

Self-Disclosure and Tinder User Impression Management in Forming Digital Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This study discusses self-disclosure and impression management of Tinder users in forming digital romantic relationships. The development of online dating apps is changing the way individuals build attractions, display identities, disclose personal information, and negotiate trust with potential partners. This study aims to understand how Tinder users open up and manage impressions through profiles, photos, bios, and conversations. The research uses a phenomenological qualitative approach. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with seven active Tinder users, limited observation of informant profiles, and anonymized conversation documentation. The results showed that self-disclosure took place selectively, gradually, and strategically. Users opened up information ranging from basic identities, personal interests, relationship preferences, to more personalized emotional experiences. Impression management was carried out through photo curation, bio preparation, language style settings, humor, and conversation responses. Digital identity is formed through the selection of information that is displayed and hidden. Trust and romantic closeness grow through communication consistency, comfort, common interests, conversation intensity, and the move of communication to a more personalized platform. This study concludes that digital romantic relationships on Tinder are formed through negotiations between self-openness, imagery, authenticity, privacy, and trust.

Keywords

Self-Disclosure, Impression Management, Tinder, Digital Identity, Digital Romantic Relationships, Digital Interpersonal Communication



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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technology has transformed the way individuals establish and develop romantic relationships. Relationships that were previously initiated primarily through face-to-face encounters, social proximity, or friendship networks are increasingly mediated by digital platforms. Tinder is one of the platforms that reflects this transformation, as interactions begin through user profiles, photographs, biographies, swipe features, matches, and digital conversations. Within this environment, the development of romantic relationships depends not only on interpersonal attraction but also

on how individuals present themselves, select information, interpret impressions, and negotiate trust through digitally mediated communication.

The Indonesian context further highlights the relevance of this phenomenon. DataReportal reported that by early 2025, Indonesia had approximately 212 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 74.6 percent (Kemp, 2025). The high level of internet use indicates that digital spaces have become an important part of people's social lives, including the process of seeking partners and developing interpersonal relationships. Tinder, as one of the digital dating platforms, can therefore be understood not merely as a medium for finding potential partners but also as a space for interpersonal communication that combines visual presentation, rapid selection, and personal conversation. Users are required to determine how they present themselves through photographs and profile information before entering more personal stages of communication.

In Tinder interactions, self-disclosure represents one of the important processes in developing interpersonal closeness. Users may disclose information about their age, occupation, education, hobbies, reasons for using the application, relationship preferences, and previous relationship experiences. However, such disclosure does not occur without consideration because users interact with individuals who are initially strangers, whose identities and intentions cannot always be fully verified. Users therefore need to consider what information should be disclosed, what information should be withheld, and when more personal information can appropriately be revealed. From the perspective of Social Penetration Theory, interpersonal relationships develop through a process of disclosure that gradually moves from relatively general information toward increasingly personal and deeper information (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Thus, self-disclosure on Tinder can be understood as a selective, gradual, and context-dependent process rather than as complete openness from the beginning of an interaction.

In addition to self-disclosure, Tinder users engage in impression management. Profile photographs, biographies, language styles, humor, conversation topics, and response patterns can be used to create particular impressions in the minds of potential partners. Users may attempt to present themselves as attractive, safe, mature, humorous, serious, or easy to communicate with. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective explains that individuals regulate symbols, appearance, language, and behavior in social interactions in order to construct particular impressions in the eyes of others (Goffman, 2008). In the context of Tinder, profiles can be viewed as a digital front stage where users present a particular version of themselves to potential matches, while conversations provide a space in which previously established impressions can be maintained, tested, or modified.

This phenomenon demonstrates the close relationship between self-disclosure and impression management in the formation of digital romantic relationships. Users need to disclose aspects of themselves so that conversations can develop, yet at the same time they may feel encouraged to present the most attractive version of themselves. This tension between openness and self-presentation can generate issues related to authenticity, privacy,

identity uncertainty, identity manipulation, and communication security. Ward (2017) demonstrates that impression management on Tinder begins when users select profile photographs while anticipating the expectations of potential matches. Similarly, Duguay (2017) shows that authenticity on Tinder is closely related to how users construct and curate their digital identities in response to the characteristics and affordances of the platform.

