



**Maynooth
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**How, and in what way, do
dating apps gamify identity
construction?**

The Case of Tinder & Grindr

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into how users navigate the constraints of dating applications and construct a user profile. The study evaluated the functionality of the user interface on the basis of gamification before performing content analysis of 50 user profiles on each of the applications *Tinder* and *Grindr*. Using the data from this preliminary research a survey instrument was constructed which was delivered to the sample group digitally. 163 participants responded to the survey and this data forms the backbone of this study. It found that although there is no universal themes in identity construction on these applications there are significant recurring themes. In addition to this, the data indicated that users believe that dating applications are not the place to form serious relationships with many users opting to use the applications to engage in casual sex. Though this is not found in the majority of cases it is a significant minority. The constraints placed on users by audience expectation and by physical structures produced by the user interface limit a users agency to construct their identity on the application. There was also a large consensus among users that dating applications did in fact constitute a form of game.

Introduction

This dissertation examines how the gamified nature of dating applications effects how users construct their identity on said applications. This will initially be done by examining literature surrounding games & play and identity construction, then by original research examining this topic in an Irish context. This research will focus on two particular dating applications: *Grindr* and *Tinder* which are very popular in Ireland at the time of writing. I have embarked upon this topic of study due to my belief that dating applications are having a profound impact on intimate socialisation and is actively leading to a gamification of dating. In addition to this dating applications provide a safe space for non heteronormative sexualities to explore their identities and I feel that this deserves greater academic study. Dating applications are very recent developments with *Grindr* being released in 2009 and *Tinder* in 2012. Despite their youth they collectively have a monthly user rate of approximately 55 million people (Bilton 2014). Due to their relatively recent release there is a very limited body of literature examining dating application use with discourse tending to focus on dating site use. Dating sites are often scaled down into mobile applications however I propose that there is a difference between scaled down dating sites and true dating applications. The latter will take advantage of geolocation technologies and will only be available in application form. This is similar to the work of Frans Mäyrä (2012) who argues that in regards to mobile play there is a difference between 'mobile handset games' and 'truly mobile games' with the later taking advantage of mobile technology. As such dating applications represent a new form of communication that is separate from what has proceeded it. With its viral success and massive active membership it provides for a new avenue of social research, one that examines socialisation, human play styles and the representation of the self.

Literature Review

Dating applications provide for a new form of play, however before dating applications can be analysed a theoretical framework must be provided for the gamified nature of these applications. Play is systemic to the human condition and it often provides escapism from the rigours of every day life. This is supported by Huizinga (1949) when he describes play as being 'different from "ordinary" life'. He goes on to discuss play as being something that is totally engrossing in its own world separate from reality. This however is not in keeping with a contemporary understanding of play with mobile play permeating everyday life causing a blurring of the line between reality and the virtual (Mäyrä 2012). However, escapism is key to an understanding of play and Roger Caillois provides an excellent framework for understanding the concept of play that is directly relevant to dating application use. Caillois (2001) identified a continuum of play: *ludus* and *paidia*. Ludus refers to a rigid and rule bound form of play that generally has clear goals with an emphasis put on winning and losing. Paidia is at the other end of the spectrum which provides players with more agency to achieve goals through creativity and improvisation. This spectrum provides a backdrop for an understanding of play in dating applications. In his discussions of play styles he discusses the notion of *mimicry* which is in essence a role-play. This involves the player assuming a role that they use while playing the game, this role is constructed to suit the gaming environment. The role that is assumed may allow the player to transcend reality in order to allow the player or actor to become fascinating to the spectator. Caillois' concepts of ludus, paidia and mimicry provide theoretical tools that allow us to identify the play elements of dating applications and allow us to create a discourse in which dating applications are not merely communication platforms but in fact geolocation based social games. Mäyrä (2012) cites Gregory Bateson as using meta-communication as being essential for an understanding of play in mobile communications.

A meta-communicative act is one that provides a context that allows individuals to construct play through communication. This meta communication ties in with the playful nature of mobile technologies which use gamification in applications to make them more user friendly. It is during these playful communications that users are engaging in play while simultaneously engaging in expressing a social identity.

Identity construction on dating applications is heavily reliant on symbolic interactionism. In essence we present ourselves differently for different people. Marwick (2013) uses Goffman to show how people present themselves differently based on the context and audience involved in social interactions. The self is constructed through the interaction between the social actor and their audience. For Goffman identity was in many ways a theatrical performance with the actor having a 'front stage' persona whereby based on the setting they would perform a certain role to the appropriate audience. The self is a process and by using the notion of the looking glass and imagining how we appear to others, we attempt to perform an identity that it will be appealing to our audience (Ritzer 1996). In the performance of the self there is a theatrical 'front' of stage where the actor performs the role expected of the audience. Most fronts are not produced by the actor but instead are produced by societal expectations (Ritzer 1996). As such users of dating applications are often taking up prefabricated tropes and recreating them in their presentation of self so that their audience interacts with them. The context of this symbolic interaction is of course that of dating applications, with the actor being the user and the audience the individuals that the user is attempting to attract. This leads the user to construct an identity that they feel will please to their audience. Thus identity is in fact flexible and is constructed using the perception of those around us. This identity is constructed in numerous ways but at the heart of it is the notion of the symbol. People use symbols to communicate something about themselves to other people (Ritzer 1996).

In the digital age and in particular on dating applications identity is constructed using both text and imagery, these symbols or digital 'tokens' are symbolic markers of personal identity (Marwick 2013). The imagery is often a photograph that has been designed for the sole purpose of representation of the self online. The choice of photo and indeed the username itself are key to convincing the audience to view an actor's profile. How identity is constructed offline often feeds directly into how their online persona is presented. Photos often try to convey a lifestyle through symbolism in the form of branded clothing, iPhones and other pieces of expensive technology (Fullick 2013). Thus identity constructed via consumerism makes reference to class and lifestyle in subtle ways which allow the dating application audience to use symbolic interactionism to choose individuals that match a similar social and cultural background. Profile photos also make use of the communication of the self in order to 'advertise' particular physical assets than an actor may have including youth, attractiveness, fitness and even more sexualised features such as genitalia characteristics. Photographs are key to identity construction in dating applications, much more substantively than dating site use or even social media use. In a discourse on identity construction on Facebook Zhao et al. (2008) discussed the importance of the body in online identity. The body is seen as an obstacle in the presentation of the self which leads to users taking photos that attempt to hide unwanted physical features. This form of identity construction relies on the manipulation of the personal front. Indeed reference is made to the early days of text based internet socialisation, a lack of visual stimuli provided more agency for online identity construction. However the evolution of the idiom of practice in regards to technology largely mandates the use of visual stimuli, and in the case of *Tinder* it is required during account creation and is the primary method of identity construction on the application. On a more theoretical note the work done by Zhao et al. (2008) also highlighted the fact that an online presence

allows for an actor to perform a 'hidden' self and an exploration of non conventional identities. This has particular reverence for non heteronormative sexual identities which are provided with virtual space to explore their sexual identities through the medium of the dating app without the fear of rejection of their peers.

Symbolism however does not solely relate to visual stimuli, language makes up a vast system of symbols. The use of dating applications require users to develop an understanding of a vast lexicon of abbreviations and terminology synonymous with application use. Common place codes used on dating app include 'NSA' or no strings attached referring to causal sex and 'masc' referring to a notion of hegemonic masculinity, these terms are particular associated with Grindr and its reputation of a 'hook up app'. Discourse on how people construct identity online using text is difficult to apply in a dating application setting due to the extremely limited space given by both Grindr and Tinder profiles for text input. On traditional dating sites Fullick (2013) has found there is a commodification of the self, where by an individual constructs a profile which advertises them as a product for a market. A dating profile is created with a specific audience in mind and its information is tailored to suit perceived desire of this audience. She found a distinctly gendered way in which profile text was constructed with hegemonic masculine themes being quite common among young men. These heteronormative constructions of gender often depicted men as seeking a seemingly passive female partner who would become an accessory to a perceived lifestyle. That stated there was a blurring of traditional gender roles with men often conforming to the notion of metrosexuality which supported Fullick's notion that gender norms are constantly in flux. Fullick's work shows that identity construction on dating sites is inherently gendered, however due to limited identity construction options available on dating applications the more intricate observations of Fullick do not apply to applications.

Although it is not strictly examined in this dissertation there are often instances of counterplay on dating applications. The term of counterplay is most often used in conjunction with the 'modding' community for mainstream video games. Counterplay refers to the act of resistance by players to the expected patterns of behaviour in games (Dyer-Withford and De Peuter 2009). For example in the popular video game franchise Grand Theft Auto a player may simply ignore the missions and objectives set out for them in the game and instead may simply drive around the virtual city killing pedestrians with their car. In dating applications counter play often takes the form of a user using the photo and characteristics of a pop culture character and acting this persona out on the application.

I propose that there is a two tiered system used in dating applications for identity construction. The first involved the actor presenting a photo and username to the audience with the express purpose of having the audience progress to the second tier. The second tier consists of the profile information and its format differs between the two applications. Grindr's profile information takes the form of a fixed template where the user uses predefined fields to select information that is appropriate to themselves, users are permitted only 350 characters from which to create original content. Tinder takes much of the user's data directly from Facebook and users are permitted only 500 characters to construct an identity using text. Thus the markers must be chosen vary carefully by an actor to represent themselves to an audience on *Tinder* and *Grindr* and these become symbolic markers (Marwick 2013).

