

Cyberintimacy Involvement on Building Emotional Intimacy in Close Relationship on Indonesian Tinder Users

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Abstract

Tinder, as one of the most popular online dating applications, is nicknamed as the hookup app. The negative perceptions inherent among the public were born because of how users in western countries operate the application, which does not follow the norms adopted in Indonesia. Many people assume that most Tinder users are those who are not looking for a long-term romantic relationship. The possibility of getting a partner who will commit to the relationship is not a common idea. This research aims to understand the development process of emotional intimacy and the initiation of a close relationship between Tinder users who have managed to find their partner through the Tinder application and communication mediated by computers (internet). This research uses a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews and Netnographic observations were used as the primary and secondary data collection techniques. This study indicates that although many Tinder users in Indonesia use Tinder similar to how people in western countries do, many users have finally succeeded in building long-term close relationships. Therefore, the perception about small numbers of Tinder users looking for long-term romantic relationships is not accurate.

Keywords: Tinder; cyberintimacy; online dating; close relationship; emotional intimacy

Introduction

In the day and age of the digital era, technology and the internet are inevitable for everyone. The world has changed by many developments that took place and influenced the way the world operates (Carr, 2010). As it is becoming a part of human life, people tend to rely on the internet for daily necessities. A survey conducted found that 77% of people considered it “very important” to have their smartphones with them at all times (Anderson, 2016). Dating is also one aspect in life that has been simplified and made easy for internet users. Today’s technology,

with connectivity, and innovative applications make connecting and meeting people easier.

As a connection portal, Tinder helps people to reduce the amount of time spent on pointless dates that often not ended up fortunate. Tinder also helps to introduce users who have a mutual interest towards each other, reducing the probability of time waste in relationship initiation. The phenomenon of online dating known as Cyberintimacy where people are now able to find and sustain romance in ways that have never been done before.

Cyberintimacy is a technology-mediated communication process between potential

romantic interests and partners that impact the way people form, maintain and establish romantic relationships (Kwok & Wescott, 2020). The lives of romances have changed since the existence of the internet and the usage of smartphones.

Although online dating has become part of human culture, of course, in different places, online dating apps are used differently. The particular action that users did while using the application is what built the image of online dating itself. This research is focusing on the Tinder app, or as known as the "hookup app." Matching up to the western culture, sexual behavior outside of traditional committed romantic pair-bond or marriage has become increasingly typical and socially acceptable (Bogle, 2008).

This led to the habit of the people that make online dating apps as medium for them to find a sexual partner instead of an actual date as for what they call it hookup, or one night-stand. Hookup is also known as a sexual encounter between individuals who are not committed romantic partners or dating each other.

Hookup popularity is affected by the popular culture that has been widespread by the media as a source of sex education as an inaccurate sexuality portrayal (Garcia et al., 2012). Hookups may include ranges of sexual activities such as kissing and penetrative intercourse. One thing for sure is getting laid was never this easy. Especially in Indonesia, the name "hookup app" creates a negative image about Tinder users as people who are not looking for serious long-term relationships. As online dating was made to be convenient and no attachment towards one and another, it makes hooking up easier.

The ability to be relatively anonymous in online social interaction reduces accountability and leads to the depersonalization and deindividuation of the interactants (Lea, Postmes, & Spears, 2002). This makes the public grow sceptical towards online dating and Tinder itself. Finding potential romantic partners through the dating app is considered special because according to previous research by Fahmi and Armando (2014), there are three types of Tinder users in Indonesia.

The users are classified by their purpose by being on online dating platforms which are the serious type, the flirter type, and the just for fun type. The three types of Tinder user shows that not all Tinder users in Indonesia are intending to

look for serious committed relationships. However, the research result of Fahmi and Armando (2014) showed that the Tinder users in Indonesia are not entirely looking for casual sexual partners.