Interpersonal communication on Tinder is also shaped by the characteristics of computer-mediated communication. Walther (1996) explains that computer-mediated communication can develop from impersonal communication into interpersonal and even hyperpersonal communication when individuals strategically manage messages, response timing, and self-presentation. On Tinder, trust and interpersonal closeness can be developed through various digital cues, including message consistency, word choice, communication intensity, narrative consistency, willingness to disclose personal information, and respect for interpersonal boundaries. Digital communication, therefore, functions not merely as a channel for exchanging messages but also as a space in which users negotiate identity, trust, and emotional closeness.

Digital identity in this context is constructed through the selection and curation of information presented to other users. The identity displayed on Tinder may not always be identical to an individual's offline identity, but such differences do not necessarily indicate deception or falsification. Rather, digital identity can emerge through a negotiation between the desire to be recognized, the desire to appear attractive, and the need to maintain privacy (Duguay, 2017). Users exercise a certain degree of control over the information they reveal and the information they withhold. Consequently, identity construction on Tinder should be understood as a dynamic communication process rather than simply as a matter of authentic versus inauthentic identity.

Previous studies have examined digital dating applications from various perspectives, including self-disclosure, self-presentation, motivations for use, relationship initiation, swipe mechanisms, and authenticity (Duguay, 2017; Ellison et al., 2006; LeFebvre, 2018; Ward, 2017). Ellison et al. (2006), for example, examined the importance of self-presentation in online dating interactions, while LeFebvre (2018) explored the process of relationship formation through Tinder. Duguay (2017) demonstrated that users' identities and perceptions of authenticity on Tinder are shaped through processes of curation and negotiation with the characteristics of the platform. Although these studies have provided important insights into digital dating and online relationship formation, there remains a need for an integrated examination of self-disclosure and impression management as interconnected processes in the formation of digital romantic relationships. This gap is important because self-disclosure and impression management do not operate independently. The information users disclose simultaneously contributes to the construction of their self-image, while the image they construct may influence their willingness to disclose increasingly personal information.

Digital romantic relationships can be understood as relationships whose formation and

development are mediated by digital platforms. On Tinder, relationships may develop from profile evaluation and matching to initial conversations, information exchange, increased communication intensity, migration to other communication platforms, and potentially face-to-face encounters. Hobbs et al. (2017) describe dating applications as spaces capable of producing networked intimacy, in which intimacy is constructed through digital networks and particular communication strategies. Relationship formation therefore depends not only on initial attraction but also on users' ability to manage self-disclosure, construct impressions, negotiate digital identities, and establish trust.

Based on this context, the present study focuses on how self-disclosure and impression management among Tinder users contribute to the formation of digital romantic relationships. The study aims to examine forms of self-disclosure, impression management strategies, digital identity construction, trust formation, the development of romantic closeness, and the negotiation between authenticity and self-presentation in Tinder interactions. The main research question is: How do self-disclosure and impression management among Tinder users contribute to the formation of digital romantic relationships? Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of digital interpersonal communication by examining the relationship between self-disclosure, impression management, digital identity, trust, and interpersonal closeness within a dating application environment. Practically, the study provides insight into the importance of managing self-disclosure, digital self-presentation, privacy, and trust when developing romantic relationships through digital dating platforms.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design. This approach was selected because the study sought to explore the lived experiences, meanings, communication strategies, and subjective interpretations of Tinder users in developing digital romantic relationships. Qualitative research enables researchers to examine social phenomena in depth, while phenomenology is particularly appropriate for understanding how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The participants consisted of seven active Tinder users aged 18–30 years who were selected through purposive sampling. Participants were required to have used Tinder for at least three months, engaged in active matches and conversations, disclosed personal information during interactions, and managed their self-presentation through profile photographs, biographies, or communication styles. The number of participants was determined based on data adequacy and the emergence of recurring patterns concerning self-disclosure, impression management, digital identity, trust, romantic closeness, and authenticity.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, limited observation of participants' Tinder profiles with their explicit consent, and documentation of anonymized conversations. The interviews explored participants' motivations for using Tinder,

