

# Don't Swipe Left Just Yet: Analysis and Subversion of Tinder's Genre Conventions

Ann Borow

In this article, Borow takes a look at the literate activity of a Tinder profile and, through analysis of the genre and application of CHAT, observes and documents how users have subverted Tinder by establishing healthy and significant romantic relationships through the app.

“He’s just a really amazing guy and I can’t believe I met him . . . at the school cafeteria,” my gorgeous friend says. I smirk and nod, agreeing with everyone, despite knowing that she met her new boyfriend on the most illicit of spaces, that place where no one ever admits to having met their boyfriend of almost three years: Tinder. Like the dark web of relationships, Tinder is an online space where the adventurous go to engage in an age-old practice that has become a staple in society: the one-night stand. We all know those people, the creative and innovative among us, who are willing to throw caution to the wind, post their best photos, and take the plunge . . . or should I say, make the swipe?

But I didn’t start this article talking about my gorgeous friend and her one-night stand, did I? No, I did not. But we’ll get to that.

## Tinder's Genre Conventions

Tinder’s main function, as defined by Wikipedia, is to operate as a location-based social search mobile app, facilitating communication between mutually

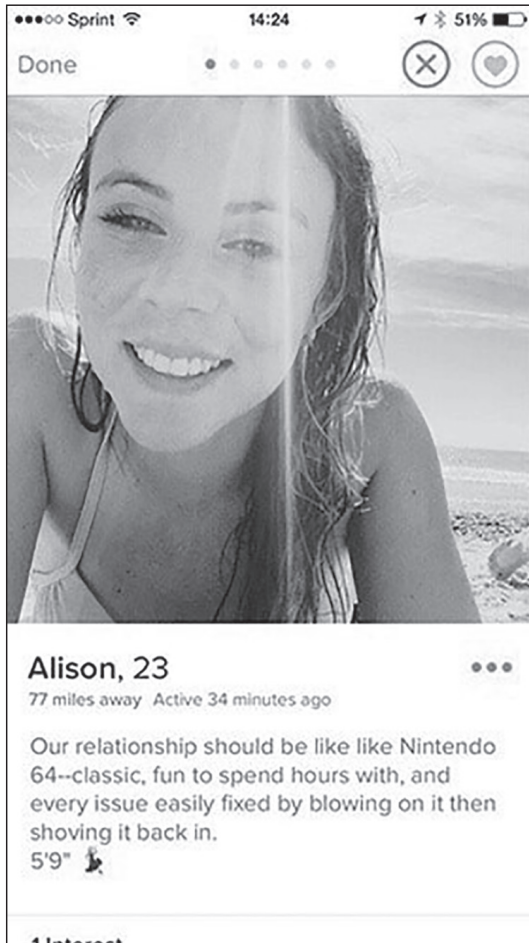


Image 1: Sample Tinder profile of a woman.

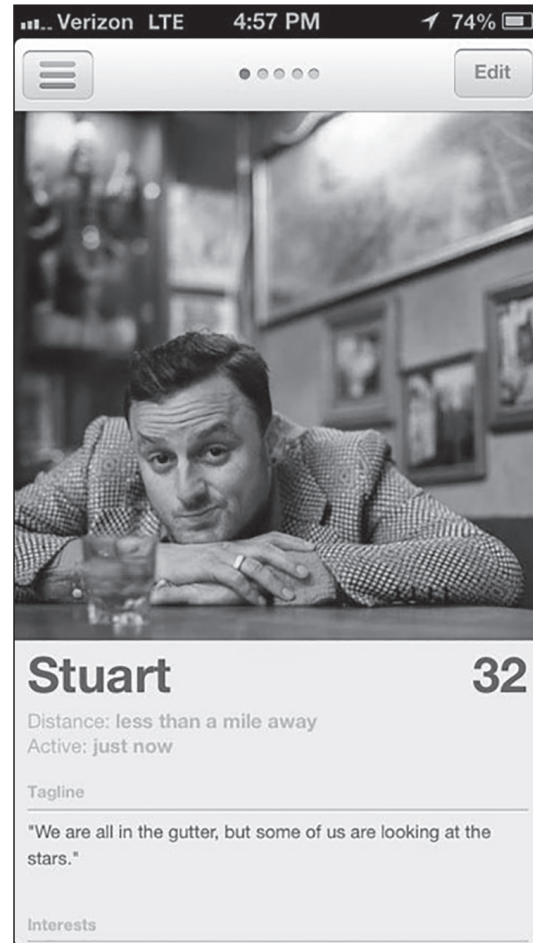


Image 2: Sample Tinder profile of a man.