Methodology

The research question I am pursuing is: *How and in what way do dating apps gamify identity construction?* This research shall seek to examine how the gamified nature of dating applications effects identity construction, be it from built in gamified features like Tinder's swiping system or just through the 2 tiered nature of the chosen dating applications and meta-communication. The nature of play in dating applications is very similar to to the notion of play in mobile communication, however the major difference between the two is the nature of identity construction. Dating applications provide for a simplified form of identity construction that relies on symbolism in both photograph and text to present an idealised human commodity to an awaiting market. With 55 million users a month between the two chosen applications *Tinder* and *Grindr* further sociological study is required to shed more light on this sociological phenomena. To this end I engaged in content analysis and from those findings constructed a survey instrument to provide empirical data on dating applications use.

Application Selection & Content Analysis

I began my research process by downloading several dating applications before narrowing my study to *Tinder* and *Grindr*. These applications were chosen for their popularity in the Irish context and thus it seemed prudent to contain my enquiry to them due to the limited scope of an undergraduate dissertation. With the two applications chosen I evaluated the functionality of the individual applications and identified key aspects of play built into the user interface. After evaluating the user interface I studied the profile construction process and counted the character allowance for text based identity construction. This in turn led me to seek out the terms and conditions of profile creation for

both applications which contributed to a greater understanding of the agency afforded to users in the content that was permitted on application profiles. After studying the structures that create the virtual environments of these applications I sought to understand how users navigated these constraints by engaging in content analysis of user profiles. This is a 'method for systematically analysing and making inferences from text' by examining what users post on their profiles to differentiate themselves (Chambliss and Russell 2013). By examining the wording used on users profiles this information could be 'coded to measure the variables involved in the research question' (Chambliss and Russell 2013). The data was coded under four headings: Frequency, Direction, Intensity and Space. In addition to this, latent coding was used to put the data into the immediate context of the dating application (Neuman 2000). This preliminary content analysis allowed me to construct an online survey to examine the patterns I encountered in greater detail and provide empirical research from which to make deductions.

Sampling

Traditionally when one is trying to develop a sampling frame they have some indication of what their targeted population looks like. Unfortunately due to the transient nature of dating application users coupled with the fact they are a recent phenomenon results in there being no data on what this population looks like. Lacking knowledge on how the population looks makes it impossible to construct an accurate sampling frame (Chambliss and Russell 2013). Thus the only criteria used for including people in the survey was having used the dating applications *Tinder* or/and *Grindr*. This availability sample is unfortunately non generalisable and the data that has been recorded provides only a limited snapshot of the world of dating applications. It may be possible to illuminate the population grouping for dating application use in the future however this was not in the scope of an undergraduate dissertation. Respondents accessed the survey either by

clicking on a link to it that was posted in several university Facebook groups or they volunteered to fill out the survey through the applications themselves where I had created a profile for that purpose.

The content analysis used all profiles available on the applications *Grindr* and *Tinder* from Maynooth University on the 22nd of April 2015 between 18:20 and 19:05 as the population. From this, a sample of the first 50 profiles with text was chosen and the data was coded and analysed.

The Survey Instrument

With the limited time and lack of a funding for an expansive study an online survey provided the best opportunity to gain access to the population of *Tinder* and *Grindr* users. Survey research is particularly advantageous in this context for several reasons, it is a very versatile method of investigation which can be shaped to fit most research topics (Chambliss and Russell 2013). Surveying is inexpensive, especially using online methods. Survey data is easily imputed into SPSS for analysis with aids in work load. As I was surveying online I evaluated many different service providers before selecting the one used in this dissertation. I choose SurveyGizmo.com as it supported mobile use as well as tablet and desktop which made it the best choice for sending to participants through the applications themselves. The survey itself consisted of 43 separate questions divided into 5 sections which were as follows:

- A. Application Usage.
- B. Attitudes & Beliefs.
- C. Identity Construction.
- D. Sexual Activity.
- E. Socio-Demographics.

Section A examines general social application usage before asking more focused questions about the specific applications being examined in this dissertation. The 13 questions in this section are a mix of binary Yes or No questions, Likert scale and multiple choice questions with qualitative boxes to allow respondents to give response categories that are not listed among the predefined answers. Section A has several skip sequences built into the matrix so that respondents do not answer questions that do not apply to them.

Section B utilises the Likert scale solely to assess respondents' attitudes to dating application use. There are 10 statements relating to usage or attitudes surrounding applications and they are rated on a five-point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Section C is where the survey instrument collects data on identity construction. It contains 10 questions. This section also contains several skip pattern sequences depending on how the respondent answered the questions. If the respondent answers 'Yes' or 'No' on designated questions (questions 24, 25 & 28) a further question is asked for the respondent to elaborate on their answer. This qualitative answering allows greater inferences to be made into the process of identity construction on dating applications.

Section D asks questions relating to sexual activity. These questions are asked as a way to gauge success on dating applications and will attempt to correlate these responses to other trends in dating applications usage.

Socio-demographic questions are asked in Section D. The section contains 6 questions that examine: gender, age, sexual orientation, educational attainment, employment status and place of residence. These allow for a greater understanding of the sample group.

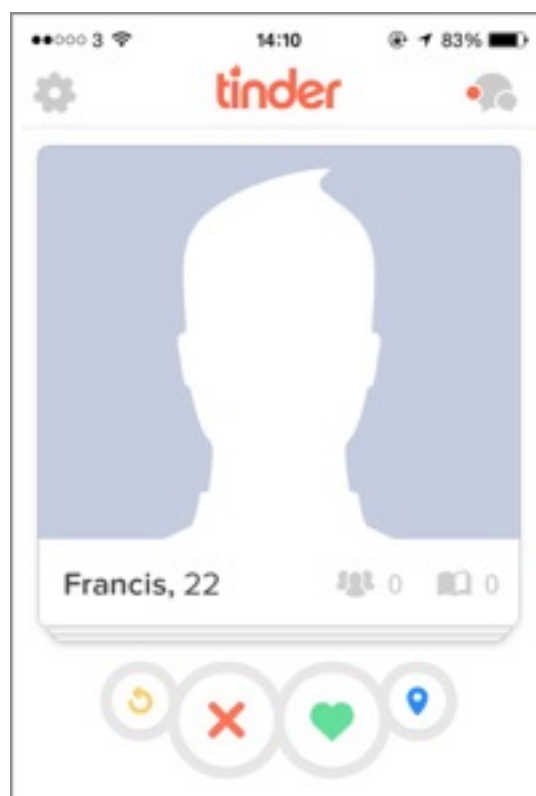
Ethics

In studying something that can be quite personal it is essential to protect the participants that have agreed to take part in this study. Nothing produced in this study has been produced without the consent of the research participant. In keeping with both the Maynooth University ethics policies and best practice all participants in this research expressed their informed consent to be involved in the research by accepting a consent form at the beginning of their survey. In keeping with the ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland I have attempted to the best of my abilities to 'explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about... [and] why it is being undertaken' in the consent form and in the thank you message the end of the survey. Due to the nature of the online survey respondents are capable of being totally anonymous and an unidentifiable from their submissions. In the content analysis portion of my research I only recorded information that was freely available on a users profile and at no stage did I record any information that would make the user identifiable. The screenshot taken for illustrative purposes in this study only displayed freely available information. The respondent had the option to leave the survey at any time should they choose to. Should any respondent have had any questions regarding the research I left contact details in both the consent form at the beginning of the survey and in the thank you message at the end. All data that was collected was stored securely in the form of encrypted files on a password protected laptop as indicated in best practice guidelines.

Findings

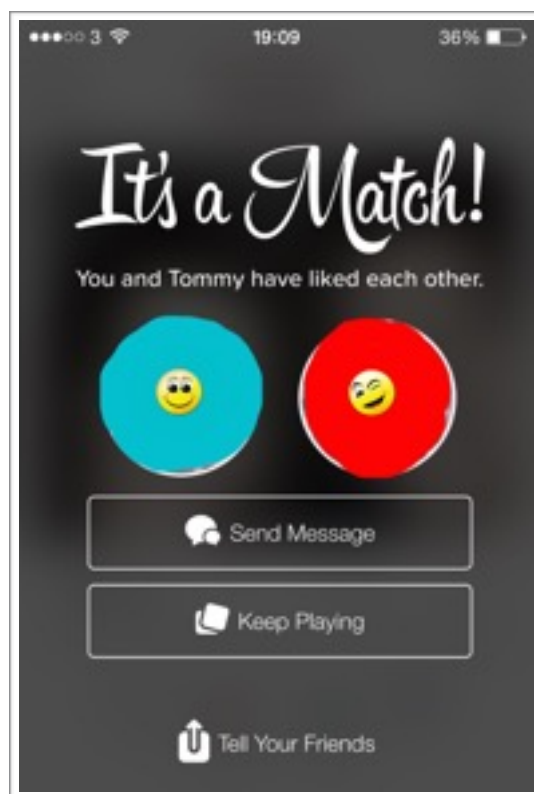
The aim of this study was to investigate the nature of identity construction on the dating applications *Tinder* and *Grindr*. This goal was accomplished by conducting both content analysis of user profiles and an online survey to collect empirical evidence. I propose that both Grindr and Tinder work on a two tiered system of identity construction. The first tier represents the display photograph and chosen name of the user. These two pieces of information serve to entice the user to move on to the second tier which consists of the main profile which contains details about the user. The end result is to start a conversation by enticing other users using a constructed identity. This identity construction process is contained by the users goals and the audiences expectations. Users must navigate both as well as the structures of the applications themselves in the form of the user interface and the content guidelines. These factors form the basis for identity construction on dating applications and each user then

