

Digital Manipulation: Self-Presentation in the Film The Tinder Swindler

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology, including social media, has emerged as a means of communicating with other people, one of which is the dating application called Tinder. Socializing, doing work, dating, and sharing life stories on social media are examples of daily activities carried out by people around the world. The focus of this research is on identity manipulation techniques which are studied using self-presentation strategy theory by Erving Goffman. This study describes how the main character uses digital platforms to manipulate using the Tinder application, as documented in the documentary film "The Tinder Swindler", resulting in losses and heartbreak felt by the victims of the dating application. The purpose of this research is to look at the digital manipulation carried out by the main character who uses the Tinder application through deceptive self-presentation for personal gain and to analyze the self-presentation strategies used in these acts of manipulation. This research methodology is qualitative using a content analysis approach which is used to explore the manipulative strategies carried out by the main character. Therefore, the results of this study show that by utilizing dating applications such as Tinder, social media, and other communication technologies, a person is able to create a very convincing fake identity and use various self-presentation strategies to deceive many victims and get everything they need through the media social.

Keywords: Digital Manipulation; Self-presentation; The Tinder Swindler; Content Analysis; Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments in the current digital era have changed people's daily lives a lot, one of which is in terms of finding a soul mate or life partner. In recent years, online dating has begun to be chosen by people as an alternative for finding a partner, whether for a serious relationship leading to marriage or just looking for fun, online dating is defined as developing a romantic relationship via the internet (Herdianti, 2018). The motivations of online dating users also vary, ranging from the aim of finding a partner for a serious relationship such as marriage, to looking for someone to talk to online, to curiosity and wanting to have fun without any particular goal (Kusuma & Letare, 2022). Online dating applications are popular platforms that people are starting to use to start romantic relationships by providing several tools and

features to present themselves ideally. One of the well-known online dating applications used almost all over the world is the Tinder application, with an estimated 50 million or more users worldwide, Tinder has become one of the most popular online dating applications (Neyt et al., 2019).

Tinder is a dating app created in 2012 by Hatch Labs, a startup under IAC (InterActiveCorp). The developers of this app are Sean Rad, Whitney Wolfe Herd, Joe Munoz, Dinesh Moorjani, Jonathan Badeen, and Justin Mateen. Since its launch, Tinder has become one of the most popular dating apps worldwide, with millions of active users every day (Levpušček & Glavač, 2023). Tinder is a mobile dating application that uses geolocation technology, which refers to technology that can identify the geographic location of a device, to connect fellow users with the closest or almost equal match level (Smith, 2022). The ease with which users can connect with interested people around them is what has led to its widespread use and use of its original concept as a “connection app”.

Tinder has become a worldwide phenomenon that has changed the way people interact and maintain romantic relationships in the digital age (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2019a). With a simple yet effective concept, Tinder has managed to increase user engagement and remain relevant in the ever-evolving digital market (Menon, 2024). Despite facing various criticisms and challenges, Tinder continues to innovate to improve the user experience and meet increasingly complex social needs. The application not only facilitates romantic relationships but also enhances social and cultural dynamics around the world.

Regardless of the reason for its use, namely for short-term or long-term interests, Tinder has quickly become the most popular dating application in the world. Based on the financial report of Match Group, which is Tinder's parent company, the current number of users, in 2023 or the fourth quarter of 2023, is estimated at 9.97 million users as explained in statistical data by the web business of apps from 2018 to 2023 (Lokanan, 2023).

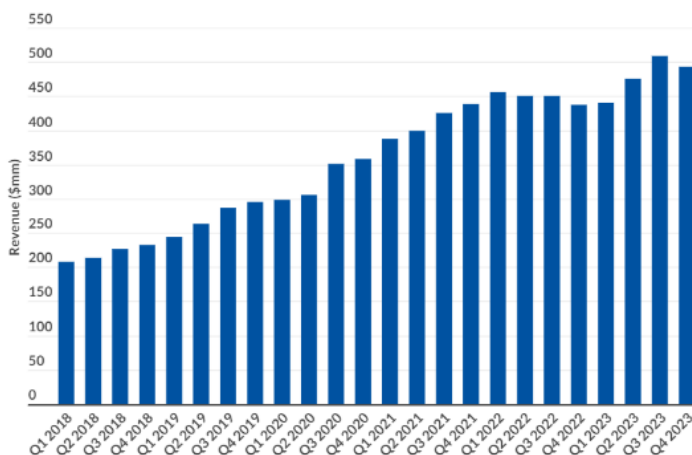


Figure 1. Tinder users 2018-2023

<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tinder-statistics/>

Since its introduction in 2012, Tinder has changed the way of finding a partner or date from having to meet in person or be introduced to each other by other people, replacing it with a practical way of establishing social relationships by making simple decisions through digital media (Ranzini et al., 2022). The unique affordances gained from the mobile medium, such as portability, increased availability, image production, and geolocation help the Tinder app in performing its duties as a matchmaking app with ease. This is proven by data in 2023 obtained from Business of Apps that the Tinder application is still the most popular application by