The negative image occurs because of cultural background where the majority of the people in Indonesia are Muslim, and people highly upholds Islamic religious and eastern cultural values. Sexual activities are only acceptable to be done by those who are married by the law and religion. This differs from the European Countries and the United States where moving in together before marriage and pre-marital sex is more common and socially acceptable. Not only motivated by how often hookups occur, online dating also became untrustworthy because of some reasons: people often lie online, most of the users are not looking for a serious relationship, numerous scams happen through online dating websites, and a relationship started online will not likely last (Anderson, 2016).

These inconveniences are the topics that the media often publish and show the ugly truth about online dating that leads to a generalization of the image of online dating applications. However, more people in Indonesia nowadays seem to feel more comfortable using online dating apps and expect to find a partner for long-term committed relationships.

In Indonesia, a twitter thread started by @neferrefel who shared her Tinder love story about being in the aisle with her match that she found on Tinder. The tweet gained approximately 8,000 retweets and up to 12,000 likes. The thread is considered viral as it gained thousands of retweets, likes, and hundreds of replies (Corrin, 2020). The tweet was trending and followed by other twitter users who relate to her story of meeting their 'one' from Tinder.

Replying to @neferrefel, many twitter users start sharing their happy stories by attaching their first Tinder message and their wedding picture. Some also shared their story on how long they have been married, and whether they are expecting children.

The twitter thread instantly became the public talk about how the impossible becomes possible by getting successful stories from Tinder users on not only finding a date but even a partner of a lifetime. A perspective change happened in society towards the image of online dating. This

phenomenon is considered unusual as it has not come to the logic of most people that a person could end up marrying someone they met from an online dating app.

This topic is wisely essential to research because relationship development of Indonesian people can be obtained from anywhere, not only face-to-face communication but also through the dating apps. This research is written based on the perspective of those users who succeed in obtaining a long-term relationship with someone they met on Tinder. Successful users will recount how their relationship initiation went. This research will also explain whether the negative perception in public would still be relevant or not.

The research question of this study would be "How Emotional Intimacy in Close Relationships is built by Cyberintimacy through Tinder?" In other words, this study wants to emphasize the relevance between the ongoing perception that is affected by western culture about Tinder and the existing fact in the field.

Cyberintimacy is a phenomenon of technology-mediated communication that has redefined the interaction and the way of connection between partners and potential romantic interest. The evolution of technology changes the way humans seek and maintain relationships. Cyberintimacy itself is often adapted by younger groups of people who grow up with the existence of technology. These digital natives have a higher coherency between the real-life and online romantic lives compared to any other groups of age.

Cyberintimacy shows how technology-mediated communication has a significant impact on real-life love live implications. Through the technology-mediated communication, there are measurable outcomes that can be seen from three stages of the romantic relationship lifecycle that includes the initiation process, maintenance process, and dissolution process (Kwok & Wescott, 2020).

Online dating is included in cyberintimacy as the beginning of people's transition from online exchanges into meeting in person. In addition, social networking sites also provide a pathway that leads to cyberintimacy as people often use it to initiate a closer contact with their potential romantic partners. Social networking sites also become a way to verify a person's identity in order to identify the legitimation of a person in online dating apps considering the amount of

cybercrime rate such as catfishing and sexual predatory in the name of online dating.

Many people perceive Tinder as an online dating platform in a negative way as a hookup app. People are hopeless in a way that they do not believe such apps can bring you potential partners for a long-term relationship. However, for some people, Tinder became something meaningful and enjoyable to them as they got used to the online dating culture.

In Indonesia, with more conservative norms and practice, people find sexual activities taboo, and we see dating as more of a step for building emotional intimacy and establishing committed romantic relationships. Emotional intimacy is the fundamental ground on adult relationships, often associated with closeness and personal affiliations. Emotional intimacy is the highest level of human intimacy. This discussion will include four essential characteristics; Mutual accessibility, Naturalness, Non-possessiveness, and Process.