Gamified User Interface



Tinder UI. Accessed at MU 26/04/15 14:10

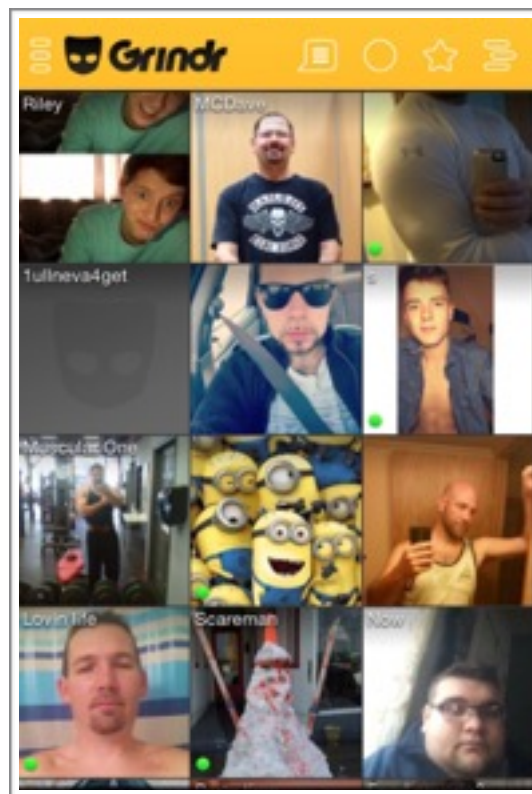
The dating application Tinder is the most obviously gamified in its user interface (UI) between the two applications. Upon opening the application the user is presented with a photograph of another user, under this photo the users name and age will be displayed. In the top left one will find a cog icon which will bring the user to the settings menu. The speech bubbles on the top right leads the user to a list of all the individuals on *Tinder* that they have 'matched' with and their conversations. The grey silhouette of the three people indicate whether or not the two users have mutual friends on Facebook and the grey book mutual interests on Facebook. The primary gamified element of the UI is the 'Like' or 'Nope' system. The green heart button indicates a 'Like' and the red X button a 'Nope'. This is more commonly referred to as 'swiping' as the user can swipe their thumb right on the screen to indicate a 'Nope' response and swipe left for a 'Like' response. If a user indicated a 'Nope' Response to the other *Tinder* user that they are presented with they will be given a replacement to swipe on. However if both the users swipe 'Like' on each other they will be matched and a new window will open.



Tinder UI. Accessed at MU 25/04/15 19:09

At this point the user will be presented with three options: 1) Send a message to the matched user, this opens a conversation window. 2) The user can 'Keep Playing' which brings them back to the swiping screen. Or finally the user can choose to share the match on social media, email or a text message. This screen makes it quite evident that even *Tinder* sees itself as a game and that there has been a convergence of the realms of gaming and dating.

Grindr by contrast has a far less gamified UI than *Tinder* and instead is more functional. On *Grindr* the main screen consists of a grid which displays other users based on geographical distance.



Grindr UI. Accessed at <http://www.imore.com/sites/imore.com/files/styles/xlarge/public/field/image/2015/02/grindr-single-screen-iphone.jpg> 25/04/15 13:01

This grid displays other users chosen display photograph (or none if the user doesn't upload one) as well as their display name. The top left icon on the screen consisting of three horizontal ovals accesses the settings options. The speech bubble opens the chat window listings for past conversations with other users. The circle is a premium feature

that allows users to only see who is online at that given time. The star accesses 'favourited' profiles. The final set of horizontal ovals is the filter options. A user can at any time double tap on a profile picture to immediately enter into a chat window with that user. As such the overt nature of play on *Tinder's* UI is lacking on *Grindr* which takes a far more pragmatic take. The play on *Grindr* is grounded in meta communication instead.

The Digital Constraints of Identity Construction

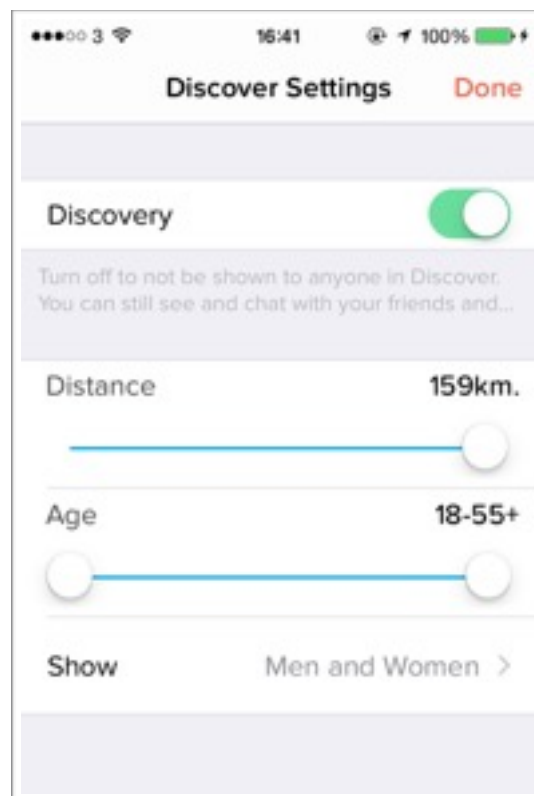
The way in which users create their identity on both apps are shaped largely by the structures of the UI. *Tinder* has a simplified version of profile construction compared to *Grindr* as it's primary focus is the swipe system and data is imported from a users Facebook account. More emphasis has been put on profile construction on *Tinder* since update 4.1.2. The new update allows users to link their *Instagram* (photo sharing application) account to *Tinder* and display their photos at the bottom of the profile. In addition to this new function the application still allows users to import 6 photographs from



My Profile on Tinder. Accessed at MU 26/04/15
16:32

their Facebook profiles and choose one of these to be their primary photograph which is displayed on the swipe screen. Supplementing the photographs *Tinder* profiles have a 500 character 'About Me' section for text based identity construction and as data is imported from Facebook it displays mutual interests and mutual friends between different users of the application.

The data provided in the profile section serves two purposes. The first is to categorise users for the filter system and the second is to provide more information to other users to try and convince them to start a conversation. The filter allows users to ask the application to only display users of a certain gender, certain age profile and in a certain geographical distance to them in real time. The use of geolocation in both applications is central to their functionality.

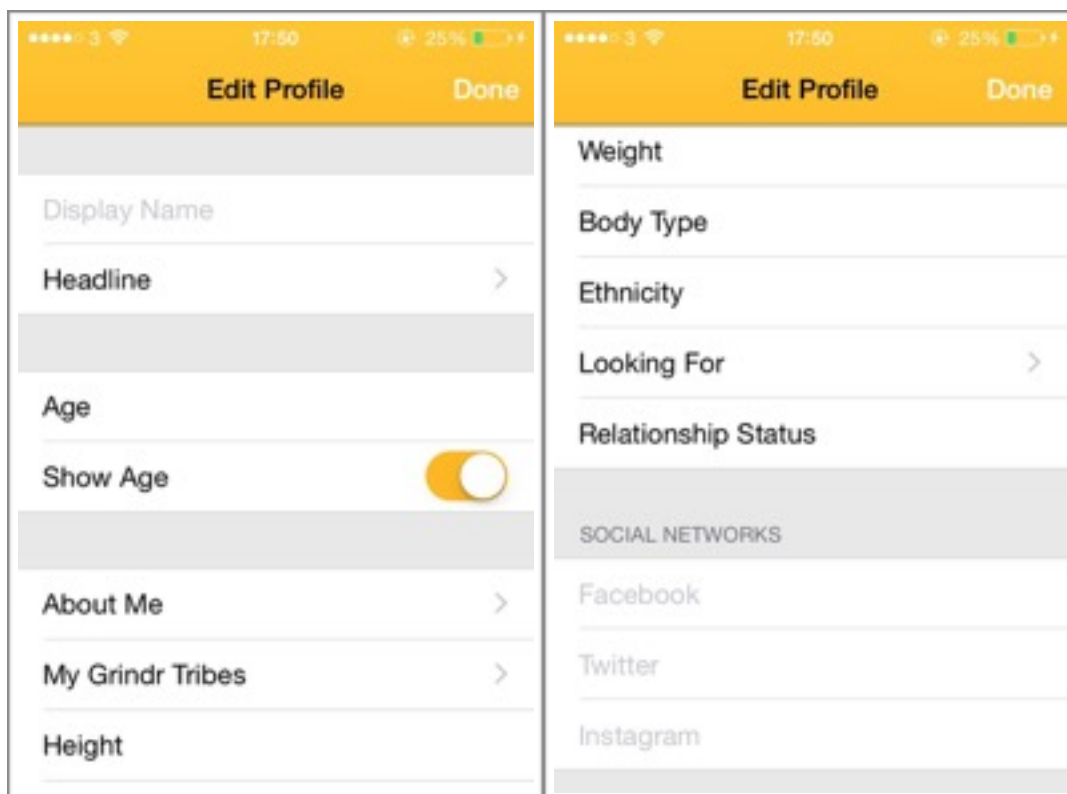


Tinder filter settings. Accessed at MU 26/04/15
16:41

By using the filter system it allows people of non heteronormative sexualities to find matches on *Tinder* as well as age matches. This provides a customised experience when playing the 'swipe' game and it reinforces the importance of filling out profile information so

that users are not excluded by filter settings. *Grindr's* filter settings are far more extensive due to the greater emphasis put on profile construction than *Tinder*.