considerations in selecting profile photographs and biographies, information they chose to disclose or withhold, strategies for managing impressions, experiences in developing conversations, perceptions of trust and comfort, identification of red flags, and decisions to continue communication through other platforms. To protect participants' privacy and maintain research ethics, all personal information, including names, addresses, telephone numbers, specific locations, social media accounts, and the identities of conversation partners, was anonymized.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure, which involved transcription, repeated reading of the data, initial coding, grouping related codes, developing themes, and interpreting the findings. Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description. Ethical considerations were applied throughout the research process, particularly because the study involved sensitive experiences related to romantic relationships, digital identities, self-disclosure, and personal communication. Participants' informed consent was obtained before data collection, and their privacy, confidentiality, and right to withdraw from the study were respected throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-Disclosure, Privacy Boundaries, and Stages of Self-Disclosure

The study's findings show that Tinder users' self-disclosure takes place gradually, selectively, and strategically. Initial disclosure usually includes basic identities, such as nicknames, age, education, public employment, extended residence, hobbies, or personal interests. This information is considered quite secure because it can help build conversations without directly exposing sensitive data. One informant stated, "I don't tell you personal things right away. I usually start with a nickname, where I go to college, daily activities, or hobbies" (R1).

Self-disclosure then progresses to relational and emotional information when communication feels more secure. Users can start talking about their goals for using Tinder, relationship preferences, past relationship experiences, or expectations for their partner. However, this openness is not given automatically. Another informant emphasized, "I don't give you a WhatsApp number right away. For me, Tinder is the starting point to get to know, so personal information should still be filtered" (R2). These findings show that openness always goes hand in hand with risk management. In the perspective of Social Penetration Theory, this pattern shows the movement from surface information to deeper information. However, in Tinder, the process is not always linear. Users can open up, then re-close the boundaries if the interlocutor's response is deemed unsafe. Thus, self-disclosure is not only a means of building closeness, but also a relational filtering mechanism. Users use openness to test whether the interlocutor has empathy, consistency, and respect for privacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973) (Gibbs et al., 2006)

Impression Management and Digital Identity Construction

The management of Tinder users' impressions is evident from the creation of the profile. Photos, bios, interests, general work, and conversational style are curated elements to make users look attractive, safe, and worthy of interaction. R1 stated, "I choose photos that look natural, but still neat. I don't want to look too contrived." This statement shows an effort to balance visual appeal and claims of authenticity. Photos are not only self-documentation, but visual language that gives an initial impression before the conversation takes place. The bio serves as a brief narrative to direct the perception of the potential partner. R4 explained that he once changed the bio because the previous version was too joking and made him not taken seriously. After that, he compiled a bio that was clearer but still light. These findings show that the bio is not just a complement to the profile, but a tool for selecting meaning. Users can signal the character, interests, humor, or orientation of the relationship through short text.

The construction of digital identities in Tinder occurs through information curation. Users do not display their entire offline identity, but choose the parts of themselves that are considered relevant to the purpose of the relationship. Information such as office names, specific locations, campuses, routines, or personal numbers are often withheld to maintain security. R5 states that it deletes campus information and daily activities because it feels too open. This shows that digital identity is not only built through the information that is displayed, but also through the information that is hidden. In Goffman's dramaturgy framework, Tinder profiles can be read as a digital front stage. Users set their appearances, symbols, and messages so that potential matches form certain perceptions. However, digital identity doesn't stop at the profile. It's tested in conversations. Consistency between photos, bios, and chat styles is an important indicator. If the profile looks polite but the conversation is aggressive, users tend to lose trust. Thus, digital identities are fluid, strategic, and constantly negotiated throughout the interaction (2008)

Digital Romantic Trust and Closeness

Trust in Tinder doesn't arise just because of a match. Users build trust through a gradual assessment of the profile, completeness of information, consistency of story, conversational style, mutual openness, and respect for privacy boundaries. R7 states, "If the profile looks like you're looking for a serious relationship, but the chat is sexually explicit or too flirtatious, I don't believe it at all." These findings suggest that trust is formed by the compatibility between self-representation and communication behavior. Users also verify information before opening up further. R4 explained that he usually switches to Instagram before WhatsApp to see if the identity of the interlocutor appears real and consistent. This practice is in line with the strategy of reducing uncertainty in online dating. Verification is not just a technical process, but a privacy negotiation. The move of the platform provides more personalized access, so it is only done when the user feels safe enough (Gibbs et al., 2011)