Material and Methodology

The researchers use qualitative as a fundamental method to do the research of interpersonal communication on building emotional intimacy in close relationship through Tinder based on social construction of technology, because in building a close relationship, it involves emotional intimacy development overtime where each individual produces different behaviors towards the case. This researcher will be using in-depth interviews and Netnography observation. For the in-depth interviews, the characteristics of the informants will be those who are Tinder users that are currently obtaining a close relationship for a minimum duration of six months with someone they met from Tinder.

There are five informants with the fulfil of those characteristics that will be familiar with relationship initiation and building emotional intimacy from Tinder over time. This research only focuses on how Cyberintimacy was involved in emotional intimacy establishment and close relationship initiation. However, the study is limited to Tinder users in Indonesia only.

Results and Discussion

Tinder has the reputation as a hookup platform coming from the western culture that caused negative perception on Asian people. With

the negative stereotype that is clinging to Tinder and online dating, it is very common for many of the female users to have at least experienced getting non-verbal flattery once throughout their time using Tinder. PW Shared her experience crossing by people who openly asked her for a hookup on Tinder.

“There were people who suddenly ask to meet up, but from the way they chat, it's leading to something that is.. you know... Inappropriately. For example, they'd treat us, but in return, they would ask for something in a sexual way. That's what makes dating apps not so great” (Informant PW).

She explained that one of the downsides from being in an online dating platform is the possibility of getting offers for things we find inappropriate. However, things like this are possible to avoid. NR is one of the female users who also experienced the same and managed to tackle sexual offers.

“ONS (One night stand)?”. I obviously did not reply. He also wasn't very eager. Maybe it was also because I don't have pictures that looked inappropriate, not too revealing and showing too much (skin)” (Informant NR).

NR believes that questions surrounding hookups or casual relationships are impossible not to experience. However, things like that did not become a big deal, because you can ignore or un-match anyone at your desire.

“The good side about online dating is, if you have uncomfortable experiences, you can just directly un-match and report. I think that's why it's nice in online dating because we have control” (Informant HA).

There are quite a number of Indonesian users who use Tinder for hookups as the western people do. However, users who don't use it for the same purpose have ways to tackle such an offer. HA explains that the plus side of online dating is that it is consensual where the users can only communicate when they swipe right on each other.

As mentioned previously, there are four steps of establishing Emotional Intimacy. According to Dahms (1972), mutual accessibility is indicated

with the ability of the two people to see each other as helpers that enable the helpee to see them as accessible.

The access can be measured according to verbal or nonverbal behavior. Supportive sentences often heard such as “let me know if you need my help” or “I will be there when you need me” are examples of verbal acts on giving access to the other party as a helpee.

When first getting to know each other, HA was able to see the access given by GA. After the first date they went on, HA and GA became comfortable enough to not only communicate through text messages but also audio calls.

“..It is like a kind of long phone call.. I'm sure you know the kind of phone call. So at that time, I was sick and I was home alone. Then I woke up at 1 am in the morning. I texted him “oh my, I'm sorry I fell asleep” and he replied “oh ya, are you okay?” So he accompanied me and we talked and that's the point where we kind of opened up” (Informant HA)

The question “are you okay?” indicates one of the verbal signs for HA as the helper to see that GA is accessible for her, which leads to a late-night phone call where both of them opened up. The willingness of GA to stay up and accompany HA while she was sick was one of the nonverbal signs of accessibility. She agrees that the part of opening up with each other is a nice rare thing to do. HA describes the relationship as conscious.

“If I have to pick something to describe it, I think our relationship is conscious where we are trying to be aware of the problems, and we keep talking about it. But other than that, we still have fun. For example, we'd play games while we called, and we find a common interest. A new common interest that we can talk about. And that way is how I try to make him my friend. With common interest” (Informant HA).