Where as *Tinder* has only one section for custom text input totalling 500 characters, Grindr has only 350 characters spread over three sections. The first section or 'Name' section allows for 15 characters and this forms the display name featured on Grindr's main screen of tiled profiles. There is a 'Headline' box that has a space of 80 characters, this information is displayed at the top of a user profile. Then finally there is a 255 character 'About Me' section which is just over half as much as *Tinder*. In addition to the custom text there are several multiple choice options where a user can up enter identifying characteristics about themselves. These options contain predefined choices that a user can select through a drop down box. In addition to the in application options for identity construction. Grindr also allows users to connect their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to their profile.



Grindr Profile Options. Accessed at MU 19/04/15
17:50

The sections in each of these categories are essential to users ability to reach their desired audience. Such as in *Tinder* where a photograph is essential in the using of the application, *Grindr* only permits users to upload one photograph which acts as their primary identifying 'digital token' indicative of Marwick's work (2013). The photograph and 'Display Name' are the only details that users can see when they enter the applications home screen as such this forms the first tier of identity construction. The more detailed text based information forms the second tier in which user provides details about themselves that they perceive the audience to find attractive as in keeping with Goffman. In the case of *Grindr* the predefined characteristics chosen by the user affect profile visibility due to the use of the filtering system which is similar to that of *Tinder* but more detailed.

In addition to the physical constraints on identity construction in the form of application structure there is also other structure in place that govern identity construction: that of content guidelines. There is a document that governs the content that can be posted on a users profile for each application. *Grindr* is particularly strict on the content that is posted and has active moderators who screen photographs and profile text for breeches of the 'Profiles Guidelines'. The guidelines state what content is unacceptable for both photographs and profile text. Essentially the photograph may not contain anything 'pornographic', 'advertise services, goods, websites or apps', contain 'images of firearms, weapons, drugs or drug paraphernalia', contain 'copyrighted pictures or illustrations' and users are not permitted to post images for the purposes of 'impersonating another users, or non-Grindr user, including celebrities' (Grindr Profile Guidelines). Text is also censored with a ban on 'sexually explicit', 'profanity', 'text that incites racism or bigotry', 'advertising of services, goods, websites or apps', 'mentioning of drugs' and 'references... that promote unsafe sex'. These restrictions serve to shape the way that users manifest their identity

and has also caused the creation of a vast lexicon of abbreviations for use on applications such as *Grindr*.

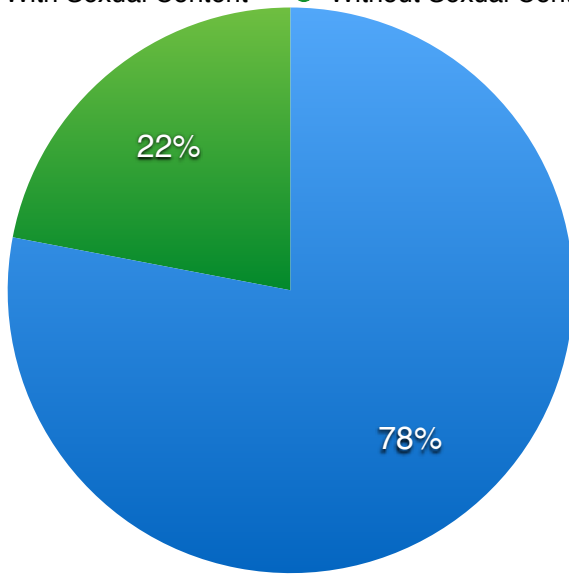
Tinder has a similar document the 'Terms of use' but where *Grindr* actively moderates user content *Tinder* takes the stance that users are 'solely responsible for the content and information that you post, upload, publish, link to, transmit, record, display or otherwise make available' (Tinder 2014). This is not to say that *Tinder* is apathetic to content, they do have stringent anti bigotry and racism policies on content and it reserves the right to ban users who post 'any offensive, inaccurate, incomplete, abusive, obscene, profane, threatening, intimidating, harassing, racially offensive, or illegal material, or any material that infringes or violates another person's rights' (Tinder 2014). The content permitted on a *Tinder* account is far less regulated than that of *Grindr* and this provides *Tinder* users with greater agency in their second tier of identity construction.

Content Analysis

After evaluating the UI and the policy constraints on identity constriction I endeavoured to understand how people constructed their identity through text in the second tier. To this end I selected the first 50 users with profile text from my geographical location of Maynooth University that were displayed on both applications. The text was then analysed for repeating patterns of phrasing and content. There was a clear difference in the sexualised nature of the discourse found on *Grindr* that was not found on *Tinder*. Out of the sample of 50, 39 profiles contained sexual references. In comparison there were no sexual references on the 50 *Tinder* profiles that were analysed. Among *Grindr* profiles there were three main recurring themes. Of the 39 profiles with sexual content, 19 of them made references to the user looking for casual sex be it in the form of 'NSA', 'Fun' or a similar admission. This represents 49% of the profiles with sexualised content and 38% of

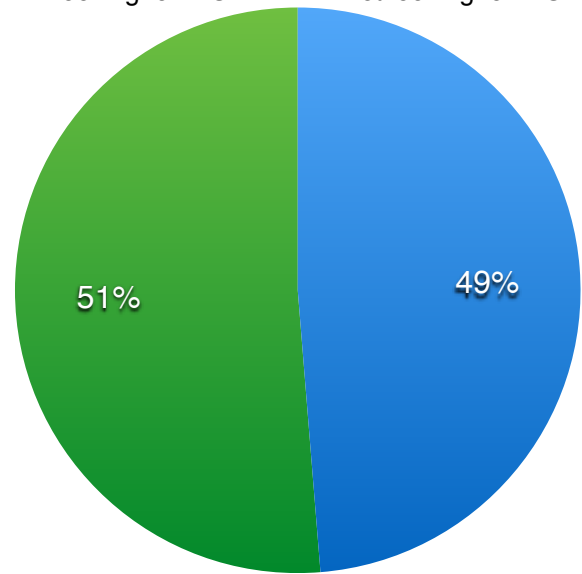
the entire sample. The term 'NSA' or no strings attached was used on other profiles

● With Sexual Content ● Without Sexual Content



Grindr profiles with sexual content in sample

● Looking for 'NSA' ● Not looking for 'NSA'

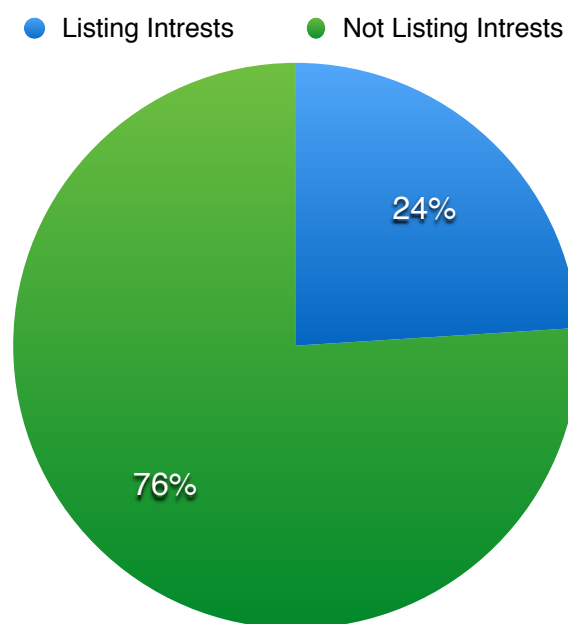


Users looking for causal sex on Grindr profiles with sexual content

negatively to indicate that the user was not interested in casual sex, however this occurred in the minority of cases. As Grindr is known as a 'hook up app' it is not surprising that there would be so many cases of users actively searching for causal sex, as such 'NSA' is often advertised by the user in the second tier of identity construction and sometimes even is used in the first tier as the users display name. The search for causal sex was followed in second place with listing sexual characteristics that the user was interested in. 12 profiles of the sample of 50 contained references to physical characteristics that the user preferred in a sexual partner. This could take the form of a user asking their audience for people with large genitals to contact him or indicating a preference for younger men. The profiles with text referring to desired physical characteristics was equal in number in this sample to those who requested that only users with a photograph message them. These 12 profiles made negative references to other users not having photographs and some would only reply to messages from profiles with pictures. Not all *Grindr* profiles made references to sex. Of the 11 profiles that made no reference, 2 contained information of the users interests and others were looking for 'chats'. The sexual culture on *Grindr* serves to set the

scene for an actor to preform to his audience as described by Goffman. As such the actors performance is often sexual in nature and their identity becomes sexualised through photos and text.

