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DATING APPS FRONT STAGE AND BACK STAGE: HOW INDONESIAN REPRESENT THEMSELVES ON TINDER

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Abstract

Tinder, which dominates the market in Western countries and targets mobile daters, has recently taken over the dating scene on a global scale. The development of the Internet has changed how we initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. The dominance of dating apps is also evident in Southeast Asia, with nearly half of Indonesian respondents using dating apps. Dating apps profiles are how people introduce themselves to other people, and user-written profiles on dating apps enable users to represent themselves to potential matches on their own. Users may be compelled to provide information that they think will benefit them in using dating apps to achieve their goals. Using Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory, this study aimed to look at the front stage and back stage of Indonesian Tinder user. By using convenience sampling to explore through the tinder profiles, 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and content analysis of Tinder profiles in Indonesia were conducted. The findings indicate that users might try to control the impression they create and can be seen through their photos, biographies, interests, and connected accounts. It can also provide information about their fashion and etiquette, while their bio can provide information on how they use languages. Most of the participants comply to Indonesian culture and beliefs when it comes to their profiles since it is more socially acceptable, and participants are consistent with their Tinder profiles and how they are behind the profiles.

Keywords: dramaturgy theory, online dating application, self-presentation, tinder.

Introduction

The development of the Internet has changed how we initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. Thanks to the rapid development of technology, people can exchange a series of electronic messages and participate in different social activities through cyberspace, one of which is online dating. For centuries, people have turned to

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third parties to help fulfill their desire for romantic relationships, from matchmakers to personal advertising, and, more recently, online dating (Sharabi, 2020). The emergence of the internet has become a huge role in dating culture. The pool of potential partners was limited before the internet era and has greatly increased as a result of the emergence of dating apps, which have enabled individuals to meet a wide range of potential partners. How people find a partner has drastically changed since the arrival of the internet. People can connect with possibly anyone around the globe without the limitation of time and space with the ability to get responses in an instant.

Online dating is the practice of using online dating sites to find a romantic partner (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2018). In contrast, offline dating or conventional dating is the way people meet potential romantic partners in their daily lives through non-Internet activities, such as their social networks, face-to-face opportunities, or some combination of the two (Finkel et al., 2012). Online dating differs from conventional forms of offline dating primarily through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which gives users "the opportunity to interact with potential partners via a dating site or service before meeting face-to-face"(Finkel et al., 2012). Dating apps can be easily accessed because online dating has developed and is now available on mobile device applications. Mobile dating apps make it easy for people to connect with others and form a relationship.

Recently, mobile dating apps have taken over the dating scene on a global scale, with Tinder dominating the market in Western nations and catering to heterosexual mobile daters (Duguay, 2017). The success of mobile dating applications appears to be rooted in their usability and connectivity, which are frequently described as being quick and effortless (David & Cambre, 2016). Online dating services enable users to specify key traits of possible partners and broaden their dating pool outside their social network (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Online dating has now become one of the most common ways to meet romantic partners (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2018).

The domination of dating apps is also apparent in Southeast Asia where according to a survey on dating apps conducted by Rakuten Insight in September 2020, around 48 percent of Indonesian respondents stated that they use such applications to meet people (Lidwina, 2021). The same survey also found that around 30 percent of Indonesian respondents use dating apps. One of the most popular online dating applications is Tinder with 6.44 million downloads of the Tinder application in January 2021 (Stancheva, 2021). Tinder's introduction to Indonesia had both positive and negative effects; on the one side, it makes it easier for people to find partners, but on the other, it promotes more western culture that clashes with Indonesian culture (Ferdiana et al., 2020).

