

CMSC 304 Computer Ethics

Dating apps

Heads-up: We will be talking about sex, sexual harassment, and assault as part of the discussion of safety and ethical implications of online dating/dating apps. Please take necessary steps to manage your mental health and comfort.

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Bookkeeping

- EA1 grades soon!
- Should be underway on EA 2
 - You will need to meet **outside of class** for this
- Projects will be **individual** or **in pairs**. Start thinking about what ethical issue you want to dig into.
- A note on participation: some participation grades will be dropped. If you get sick, stay home!
- Reading journal reminder: You must include something **new to the conversation**.

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Recurring concepts

- “how is this not illegal”
- “I was surprised how similar internet stalking in 2013 to how it is today”
- “There isn't much mitigation to stop assailants from using apps to find targets” (why?)
- “I wholeheartedly agree that dating apps could be doing a lot more”
- “Some people don't recognize the individual responsibility they must have” (but are we victim blaming?)

(shortened/paraphrased to fit on a slide)

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Positives of online dating

- Have made dating easier
 - >50% of Americans ages 18-30 use dating apps
 - ~53% have positive experiences
- Allow an expanded pool of possible partners
- Easier to meet people from different demographic pools

Because we're talking about ethical issues and failures, we'll mostly be discussing ways computer dating goes wrong.

This is not to say they don't provide a valuable service or have positive value – which is why we bother trying to improve them!

twitter.com/privacvint/status/831563605397102593

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Some of the dangers of online dating

- Safety
- Scams
- Infidelity
- Do they make us more racist, sexist, etc.?
- Lying and accuracy of presented identities
- Impacts on mental health
- Lack of face-to-face interaction can lead to bad behavior
- Harassment
- Catfishing



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Safety: statistics

- Of 1,244 women who have used dating apps, 31% have been assaulted
 - About half of those were raped
 - These assaults tend to be more violent
 - Most assaults occur during first in-person meeting
 - Population is a set of Mechanical Turk workers who completed the survey
 - Something like 1/6 men (17%)
 - **This is much higher than general population numbers**
- Reminder: Sexual assault and harassment are never the victim's fault, no matter what they were wearing, drinking, or whom they were with
- **But what responsibilities do app developers have?**

time.com/6256395/dating-app-safety-tips/

www.rainn.org/articles/online-dating-and-dating-app-safety-tips

ProPublica/Columbia Journalism Investigations survey - www.propublica.org/article/tinder-lets-known-sex-offenders-use-the-app-its-not-the-only-one

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Safety: app development

- Most dating sites don't screen registered sex offenders
- Legal options against sites are extremely curtailed
- Only a few states enforce any kind of safety regulations for dating apps/sites
 - Mostly require notifying users that there are no background checks
- Because sex offenses are under-reported, registries are imperfect
 - There's a whole discussion of the ethics of such registries, but it is (semi) orthogonal to the discussion of safety in online dating

time.com/6256395/dating-app-safety-tips/

ProPublica/Columbia Journalism Investigations survey - www.propublica.org/article/tinder-lets-known-sex-offenders-use-the-app-its-not-the-only-one

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PSA safety tips

- Don't re-use pictures that appear elsewhere on the internet
- Don't publicize personal details (address, workplace)
- Consider using a shortened name or initials
- Communicate using the dating app
 - Safety tools like nude blockers exist; scams are more likely when outside
- Don't link other social media accounts to your profile, don't log in via Facebook
- Don't go someplace private or unsafe with someone the first ~~few several~~ many meetings
- Never provide financial **anything** online

www.rainn.org/articles/online-dating-and-dating-app-safety-tips
www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/jul/10/five-dating-app-dilemmas-answered-by-experts