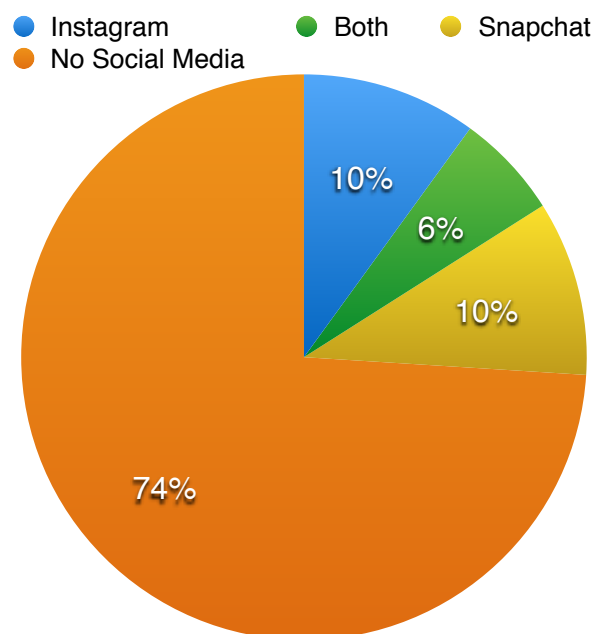
The analysis of the 50 *Tinder* profiles illustrated different themes than the ones found on *Grindr*. No sexual content was encountered on any profiles in the sample group. It was observed that many profiles did not have any customised text and instead relied on first tier identity construction only to engage users in conversation. This is easier on *Tinder* due to the swiping system and is seen less often on *Grindr*. One of the most common themes to be encountered in the sample was for users to list some of their interests in their profile text of which 12 did so. This was followed very closely by users who made reference to their profession or if a student to the course they were studying. This figure all



Profiles listing interests in sample

though only 22% of the the sample indicates that a significant minority felt it was important to list their profession or higher level education in their profile text. This is indicative of Fullick’s work (2013) when she talks about how online dating users felt that by making subtle references to class and lifestyle it would help match the user to an individual of a

similar background. 15 of the profiles or 30% of the sample group made reference to either their geographical location or their university. This could be an attempt to again subtly add a class dimension to their identity construction however I feel it more likely that it is merely an attempt to find people who are in a similar geographical location. The final recurrent theme in the sample group of Tinder profiles was adding other forms of social media to their profiles. 13 profiles in the sample group (26%) posted details of either Snapchat, Instagram or in some cases both. Although this 26% is only a minority of the sample group



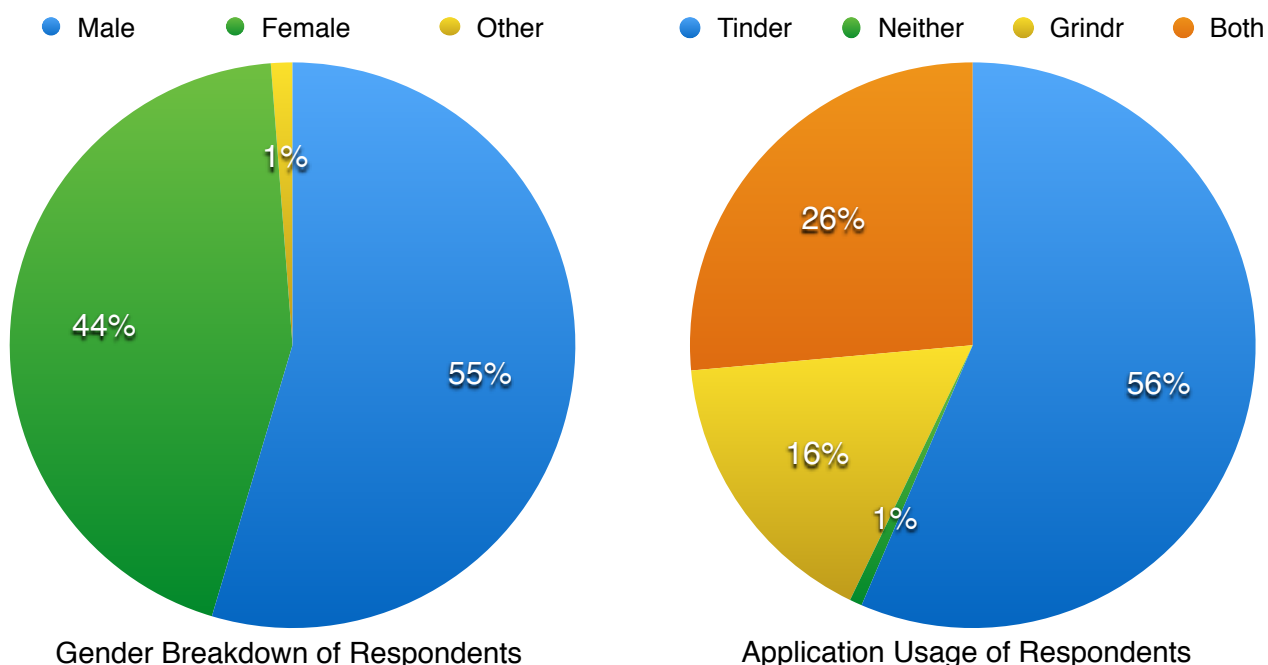
Social media details posted on Tinder profiles in sample

it is significantly frequent. It was the data that was collected in this provisional content analysis section which provided the framework necessary to construct the survey instrument for the main data gathering portion of the study. However it must be highlighted that there is a sexual undertone on *Grindr* that is not found on *Tinder* and it has a very real effect on how identity is both perceived and in turn performed by users to their audience.

The Online Survey

Socio-demographics

The online survey link was posted on university Facebook pages and was given to willing participants through both applications. The survey contained 163 respondents with a relative gender balance of 55% identifying as a male and 44% female and 1% as other. 23 or 14% of respondents had never used a dating application. Of the respondents who had used the applications 56% were *Tinder* users, 17% were *Grindr* users and 26% used both applications with one respondent using neither of them. If a crosstabulation is run on

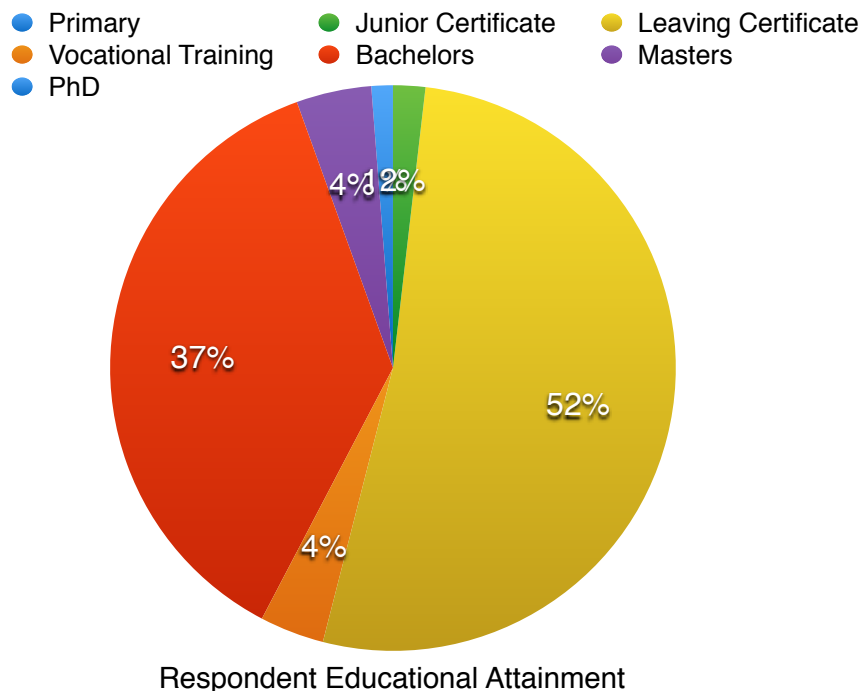


these two statistics we get a gender breakdown of respondents using both dating applications. 100% of *Grindr* users were male which is as expected as it is an application for gay and bisexual men. On *Tinder* however the gender breakdown was 58 males to 57 females giving an almost equal gender balance.

The age range of the sample group was as follows: 41 respondents were in the age bracket 18-19 years, 103 respondents were in the age bracket 20-24, 9 respondents were aged 25-30, 5 respondents were aged 31-39 and 5 were aged 40+.

85 respondents identified as heterosexual which made up 52% of the sample group. 57 respondents identified as gay or lesbian making up 35% of the sample. 16 respondents identified as bisexual this being 10% of the sample and the final 3% was made up of 5 individuals which described their sexual orientation as 'Other'.

The socio-demographic section also evaluated educational attainment and employment status as a mechanism to try and establish a class background for respondents. Respondents were asked to supply information about their highest educational attainment. 2% of the sample listed the Junior Certificate as their highest educational attainment. 52% listed the Leaving Certificate. 4% listed vocational training has their highest educational attainment. 37% had a bachelors degree and 4% a masters degree. 2 respondents indicated that they had a PhD filling in the final 1%. In regards to employment status, 16% had a full time job. 49% were employed part time. 27% indicated that they were unemployed and 9% indicated an 'other' work status.