market share compared to various other similar applications such as Bumble, Hinge, Badoo, and so on (Lokanan, 2023).

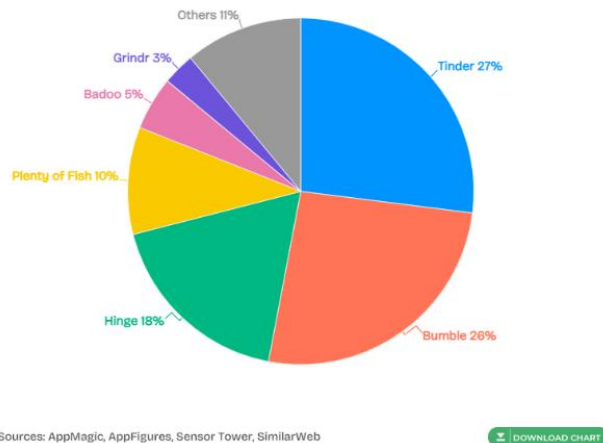


Figure 2. Online Apps Data
(<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tinder-statistics/>)

Using the Tinder application is very simple and easy that's why so many people use it. Users only need to log in using Facebook or a phone number if they already have a Facebook account, they can use it to quickly enter their email address and password, or they can create a new Facebook account by clicking the "sign up" button (Appel et al., 2023). Therefore, using a Facebook login is expected to provide an increased sense of authenticity and security to users so that they can see whether the person they like has mutual friends, or they can explore other linked accounts such as Instagram to find out more about the person they like (Fowler & Both, 2020).

Leveraging the innovative concept of "swiping," Tinder allows users to be selected based solely on their visual preferences. Users create profiles with a few photos and a short description. While using the app, users can view profiles of other people within a certain geopolitical radius (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2019). If they are interested, they can swipe right to right, and if not, they can swipe left to left. If both users simultaneously swipe left, a "match" occurs and they can start chatting using the app's text messaging feature (Bowman et al., 2025). The large number of people who use the Tinder application of course not only has a positive impact, such as connecting individuals with other individuals and finding partners, but there are also many cases where Tinder has a negative impact. Some individuals deliberately use the Tinder application as a medium to deceive through feelings of love, both materially and mentally (Shuster et al., 2024).

Tinder has improved the way people meet and engage in romantic interactions. The app depicts the concept of "speed dating" in a more direct and spontaneous way by presenting quick results based on visual aids. In addition, Tinder has opened up opportunities for all types of relationships, from casual dating to long-term relationships (Walker & McPherson, 2017). The app is used not only by individuals looking for romantic relationships, but also by people who want to strengthen their social bonds. Tinder has reached a new level of development with features designed to maximize the number of users and meet various social needs (Freyth & Batinic, 2021).

This is proven by the existence of manipulation in the current digital era, namely self-presentation which is misused by the main character in the documentary film *The Tinder Swindler*. *The Tinder Swindler* is a documentary film that premiered on Netflix on February 2 2022. This documentary tells the story of a real-life case of identity and financial theft

committed by a young man who used the pseudonym Simon Leviev and claimed to be the CEO of a real estate company called LLD Diamonds, whose real name is Simon Hayut, is a native of Israel. Simon succeeded in committing fraud based on love and affection and took large financial amounts from three women, identified as Cecilie Fjellhoy, Pernilla Sjöholm and Ayleen Charlotte.



Figure 3. Poster Film The Tinder Swindler

The figure of Simon is described as a man who supports himself by working hard so that he becomes the dream of women, such as having extraordinary financial abilities, good looks, intelligent charm, and the ability to make his partner happy with the wealth he displays. Amazingly, Simon even made a commitment to the people he robbed, namely the women who met him. Starting from establishing strong bonds between friends to more serious relationships, such as celebrating birthdays and raising children together. But things get worse when Simon, who is traveling to several different countries on business, realizes that he is receiving attacks from "enemies" or other people who belittle his position as director of a company. Simon then requested financial assistance due to his inability to access his credit card or account.