interested users, allowing matched users to chat (“Tinder (app)”). While this was the intent in its initial creation, Tinder’s genre conventions have been subverted by users, resulting in new conventions for the genre (which I’ll explain in more depth later). Its common use has evolved into a dating or hookup app, an easy move for users because of Tinder’s interface, which includes multiple different ways to communicate. In fact, if you take a look at Tinder, you’ll see that it has a variety of genre conventions facilitating its matchmaking capabilities. I’ve included these images of Tinder profile examples to use while explaining the Tinder interface.

To create a Tinder account and profile, first, you log in with your Facebook profile and the same info is taken from there to create your main Tinder profile. Then, you choose a main picture. It is the first thing other users see when they are matched with you. Tinder uses your Facebook profile picture (and all your Facebook information that is public) as the main information for your profile, but you can change this depending on what you want others to see on your profile while they are swiping. You also have

a 500-character word count to describe what you're looking for on Tinder and who you are. You can add your current work, schooling, and gender as well. The app gives you a wide age range—anywhere between ages 18 to 55 plus—for you to determine the people you want to match with. In researching for this article, I pretended to create a Tinder profile, so for my profile I chose men as my preference. However, you can choose women or both men and women depending on your preferences.

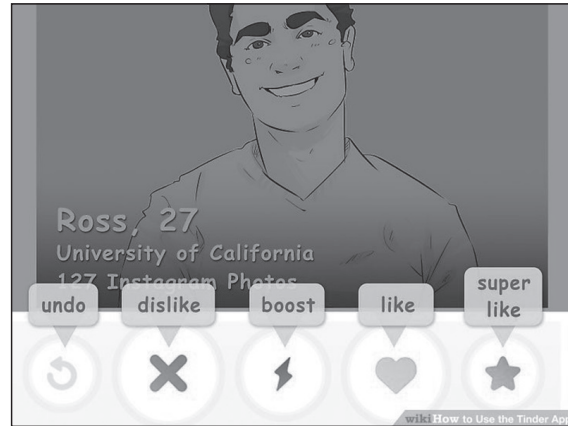


Image 3: Explanation of Tinder buttons. Image from Wikipedia.

You also have the option to turn the “Show me on Tinder” button on or off. This means your profile will be removed from the match options, or “card stack,” as Tinder terms it, if turned off. When matched with other users, you can see their activity times, or how long ago someone was using their Tinder app. As you can see in the examples above, there is also a mile radius feature, which is defaulted to search for matches within 50 miles. However, you can change and adapt this depending on how close or far away you are willing to travel. This requires that you have location services on your phone as well. You can also determine what notifications you would like turned on or off, like most social media apps. As I delved further into my Tinder research on conventions, like the ones I’ve listed, I realized there is a whole key that tells you what to do when each matched profile is displayed. The buttons and their functions are explained in Image 3 on the right. Tapping the yellow arrow (or white as pictured here) will undo your last swipe. The red X is the dislike button, which users can tap to dislike a profile, or left swipe too. The purple lightning bolt is a boost button, allowing you to boost your profile’s visibility for 30 minutes. You can only do this once a month, however. The green heart is the like button, but you can also swipe right to like a profile too. Lastly, there’s the Super Like star button, which you can also do by swiping up in a person’s profile. You need a Tinder Plus subscription to do this. You only get three free super likes per month, but you can pay anywhere from \$2 to \$20 for the Tinder Plus upgrade and get unlimited super likes, boost, and the added undo feature. Numerous other enhancements are available if you are willing to pay a small sum for them.