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Harassment

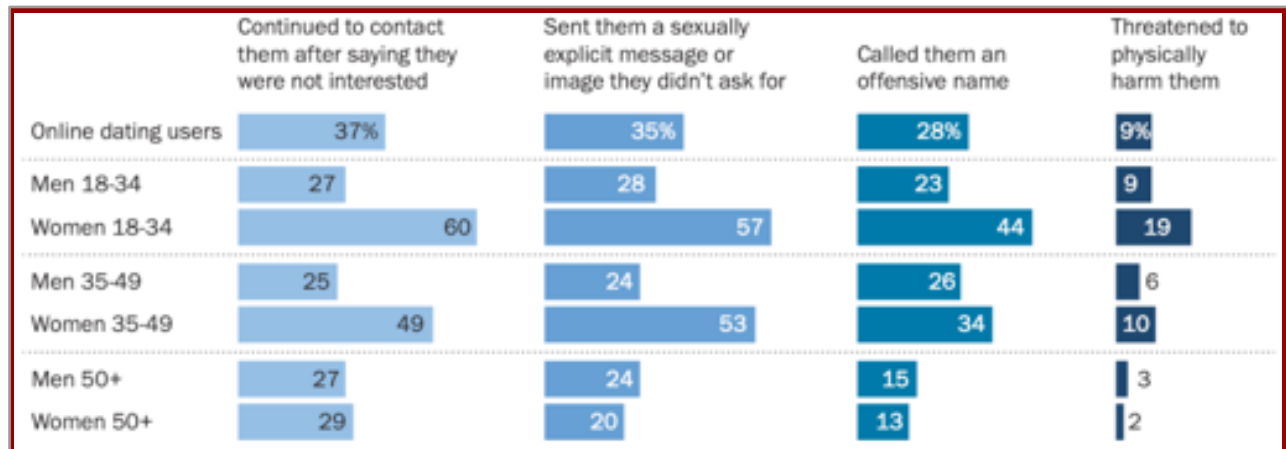
- Abusive or threatening language
 - Women aged 18-34: 19%
- Nonconsensual sexual imagery or language
 - Women 18-34: 57%; men: 28%
- Stalking
 - Can translate into the real world. One Australian study:
 - Being contacted again despite rejection (47.3%)
 - Being sent sexual images the participant didn't ask for (40.9%)
 - Threatening language (45%)
 - Online stalking (27%)



www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-22/women-rejected-men-on-dating-apps-then-the-abuse-started/10141306
www.vice.com/en/article/v7yy5y/an-overwhelming-majority-of-dating-app-users-experience-sexual-harassment
www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/06/young-women-often-face-sexual-harassment-online-including-on-dating-sites-and-apps

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Harassment



www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/06/young-women-often-face-sexual-harassment-online-including-on-dating-sites-and-apps

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Harassment: app development

What can/should app developers do to minimize harassment?

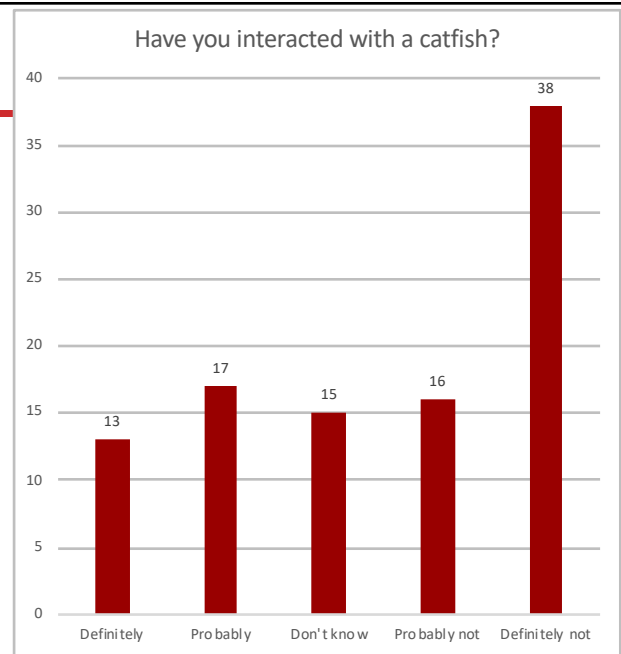
- If anything..?
- Take reports of harassing behaviors?
 - Currently, reporting frequently doesn't do anything
 - Moderators are not generally trained to address sexual assault gracefully
 - Reporting rape to a chatbot is pretty questionable
- Policies: ban users from platforms?
 - Could this be misused?
 - Does it work if it's easy to add "new" accounts?
- Stronger anti-harassment filters?
- What else?