In dating apps, user-written profiles serve as the primary way for people to introduce themselves to others and learn more about potential partners (Tong et al., 2019). Through online profiles, users present themselves to others and gather information about potential partners. It is based on these impressions that daters decide whether to initiate communication or explore further relationship development (Tong et al., 2019). User-

written profiles enable online dating application users to make their own online self-presentations to potential partners. Self-presentation is the process by which we describe ourselves to others to make the desired impression. With the rapid development of information and communication technology in supporting interpersonal interactions, experts have recognized that impression formation is not limited to face-to-face interactions (FtF), but also extends to mediated contexts and in this case online dating applications (Tong et al., 2019).

Goffman suggests that an individual who enters into interaction with another person always tries to control the image they create in their mind about that individual and the impression that individual makes (Goffman, 1959). Users may be motivated to put pieces of information that they believe will help them achieve their goals in using dating apps. With the application of Erving Goffman's theory in the modern world, this study sought to find out why and how dating apps user represent themselves on Tinder in Indonesia.

Literature Review

A. *Dating Meets Technology*

Tinder is a location-based mobile online dating application that allows users to find and connect with their potential partners. The wildly popular mobile dating app was launched in 2012 by Sean Rad (Theo Wayt, 2021). Tinder has grown an increasingly large user worldwide with 6.44 million downloads in January 2021 alone (Stancheva, 2021). By April 2015, more than 26 million matches had been created per day by Tinder users as they scrolled through 1.6 billion profiles (Yi, 2015). Over 190 countries and 56 languages are covered by the popular dating app Tinder (Tinder, 2021). Tinder is distinct from typical dating sites in that users are not required to fill out lengthy personality questionnaires (Kallis, 2020).

This free-to-download app is easy to use, users are to set up their profile with just a few photos and a short biography to start swiping. Users can also display recent pictures by connecting their Instagram accounts and linking their Spotify accounts to display their music. The main profile photo on Tinder is the first impression users have of a possible match (Ward, 2016). Users are immediately presented with nearby profiles for them to “swipe”, with a right swipe to show interest and a left swipe to indicate a pass on their profile. In the "Discovery" queue, users can examine which profiles spark their interest. Users are only allowed a certain number of right swipes each day. When two users swipe right, their profiles are "matched," allowing them to message one another and browse one another's accounts whenever they like. The potential partners offered by tinder can easily be screened and filtered by using their filter feature to define the preferred search radius, age range, and gender for the user desired. Users only appear in queues if they match each search criteria of others. Users could "rewind" the most recent swipe, hide their age or location, have unlimited

swipes, "passport" to any area in the world to swipe as if they were there, and make their profile shown only to those they right swipe with a paid subscription to "Tinder Plus."

With the convenience that comes with tinder, researcher has found that it is not only used for dating but also for so much more. In one study, some of the first academics to ask the issue, "Why do people use these mobile dating apps?" created the Tinder Motives Scale through their research, which had thirteen motives; seeking social approval, looking for relationships, seeking sexual experience, improving flirting/social skills, preparing for travelling, getting over previous relationships, gaining belongingness, responding to peer pressure, meeting people with the same sexual orientation, passing time, distracting oneself from work or study, and fulfilling curiosity (Timmermans & de Caluwé, 2017). However, other researcher contends that these dating apps are merely amusement that may be used to fill a user's life with sex, a relationship, a friendship, or something else when they are bored (Kingwell, 2017). Kingwell suggested that it's possible that people simply become addicted to the motion of browsing profiles and "choosing" partners online when they can't actually do so in real life. Although Tinder is referred to as a "hook up app" in popular culture, it's unclear what motivates users to use the app (Kallis, 2020). The majority of the existing work on Tinder focuses on users' motivations for using the applications rather than how users interact with the application itself.

B. *Impression Management on Tinder*

In 1959, Erving Goffman introduced the idea of dramaturgy. This theory makes the analogy of life as a theatrical performance and stated that the way we present ourselves in everyday life is similar to a performance on a stage. In other words, when a person interacts with people, that person is an actor in a show. By the time the show (interaction) ends, they may return to behind the scenes where they give up their role, relaxes and potentially prepares for the next show (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). Performances are largely based on values, beliefs, and habits that we learn from social institutions as well as from the interactions with other people. Goffman concluded that an individual who enters into interaction with another person always tries to control the image they create in their mind about that individual and the impression that individual makes of them (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019).

