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Duguay, S. (2018). Tinder - Swiped: A focal gesture and contested app visions. In J. W. Morris & S. Murray (eds.), *Appified: Culture in the Age of Apps*, pp. 127-135. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

App: Tinder

Developer: Tinder Inc. (Part of *Match Group*, within the media conglomerate IAC/InterActiveCorp)

Category: Lifestyle

Price: Free (Tinder Plus starting at \$9.99 USD monthly)

Platform: iOS and Android

Tags: social networking, hooking up, relationships, swiping

Tagline: "Meet interesting people nearby"

Related apps: happn, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hinge

Contested App Visions

At one point, Tinder's webpage displayed the app's download button with the tagline, "Any swipe can change your life." When the app launched in 2012, its introduction of the swipe functionality for sorting users into categories of "like" and "nope" was fairly novel. As Tinder gained popularity, reflecting the increased uptake of dating websites and apps among American adults (Smith 2016), swiping proliferated across apps for other purposes, from selecting rental properties to matching rescued pets with owners (Cunningham 2015). The swipe has also become a culturally recognised logic, with popular songs, jingles, and celebrities making reference to "swiping right" on people and products they find favourable. While the swipe is a simple, mundane gesture that has previously featured in touchscreen technologies, its central role in Tinder's design has been highly influential in shaping users' and the media's perception of the app. Despite Tinder developers' assertion that it is a "social discovery app" (Craw 2014) for meeting new people, media commentary has often associated Tinder's rapid swiping with facilitating casual sexual encounters. This association between Tinder and hooking up poses a threat to the company's bottom line, as discourses that link casual sex to immorality, promiscuity, and danger affect Tinder's uptake.

Perceptions of apps are not arbitrary; they stem from the sociotechnical, political, cultural, and economic arrangements in which users are embedded (van Dijck 2013). Tinder's iconic design functionality - the swipe - harnesses material features of software and hardware to facilitate rapid, sustained, binary, and visually focused interactions with the app. Users and the media perceive these qualities in relation to social and cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. As the swipe becomes fused with these perceptions, this focal functionality inhibits Tinder from dislodging popular notions of its app through either rhetorical or design interventions. In fact, attempts to re-align users to a more favorable and, by extension, profitable vision risk trivializing the app's purpose altogether. This chapter examines the swipe's

integration into mobile technology and how its affordances have been perceived within a particular sociocultural context, contributing to the app's reputation. By reflecting on Tinder's swipe, it is possible to understand the relationship between an app's design, corporate framing, and popular reception.

The Swipe as the Main Attraction

The swipe, as an embodied gesture, has historically featured in social, financial, and technological interactions, often bridging the body and technological interfaces. Waving one's hand or finger from side-to-side is a common motion that can symbolize greeting, dismissal, or communicate that people or things should be sorted *here* or *there*. In combination with various media forms, swiping enables perusing a magazine or flicking a radio dial. With the development of financial technologies, swiping acquired a transactional quality, as credit cards and loyalty cards now enable the exchange of money or personal data with a quick swipe. Swiping features as a main activity on touchscreen devices, most famously applied in Apple's patented "slide-to-unlock" iPhone feature (Macari 2012). Some form of swiping is now used to accomplish a range of appified tasks, from composing words with SwiftKey to pulling back a slingshot in Angry Birds. While Tinder's adoption of the swipe extends from its role as an interactional, transactional, and interfacing gesture, the app's configuration of users, software, and hardware emphasizes certain qualities of the swipe, mainly the possibility for it to be continuous, binary, and visually focused.

Tinder's app store description identifies the swipe as the app's central activity. The app presents users with a profile "card" containing a potential match's photo, name, and age. While heart and "x" buttons are present, Tinder suggests, "If you're interested in connecting with someone, swipe right! If not, just swipe left to pass" (Apple Inc., 2016). If users swipe right on each other's cards, they create a match, allowing them to message one another. Werning (2015) describes Tinder's swipe as a sorting function that conceptualizes infinite space on either side of the screen, allowing users to categorize others into bottomless repositories. As Tinder combines the gesture with a predictive algorithm that attunes to users' selection patterns, the swipe is designed to reward ongoing use with more accurate potential matches. Rewarding consistent interaction compliments how smartphones have become constant companions with which users build intimacy (Mowlabocus 2016). Tinder's flow of new profiles, combined with repeated haptic interaction, fosters an intimacy between users and the app that sustains continuous engagement.