The efforts that both parties give show mutual accessibility by finding common interest to be friends with each other. The efforts can be interpreted as none of the parties that would want to exclude each other in the things they can find meaningful and interesting. Being aware of problems and communicating, it also shows accessibility where both parties are still showing

effort into maintaining the relationship in the long-run. The statement of showing efforts is also supported by GA;

“In general? I would say that we are putting a lot of effort into it, equally, which is a good thing, because we are kindly serious about this. It’s not like we talk about getting a house or anything. But it’s like, when we have a problem, we really try to get to the bottom of it and we try to communicate” (Informant GA).

The desire to grow with each other in the long-run can be the fundamental reason why the efforts are still made over time. To be able to communicate by getting to the bottom of the existing problems and the will to change themselves to be better and more acceptable by each other presents how both parties are accessible for each other as the helper.

By being able to see mutual accessibility, HA and GA grow the feeling of intimacy where security towards each other can be found. Second, Dahms explains that non-possessiveness refers to equality without labeling, which is superior and inferior. As GA explained, the effort put equally shows the absence of inequality where both parties are making the most of the relationship by seeing that a relationship is not a one-person show.

However, in the early stage of PW and FK’s relationship, mutual accessibility was hardly seen because of the existing barriers that both put for each other. The fear of being too dependent leads to a lack of trust and security. At this stage, both parties were not able to feel emotionally connected, moreover intimate.

The barriers do not allow both parties to see each other as helpers. Both PW and FK struggled as the feeling of uncertainty towards the relationship started to occur. By the time the interview was conducted, PW had expressed that the relationship is exceptional, and they both are in a good state of mind. This statement was after they finally sorted out the existing problem by communicating it.

“Last month, we really made up and communicated about this relationship. We need to become two people who really appreciate each other, who really can adore the other person. She will appreciate me, and

I appreciate her. And we also give our expectations towards our relationship so we know what we expect for each other” (Informant FK).

FK feels both of them have to be able to open up with each other by communicating the expectations that both of them have towards the relationship. Communicating problems and expectations allows them to see the access given. Showing appreciation can also become one of the nonverbal acts of showing mutual accessibility as then both parties can see whether the efforts they put for each other are valued or not.

Personal Acceptance

The next stage of emotional intimacy establishment is naturalness, as one of the essential characteristics in the emotional intimacy of a relationship where a person can be accepted as they are and not for their ability to change or meet the requirements of others. With online dating, elimination for personal acceptance is usually done before swiping right on someone. The decision of right-swiping someone is also supported by various different factors. As explained, physical attraction becomes one of the most significant driving factors in attracting potential dates. In addition, interviewees agree there are several specific things they might look for in their prospective partners.

NR recognized that her interest in her spouse was mainly because of physical attraction. However, NR also has her interest in those who share the same enjoyment towards country music or the football club Manchester United.

“...some people who lived up to my criteria (interested in country music, drum and bass music, and Manchester United FC) are those who I ended up not interested in. The hobby (interest) was similar, and I tried to force it, I swiped right on them and we matched. But when we talked, we didn’t connect at all” (Informant NR).

After going on their first date, she underestimated the compatibility between her and her spouse and saw it as a probation period. NR admitted that she did not think the relationship she has with her spouse will last until marriage, which then fortunately lasts.

As previously explained, for HA and GA, an overall profile presentation becomes their way to eliminate the potential dates on the app. For HA, she did not necessarily see GA physically, but rather what he presented on his profile, which she then realized on the first date.

“But I think it's not necessarily his physic. I think it's the overall of his profile. Like, he put his spotify. I forgot whether he connected his Instagram too. But there is something that shows his overall profile is showing clear intention. Like, there were a lot of pictures. And good photo (you can see his face). Not necessarily attractive or not, but more to the overall profile that he built” (Informant HA).

The acceptance towards potential partners has been supported with similar interest that HA and GA shared, which are music and arts. Nevertheless, acceptance does not stop there. Having a different cultural background where GA was raised in a more traditional milieu compared to HA, who was raised in a more modern sphere, gives different understandings to how they perceived intimacy.