Simon even informed the victims that he was attacked by enemies as evidenced by photos and videos in the ambulance with his personal bodyguard named Peter. Simon then obtained a large amount of money from the victims and even provided loans out of pity and fear that something would happen to their loved ones. Later, one by one the women complained that they had become victims because Simon did not reimburse them for the money they lent to them. The fact became even more surprising when the victims learned that Simon, along with several other names known to the victims, was actually an Israeli citizen known as Simon Yehuda Hayut.

Self-presentation or often also called impression management is an act of presenting oneself that a person carries out to achieve a desired self-image (Sari & Kusuma, 2018). This is not only because Tinder is the most popular online dating site featuring a variety of individuals on it, but also because Tinder can be seen as a platform for expression that involves processes of self-representation and online identity construction (Ford, 2024). Self-presentation behavior felt and carried out by a person depends on social motivations, such as integration, self-promotion, intimidation, personal enjoyment, or even lifestyle (Choe, 2024). As a result, a person can be recognized by other people as having certain attitudes, traits or identities through the symbolic appearance represented in the Tinder application.

Therefore, the focus of this research is to look in depth through self-presentation theory regarding manipulation or deception in the current digital era which is spread across various

levels of society, through self-representation carried out in the film *The Tinder Swindler*. Which is based on a true story that has harmed many parties and victims. This is quite a big threat in the world of digital media and social communication today, many victims experience depression because they have lost many things in their lives such as trust, love, and even finances which were taken by Tinder fraudsters. The self-presentation that Simon misuses in this film is identity falsification, defamation of certain people and companies, namely LLD Diamonds, fraud, and also threats to victims.

This research aims to provide views and insights to readers to be more careful when using digital media, especially for personal interests. A number of previous studies examined the impact of using the Tinder application and a person's self-presentation when they want to achieve something. This includes a study conducted by Cheuk Wan and Victoria Yeung (2022) regarding self-presentation strategies on online dating sites in America and China. In the study, users of online dating sites used in mobile societies pursued different relationship goals and used different self-presentation strategies to attract potential partners (Mayshak et al., 2023). Online data users from societies with high relational mobility such as the US appear to be more likely to maximize their opportunities to engage in different types of relationships with a preference for less committed relationships, and emphasize self-improvement goals. In contrast, online daters from low-mobility societies like Hong Kong appear to be more likely to seek more committed relationships (Gori et al., 2024). So this research shows that individuals' relationship goals and self-presentation strategies on competitive online platforms can be limited by the socio-ecological characteristics of their surrounding culture or environment (Wan & Yeung, 2022).

Apart from that, there was also previous research conducted by M. Appel, F. Hutmacher, and Politt (2023) which discussed the use of filters or edits on men's Tinder profiles which resulted in women judging them as less trustworthy but increasing their curiosity towards them its potential physical attraction (Appel et al., 2023). In this study, extending existing theory and research, there was a dual effect of idealized self-presentation in relation to men's use of beauty filters in online dating profiles. The reason is that by editing their photos, men can significantly increase the attractiveness of their potential female partner. However, the assessment of trustworthiness tends to decrease, this is proven by the existence of various edits to men's profiles on the Tinder application which make potential partners believe them, even though in reality they are all just edits or hoaxes. So this research shows that in some cases of online dating via the Tinder application, male partners often make edits to their profiles to attract the interest of their female partners (Appel et al., 2023).

SELF-PRESENTATION THEORY

Erving Goffman in his book entitled "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" introduced the theory of self-presentation or in other terms, namely impression management in 1959. He said, everyone adopts self-presentation behavior, meaning that individuals try to show different things (García-Canal et al., 2024). in front of other people as an individual's effort to create a certain impression so that other people interpret their identity according to what they want (Phan et al., 2021). So that each individual always tries to maintain his or her identity, for example in terms of the work displayed, relationships, possessions/wealth, and so on. This behavior exists in everyday life to display a good image (Jiménez-Muro et al., 2024).

Self-presentation has been widely used to discuss various studies regarding how someone presents themselves on social media. Since the emergence of digital and mobile media, it seems that people are more interested in building their own profiles and personas online (Alexopoulos et al., 2020). The reason is, in the current social media context, social media users do not just

appear on stage, but present themselves through profile pages and photos on the internet or social media (Yu et al., 2022).