The swipe's sorting functionality presents users with binary options that emphasize visually focused information for decision-making. Binary sorting according to attractiveness builds on previous rating games, such as *Hot or Not* and the early version of Facebook, *Facemash*, which allowed Harvard students to rank each other's appearance (Kaplan 2003). A user's photo occupies most of the screen and users must interrupt the flow of swiping by tapping on a profile to see additional information. Emphasizing appearance accords with a broader visual turn in social media design and practice, with photo and video sharing increasing as technology becomes more accommodating to these formats (Duggan 2013). Rapidly swiping through continuous visual information is common to navigating other visually laden social media, such

as by flicking upward to scroll through Instagram photos. When deployed among particular gender and sexual discourses, these continuous, binary, and visual qualities of Tinder's swipe are perceived in ways that influence the app's reception.

Interpreting the Swipe

Tinder's framing and users' perception of the swipe's qualities have developed within a particular sociocultural context. Nagy and Neff (2015) propose the concept of *imagined affordances* as possibilities for action that "emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (p. 5). Tinder's material arrangements present the qualities discussed above, which are imagined to afford different applications according to various actors and their relation to the app. The company imagines Tinder's affordances in its attempt to market the app while users and the media imagine these affordances differently as they adopt and critique Tinder. These multiple imaginings are shaped through existing discourses about sex, gender, and relationships.

Tinder's early promotion framed the app as conducive to sexual encounters. Bikini-clad models featured on Tinder's homepage¹ while launch videos on YouTube (now removed) included sexually charged imagery. Tapping into associations among alcohol intake, college life, and casual sex (Heldman and Wade 2010), Tinder featured alcohol brands in early videos and promoted the app to sororities and fraternities (Summers 2014). Tinder followed on the success of several hookup apps for men seeking men and media articles often compared it to these apps (e.g., Muston 2013). Similar to the way that Grindr's focus on images with minimal information exchange frames encounters as "no strings attached" (Licoppe, Riviere, and Morel 2015; Race 2014), Tinder's developers discussed its swipe as a casual, game-like activity (Stampler 2014). Licoppe, Riviere, and Morel (2015) found that some Grindr users viewed themselves as hunters and other users as sexual prey. Tinder's CEO Sean Rad has similarly stated that when people meet, "You're either a hunter – the way we see it – or you're being hunted" (Tinder 2013a) and Tinder mediates this situation. This frames Tinder's swipe as a mechanism for accessing and arranging casual sex, which carries the baggage of gendered stereotypes and expectations.

Tinder user surveys identify entertainment as the top motivation for use (Carpenter and McEwan 2016; Ranzini and Lutz 2016) and the most frequent users as those seeking sexual partners (Carpenter and McEwan 2016). However, men are more likely than women to look for sex on Tinder (Ranzini and Lutz 2016). Examining user commentary beyond these statistics reveals the endurance of a gendered double-standard that rewards men's engagement in casual sex while women are pressured to engage in sexual activity but shamed when they do (Kalish and Kimmel 2011). The Tinder subreddit (r/tinder) hosts discussions among users, mostly men, about optimizing profiles to attain hookups and includes screenshots triumphantly

¹ Accessed through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20130403040153/http://www.gotinder.com/>

depicting Tinder chats leading to casual sex. While these conquest stories receive the equivalent of textual high fives from other Redditors, female users re-post men's vulgar, forceful, and unwanted sexual solicitations to @tindernightmares on Instagram. Their posts highlight gendered discourses about men's entitlement to sex and reflect trends of digital technology being used for gender-based abuse and harassment (Jane 2016). An experimental study has shown that men tend to swipe right in higher volumes while women swipe right less frequently and are more selective (Tyson, Perta, Haddadi, and Seto 2016). Keeping in mind the gendered sexual discourses that shape perceptions of Tinder, one possible explanation of these trends may be that male users are more likely to perceive Tinder's swipe as a way to access sex and, by extension, social status. Concurrently, women might perceive the swipe's double opt-in as a way to deflect male sexual entitlement and regulate the visibility of their expression of sexual desire.