### Terminology Rabbit Trail

Now that we’ve discussed how Tinder works, I want to introduce **CHAT**<sup>1</sup> (**cultural-historical activity theory**) here to help with my analysis. When

we look at how something is **produced**, CHAT can help us break down the method of what goes into creating that genre. The following are a few of the terms referenced in this article. I'm afraid you all might get a little bored with all the definitions in this section, but I appeal to you, as I plunge headlong down the rabbit hole, don't swipe left just yet. So, the following are some CHAT terms we will discuss:

- **Ecology:** Environmental factors (physical/spatial) that can affect the text at all points during its trajectory through the world. Ecology is the atmosphere produced by actions inside the Tinder app. Tinder profiles, their setup, and the way these profiles are utilized are all aspects that affect Tinder's ecology, because they affect the relationships or hookups created therein. In essence, Tinder's ecology impacts what people seeking a significant or fleeting relationship do, dependent upon the app's users, their profile-making decisions, and their responses to other profiles they interact with on Tinder.
- **Reception:** All the ways a text can move around in the world, once it's produced, including people's reactions to the text and what they might do when or after reading it. The members of Tinder produce profiles, which are viewed and responded to in a variety of ways. We want to focus on how a user's receptions are changed by what they see, or by what they do in response to their significant others' profiles. This reception is really what will determine the building of a significant relationship rather than a one-night stand, as we will see.
- **Representation:** All of the thinking (from various people) that goes into how and why the text gets produced. Each Tinder user decided to present themselves in a way that would attract attention for a specific purpose. While most Tinder profiles are rather blunt and risqué, users make specific decisions in their representation. They make these choices either consciously or unconsciously and therefore determine what kind of person is going to look at their profile.

## Subverting the Conventions

Tinder's genre subversion blooms out of the soil in which it was planted: the hookup culture we currently live in. Tinder's users have taken this friendship-building mechanism and morphed it into a hookup app. I explained the conventions of Tinder's atmosphere above to show you how the app is truly an environment that creates networks of people, an ecological space in which people make decisions based on split-second actions. This ecology includes

the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing (isuwriting.com). The elements that make up the app have also been taken and changed or subverted by those users we are focusing on: users seeking long-term relationships.

The Tinder world gives you unlimited power in deciding who you want to date. Take a minute to think about your own friends. We, the aged 18–30-year-olds, are Tinder's biggest user base, according to Nick Bilton's article, "Tinder, the Fast-Growing Dating App, Taps an Age-Old Truth," published in the *New York Times*. We seek out Tinder, post our best-looking pictures with a few sentences about our interests, and then we swipe. You don't even have to get out of your bed or those flannel pajamas you're wearing to do it. Thus, the basis of Tinder's appeal, and the source of its famous nickname "the hookup app." While the CEOs of Tinder have done their best to distance themselves from the label, hook ups and one-night stands have become an essential part of Tinder's genre **conventions**: the features and elements that make the genre recognizable (isuwriting.com). I guess my question here is . . . why? Though I'm not going to attempt to answer this or probe the human psyche, keep this question in mind as you continue reading my article.

In college, students are often looking for companionship. I like to think that this is where my interest in this **genre** (which is, according to the ISU Writing Program, "a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable") stemmed from. Upon my exodus from high school into the wasteland of the collegiate unknown, my friends were all about Tinder. All of them were looking for something more, a guy or girl who could make or break their future lives. And despite us all attending events and classes with hundreds of students, my peers and friends turned to the online world of dating in order to find those special people for themselves.

### Why Such a Risqué Topic, Ann?

It was due to my friend that I became aware of the idea that Tinder had genre conventions and that these conventions were being subverted and changed every day. I learned about my friend's boyfriend very late into her freshman year, and, at first, she told me that cafeteria story. I knew that she had been dating this guy for a while (almost half a year), and it took a lot of personal probing to finally get the details. Back then I never questioned the elements of her story, but I started to wonder at the number of people I talked to and

knew who had built significant relationships from Tinder, despite its clear genre conventions perpetuating singular sexual nights between strangers. As I continued my research, I found a significant group of young people whose **reception** (how a text is taken up and used by others, as well as the ways people might use or re-purpose a text) of the Tinder app was different than most. They looked at the environment, and through the way they used the Tinder app itself, they were subverting the ecology of this environment to fit their needs. The relationships were being built, and I wanted to see how that was being accomplished, and to share those stories.