Digital romantic closeness grows when the initial attraction develops into a

communication convenience. Matches open up opportunities, but conversations determine the direction of the relationship. Shared interests, the right humor, small attention, consistent responses, and the intensity of communication reinforce closeness. R3 states that he begins to feel close when the interlocutor remembers a small story he or she once told. In the perspective of intimacy, closeness is not only determined by self-disclosure, but also by the responsiveness of the partner, which is the experience of feeling understood, validated, and cared for (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Digital romantic closeness does not mean superficial because it is mediated by an application. It has different formation mechanisms. Users assess profiles, read communication styles, open up slowly, test trust, maintain privacy, and then decide whether communication is worth moving to a more personal space. New relationships develop when openness, comfort, trust, and responsiveness go reciprocatingly.

Authenticity, Imagery, and Discussion Synthesis

The tension between authenticity and self-image is a key dynamic in Tinder's overall communication process. Users want to appear as an honest self, but also feel the need to build an attractive image in order to get attention. R6 stated, "In chats I can be more confident than I am. But I realize that if it's too different, it's going to be hard to meet in person." This statement shows that authenticity is understood not as total openness, but as consistency between profiles, conversations, and offline identities. Imagery in Tinder doesn't necessarily mean manipulation. Selection of the best photos, bio drafting, language style adjustments, and restricting personal information can be a reasonable communication strategy as long as it's not misleading. Duguay explains that authenticity in Tinder has to do with the user's ability to build a coherent self-narrative within the platform's logic. Problems arise when the image displayed goes too far from communication behavior or creates untenable expectations (2017)

If all the findings are put together, the formation of digital romantic relationships on Tinder takes place through a multi-level mechanism. First, users build initial interest through profiles, photos, and bios. Second, users open up to a limited extent to initiate introductions. Third, users manage impressions so that the information opened is understood positively. Fourth, digital identity is tested through consistency between profiles and conversations. Fifth, trust grows when communication feels secure, reciprocal, and non-forceful. Sixth, romantic closeness develops through attention, humor, common interests, communication intensity, and responsiveness. Thus, Tinder is not just a space for couples selection, but a space for negotiating identity and closeness. Users are not just looking for interesting people, but also people they can trust. Self-disclosure paves the way to recognition, impression management shapes perception, digital identity provides the basis for representation, trust determines the feasibility of interactions, and intimacy grows through reciprocal communication. Authenticity is a measure of whether a relationship can move from mere digital attraction to more meaningful romantic closeness (Duguay, 2017; Laurenceau et al., 1998)

CONCLUSION

This research shows that self-disclosure and impression management play an important role in shaping digital romantic relationships of Tinder users. Relationships do not emerge instantly through matches, but through selective, gradual, and strategic communication processes. Users assess profiles, read initial impressions, build conversations, slowly open self-information, test the consistency of the interlocutor, and determine whether the interaction is worth continuing to a more personal stage. Self-disclosure takes place through the opening of basic information towards more personal information, but always accompanied by control over privacy boundaries. At the same time, impression management is carried out through photos, bios, information choices, language styles, humor, and message responses. This strategy not only aims to attract attention, but also to form an image as a safe, credible, and trustworthy person. The construction of a Tinder user's digital identity is formed through information selection and self-representation. Digital identities do not fully reflect the entirety of offline identities, but they are also not necessarily fake. They are tested through consistency between profiles, bios, photos, and conversational styles. Trust grows when the interlocutor demonstrates information appropriateness, comfortable communication, consistent responses, and respect for personal boundaries. Romantic closeness is formed when openness, common interests, humor, attention, and the intensity of communication develop reciprocity.

The tension between authenticity and self-image becomes a key dynamic in the process. Users want to appear honest, but they also need to build an attractive image. Curation of photos, bios, communication styles, and personal information is considered reasonable as long as it remains consistent with the user's identity. Imagery becomes problematic when it conflicts with communication behaviors or establishes untenable expectations. Theoretically, this study strengthens the study of digital interpersonal communication by showing that self-disclosure and impression management are inseparable in the formation of application-based romantic relationships. Practically, this study emphasizes the importance of a balance between self-openness, attractiveness, privacy, and trust in the use of dating apps.

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