www.propublica.org/article/addressing-rape-in-four-minutes-or-less-dating-app-reps-left-unprepared-to-respond-to-assault-victims

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Catfishing and scams

- Creating a fake (or stolen) persona on dating sites/apps and using it to engage in interactions
- Often used to steal money
 - Romance scam losses: from \$493 million in 2019 to over \$1.3 billion per year in 2021 and 2022
 - Most scams aren't reported, so these numbers are low
- Frequently target minors



www.garbo.io/blog/what-is-catfishing
www.wired.com/story/dating-apps-tools-to-thwart-scams
www.statista.com/statistics/1291656/us-adults-catfishing-interaction

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Catfishing

- Men are more likely to catfish than women
- There are a variety of reasons people do it
 - Loneliness is the #1 cited factor
 - Followed by revenge and boredom
 - Around 24% of all catfishing perpetrators pose as a different gender
- However, Facebook has bigger problems than dating apps
- Romance scams spiked during COVID
- On free dating sites, ~10% of accounts are scammers



www.datingadvice.com/online-dating/statistics-on-catfishing

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Catfishing and scams: App development

- Tinder uses ID verification
 - Can't lie about age, gender, name
- Bumble uses photo verification
 - Take a selfie using the app
 - Then compared manually to profile image(s)
 - Hinge does the same thing with videos, uses "a mix of AI and human verification"
- Blume requires users to send each other selfies before chatting
 - Again requires using the app to avoid uploading fake pictures



www.makeuseof.com/tinder-id-verification-prevent-catfishing
www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/blume-dating-app-thwarts-catfishing
www.wired.com/story/hinge-selfie-verification-scammers-bots

www.fastcompany.com/4019806/dating-app-bumble-adds-photo-verification-to-prevent-cat-fishing-nightmares

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Catfishing and scams: The problems

- ID verification
 - People need to give sensitive personal data to use the app
 - Not everyone has a driver's license
- Photo and video verification
 - Requires extensive work on the part of the developer
 - May be gameable with deepfakes
- Requiring selfies sharing
 - Requires sharing personal info with potential matches early, which is generally the opposite of security/safety advice
- **What about data privacy?**
 - **Generally, apps don't commit to not storing/using/selling biometric or ID data**

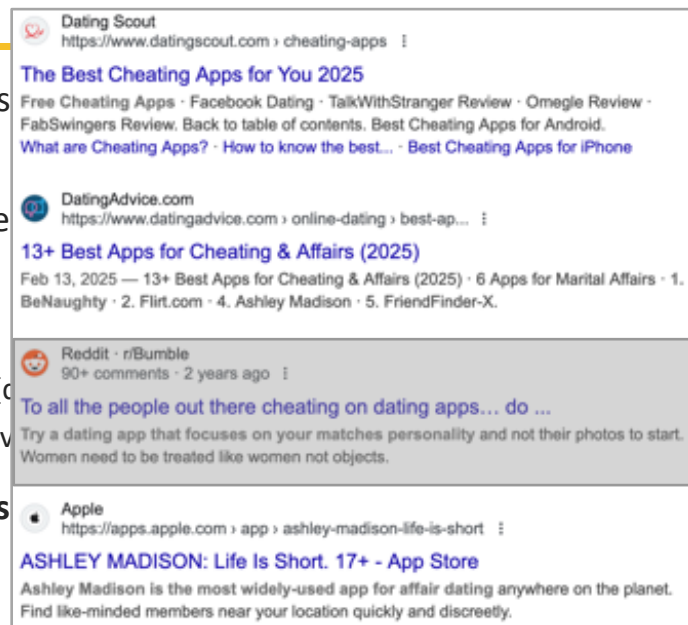
www.wired.com/story/hinge-selfie-verification-scammers-bots