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory suggested that people "perform" according to their social environment and desired image in social life, such as "actors" performing on "stage" (Jin et al., 2022). In order to meet audience expectations and social norms for positive feedback, individuals try to present their "ideal" self and represent themselves in the best possible condition (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). Therefore they exaggerated certain aspects of their personality while suppressing or completely hiding the negative. In this way the participant presents themselves in a certain role and controls the impression they made, thereby also influencing the

opinion formed in the minds of the audience. Goffman calls this impression management, the act of self-presentation, an elemental social activity. According to Goffman, people didn't really change their personalities all the time during various performances in everyday social life. Instead, people wore "masks" over their personalities as a means of deception in face-to-face interactions (Goffman, 1959). In this study, Tinder's environment can be seen as the stage.

Goffman takes this perspective from theatre; he used theatre as a metaphor to represent how people behave in society and represent themselves. In this metaphor, people are actors and society is the stage, individuals interact with each other, as an actor exchange dialogue, they are directed by the norms and values adopted as members of society. In Goffman's theory, performances by certain individuals (actors) always take place on a stage which consists of two main areas, namely the front stage and the back stage. The front area is where the show itself takes place. Here the individual plays a certain role (defined by appearance, stage, and manner of performance) for the audience and tries to provoke a certain impression (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019).

With performances that are always adapting, each individual can be seen as an actor with a social setting where the audience sees them as the front stage (Jin et al., 2022). The front stage self is the self that we are likely to show the world. It is the self that we present when we step out of the familiar environment, when we interact with people we do not feel comfortable with, people we do not know. In this study, the front stage that wants to be studied is the profiles of Tinder users. At this stage, the actor is aware of being observed by the audience and will appear based on social norms that apply to certain situations (Jin et al., 2022).

This is where impression management plays a role, usually people tend to show behaviors that will be easily accepted by society. In situations where we don't know the other person, people tend to put themselves in front. This front stage self is a version of oneself that is believed to benefit others. In this study, impression management can be seen as a tool used to get a date. On the other hand, backstage self refers to the aspect of a person's true self, who people are when they are in a comfortable environment. When actors retreat backstage where no audience is watching, they acted differently (Jin et al., 2022). Here people are accepted, people know us for who we are and don't need to build any impression. The backstage is the space where an individual can behave naturally and where they usually shifted to more informal behaviour and speech, sometimes even contradicting their previous carefully conveyed efforts (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). Therefore, it is important to limit access to the backstage so backstage behaviour is not visible to others.

Goffman argued that individuals manipulated their setting, appearance, and behaviour in an attempt to control or guide their impression on others (Goffman, 1959). Face-to-face interactions were the primary focus of Goffman's initial research on self-

presentation. Goffman's concepts have been extended by other scholars to electronic environments, albeit still within an interpersonal context (Miller, 1995; Papacharissi, 2002; Tufekci, 2008). Previous studies have found that users are highly motivated to control the impression they create in mediated dating environment (Ellison et al., 2012; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Toma et al., 2008; Zytko et al., 2014).

Tinder and other dating apps are different in that connections are confidential. The profile itself, though, is semi-public and oriented toward the user, providing a means of interaction. According to Goffman, Tinder gives the user a stage where they can perform (Ward, 2016). These dating apps' profiles are semi-public where people can see your profile based on their search filter. On Tinder, impression management starts with the selection of pictures and a short biography for the description of the profile. People may instinctively change the camera angle when shooting a self-portrait or "selfie" to include in an online dating profile to represent how they want to be perceived by the opposite sex (Sedgewick et al., 2017).