### The Cute/Romantic/Juicy Part!!

The following interviews come from people of a variety of genders and sexual orientations. Their relationships are also all different in duration of time. Each question is answered by four Tinder users, and their basic information is in the key below. After each question section, I'm going to summarize how these relationships are broken down through some CHAT terms, so that you can see the breakage of Tinder's genre conventions by these relationships.

### Key

**Interviewee #1**—Straight female, senior in college, dating her boyfriend E for 3 years. Live in close proximity, have had on and off again periods of time, but are mostly on.

**Interviewee #2**—Straight female, freshman in college, dated her ex G on Tinder for 5 months. Currently attending schools with a big enough distance proximity that dating long distance was not for them. Still very good friends and would pursue something if they lived closer.

**Interviewee #3**—Straight male, began his relationship of 3 years in undergrad, she is finishing her undergrad, so they are a short distance apart, but close enough to visit every so often, have dated straight through the 3 years.

**Interviewee #4**—Bisexual female, dated her girlfriend for about 10 months. Currently going to school with a distance proximity which makes long distance not work for them. They are still good friends and talk all the time.

## The Interviews

*Q: Why did you decide to join Tinder?*

**1:** I guess I joined because all my friends were joining Tinder at the time, and they kind of pressured me into joining too? I only kept my profile for four days after meeting E, though.

**2:** I had just gotten out of a pretty toxic relationship and was looking to make new friends and meet people to forget him, so I was like, welp, Tinder. I wasn't really looking to meet anyone new romantically and just wanted to forget the other guy.

**3:** I guess I didn't have any set expectations, I was just trying to meet people. But also, I was in a frat in undergrad when I used Tinder, and so I was seeking a partner to whatever degree that might be.

**4:** I made a Tinder partially as a joke, but I was still interested in seeking one-night stands, and possibly a relationship if one ended up developing. I used it instead of meeting people in real life because finding other women who like women just . . . out in the wild is damn near impossible. A lot of times, we *need* to use apps.

So, these individuals decided to join Tinder because they knew that they could find relationships or friendships easily because building these is part of what makes up the genre of Tinder. Some went into it looking for something serious, others because they were bored and lonely. This is where breaking the conventions of Tinder's genre comes in; these people went out of the normal use of Tinder's genre and began to change it in order to fit their specific wants and needs. This subversion occurred once when Tinder changed from being a social media app and became a hook up app, and then changed again when, like my interview subjects, some members started using it to find more significant kinds of relationships. This change in the genre was built through the actions of individual users, who went on the website in order to achieve different ends. Some did use Tinder to hook up, but many people went on looking for something that was ordinarily out of the conventions of the genre.

*Q: Did you have any specifications that you set on your profile?*

**1:** I set mine for a distance of the nearest five miles, because I hoped to meet men from [our undergrad university]. When I was swiping, if it didn't look like they were from our school anymore, then I would stop swiping right.

**2:** I think just my photos attracted guys mainly; you can post up to five and one was a selfie of me wearing these clear glasses and I kept getting

comments from guys that my glasses were adorable. Also, the standard mile radius is set at 50, and you can change it, but I kept mine at 50 since I was a senior in high school when I started using Tinder.

**3:** Yeah. I didn't want to date someone way younger or way older than me and I didn't want to date anyone in high school. I also set my seeking gender to women.

**4:** Matches had to be my age, and up to 28-years-old. I also went back and forth between the "only women" and the "men and women" match settings.

From these responses, we see that ecology is directly affecting these four Tinder users. Interviewee 1 set her Tinder settings to limit the group of men she would be interested in, and that changed who could have matched with her and eliminated a big group of men. Ecology affected Interviewee 3 since he eliminated a big group of women, thus taking out lots of match possibilities. The radius feature affects ecology here as well, since the four users changed the settings to fit their needs. Thus, ecology was affected by limiting or expanding the match groups. Similarly, the ecology of some of these people's college friends encouraged them to try out Tinder, something they may never have done had they not been influenced by their college friends or environment.