The final question asked in the socio-demographic section was on the nature of where the respondent lived. Of which 68% lived in an urban area and 19% a semi rural area which was described as a 'small village' in the question. 14% of respondents listed

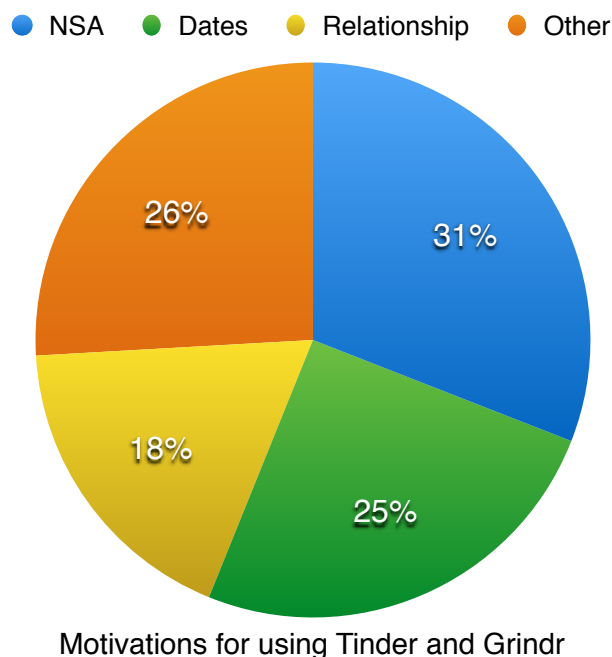
that they lived in a rural area. This question was asked to ascertain if there was a correlation between rurality and identity construction. No statically significant difference was found however.

Application Usage

In asking respondents questions about general application usages the purpose was to provide background information on online activity. 99% of the sample had a smartphone or tablet and 98% used social media applications. This indicates that the vast majority of the sample are familiar with social media applications and applications in general. With the pervasiveness of technology in our everyday lives it is not surprising that dating is becoming a form of social media. 86% of the sample group indicated that they had used a dating application with 77% having an active profile on a dating application at the time of surveying. Of the 138 respondents who was active on the applications *Tinder* and *Grindr*, 36% had used the application less than one hour before they completed the survey and 56% had used the application within 24 hours of being surveyed. This contrasted with the frequency of general social media use where 82% of respondents indicated that they had used a social media applications less than 10 minutes before they completed the survey. This pattern indicates that dating applications are not used as heavily as social media applications and with 39% of the sample not having used a dating application for a week or more at the time of surveying. It could be argued that dating applications are not taken seriously by a significant amount of users in the sample.

Respondents were asked if they had ever met with someone in real life that they had first met on either of the applications examined in this study. 63% of the sample using the applications reported that they had in fact done so however when asked if they had been in a relationship with someone from a dating application that had lasted in excess of 6 months only 18% had listed that they had. When asked if they had any knowledge of an

other individual being in a relationship that had lasted in excess of 6 months with someone they had met on a either *Tinder* or *Grindr* only 40% of the sample responded that they had. This may indicate a preference for causal relations rather than a full blown relationship on the part of dating application users. When questioned on their motivations for use of the applications a range of responses were received. Only 18% of respondents indicated that they were looking for a relationship and 25% interested in dates. The largest single proportion of the sample were looking for 'No strings attached fun' or 'NSA' at 31%. 26% selected the 'other' option were provided with a text box to input their motivations. This data was then coded and the results are as follows: 14 users were looking for entertainment or were satisfying curiosities about the application. 5 respondents were on the application to chat with other users and 3 respondents indicated that they were using the application to get over a recent breakup.



The notion that dating application use is being used for causal relations is reinforced when the respondents were asked about how they would describe dating applications. Only 2.5% of respondents stated that they saw dating applications as a place to start a serious relationship. In addition to this after coding the 'Other' responses, 7

respondents saw dating applications as a place for sexual gratification. In the words of one user:

'A weird way to start relationships, because as a general statement people are usually just looking for sex on them. I personally would not find them the right way for me to start a relationship. They kind of look like a cattle market.'

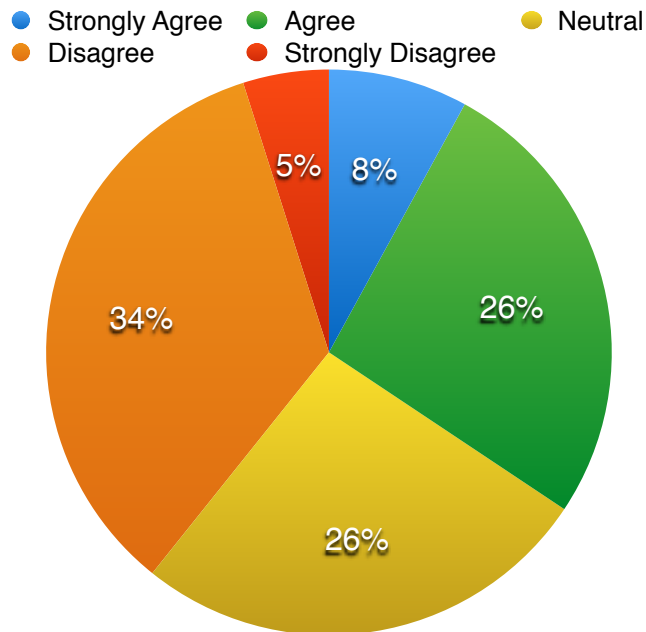
- Grindr User, Aged 20-24

There seems to be a lack of trust associated with dating applications which is quite possibly rooted in users personal experience with 51% of users indicating that they have had a 'mixed' experience using the applications. People seem to feel that they are for 'NSA' encounters and not for relationships. This would support the text found in users profiles on *Grindr* during the provisional content analysis.

Attitudes & Beliefs

Although touched upon in the first section respondents attitudes to dating application use was examined in detail in section B. The majority of respondents agree that dating applications are a good way of meeting new people with 7% strongly agreeing to the statement and 49% agreeing. This gives a total of 56% of the sample group agreeing with the statement and 30% staying neutral. However when asked for their opinion on the statement 'Dating apps allow you to find a better match for yourself because you get to know the person before meeting them' only 39% both agreed and strongly agreed. This would indicate although people might think it convenient to meet new people on them it does not provide an immediate benefit over traditional methods of meeting new people. Building on the recurrent theme of individuals looking for casual sex in both tier one and tier two identity construction found during content analysis, respondents were asked if dating applications were just for people looking for 'NSA'. 8% of respondents strongly

agreed with this statement while 26% agreed. 27% remained neutral while a majority of 35% disagreed with the statement and the remaining 5% strongly disagreed. Thus opinion



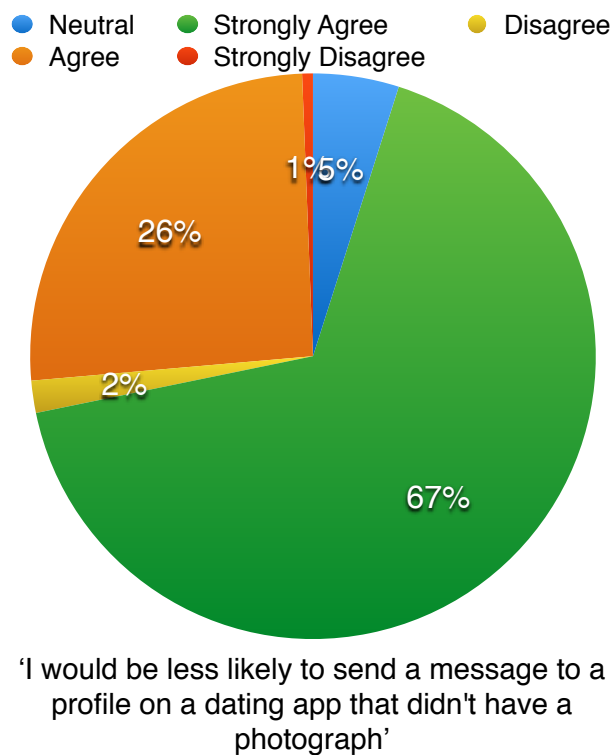
'Dating apps are just for people who are looking for fun and not a serious relationship'

on this issue seem to be distributed across the board with no strong consensus. However it must be stated that although it may not be the primary concern of users on dating applications there is a significant minority who's purpose on dating applications is to engage in 'NSA' and thus it forms a central theme in their identity construction.

There is a pop culture impression that internet dating was always for desperate people who could never use traditional methods. This has been a theme in television and cinema since the 1990's. I examined whether or not this view was found in contemporary non traditional dating methods such as dating applications. Respondents were asked if 'Dating apps are just for desperate people', 51% of respondents disagreed with this statement and a further 25% strongly disagreed. Thus it can be inferred that a total of 76% of respondents feel that dating application use is a legitimate way of meeting intimate partners. However when asked if respondents would feel uncomfortable to admit to using a dating application response were mixed. Only 40% disagreed with the statement and 9% strongly disagreed. This 49% of people who would not feel uncomfortable doesn't match

up with the 76% who agree that dating applications are not the refuge of the desperate. Thus there are a number of people who seemingly feel that they would be judged for seeking out non traditional dating practices.

As previously stated photographs are immeasurably important to identity construction on dating applications as they form the base of tier one. To this end respondents were asked if they would be less likely to send a message to a profile on an application that did not have a photograph. 67% of respondents strongly agreed to this statement with a further 26% choosing agree. Thus a total of 93% of all respondents agree



that visual representation on dating applications are essential for success. However when asked if users take photographs of themselves for the sole purpose of dating application use 48% disagreed with a further 15% strongly disagreeing. This total of 63% of respondents clearly illustrates a majority of users do not engage in this activity. In regards to the way in which *Tinder* works this is not surprising as the user must import their photographs from Facebook. Of *Grindr* users however 73% stated either agree or strongly agree to the statement. Thus there is a huge divide based on which particular application

that respondents are using. Indeed as *Grindr* allows users to upload only one photo its unsurprising that 73% of its users in this sample take particular effort to ensure that said photo actively conveys their of performance to their audience. This also corresponds to Zhao (2008) where the body is seen to be a obstacle in presentation of the self. Photographs are as such taken to hide unwanted physical features in a manipulation of the personal front. In tier two identity construction text is extremely important for the user to provide symbolic markers for their audience. However the information that is omitted is just as important as the information that is supplied. In the words of one *Grindr* user:

'It is like a game actually playing around with your profile to see what gets you more messages. I noticed putting masculine always gets you more and so does genuine. You don't want to want to be too specific though in what you are looking for. You get more messages if you're vague. You have to a profile that is more suggestive than revealing information to get more hits. It's all about the reveal of information. Enough to create intrigue but not enough so that people make up your mind not to message you.'

