

Misuse of Networking: Crimes through Dating Apps

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Abstract— In this technologically advanced world, networking has become inevitable. We use it commonly to exchange data and connect to people; irrespective of their distances. But every coin has its two sides. Along with the attractive advantages of networking, we also need to be aware of the darker, criminal oriented side. Through this case study, we will come across the different ways a criminal can exploit users – ranging from ages 18 to 60 – through dating apps.

Keywords— *networking, socializing, misuse, dating apps, exploit, users, manipulation, awareness, victims.*

I. INTRODUCTION

[1]The establishment, maintenance, and utilization of social or professional contacts with the objective of exchanging data and resources can be termed as networking with reference to social interaction. Influence of networking in an individual's job rank and career flexibility has been a subject of concern for various industrial experts. In the circumstances of hunting for a job, networking is essential for socializing for personal or professional gains – which has more success rate than traditional job search methods.

Social networking has brought a major change in our communication, and our private and professional relationships. But is the change for better or for worse? Technology in itself is a pretty multifaceted topic with no certain, fixed answer.

Diving further into the topic of socializing, we sometimes get lonely and feel the need to establish some kind of platonic or romantic relationship with someone. For such reasons, developers have created and deployed certain applications that allow you to meet, chat, and interact with strangers online.

Users use such apps with the intention of dating and creating possible lasting relationships. Social media is not new in this field; stories of online love circulate throughout the platform, giving others an idea of possibly being in the same situation.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

A. Benefits of social network

[2]An active and energetic participation by social network has been seen in globalization, where, this networking enables communication and exchange between people. Due to this, we can highlight some benefits of social networking:

- Establishing of links with people all over the world

- Connecting us together
- Uncomplicated and quick communication
 - Just one chat away
- Sharing and discovery of information in real time
 - Know what's going on even through a remote place
- General pleasure
 - Provides entertainment

B. Drawbacks of social network

Studies have shown that humans tend to be vulnerable when it comes to networking. A term – 'Fear of missing out' – has been used frequently by people who are chronically online and are quite obsessed with the internet culture.

- Users being overwhelmed by information
 - Exposure to sensitive and unwanted data
- Priority and preferring of online over offline interaction
 - Eyes get more light from device screens than the sun
- Distraction and procrastination
 - Highly addictive
- Irregularities in lifestyle and sleep schedule
 - Losing consciousness of a world outside the virtual one
- Intensifies disconnection of face to face interactions
 - Preferring of convenience over efforts

C. Dating apps

There are multiple dating apps available on the Play Store, such as – Bumble, Tinder, OkCupid, Hinge, etc. These apps have a common feature where users can look at different profiles and match with them based on interest and attraction. The app algorithm helps them filter out recommendations that it thinks could be a suitable match for the user. As soon as the user likes a profile, they either have to wait for the profile to

like them back, or they instantly get matched. When they do get matched, they have an option to start messaging their match as well. Paid members also get to use distinguished features of the applications, like messaging without matching or bringing back profiles that were initially disliked, that helps them in creating relationships.

[3] Dating applications make use of user’s smartphone’s GPS location capabilities, access to photo galleries, and E-wallets to intensify the customary nature of online dating. Tinder made a big impact on the online dating industry, which paved the path for other applications to be uploaded for global use as well.

A demographic group research, conducted by Pew Research Center, shows that the age group that uses dating apps the most range between 18-24. There are different applications that specially cater to various communities. Such apps allow the communities to freely interact without having to face certain prejudices. For example, LGBTQ+ community, Muslim community, Christian community, Jewish community, etc. There are apps like Raya, who only accept users through referral, to ensure the safety and privacy of high profile celebrities.

[4] Dating applications have become successful in the era where rates of permanent commitments, such as marriages, are declining. They have caused a huge revolution in the dating industry. Creating an online presence and chatting with strangers have become socially acceptable, more like a norm, especially for young generation. The online persona a user has cannot actually depict their real, personal self; which is one of the downsides to online dating. This questions the authenticity of someone’s identity. Dating apps also have caused a rise in dissatisfaction with a single partner, as users keep moving on quickly for short time companionship.