Other than that, photo editing can also be considered beneficial because the photo's ability to be edited, there are options to create a more strategic self-presentation (Hancock & Toma, 2009). There are two key processes in impression management that are impression motivation and impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression motivation is when people are motivated to participate in their particular self-presentation behaviour, whereas impression construction is when people decide the impression they want to make and how they choose to express it. This study only focuses on the impression construction of tinder users that are their Tinder profiles and how they decide to put what information to reach certain goals. The purpose of this study is to investigate the following, which is expressed as a research question: *How are Indonesian Tinder users' front and backstages?*

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative methodology to investigate how users of dating apps represent themselves on Tinder. Eleven in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Tinder users in Indonesia by using convenience sampling. Participants were interviewed via Zoom, and face-to-face interviews. The researcher translated and transcribed the interviews before using dramaturgy theory to analyse the data using indicator from the theory which are setting, fashion, language, and etiquette (Goffman, 1959). Analysis of the individuals' Tinder profiles were also carried out to explore the consistency of what they were saying.

Discussion and Findings

Through their profiles, Tinder users can express and present themselves. Some participants carefully selected the images, bios, and interests they wanted to display on

their profiles to potential matches with some even connected their other social media accounts. The majority of the participants are honest and true to their online selves. Aside from the dramaturgy indicator which are setting, fashion, language, and fashion, the findings also shows that there are some elements of photo manipulation when it comes to choosing pictures for tinder profiles.

A. *Setting*

The majority of participants are consistent between who they portray on their profiles and who they are in real life. A previous study has shown that personality traits can be accurately predicted (Ferwerda et al., 2016). Their profile photos, "about me" section, interests, and other associated accounts all reveal something about their personality. Few of the participants even included their MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) on their profiles to present themselves. One participant claimed to be shy, which is evident in her choice of photos, where she avoided taking any that clearly showed her face. Others who identified as extroverted made the decision to publicly display their faces on their profiles. Most participants decide to upload their best photos simply because they feel attractive in them. Although many participants are honest, not all individuals are authentic when creating their profiles. By choosing to use images of themselves alone in each of their profile pictures, two of the participants who claimed to be extroverted individuals were unable to be identified. The study's participants described themselves as either extroverted, reserved, or in the middle. As explained by some participants:

> *"I realized that I am an introverted person, so I would be a very quiet person when I'm with people who aren't that close to me."* (Sarah, 18)
>
> *"I'm an ambivert, so sometimes I'm an introvert and sometimes an extrovert on some occasions. It's just that I'm actually more of an extrovert, but I could be awkward when meeting with new people. But if I have met them once or twice, I tend to overshare instead of being more reserved."* (Maura, 22)
>
> *"Yes, I'm more of an extrovert. What made me realize was I'm a person who couldn't survive alone, especially when I was in my room and my social energy is hard to drain. So if I were to go out the whole day and meet people, I wouldn't be tired."* (Jo, 22)

The "about me" section and one's interests might give one a sense of who they are. A participant who identified herself as talkative stated on her bio, "Chatting when I'm bored," and another participant connected his Spotify and Instagram accounts to demonstrate his love in music and photography. Additionally, a person's profile may reveal information about their interests, lifestyles, and hobbies. Another participant who enjoys photography made the decision to list "photography" under his interests and use a photo of himself holding a camera as his profile picture. Lifestyles can also be seen through a person's profile, as seen by the participant whose image was taken against a lavish setting and who claimed to have a more luxurious lifestyle. In contrast,

another participant who claimed to lead a slightly middle-class lifestyle is inconsistent in her photos, all of which were taken overseas.