*Q: What made you swipe right on your significant other?*

**1:** I really liked E's profile picture. It was black and white, he looked really good in it and smiled with teeth, which he doesn't often do. And also, he had this picture of him and his pug, and it said in his bio something about how they take on the world together. I thought that was super cute.

**2:** I saw he Super Liked me, which is a premium feature where you swipe up and it shows up as blue and a star, and this means if the receiver swipes right you automatically match. So, I saw that and thought he was cute from his profile pictures, so I swiped right since I knew we'd match. He had picture of his dog, and I thought he was an attractive and cute person. Plus, we were both Italian, so we related on our similarities with that.

**3:** What immediately caught my attention was that she was very beautiful. There was also a picture of her walking across a stream in the outdoors, and I liked the outdoors as well so that clicked with me. She was around my age (only a year younger). Her bio was sparse, but it said, "Give me your best cheesy pick up line." And I was like, "Oh, this is my forte, I got this." So, what I sent her was something about how if she were a cheese she would be cheddar, because she looked really sharp. And I said, if you think that's good, you haven't even seen the Gouda ones yet. She thought it was funny, but told



me later that she hadn't even written that as her bio, her friend had, but I definitely wouldn't have messaged her as immediately if she hadn't had that.

**4:** I swiped right because she looked like a pretty awesome person, and I knew from her bio that we would at least be able to have a conversation. She also had cute pictures, but mainly she described being into witchcraft and we liked a lot of the same TV shows, all of which were winning details in my book.

Both reception and representation come into play here and help us look at how Tinder's genre conventions are being broken by significant relationships. After seeing their significant others' pictures, the viewers' reception changed, because they thought these people were attractive or at least cute. Similarly, some of the women thought that their significant other's pictures with dogs made them more endearing, and this changed the perception from that of hook ups to relationship material. The four interviewees put up pictures of themselves that their partners found appealing. This changed how their respective partners viewed their Tinder profiles (the text). This reception made their partners either swipe right, or super like their profiles.

Representation bleeds into reception here as well. All the interviewees said they liked certain parts of their partner's bios, which represented them in an individual and relatable way based on shared interests or things the both of them enjoyed doing. By then looking at their Tinder bios beyond just physical attraction, the four people's receptions were changed, because of the way in which partners chose to represent themselves. It was different than the typical user who was looking for a one-night stand. Thus, they chose to then swipe right or match with these particular users.

*Q: How did you get asked, or plan your first date after matching?*

**1:** He was persistent and was always cracking hilarious jokes, so when we messaged each other, it was this along with his laid-back personality that made me try to make plans with him. Eventually, we were like okay do you want to meet for breakfast tomorrow? And that was the first time we went out officially. I was super nervous, but he was asking all these caring questions, and seemed like he really wanted to know about me. The other guys I had talked with were super pushy and aggressive. They were so extra, haha. I don't know how else to say it? But he wasn't, and that was kind of the clincher there. I liked that.

**2:** G texted me this long elaborate text that was really strange. It was so weird that I didn't message him until a month later when I was bored and sad about my ex. We started texting and didn't stop for three days straight. He

was super sweet. He acted very interested in what I had to say, and even though we had nothing in common (he was a jock and I, in theater), when I would talk about my interests, he would listen.

**3:** I first wanted to meet up somewhere public since going to the other person's place gave implications that I didn't want to give out yet. So, I asked her out for coffee cause we had been talking a couple days before going out, since I wanted to talk about things of substance instead of starting points. We met up at this really cool coffee shop on campus near her dorm and began talking. After finding out that we had many similar interests, we left the café together and went to her dorm. S is a big horror fan and, since I had just started it myself, she suggested we watch *American Horror Story: Coven*. So, we watched a couple episodes but didn't really like it. We turned it off and then went our separate ways.