“I'm not used using ‘Gue-Lo’ (slang for Me-You), and I somehow have this expectation where couples should use ‘Aku-Kamu’. And HA, even though we both are Javanese, but she spent all her life in Jakarta. So yeah, Gue-Lo. At first it was weird to get used to the idea that using Gue-Lo is not intimate” (Informant GA).

Although having language barriers because of different practices, GA comes to an understanding where using slang words does not make a relationship less intimate. HA also understood the background of GA's reasoning, and this became something they communicated actively. The understanding both parties have towards each other turns it into empathy and consideration that leads to personal acceptance where no expectation regarding the language has to be fulfilled.

The fact that the acquaintance process started online can surely affect how two people run the relationship. The lack of information about each other requires both parties to work harder on getting to know and understanding each other to be able to have a lasting relationship. Not often

couples have mutual friends they could ask for help when a couple are facing relationship problems. With online dating, there might not be possibilities to have mutual friends and it requires them to communicate effectively when solving a problem.

Romantic Relationships Establishment

Romantic relationship is established with four possible stages. According to Fox & Anderegg (2014), there are; face-to-face meeting, after face-to-face meeting, casual date and exclusive dates. In typical traditional dating, individuals first meet and become acquainted. They later establish an interest romantically, go on a date and start to enter the stage of exclusive relationships that become a commitment over time.

Throughout this development, the intimacy between the two parties might increase. However, with the existence of social media and social networking sites, there are changes that took place in the process of relationship development. In traditional dating, relationships are typically described by the initiation of a face-to-face meeting. But in the current dating style, individuals are often acquainted through online before they meet face-to-face.

Online dating as part of a social networking site makes changes to the relationship and meeting initiation where people from online dating tend to be quicker compared to those who know each other conventionally. In Tinder, users are able to send messages to their matches and send moving pictures or GIFs that are provided in the chat room. Text usually started with a ‘Hi’ or mentioning anything related to the other user's profile, such as profile pictures, a profile description, or music taste.

“At first, I just said ‘you have an excellent choice of text by the way,’ and then she said ‘you find it excellent because we have similar taste, but thank you’ (Informant GA).

GA shared his first text with his current girlfriend, HA, by complimenting her music taste and sending her a funny GIF saying “*Noice*” that then continued by getting to know each other. The same was experienced by FK, where his current girlfriend, PW, commented on a cat picture that FK put in his profile. FK and PW started-off discussing things that were visible to see on each

other's profiles, such as personality types and TV shows.

“I feel like we connect. We were basically talking about TV series on Netflix, and then she told me the cat on my Tinder profile picture looks cute” (Informant FK).

First interactions are usually based on interest on both profiles. Interest can also be measured by a less personalized communication form such as virtual ‘winks’ or emoji (Finkle et al. 2012). However, the kind of messages that would likely be replied is the ones that include a decent topic for starting a conversation.

When users feel interested in talking to each other, users don’t usually spend a long time talking in the online dating app. Finkle (2012) explained, for members who are interested in meeting face-to-face, usually, they exchange contact information into a more personal social media. Contact exchange between PW and FK happened because both of them were interested to finally meet each other face-to-face offline.

“At that time, we moved to other social media because we wanted to meet up. I thought, ‘Are we not going to exchange contacts?’ We exchanged contact about a month after we matched” (Informant PW).

PW and FK spent two weeks in total talking through the app. The same was shared by HA and GA, who spent only two days in total texting through the app until they decided to exchange more personal contact to communicate.

“We start off talking about the music we like, our hobbies, and then he said ‘Oh, I play music.’ So I asked, ‘do you have any that I can listen to?’ and he said, ‘yeah, I can send you the recording, but It’s not possible here (Tinder). How about moving to Line?’ Haha, so it was like.. score” (Informant HA).

HA shared her thoughts on good texting in an online dating app, where texting became one of the important aspects to grow interests towards the other user.

