must the people relate to each other? (How must they influence or depend on each other?)

—How do workers relate to their environment?

—How do workers relate to the public?

■ **Examine Everyday Civic Bonds**

—Between a customer and a sales clerk, a customer and a mail carrier, the public and a city police force, a politician and her constituents, or an artist and the public.

Valeria Obregon/StockXchng

John Metz

- **Imagine Human/Object Relationships**
  —Between a person and a computer, a person and a musical instrument, a person and a car; or between two objects, such as a college course and a textbook, a book and a computer, an old car and a new one, or a road and a house.

- **Examine Relationships in Your Academic Major**
  —Between the professionals in your field of study and the public (such as nurses and their patients, or business marketing professionals and potential consumers).

  —Between two things in your field of study. Students of criminal justice, for instance, can explore how one case (or one kind of case) relates to another; environmental scientists can explore the relationship between waterways and surrounding land or between trees and animal life.

  —Between your field of study and another field. Most academic disciplines and professional fields define themselves in conjunction with other fields. For instance, biology explores its relationship with ethics, computer technologies involve visual or graphic design, and political science involves religious studies.

Analysis

Analysis is the process of inspecting how or why something works, but analysis also involves discovering connections and meaning. In this chapter, analysis involves investigating all the possible ways entities relate to each other. It means going beyond the obvious relationship and exploring the hidden connections. For example, we might begin with some basic understanding of a relationship:

- Students have a relationship with education.

- Smokers have a relationship with cigarettes.

- Pet owners have a relationship with their pets.

- Athletes have a relationship with their equipment.

Inside of the broad idea, we can look for relational clusters—for more specific relationships that maintain or give meaning to the broader idea. For instance, a student has a relationship with education, but more specifically, a computer sciences student may have a relationship to technology *and* change *and* Generation Y. Or a pet owner may have many specific relationships because of her dog—say, with a certain open field, a leash law, or a neighborhood park. When we begin to see clusters of relationships within the broader idea, we get closer to revealing important connections. Use the following Invention Questions to explore deep layers of the relationship that you will explain in your essay:

❭ What relationships exist within the broader relationship? How do those smaller relationships drive the broader relationship?