B. *Fashion*

A person's choice of clothing can reveal insights about their self-concept (McNeill, 2018). Everyone who took part said that fashion is important to them. Their photographs not only highlight the significance of fashion, but several also list it as one of their interests. For example, some participants mentioned:

> *"I think it's really important because I think it can reflect who I am from the clothes."* (Sarah, 18)
>
> *"It's important, clothes make us see ourselves and our personality. Like if you dress neatly, people will see you as a neat person. Anyway, the form of clothing is related to the value of our personality as well*." (Thita, 26)
>
> *"Clothes are really important for me because even though there is a saying 'Don't judge book by the cover' for me, it's the appearance that is seen first by the people. It's not good either if people's first impression of us is a mess. So I feel like I have to keep it neat even though I'm just meeting friends who I met every day. I still have to dress neat even if it's just a few blocks or houses when I hang with my friends. So, it's important."* (Raksa, 24)

Only two people are inconsistent between what they like in real life and what they wear in their Tinder accounts, making fashion the portion of Tinder profiles that is the most authentic to their users. The study's participants described their style as being simple, casual, and trend inspired. For example, some participants mentioned:

> *"I'm a person who follows the trend, so sometimes I get the idea from Pinterest. Then I like to wear clothes that tend to be black because my body is a little fat. What makes me like to wear black clothes is that it makes me thinner and for my skin color when I wear dark clothes it can make it brighter."* (Gisel, 18)
>
> *"My way of dressing is more casual, what's simple. That's why I dress like that, I'm not a complicated person. So, I just use it as comfortable as I am. It's not too much of an uproar, it's not too complicated. And I don't like full color, I definitely like colors that are usually monochrome. From the simple color and model, the point is that it's not complicated."* (Thita, 26)

Based on their profiles, Tinder users may easily identify their fashion sense. Most of the apparel displayed on participants' profiles is representative of how they typically dress. Although it is important and easy to show through one's profile, one participant who claimed that she dressed neatly is inconsistent and chose to only publish images with casual attire on her profiles. Makeup is another element that appear to be inconsistent. Pictures without makeup were chosen by a participant who values makeup highly, while another participant who thinks make-up is not that important uses all her pictures with make-up in it.

C. *Language*

The participants about me section reveals the language aspect. Although not all participants have bios, a large portion of participants are consistent in their speech and language. Specific indicators, such as formal/informal language style, politeness level, or the usage of emotional words or symbols, can be used to identify self-presentation behaviors (Ostermaier-Grabow & Linek, 2019). Few participants who provided English-language bios, which are not their first tongue, are actually able to communicate in English in their everyday life. As some participants mentioned:

"What I can use is first the mother tongue, which is Indonesian and then English." (Maura, 22)

"For language is for sure Indonesian, then the second one is English." (Sarah, 18)

"Actually, fluently other than Indonesian, it's English." (Jo, 22)

But despite her poor English skills, one participant decided to use an English bio as well. The following are the justifications for her decisions:

"As I mentioned, I'm a person who maintains my image very well. Even though I couldn't use English very well, I can understand it. The reason I use an English bio is because most users like to speak English. It's like, 'yes, I can do it too'. And I don't want to be seen as tacky." (Thita, 26)

Another participant emphasized that she used an English bio because it matched her standards and helped her narrow down potential matches. In the participant's own words:

"So when I was still using an Indonesian bio, few of my matches that I had a chat with didn't meet my standard. Even when I have lowered my standard by chatting with them, I still feel like something is missing. Meanwhile, when I later chose to use an English bio, some of those who matched me met the standard I wanted. The standard I want is for them to be able to connect with me even in English or Indonesian. Even though I my bio is in English, I sometimes also reply to their chats in Indonesian and vice versa." (Maura, 22)

Their bio can also serve as a representation of their speaking style. Only a few of the people who claimed to joke around include jokes in their bios. One participant, who said she would only speak when absolutely necessary, represented it as she only has a brief bio on her profile. Although most participants accurately depict how they talk in their profiles, others do not. One participant, for instance, who claimed to speak in a more serious manner in daily life, utilizes humor in his bio.