Self-presentation is never built in a vacuum and can become a boundary between public and private. Experts note that when people use apps as a channel to express and display their identities, they tend to very selectively display the best version of themselves (Smith, 2022). Self-presentation conveys what individuals feel is best in themselves and expresses their identity according to the standards of the social environment around them. Therefore, online self-presentation can be selective or even distorted based on the user's goals and expectations in the form of responses from the surrounding environment (Choe, 2024). Given the technological affordances and personal selectivity that exist on social media, self-presentation can take various forms depending on what aspects the individual wishes to share and demonstrate.

SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY

According to Jones and Pittman, self-presentation strategies are strategies as behavioral characteristics influenced by the theme of power that a person chooses to implement in order to gain respect from others. The features used and implemented in it include nonverbal expressions of love and affection as well as verbal communication that occurs on social media. There are two types of self-presentation strategies, namely those described by Arkin (1981) and those described by Jones & Pittman (1982). According to Arkin (1981), there are two self-presentation strategies that can be used to manage and carry out daily tasks which were also explained by Goffman, namely acquisition and protective self-presentation. Meanwhile, the concept of self-presentation strategies as proposed by Jones & Pittman (1982) is explained in more detail by presenting five self-presentation strategies.

Therefore, in this research to describe and explain the self-presentation strategy used in the film *The Tinder Swindler* is the concept of self-presentation strategy by Jones & Pittman. The concept of five self-presentation strategies from Jones & Pittman describes certain situations that encourage online users to fulfill their need to interact with other online users (Yu et al., 2022).

However, in this study, only four self-presentation strategies were used as described by Jones and Pittman, namely the first, ingratiation, a strategy used to present oneself with the aim of being liked by other people. Individuals who have the motive to get other people interested in them will try to display the characteristics of being warm, humorous, reliable, charming, and displaying physical attractiveness (Pfundmair & Berthold, 2020). Second, self-promotion is a strategy used to seek recognition from others. An individual will present himself as a competent person, both in general competence and specific competence. Third, supplication strategy, namely self-presentation which is carried out by revealing one's weaknesses and dependence on other people. Supplication is the act of appearing incompetent to achieve something greater. Lastly, Intimidation is a strategy used by individuals to appear as someone who is feared by other parties. The characteristics that appear in someone who displays an intimidating impression are threatening and displaying anger (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive methodology. Descriptive research aims to represent phenomena which are then described through individual verbal or written expressions and observable behavior (Kriyantono, 2012). The content analysis method is used as a method to examine the components of a communication message systematically and in depth. This

research or study will use a conventional content analysis approach which starts from observation. This study takes interpersonal elements from documentary films as well as deceptive methods in describing, interpreting and explaining. The sample in this study consisted of a 2022 Netflix documentary entitled *The Tinder Swindler*. The focus of analysis in this research is on the four self-presentation strategies shown, namely ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, and supplication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

INGRATIATION STRATEGY

In the ingratiation aspect, Simon tries to shape his self-presentation as a positive figure, hard worker, rich, and easy for his potential partner to like. Simon created a fake profile on the dating app Tinder, where he verified his identity to manage his official Instagram account. The first thing Simon did was make a strong first impression by displaying a luxurious lifestyle. Simon always appears dapper and classy, often displaying a luxurious lifestyle by wearing designer clothes, driving expensive cars, and staying in luxury hotels.

This appearance is designed to impress the victim and make him believe that he is successful and rich. Simon claims to be the son of a billionaire in the diamond business, providing a convincing background of his life and supporting his first impression with an edited photo of him with the owner of LLD Diamonds. This is what caused Cecilie Fjellhoy, Pernilla Sjoholm, and Ayleen Charlotte in this film to feel impressed and compatible with Simon.



Figure 4. Simon Leviev's appearance in the film *The Tinder Swindler*

SELF-PROMOTION STRATEGY

In the Self-Promotion aspect, Simon Leviev creates an image of himself as a successful, rich and influential figure. Simon admits he is the son of Lev Leviev, a billionaire diamond businessman. This is a form of self-promotion that gives the impression that he comes from a very rich and influential family, so Simon often invites his victims to experience his luxurious lifestyle firsthand. Simon often mentions that he has connections with important and influential people, including a personal bodyguard named Peter and security staff which adds credibility to his success story. Simon uses firm, convincing gestures and body language, which helps reinforce his image as a powerful and successful person.

