

What it Costs to Swipe Right

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Today's culture has made communication between people, even across vast distances, easier than it has ever been before. Living within this highly interconnected and social culture, people from all walks of life can like, comment, follow their friends, family, celebrities, and even track news reports in real time. Smart cellular devices, nestled in the hands of both professionals and toddlers, have given us access to a virtual world that has drastically revolutionized the way we, as individuals, communicate with and form bonds with other individuals we meet in this digital landscape. It is not surprising, although troubling, that more and more people find themselves today using online dating apps to pursue a variety of relationships. With the advent of social media, the transition from merely interacting to dating online was a natural one. Today, more than 30% of adults in the US say they have used online dating apps;¹ more than 50 million people worldwide have Tinder accounts.² Although a seemingly convenient way to date, or even just "Netflix and chill," these apps have introduced a host of new issues to healthy dating, including identity theft, online harassment, scams, and even risk of physical danger and addiction. Dating apps require users to create dating profiles for other users to gauge their initial interest: but a majority of these online daters say it is common for other users to misrepresent themselves to appear more desirable. This sense of dishonesty is well-founded because there are no regulations that prevent sexual predators from creating false profiles. Some may say that in such cases people are just trying to put their best foot forward and not intentionally misrepresent themselves, and yet a sense of pervasive dishonesty and a lack of uniform policies governing these dating platforms can make them dangerous and rife with bad intentions.

There is no total guarantee that who you talk to on the other end of a digital screen is who they say they are, and yet dating apps can affect neurochemical changes in the brain and become addictive.³ This age of digital communication is quite literally reshaping the geography of our brains: as users continue to use their online dating profiles, even with the conscious acknowledgment of the dangers they pose, the endorphin rush associated with online dating makes our brains feel good and induce a chemical high. There is a growing association between anxiety and depression and the extent to which an individual uses their dating profile. The biggest irony of this whole culture of interconnected social media is that dating apps can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. So, in the midst of hollow highs and endorphin rushes, our emotional landscapes have discerned the shallow and gilded nature of online dating platforms. It is of great importance that we face the dark underbelly of online dating, and even social media in general, because the ease of access to the internet allows strangers to use anonymity as the greatest tool in their arsenal when seeking to do harm to others. Can you be certain the person you swipe right on is who you expect them to be? How ought we rekindle traditional, personal, forms of interaction when the neurochemical environment of our brains has been reshaped to reward itself chemically through online interactions? Online dating is simply a product of the times we find ourselves living in, but its impact on the emotional and mental wellbeing of all those who participate in it is serious and threatens to dismantle our most natural, most human, methods of interacting and forming bonds with others.

¹ Monica Anderson, Emily Vogels, and Erica Turner, "The Virtues and Downsides of Online Dating," <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/06/the-virtues-and-downsides-of-online-dating/>

² Megan McClintock, "The Psychology of Dating Apps: How dating apps influence our brain, our behavior, and how we interact with each other," <https://medium.com/swlh/the-psychology-of-dating-apps-d014c304bdbe>

³ McClintock, "The Psychology of Dating Apps."