D. *Etiquette*

Even though many participants are genuine about their etiquette, etiquette is the most inconsistent element of their Tinder profiles. While some individuals' alleged use of more revealing attire is evident in the attire they are wearing in the picture, more than half of the participants stated that they prefer to wear modest clothing rather than revealing attire. The term "modest fashion" is commonly used to refer to a clothing

fashion style that covers up the body's shape (Fauzi et al., 2020). Most of them who claimed to have dress modestly are reflected on their profile picture such as wearing a hijab. A few participants that uphold the local value and norm in suggest that it is an important thing. On the contrary, one of them instead display most of his pictures using short pants and short sleeves while claiming to be a modest person. Some participants commented on why they chose to dress modestly as mentioned:

"Because of the demands of religion and parents, I am modest." (Sarah, 18)

"I'm not so confident and I don't think I'm not worthy of wearing clothes that are too revealing." (Maura, 22)

"Now I'm fully covered, I've never used the revealing one again because I got a warning from a friend." (Nabila, 19)

E. *Photo Manipulation*

Since photo manipulation is a revolutionary method of self-presentation for users to create their image, it cannot be included in existing dramaturgy indicators. Although photo editing is evident in many profiles, the majority of participants claim that they simply use it to enhance the lighting in their photos.

"It's rare for me to edit the photo, at the very least I just brighten up the image. For example, the photo is too dark, I just turned up the exposure. As for the ones that changed the skin tones and all, I don't do that. So just basic edits, but most of the times I don't edit it at all." (Raksa, 24)

"Ideally, I wouldn't want to edit the photo, I'd want the photo to look good by itself. Because it would be apparent if it's edited. I'd want the photo to look good out of the box. But I will still edit if i found myself looking good but the photo is a little dark, but most of the times I don't do filters, I just play with the brightness." (Aubrey, 24)

"I usually do filters so that the colors looked the same. Trying to do that so it looks good. So just to change the colors, not the skin tone. I'm really against changing skin tones like that. The shape of the face is also not changed. It's just for aesthetics." (Fahira, 21)

Some of the reasons why people feel the urge to manipulate photos include insecurity and low self-esteem (Chua & Chang, 2016). Despite the fact that most participants are direct, one participant isn't as forthcoming regarding his use of photo modification. His statement that he is not a fan of photo manipulation, particularly ones that modify the contour of the face, conflicts with the pictures he chooses, in which he applies filters to change his facial features. Unexpectedly, one of the participants is upfront about her usage of photo editing to alter her skin tone.

Conclusion

How Tinder users represent themselves have been explored in this study. Users of Tinder utilize their profiles to represent themselves, including images, interests, an "about

me" section, as well as connected accounts. The findings shed a light on the dating apps platform, with Tinder being one of the most well-known. It's particularly fascinating to note that, despite occasional discrepancies between people's profiles and how they truly are, some characteristics are thought to be more consistent than others. It is congruent with Goffman's theories that people perform on stage while wearing masks and that there are distinctions between the backstage and the front stage where they aim to make an impression to the audience (Goffman, 1959). This research sheds light on how Tinder users decide what to include in their profiles. This study shows that individuals post their best photos on their profile where they appear attractive, which is in line with previous studies that revealed that the attractiveness of profile pictures is the strongest indicator of whether a user will be attracted to that profile (McGloin & Denes, 2016). Previous research also explained that users can encode elements about themselves through language (Tong et al., 2019). This research presents evidence and explains why people choose to present themselves in a particular way on their accounts.

The exploratory nature, qualitative methodology, sample size, and convenience sampling are the research's limitations. The methodology and sampling method chosen make it very difficult to generalize the results. Additionally, the results only apply to a relatively narrow group of users; users of different ages may have different methods of presenting themselves. As a result, this research cannot be regarded as definitive and should not be used in that manner. Instead, the goal of this study is to introduce a phenomenon that the researchers have observed. This research could be expanded in the future by combining more qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, as well as by increasing the sample size and segment. Future studies might also look at how well the user's intended impression matches what the other person perceives. Finally, the question of whether presentations that users are hiding or have chosen not to show should also be included in future studies.

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