With Tinder increasing in popularity, media reports and critiques have run with the association between the swipe's qualities and casual sex to sustain moral panics about technology. Some op-eds lament the swipe's rapidly continuous, binary, and visual qualities as inhibiting young people from forging intimate and long-term relationships (e.g., Eler and Peyser 2016) while others compare the swipe's transactional qualities to online shopping (e.g., Sales 2015). Campaigns have also critiqued the swipe as commodifying and objectifying individuals, reducing users to pieces of meat (e.g., Maureira 2014). Alarming news articles about Tinder dates being assaulted or murdered associate unscrupulous swiping with tragic consequences (Sutton 2015), often framing the app as an irresponsible way to meet partners. From this publicity, it is evident that Tinder's initial sexual framing and subsequent perception as a hookup app have contributed to a reputation that constrains the app's uptake for other purposes.

Interventions Without a Match

User and media interpretations of the swipe as mainly for hookups narrows Tinder's desired scope of use, limiting its appeal to different user groups and potential advertisers. While referred to as an app, Tinder engages in the "politics of 'platforms'" (Gillespie 2010), navigating tensions between commercial interests and fostering user-generated content to form connections and sustain a business enterprise. Within these politics, platform owners attempt to sway the adoption and development of their technology toward the most profitable interpretation of its affordances. A narrow user base and stigmatized sexual environment is hostile to advertisers, especially larger, higher-paying brands that have a stake in maintaining their wholesome image. Therefore, Tinder's attempts to redefine its app must retain utility for current users while increasing broader appeal.

Pinch and Bijker's (1984) concept of interpretive flexibility describes technological development as a process of variation and selection as social groups vie over the meaning of an object. Companies infuse commercial interests into these iterative development stages, such as through the incremental shifts that transformed Twitter from "primarily a conversational communication tool to being a global, ad-supported followers tool" (van Dijck 2011, p. 343). Although the notion of closure has been challenged (Clayton 2002), it is useful to note that attempts at stabilizing a technology's interpretation are often made through two approaches

(Pinch and Bijker 1984): “rhetorical closure” (p. 426), efforts to produce dominant discourse that allays the controversy encompassing a technology, and “redefinition of the problem” (p. 427), reframing a problem to garner agreement that the technology in question presents the solution. Tinder has taken both of these approaches to instill its reinterpretation.

Tinder’s rhetoric has increasingly steered users toward perceiving the app as useful for meeting people and forming romantic relationships. The company’s first narrative promotional video, #ItStartsHere,² abandoned dark nightclubs to depict young people socializing in well-lit, diverse settings (e.g., parks, beaches). Tinder also combatted perceptions of being for hookups through social media campaigns, such as #SwipedRight,³ showcasing engagement and wedding stories from couples who met through Tinder. “#SwipedRight” implies that the “right” approach to swiping is one that yields relationships rather than hookups. Tensions between Tinder’s vision and media interpretations eventually intensified with Vanity Fair’s article, “Tinder and the dawn of the ‘dating apocalypse’” (Sales, 2015), which depicted New Yorkers endlessly swiping for casual sex. Tinder responded with tweets asserting that its app has many purposes aside from sex, including “travel, dating, relationships, friends and a shit ton of marriages” (Tinder, 2015a). Despite subtle and fervent attempts to reframe Tinder, media and user rhetoric maintains its perception as a hookup app. CEO Sean Rad’s assertions that the app is broadly “about making introductions” (Recode, 2016) are still met with incredulity in media interviews following years of relationship-focused branding strategies.

When perceived as a hookup app, Tinder’s swipe solves the problem of finding partners for casual sex. Tinder has attempted to redefine the swipe so that it instead solves the problems of: a) initiating relationships between users; b) initiating relationships between users and advertisers; and c) monetizing users’ relationship with Tinder. Tinder placed limits upon the swipe’s rapid and continuous qualities by introducing “an algorithm that intelligently limits the number of likes a user can make in a consecutive 12 hour period” (Tinder, 2015b). The swipe limit was designed to thwart users, third-party apps, and spambots from continuous right swiping (Crook, 2015) and encourage users to become “more thoughtful” (Tinder, 2015b) through rationed swipes. This update was premised on the assumption that if users had to be more selective about swipes, they would expend fewer swipes on casual encounters and instead seek relationship partners. However, this change was imposed concurrently with the unveiling of Tinder Plus: a subscription model that provided perks to paying users, including unlimited swiping. By allowing revenue-producing users to continue swiping indiscriminately, this update did not improve Tinder’s reputation but only ignited uproar among users (Acker and Beaton 2016).