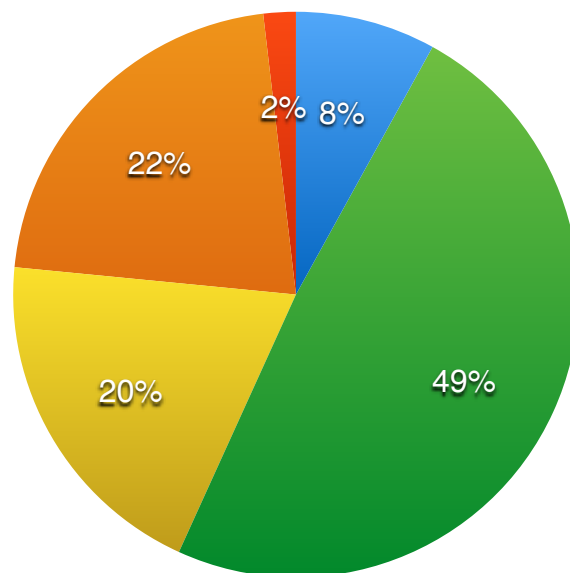
- Grindr User, Aged 20-24

When the question 'I would withhold details about myself to appear more attractive on a dating app profile' was put to the sample group it received a positive skew with strongly agree at 6% and agree at 42%. This total of 48% in favour of the statement contrasts with the 28% against it. Thus indicating that users do in fact omit details about themselves during the identity construction process in order to preform for their audience. In addition to omitting details that users felt would make them unattractive, respondents were asked if they would mention sports or physical activities in order to subtly inform people that they were physically fit. This question was inspired by Fullick's work (2013) on internet dating. Only 5% of the sample group strongly agreed with the statement and only 23% agreed. A

total of 50% of the group disagreed or strongly disagreed. This makes it clear that Fullick's observations on online dating profiles does not seem to apply to their mobile counterparts.

One of the core tenants of this research is that both *Tinder* and *Grindr* are in fact games and users engage in a type of play. In order to give this assertion empirical weight the sample group was asked if 'Using dating apps are very like playing games'. 49% of the sample group agreed with this statement and a further 8% strongly agree. Only 24% disagreed with 20% remaining neutral. This illustrates that there is a strongly sense of play around dating applications and reinforces the notion that they are gamified virtual institutions.

● Strongly Agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree
● Strongly Disagree

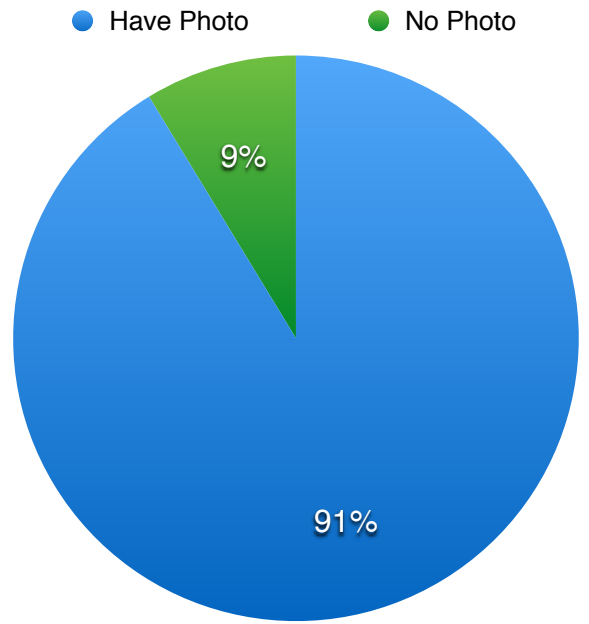


'Using dating apps are very like playing playing games.'

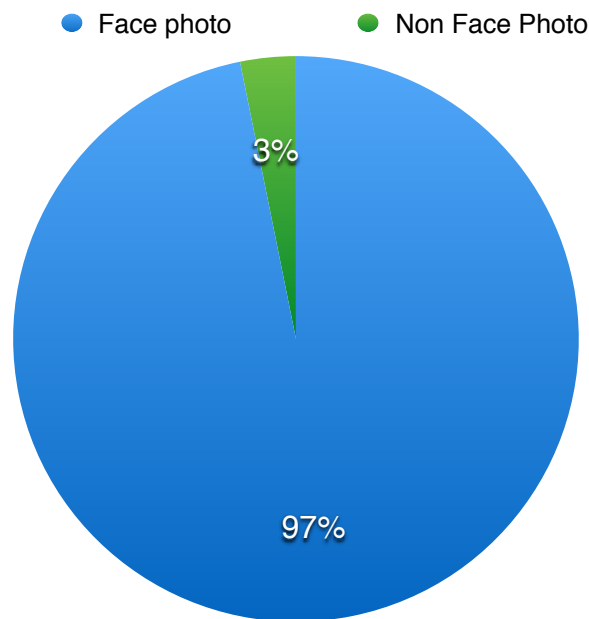
Identity Construction

Using the themes encountered during content analysis, questions were drafted to further explore these findings. As such and as previously indicated, photographs are vital pieces of identity construction on the examined dating applications. With 93% of respondents already indicating that they would be less likely to message a user who did not display a photograph it is unsurprising that 91% of respondents had a photograph as part of their

profile information. Of the 91% of respondents with a photograph, 97% of these displayed



Respondents with photographs



Respondents with face photographs

photographs of their face. The 4 respondents who did not use a photograph of their face were asked what they used instead and why they used it. 2 users used a photograph of their bodies which omitted their face. For one user this was due to him not being openly bisexual and felt uncomfortable being identified on a dating application. The other user who displayed his torso indicated that:

'I'm only looking for fun, most people who want to see your face straight away want more.'

- Grindr User, Aged 25-30

The other 2 users who did not use a photograph of their faces also did not use a photograph of themselves at all. One used a landscape and the other an internet meme. One individual's motivations were that of privacy however the other wanted to:

'Remain anon to weirdos.'

- Grindr User, Aged 20-24

The latter's response is particularly interesting when one recalls that 51% of users reported having mixed experiences. It can be inferred that users are taking measures to protect themselves from negative experiences by limiting the information that they release to their audience. This is not done for reasons of seeming more attractive but to control the amount of access their audience has to their everyday identity.

Text based identity construction is important for giving the audience key details about a user in an effort to convince them to message. During content analysis there were recurrent phrases particularly on *Grindr*. When the sample was asked if they used particular phrases such as 'masc', 'genuine', 'straight acting' etc. only 7% of respondents indicated that they had. Those that had were all *Grindr* users and represented 15% of the total *Grindr* sample. A great difficulty in measuring the use of particular phrases on dating applications is due to the fluid nature of profile construction. They are in a constant state of flux with changes often taking place. It is accepted however that there are phrases in wide

spread use on Grindr with this advertisement for the premium version of the application



Grindr advertisement. Accessed at MU 04/03/15
22:12

capitalising on it.

In using set phrases on users tier two profile construction they were able to give details about themselves using the accepted lexicon of the *Grindr* audience. When asked about the types of phrases posted on their profile one respondent stated:

'Laid-back, easy going, creative, masc sometimes, I mention my interests. Use Entp to show my personality type.'

- Grindr User, Aged 25-30

Another:

'Non scene, fit, educated.'

- Grindr User, Aged 25-30

The latter makes obvious use of subtle hints to indicate class background and sexual characteristics to his audience as found in Fullick's work (2013). When users were asked about their motivations for using stock phrases in their profiles some of the responses were:

'To firmly illustrate sexual orientation, by doing this it filters out undesirable matches. It saves everyone wasting their time and avoids possible awkward conversations'

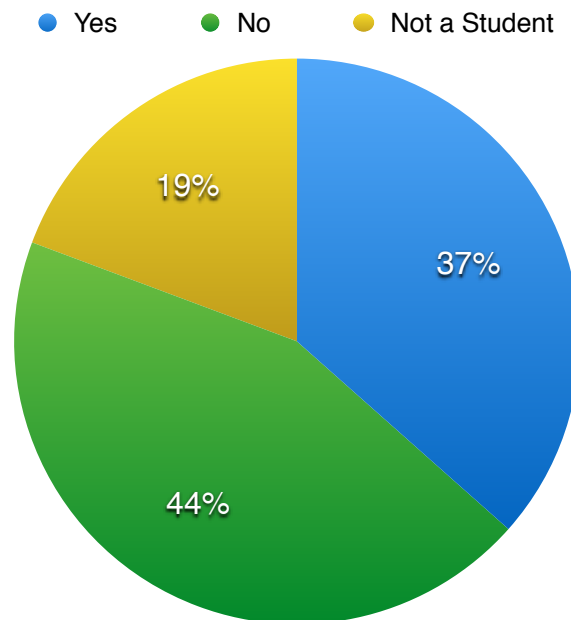
- Grindr User, Aged 20-24

'To present a certain image of myself and to attract a particular sort of person. The person I want to attract will hopefully be similar and also be intrigued by what I have put up. Hopefully they will message me'

- Grindr User, Aged 20-24

In addition to set phrases the sample group were asked if it made any sexual references on their profile to attract other users. Only 13% of the sample stated that they did with 87% indicating that they did not. Thus it would appear from the sample that sexual references are limited to *Grindr* and even at that happen in the minority of cases. This is not in keeping with what was observed during content analysis. Making references to hobbies or interests on the second tier of their application profiles was split equally among the sample with 50% listing them and 50% omitting them. One particular phenomenon that was witnessed during content analysis was that of students making reference to their place of study in their profile, possible as a class indicator. Respondents were asked 'If you are a student do you reference your place of study on your profile?'. 38% of respondents indicated that they had intact done so, while 46% stated that they didn't with 16% not a

student. Another recurring theme, particularly on *Tinder* was individuals posting details to their other social media accounts. However only 18% of respondents indicated that they had done this with 82% having not.