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Infidelity

- 40 percent of U.S.-based singles are active on dating apps
- 42% of daters on apps are
- Main reasons
 - Hookups
 - “Estimating value on the [c]
 - Would people who cheat v
- **App development: apps s**

Google hits for “dating apps for cheating”



www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747505219302961

www.vice.com/en/article/g5vv5w/why-are-non-single-people-on-dating-apps

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Dating apps and mental health

- Tinder users (all groups) have lower satisfaction with their faces and bodies, and are more likely to monitor their appearance and view themselves from an external perspective^[1]
 - “The ... evaluation that defines Tinder use is an objectifying process that may increase body consciousness and psychological distress”^[1]
- Men who use Tinder regularly have more self-esteem issues
- Sexual racism is prevalent
 - “OKCupid ... found that compared to black, Asian or minority ethnic users, white users got more messages. White users were also found to be less likely to reply or match with users of a different race to themselves”^[2]
 - Which is obviously hard on members of minority groups using the apps

[1] www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1740144516303254

[2] theconversation.com/dating-apps-make-men-unhappy-and-provide-a-platform-for-racism-82711

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Downsides of commercial dating apps

- Many apps, but owned by a small number of companies
- The way they operate is generally secret
 - We don't know how our romantic/sexual lives are being managed (or sold)
- Data privacy and security
 - Collect large amounts of very personal data
 - Some of which could lead to discrimination, persecution, or prosecution
- Apps can shut out whole groups of people
 - If app access is a big part of dating, exclusions are socially problematic
 - Example: Tinder has issues with banning trans users^[1]

[1] www.vice.com/en/article/xwvaaz/why-do-trans-people-keep-being-banned-from-tinder

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Additional ethical failures when building apps

- Sale of users' data
- Fake profiles (mostly of women) designed to suck people in and get them to pay for advanced features
- Building deliberately addictive products
- Having a large, returning user base vs. successful dating
- The core idea of profiting from people's needs/loneliness

www.mindtheproduct.com/the-ethical-challenges-of-building-dating-apps

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More ethical failures when building apps

- -ist behavior of matching algorithms
- Supporting sexist expectations/standards of dating
- Distorted view of available options
- Underaged users
- Treating people as “disposable” game pieces

www.mindtheproduct.com/the-ethical-challenges-of-building-dating-apps

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Exclusionary practices

- Assuming binaries/categories (male/female, sexual orientation, race)
- Increased focus on physical appearance
- Increased focus on a narrow definition of physical attractiveness
- Tendency towards race-based user behavior
 - White men receive the most messages, Black women the fewest
 - Minority group members often receive messages using racial slurs
 - Probably exacerbated by perceived anonymity
- User behavior, e.g., profiles with “no Asians, no trannies”
 - “We don’t accept ‘No blacks, no Irish’ signs in real life any more, so why do we on platforms that are a major part of our dating lives [...]?”^[1]

[1] www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/sep/29/wlrm-colour-blind-dating-app-racial-discrimination-grindr-tinder-algorithm-racism

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Discussion

- Despite all this, dating apps offer a service people want!
- Say you were starting a new dating service, and you want to design the app to **avoid common ethical failures** in app design.
- Of the **ethical** issues we've discussed, name **two** that you think most need to be addressed at the app development level.
 - Safety, harassment, scams, catfishing, infidelity, bias...
- For each of those, describe the approach (policy) you would take to ensuring that your approach is ethical or supports ethical behavior.

<http://tiny.cc/computer-dating>