**4:** We hung out a few times and were in that weird "talking" stage for a bit, and then kind of agreed that we were dating. Our first date wasn't technically a "date" in the traditional sense. We threw a birthday party for Stevie Nicks and played Jenga. Even though it was a "Tinder Date," the whole evening felt super comfortable.

Although Interviewee 4 said hers was a "Tinder Date," the actual dates were pretty normal and simple. Their comfortable nature appealed to the users, because the typical Tinder users are "so extra," as Interviewee 1 said. Also, the nature of each date was directly responsive to how each user's text was represented. Interviewee 3 and his girlfriend liked coffee, Interviewee 1 and her boyfriend were laid back, Interviewee 4 said her date was comfortable and fun, and Interviewee 2 appreciated her ex's interest. These examples show us how these couples subverted the genre as well because they could have just texted online and never met in real life as Tinder intended. They took the initiative, looked at how their partner talked about (represented) their interests through pictures and the bio, and then created a date that was interesting by doing something the other person also liked.

*Q: How do you tell people you met?*

**1:** Well I always felt super ashamed when I had to tell people we met on Tinder, so I told E not to say that when we were telling people. I also still haven't told my mom that we met on Tinder; she thinks we met at our school's cafeteria.

**2:** Our close friends knew we met on Tinder, and we were still embarrassed about it with them, and knew they wouldn't understand, so we told them that I met G at the animal shelter while I was looking for a kitten.

**3:** At first, I wasn't sure if we should tell people that we met on Tinder. So, we made up a story that she was in the English building and dropped one of her books, and it happened to be about poetry, so I picked the book up and said I loved poetry and then asked her to go out with me.

**4:** Our answers did change depending on the people we talked to. Most people knew we met on Tinder, but if we were talking with people who wouldn't really understand what the app was, we would just say we met through mutual friends (which was kind of half-true—we had matched on Tinder and had been talking for a while without meeting up, but our mutual friend ended up getting us to hang out).

I feel like this is one of the most important parts of these interviews. Because of the way users have used Tinder to hook up and changed the original genre of this text, these couples all individually told me that they were in one way or another ashamed of having met on Tinder. This is their reception of their own text, and so each couple interpreted how others' reception would be affected by the knowledge of where their relationship began. Most felt their parents or relatives wouldn't understand how a significant relationship could be built from a text whose genre conventions dictated it for one specific purpose. The couples told people whom they trusted the truth about where their relationship started, which changed how those people viewed Tinder as a text, myself included.

### Exiting the App ... Er, Article

It is my hope that, after reading this article, you are aware of the ways that genre conventions, especially for flexible tools like Tinder, can alter in significant ways over time. Additionally, I felt that these relationships, which represent very different uses of Tinder, needed to be talked about. In interviewing real-life people who have built significant relationships from Tinder, I got to see how they have broken the conventions of this genre, but I was able to use CHAT to analyze how their and outsiders' reception, representation, and ecology were affected by these unique relationships.

I found these four relationships and built my research off of Tinder's genre conventions, which should, if you understand Tinder's original purpose, be unable to facilitate such a thing. Also, I'm an optimistic and happy person by choice, and looking for the romances, and yes, even the one-night stands, was something that I thought you, my student audience, needed to hear and understand in a positive light. My own understanding of Tinder changed through this article. And I hope it might also have offered

you a chance to see how different platforms and apps can be altered to suit the needs of users.

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## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> <http://isuwriting.com/glossary/>. This link explains the CHAT terms in a more scientific way. My explanations are in reference to writing about Tinder.

**Ann Borow** graduated with her Bachelor of Science degree in English from the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota in 2016. She is currently pursuing her Master's in English at Illinois State University. Growing up in a large family, reading was Ann's way of escaping the chaos around her. Thus, she threw herself into the different realms of fantasy literature and its diverse worlds. While being a little chaotic and crazy herself, Ann lives life unapologetically, and, in her spare time, loves watching action movies and tv shows with her amazing boyfriend. She lives life by the quote, "We're All Mad Here," and is secretly (or not so secretly) a wild and majestic unicorn.