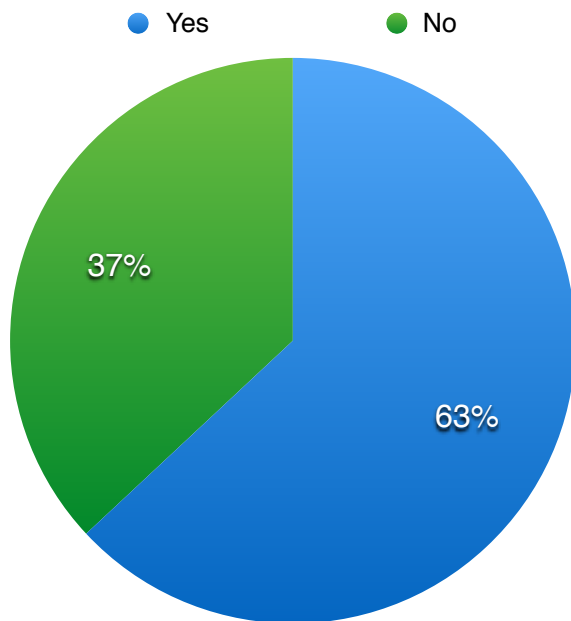
If you are a student do you reference your place of study on your profile?

What this data shows is that there are no constant themes in dating application identity construction but there are however significant recurring themes which differ depending on what application the individual is using.

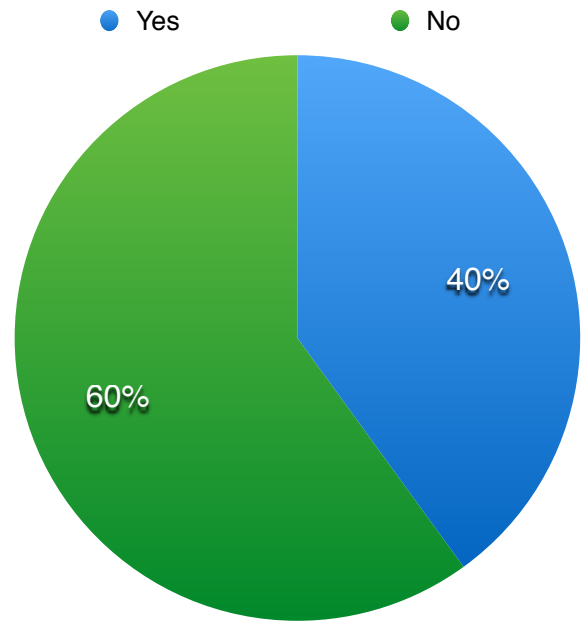
Sexual Activity

This section was included in the survey as a mechanism for attempting to measure 'success' on dating applications. 83% of respondents indicated that they were in fact sexually active at the time of surveying. 43% of the sample admit to having sent a sexually explicit photo to another user on a dating application. 40% of respondents indicated that they have met someone from a dating application for the sole purpose of sexual activity. This figure is particularly interesting when we consider that 63% of respondents reported that they had in fact met up with someone from either of the two applications examined in

this research. This would indicate that a large proportion of the users who have met up with people from dating applications did so for the purpose of sex. This seems to be indicative of the significant proportion of dating application users who are using the services



Have you ever met someone in real life that you first met on Tinder or Grindr?



Have you ever met someone from a dating app for the purpose of sexual activity?

for 'NSA' encounters.

Summery of Findings

It is clear from the data that has been collected that there are no universal traits in identity construction on both *Tinder* and *Grindr*. There are however several recurrent themes that are common to both. There appears to be a significant amount of people who are only looking for causal relations and this effects how users represent themselves on the applications. It is clear that Grindr is a far more sexualised application and 'NSA' is a common and accepted practice. So much so that it is not uncommon for the first tier of identity construction to contain the phrase 'NSA' as a use name. Although there is a large population looking for causal relations it is also apparent that there are those who are looking for both friendship and relationships. These factors actively play a role in how users shape their profiles and dictates the content that is posted on the second tier of an

application profile. Those looking for friendship and socialisation often put details of their other social media accounts so that users can link in with them on other services and those looking for relationships post details of their hobbies and interests. In the case of relationships however it seems that dating applicants are not yet ready to replace traditional methods of relationship foundation.

There is definitely gamification at work on dating applications. It takes place in the actual user interface on *Tinder* with the swipe system, gamification in the user interface of *Grindr* is minimal however there are certain features of it such as double tapping directly into conversations with other users. The primary form of play on Grindr is that of meta communication as found in Mäyrä's article (2012). A form of play though communication which is found in other applications and social media settings.

Conclusion

This dissertation was to examine both the gamified nature of the dating applications Tinder and Grindr, also provide an exploratory study into how the self is constructed and represented on the application. In addition I wished explore if there was any link between gamification and identity construction. My interest in dating applications stems from having a non heteronormative sexual orientation. Dating applications and dating sites before them provided a safe space to reach out and find people of a similar orientation. This virtual safe space allowed individuals to explore their sexual identity without the fear of being ostracised and rejected by ones peers. As such upon reading Mäyrä's article on mobile play in my special topics class I wanted to research dating applications from a perspective of play and representation. This in turn lead to my analysis of the topic on which there has been very little formal academic research. This made the research process very challenging, especially for someone who had never attempted a research project previously.

With no literature on the subject I had to use discourses on social media, identity construction and online dating and try to weave it into my subject matter. With little in the way of examples to follow it was difficult to formulate an appropriate research methodology. There is no data to build on or use as a starting point. Using the survey skills I had gained in a previous module I decided that's was the best way of gathering data, however I quickly realised that to be able to construct a survey instrument I would have to study the applications them selves first. This lead to my evaluation of the user interface before moving onto the content analysis. Using my findings from this I was able to construct a survey instrument to gather data from application users. As dating applications exist as a virtual world it made sense to use a virtual survey. Thus I evaluated different service providers before choosing one that allowed the survey to be accessed on mobile

devices. By doing so I was able to send links to the survey through the dating applications themselves to willing participants as well as posting a link to it on university Facebook groups. This allowed me to have a sample size of 163 participants.

As there is no known population statistics for dating applications users it is impossible to know if my findings are generalisable. However what was made clear was that different applications have different characteristics of identity construction. The sexualised nature of Grindr in comparison to Tinder provided different results and it could be argued that the nature of the culture on certain applications structures the audience expectations that an actor must live up to for a successful performance. What is common to both applications is the two tiered system of identity construction. The first tier consists of a profile photograph and a user name, the purpose of which is to entice the audience to either progress to the second tier or to try to connect with the other user immediately either by swiping 'Like' in the case of *Tinder* or by double clicking on a *Grindr* profile to enter a conversation window. There appears to be a mentality in regards to dating applications that they are not for starting serious relationships and instead are for casual fun. This is not a universal feeling among users by any means but it is significant. The motivation for being on the application affects how users create their profile both in regards to photograph and text and this does feed into the gamified nature of the tiered identity construction.

In hindsight this project is too vast to be adequately explained in an undergraduate research project and it is my hope that this area will be studied in greater detail in the future. Dating applications, particularly those that use geolocation are playing an active role in people's lives. With the integration of technology into our everyday lives it is not surprising that dating is becoming almost digitised. It represents a very real change in socialisation patterns that transcends geographical distance. I enjoyed carrying out this research but it was quite challenging. It is my sincere hope that the data collected in this research may go on to provide a base for more expansive studies of the field of dating applications.

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Appendix

Consent Page Text

As the survey was digital there was no physical connect form. The following is the text from the first page of the survey where respondents had to click a button to illustrate that they had given their consent to participate:

Dating Apps Survey, 2015

Introduction

Research Participation Consent

Date: March 2015

I am conducting research as part of my undergraduate Sociology thesis at Maynooth University. The research question I am pursuing is: How and in what way do dating apps gamify identity construction? and your voluntary participation in this research is really appreciated.

This survey may take up 10 minutes and will be totally anonymous.

Should you wish a copy of the finished thesis to review the findings of this research you are welcome to contact me using the information below and I would be more than happy to oblige you.

All of the survey information will be kept confidential. The data from this research will be stored securely. Your identity will also be confidential and neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at daniel.sheridan.2013@nuim.ie or my research supervisor Dr Aphra Kerr at aphra.kerr@nuim.ie or (+353) 1 708 6140.

By continuing to the next page you are consenting to participate in my research.

Survey Instrument