Tinder also attempted to alter the swipe’s visual focus by presenting more information about users. A major update allowed users to display Instagram photos, made Facebook ‘likes’ more visible, and enabled users to see friends of mutual friends, extending visible connections one step further (Tinder, 2015c). However, this information was not visible from the swipe screen

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PijV1HIHTIY>

³ <http://swipedright.gotinder.com/>

and only appeared when users tapped to explore individual profiles further. A later update imported users' job and education directly to their swipe cards (Lam, 2015). While this design change adds personal details to users' decision-making process during swiping, positioning these indicators of socioeconomic status prominently does little to ameliorate Tinder's reputation of commodifying users.

In 2016, a drastic addition to the app's interface combined rhetorical and hard-coded redefinition attempts. "Tinder Social" allows users to see other Facebook friends who are using Tinder and select up to three of them to form a group. Groups can swipe collectively on other groups and match to chat and make arrangements for meeting up. Promotion on the company's blog underscores the feature's *social* use: to take "an average night out with your friends to the next level" (Tinder, 2016). However, reception to Tinder Social indicated just how ingrained the swipe had become with perceptions that its main purpose is for hooking up. Media stories immediately circulated interpretations of the feature as being for group sex (Kleeman, 2016). Qualities of the swipe are not easily reinterpreted as conducive to forging friendships, since people are thought to carefully select friends based upon more than appearance and minimal information. Sorting groups in a binary manner also presents the problem of discarding potentially compatible users along with incompatible ones if seeking to form longer-term relationships.

These instances of rhetorical and technological intervention into Tinder's imagined affordances demonstrate the difficulty of dislodging the swipe from its initial interpretation. Despite expending resources on rebranding, the app's developers altered multiple aspects of its interface while leaving the swipe's continuous, binary, and visual qualities largely intact. The necessity of retaining Tinder's trademark functionality, which earned the app a place in the everyday vernacular, has constrained Tinder's avenues for shifting its overall perception.

Conclusion

Tinder's swipe, as a gesture combined with software features and hardware characteristics, comprises a network of material arrangements that give rise to the qualities of sustained engagement, binary sorting, and visual emphasis. Users and the media perceive these qualities within their sociocultural context, creating associations between the app and casual sex that conflict with the company's vision and commercial interests. In response, Tinder's development has included rhetorical and design interventions aimed at re-defining and modifying the swipe's qualities so they may be perceived as conducive to forming relationships.

Tinder's difficulty in shifting users' perceptions draws attention to how its sociocultural context complicates the management of platform politics. Tinder must balance tensions between users and advertisers while also maneuvering deep-seated sexual stigmas. The swipe's connection to casual sex, which has led to both the app's popularity and infamy, must become distanced from sexual activity to appeal to advertisers who seek to capitalize on the swipe for product selection. Adding functionality deemed *social*, along with swipe limits and increased displays of personal information, allows Tinder to demonstrate that its app has a range of uses conducive to selling cars, gum, and TV shows while preserving advertisers' reputations. Although the

swipe has become entrenched in interpretations linking it to casual sex, Tinder's interventions push against this perception to bolster its bottom line while simultaneously attempting to maintain the app's signature functionality.

This analysis of the swipe, a simple gesture integrated into app technology, demonstrates how such design elements can influence a technology's reception and development trajectory. Rather than taking a deterministic approach, this chapter has examined how users, the media, and Tinder's developers have imagined and interacted with the swipe in ways leading to the mutual shaping of the app's technological design and its social, cultural, and economic outcomes. This shows how embodied ways of interfacing with technology can accrue greater meaning within particular sociocultural contexts. The interpretation of this meaning can subsequently spark contention among those who have a stake in an app's future.

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