Younger Users Turned to Dating Apps Amid COVID-19

Quarterly average age and U.S. downloads for the top 25 dating apps

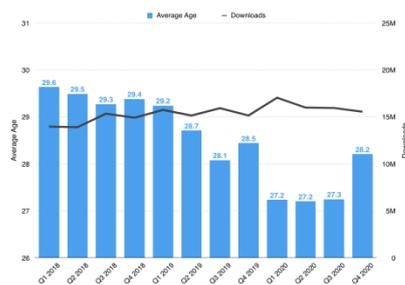


Fig. 1. Sensor Tower’s state of Dating apps 2021[5]

Most Popular Dating Apps in India

Rank	App	Launch Year	Downloads on Play Store
#1	Tinder	2012 (2016 in India)	100 million +
#2	OkCupid	2004 (2018 in India)	10 million +
#3	Happn	2014 (2016 in India)	50 million +
#4	Bumble	2014 (2018 in India)	10 million +
#5	Truly Madly	2014	5 million +
#6	Woo	2014	10 million +
#7	Grindr	2009 (2018 in India)	10 million +
#8	Coffee Meets Bagel	2012 (2018 in India)	1 million +
#9	Hinge	2012 (2015 in India)	5 million +
#10	Aisle	2014	1 million +

SOURCE: Statista; company profiles; Google Play Store. Downloads as of December 9, 2020

Fig. 2. Most popular dating apps in India 2020[6]

The rise in dating apps’ popularity in India doesn’t necessarily mean that they have overturned the rule of match-making platforms in the said country. Most Asian parents hope to find their children suitable partners; not just some short term flings.

III. TYPES OF CRIMES OCCURRING THROUGH DATING APPS

Surely, dating applications enable people from all corners of the world to connect to each other while it makes good use of technology embedded in smartphones. But do such applications ensure our safety and privacy? In this section, we come across the different ways someone can manipulatively use dating applications to achieve their objectives:

A. Data Privacy

All online apps, especially the ones containing a bunch of personal and important information, have been a centre of concern for misuse of data. [7] In 2018, an article written in The Guardian grabbed attention for its headline. It alleged that Grindr, a dating app for gay men, had leaked the HIV status of several users with numerous companies, which was accepted by the app’s representatives.

Following the stigma attached to dating customs in the LGBT community, many LGBT people turn to online dating platforms for their romantic ventures. Scammers often exploit this desideratum in the LGBT community to blackmail them into revealing their identities and sharing it publically.

B. Catfishing and Identity Theft

[8] The activity of interacting with someone through a deceit by creating a sham identity on social networks, often to target specific victims, is termed as catfishing. Sexual predators are often seen catfishing to interact with children and younger teens, so that the victims start trusting them. By trapping them, the predators obtain information and intentionally use it against them.

Identity theft is also a common occurrence, majority of times done by someone you’re familiar with, which results in a pretty bad, often devastating, situation. Suppose, person A somehow obtains the information and pictures of Person B. Whatever ruckus person A causes, person B has to suffer for it. Things could go as far as person A committing a crime and person B being investigated for it. Person B will be falsely convicted for the crime.

[9] Personal identifiable information could include someone's name, picture, date of birth, phone number, credit card number and pin, signature, etc.

C. Human trafficking and Assault

A 28 year old woman was allegedly assaulted by someone whom she met through a dating app. He invited her and committed the crime in a five-star hotel in New Delhi [10]. Dating applications are a resource and a way of hunting out the victims for sexual predators.

[11] A study conducted by Brigham Young University concluded that approximately 14% of assaults were carried out by acquaintances met through the applications. People suffering from mental disorders were the most unfortunate and majorly targeted victims as the attacks were remarkably more violent. College students were one of the most notable targets of the assaults as well.