Simon often told stories about the dangers and threats he faced because of the diamond business, which made his victims feel sympathy and want to help him. This is proven by the increasing sense of trust in the women he meets through the Tinder application. For example, Cecilie immediately met Simon at the hotel where he was staying when he was in London. Simon asked Cecilie to follow them, namely Simon, his bodyguard, and two other people to

travel to Bulgaria for a business trip on his private jet. This convinced Cecilie that Simon was the son of the owner of LLD Diamonds, Simon even prepared a passport, private car and accommodation for Cecilie. In the same month, Simon also did this to Pernilla who was in Sweden, and Ayleen who was in Amsterdam.



Figure 5. The victims in the film the tinder swindler (Cecilie, Pernilla, and Ayleen)

Simon often sent romantic and caring messages to his victims, making them feel special and appreciated. He also often pays special attention and performs small actions that show interest, such as remembering small details about his victims' lives.

SUPPLICATION STRATEGY

In the supplication aspect, Simon Leviev utilized this strategy very effectively to gain sympathy and financial assistance from his victims. Simon often said that his life was threatened because of the diamond business he ran, that his enemies wanted to harm him so he had to hide or run away. Simon admitted that due to the emergency situation, he could not access his personal funds and needed immediate financial assistance from his victims. Simon sent messages full of sadness and despair to his victims, making them feel sorry for him and want to help.

On several occasions, Simon also presented himself as tired and depressed, whether through text messages, telephone calls, or in person. This reinforces the impression that he is truly in danger and desperately needs help. To reassure his victims, Simon often promised that he would immediately pay back the money he borrowed once the emergency had passed. Simon makes his victims feel that they are the only person who can help them in the situation. Using emotional manipulation to make his victims feel guilty if they do not help, Simon does not ask for large amounts all at once, but starts with small requests that gradually increase. This makes victims feel more comfortable providing assistance initially, which then grows into larger amounts.

INTIMIDATION STRATEGY

Simon Leviev also uses intimidation strategies as part of his manipulative tactics to control and manipulate his victims. Simon often shows that he has bodyguards and personal security staff ready to protect him, this gives the impression that the threats against him are very serious and real which scares his victims. Simon sometimes shows a firm and aggressive attitude in interactions with his partner, both through words and actions to scare his victims and make them feel like they have to obey what he asks. Various methods are used, ranging from emotional pressure to make the victim feel anxious and afraid to telling them that if they don't

help, the situation will get worse and more dangerous. This makes the victim feel responsible for Simon's safety.

Simon even threatened by saying that his enemies would look for those closest to him, namely these women, to harm them. This was done so that the women felt insecure, afraid, and did everything they could to help Simon, starting from opening loans from several banks, even selling their personal assets. Simon often pressured his victims with urgent demands for money making them feel they had to provide immediate assistance to avoid dire consequences. In reality, all the money given to Simon was used to manipulate and have fun with other women he met on the Tinder application.

CONCLUSION

As one of the most transparent apps, Tinder has both positive and negative aspects that should be considered before using it. On the positive side, Tinder makes it easy to meet new people and expand your social network. The app can boost self-confidence, provide flexibility in terms of usage purposes, and offers safety features that help users create a safer environment. However, on the negative side, users may become too dependent on external validation, which can negatively impact their mental health and self-esteem. Security and privacy remain a major concern given the number of reported cases of theft and fraud. Such as barriers to dishonesty and fake profiles, as well as mismatched expectations in finding a serious relationship. The negative effects of this app can interfere with productivity and silent social interactions.

Based on the analysis of the film *The Tinder Swindler* it can be concluded that the digital era is a platform that can be utilized and abused for manipulation in large and real cases. By utilizing dating apps such as Tinder, social media, and communications technology, Simon Leviev was able to create highly convincing false identities and use various self-presentation strategies to deceive numerous victims. The film received widespread attention and sparked discussions about online dating safety and digital fraud. Many viewers were shocked by the victims' stories and felt sympathy for their experiences.

The Tinder Swindler also provides encouragement for dating platforms to increase their security measures and for users to be more careful in their online interactions. Therefore, this film also highlights the importance of awareness and vigilance in interacting in the digital world. Users should not easily believe the information they receive, especially when it involves financial relationships and transactions. Additionally, there is an urgent need for stricter regulations and better security measures on digital platforms to protect users from manipulation and fraud as depicted in the documentary *The Tinder Swindler*. Through the story of Simon Leviev, this film shows how easy it is to identities can be faked and how powerful the psychological impact of manipulative methods through self-presentation strategies can be so easily. Therefore, this is a valuable lesson about the importance of digital literacy and psychological understanding to protect oneself from manipulation in the digital era.

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