“It is not just about it (Saying hi). It is also about how you set up your profile, your online persona, about your jokes, the way

you text, it all matters in online dating. It is not necessarily physical. It is also about how you bring yourself online and how you communicate” (Informant HA).

Just like HA and GA, who waited just a week for their first date after they first get acquainted online agree that they felt the shift in dating that is initiated from online compared to the traditional dating initiation.

“Because in my opinion, that’s the one I’ve said, the point where I think you have to be friends first before going to the next level. But at one point, it is the opposite (wanting online dating too), with this evidence, that you can also date first and then be friends after. Getting to know each other while dating, it also works” (Informant HA).

HA thinks that by being on online dating and being straightforward with the intention on why people are on online dating shorten out the time and skip stages that are usually done in traditional dating and one of it is being friends. HA believes that to be friends before dating someone is what should be done as it is the stage where both individuals are getting to know each other better. With online dating, HA feels like she skipped the part and got to know her partner while dating them and not beforehand. However, HA assured me that acquaintance from online dating does not necessarily mean that getting to know the partner does not happen. In her personal experience, HA finds that getting to know her partner is doable and does not have to be done on the first stage of acquaintance.

HA and GA spent three weeks in total of them to go through the process of romantic relationship development. They have tried to get to know each other online for a week. They then had their first face-to-face meeting, and went on a second casual date to then decide on making the relationship exclusive.

Following the statement by HA, NR’s experience can be a little more extreme compared to HA’s. NR finds that texting too long with a potential partner is bringing her negative impact towards her interest. Talking via chat too long can bore her because in her experience, she has met potential partners that turned out to be incompatible and she feels like that process wastes her time by doing pointless texts.

“I think it (the text) was (lasted) for four days because I’m done with people who come and go. So after four days of chatting, we met up and decided to date” (Informant NR).

NR and her husband spent only four days texting through Tinder until they finally decided to meet face-to-face and decided to date exclusively right away. 4 days after texting, NR decided to meet her current husband where at that time they were a match and agreed to be in a relationship with him. Where deciding to be dating exclusively sits on the last stage of traditional romantic relationship development, NR has skipped to the part where she gets to know her partner online in just four days and decides to make it exclusive on their first face-to-face meeting.

This shows that the technology as in online dating really brought a significant impact on how romantic relationship initiation happened where some parts of traditional dating stages are undone or done in mixed order. With online dating, romantic relationship initiation could happen in a matter of weeks or days.

Conclusion

Over time, the use of Tinder became more understandable, and people with a limited knowledge of Western culture began to use it. The development has been made by Tinder as they began to try to occupy the market in Asia. The development that Tinder could make includes their advertisement in Asian regions where Tinder crafts a more personalized advertising and marketing plan regarding the dating tradition and religious values that are being held in Asian countries.

The changes to their branding and advertising can be done in order to try to change perspectives in the community from the negative perceptions including hookups and sexual activities into good perceptions where people can find their potential romantic partner through the app and Tinder can be something that is not taboo to talk about.

Online dating's significant role only appears at the beginning of a meeting between two people who do not know each other. The lack of information before two people got together in a relationship requires them to work on the relationship better.

By understanding how couples successfully maintain a relationship through the app, the result shows three essential aspects of the emotional intimacy development; (1) High intensity of textual communication. As online dating is a text-based application, the formation of emotional intimacy is most likely seen by how intense two users are communicating online before they decide to meet face to face. The higher the communication intensity between two parties mutually, the higher the chance that a relationship could continue into an actual date; (2) Share common interests. By having things that both parties find interesting and can talk about, could likely support the interest towards each other as they have similarities towards each other; (3) Communicate effectively. When agreeing to be in a romantic relationship together, communication becomes important.

Because of the possibility of a lack of mutual friends, both parties should be able to communicate existing worries and problems towards each other or the relationship in order to be able to maintain the relationship.

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