[12] Here is the story of Chelsie Lancaster, who found her potential match through a dating app and fell into his charms pretty quickly as a result of an upsetting breakup. She was unknown to the dangers coming her way. The man persuaded Chelsie to perform in a strip club and threatened to release her private information, which, according to Chelsie, "made you just comply out of fear". She was forced into the life of prostitution after being trafficked by the man she thought to be the one for her.

D. Fraud

[13] Catfishers mainly deceive the naïve and gullible users, in order to commit fraud. One of the prime examples is India's Tinder Swindler. Ramesh Kumar Swain, a 66 year old man, married 27 women from 10 different states over past 4 years, by faking a persona. It was a big shock to everyone that some of his brides (or victims, in this case) were official government employees. He conned the women by faking as a deputy director general of health education and that he was training at the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. He swindles lakhs of money from each of his victim, and moved away whenever his cover was blown.

Through a further investigation, it was found that Swain had actually cheated more than 90 women, but they refused to be a part of his case due to the fear of facing disgrace from the society.

E. Objectification

Although this is not exactly a crime, objectification is really frowned upon. Women have been objectified and treated less than their worth since decades. After matching with a woman, there have been few cases where men have shared their personal and intimate chats with their group chats.

[14] In 2019, South Korean singer Jung Joon-young was involved in a scandal that revealed his alleged crimes in KakaoTalk (a South Korean messaging app). The leaked messages contained photos, videos, and conversations dating from 2015-2016. The singer and other convicts were charged with sharing illegal filming and sharing, and sharing illicit photography in the chat-rooms. He also shared 'molka', a South Korean word for forwarding of non-consensual intimate videos of women.

IV. PRECAUTIONS TO BE TAKEN

After going through the various types of crime occurring through dating apps, the first and foremost advice that everyone needs to fit in their head is awareness. "Prevention is better than cure." This thought was put forth by Erasmus in the 16th century. The current generation should take awareness seriously and prevent any such situations to affect them.

[15] In addition to awareness, the following precautions should be taken while using dating apps:

A. Watching Out for Excessive Adoration and Affection

People who are facing abandonment and isolation are more prone to falling victims of 'love-bombing', which is a false sense of intimacy giving unrestrained affection to the victims. They need to pay attention to any unusual tricks played by their matches and save themselves from falling down the rabbit hole.

B. Solicitation of Explicit Photographs

This trick is mostly used by traffickers and blackmailers, where they ask for some private and graphic pictures of their victims, and use them illegally with the intention to commit their crimes, such as forcing them into illegal jobs. Users should rarely take the risk of sharing such pictures, and if possible, never share it or even store it on their devices. This goes without saying – do not share your private information as well!

C. Background Checking

At times, background checks by running a simple Google search is possible. Users should give it a try when they interact with a match.

D. Sharing the Profile Details

If users have set up a meet or a date with their matches, they should share their matches' profile details with someone trustworthy who would help them in dire situations. They should also share their locations for a faster tracking.

E. Awareness of your Surroundings

During your date, always pay heed to your surroundings. If you ever feel the need to escape, ask for help and reach the nearest police station.

F. Blocking of Suspicious Users

If a user feels like the profile on their page has suspicious pictures and information, or if their matches are behaving in a way that can raise some serious questions, it is best to report them to the application supervisors. This way, users save themselves as well as other potential victims.

G. Request for Financial Aid

Users should be alert of matches asking for any sort of financial help. They should immediately report them to the authorities.

H. Transportation Independent

Whenever meeting up with their match, users must never depend on the match for transportation. This prevents from any mishaps happening during the ride and the match taking them somewhere without consent.

Lastly, always trust your instincts! If your gut tells you that something bad is going to happen on the date, do not go on that date. You should be smart and safe at every stage of your life.

CONCLUSION

This case study focuses on the in-depth introduction to dating applications, the demographical use, and how they play a part in the crimes, manipulations, and tricks played by criminals and predators to exploit their victims. We also try to present a few precautionary steps that can be taken by the victims. The case study aims to provide awareness and help to lessen the stigma of zero safety with dating applications.

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