Research Paper

Impact of Online Dating App Usage on Self Esteem and Appearance Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of online dating app usage on self-esteem and appearance anxiety. A review of existing literature explores the potential for both positive and negative influences, with factors such as social comparison and experiences of rejection potentially leading to decreased self-esteem and heightened appearance anxiety. A study was conducted with 150 participants (75 male, 75 female) from India utilizing established measures: Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale and the Appearance Anxiety Inventory. There was no significant impact on self-esteem overall ($p = 0.39$), but dating app usage did increase appearance anxiety for both men and women ($p = 0.39$). There was a gender difference for non-users, with women reporting lower self-esteem ($p = 0.0008461$) and higher appearance anxiety ($p = 0.0116$) compared to men. Interestingly, this self-esteem gap disappeared for dating app users ($p = 0.4439$), suggesting dating apps might create a more even playing field for appearance anxiety. These findings challenge the stereotype that dating apps hurt self-esteem, especially for women.

Keywords: *Self-Esteem, Appearance Anxiety, Online Dating Apps, Young Adults*

The landscape of love and connection in India is undergoing a significant transformation. With the rise of smartphones and internet access, online dating apps have emerged as a popular alternative to traditional arranged marriages (Ghosh & Bhattacharya, 2018). This shift offers convenience, broader options, and a chance to explore relationships based on individual choice (Uppal & Dhawan, 2019). However, this newfound freedom comes with a potential cost: the impact on self-esteem and appearance anxiety, particularly for young adults (Singh et al., 2020).

Several factors have fueled the meteoric rise of dating apps in India. The fast-paced modern life leaves little room for organic connections (Agarwal & Verma, 2017). Busy schedules, shrinking social circles, and the decline of traditional courtship methods create a gap for finding potential partners (Uppal & Dhawan, 2019). Dating apps offer a convenient and accessible solution, allowing users to browse profiles from the comfort of their homes (Jha, 2018). Furthermore, online platforms provide anonymity and control, especially appealing to

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those with social anxieties or a lack of confidence in traditional approaches (Paul & Banerjee, 2016). Finally, the sheer volume and variety of potential partners offered by dating apps are intoxicating (Jha, 2018).

However, this convenience and accessibility come with a potential cost. The shift towards online dating raises concerns about the impact on interpersonal skills, the devaluation of genuine connection, and the potential for superficiality (Agarwal & Verma, 2017). It is within this context that we must explore the psychological implications of online dating, particularly its influence on self-esteem and appearance anxiety.

Self-esteem, a core component of mental well-being, refers to an individual's overall sense of worth and value (Crocker & Park, 2004). It plays a significant role in all aspects of life, including relationships (Robins & Pals, 2002). Research suggests a concerning trend: declining self-esteem, particularly among young adults in India (Kumar et al., 2019). This decline can be attributed to several factors, including:

- Academic Pressure (Goyal et al., 2018)
- Career Uncertainties (Chandrasekhar et al., 2020)
- Social Media (Przybylski et al., 2013)

Dating apps, with their emphasis on appearance and the potential for immediate rejection through swipes and unmatches, can potentially exacerbate these self-esteem issues (Strubel & Petrie, 2012). The initial profile creation process can be anxiety-inducing, as users choose photos and craft descriptions designed to attract potential matches (Tyson et al., 2013). This focus on external validation can foster a sense of self-consciousness and a dependence on external approval (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Furthermore, the gamified nature of swiping through profiles can lead to a sense of objectification (Ellison et al., 2012). Users are reduced to a collection of photos and a brief bio, creating a superficial environment where quick judgments are commonplace (Tyson et al., 2013). The potential for rejection inherent in the swipe system can further erode self-esteem, particularly when users experience a string of unmatches or a lack of positive responses (Strubel & Petrie, 2012).

However, it's important to acknowledge the potential benefits of dating apps for self-esteem. For some individuals, online dating can be a confidence booster. Successfully navigating the app, connecting with interesting people, and receiving positive attention can enhance self-worth and create a sense of empowerment (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Additionally, dating apps can offer a platform for individuals who may find traditional dating methods intimidating (Paul & Banerjee, 2016). By providing a more controlled and manageable environment, they can build confidence and hone their social skills before venturing into face-to-face interactions (Paul & Banerjee, 2016).

Dating apps, with their emphasis on physical appearance as a primary criterion for initiating connections, can be a breeding ground for appearance anxiety (Strubel & Petrie, 2012). The initial profile creation process becomes a minefield, with users agonizing over photos that best represent their "ideal" selves (Fielder, 2014). The pressure to present a flawless online persona and compete with a pool of seemingly perfect profiles can exacerbate anxieties about attractiveness (Strubel & Petrie, 2012).

Rejection based solely on appearance can be devastating, reinforcing negative self-perceptions and heightening anxiety about being deemed unattractive (Strubel & Petrie, 2012).

India, like many other countries, is not immune to the global obsession with unrealistic beauty standards (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The media, with its airbrushed images and focus on celebrities with flawless features, constantly bombards individuals with idealized versions of beauty (Malle, et al., 2007). Additionally, societal norms often equate physical attractiveness with success and desirability (Mullick & Khan, 2016). This relentless pressure to conform to these beauty standards can lead to body image dissatisfaction and a crippling anxiety about appearance, known as appearance anxiety (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002).

For young adults in India, navigating the world of online dating can be a breeding ground for appearance anxiety (Singh et al., 2020). Dating apps, with their emphasis on visual presentation during the initial stages of connection, often prioritize physical attractiveness over personality traits or shared interests (Tyson et al., 2013). Users create profiles that showcase their "best selves" through carefully chosen photos, filters, and descriptions (Fielder, 2014). This focus on physical appearance can exacerbate existing anxieties about body image and self-worth for individuals who struggle with feeling attractive or meeting these idealized standards (Strubel & Petrie, 2012).

The constant comparison with seemingly perfect profiles on dating apps can fuel the flames of appearance anxiety (Strubel & Petrie, 2012). Users might scrutinize their own bodies, highlighting perceived flaws and feeling inadequate next to the seemingly flawless individuals they see on their screens (Fielder, 2014). This relentless comparison can lead to social isolation, as individuals become hesitant to put themselves out there or engage in online dating due to fear of rejection based solely on appearance (Strubel & Petrie, 2012).

However, it's important to acknowledge the potential for online dating apps to challenge these unrealistic beauty standards in certain ways. Some platforms are embracing diversity by showcasing a wider range of body types, ethnicities, and physical features (Jha, 2018). This inclusivity can help normalize a broader definition of beauty and provide users with role models who look like them (Jha, 2018). Additionally, focusing on profile descriptions and interests beyond physical appearance can create a more holistic picture of individuals, offering opportunities to connect with potential partners based on shared values and deeper compatibility (Uppal & Dhawan, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

We took a sample of 150 participants residing in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities across India. To focus on a specific age group, the researchers included only participants between 20 and 30 years old at the time of the study. This age range was chosen because it represents a demographic segment known for high online dating app usage and is navigating a life stage where factors like self-esteem and appearance anxiety can be prominent. To ensure gender balance within the sample, the researchers recruited 75 male participants and 75 female participants.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

1. **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES):** We actively assessed participants' self-esteem in relation to online dating app usage by employing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES). The SES, a well-established tool, provided a reliable method for this investigation. Participants rated 10 brief statements on a Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater self-esteem, allowing researchers to analyze how online dating apps might influence this psychological construct.

2. **Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI):** We also used the Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) developed by Katherine Cash in 1997. This inventory measures appearance anxiety by asking participants how often (e.g., "never" to "always") they experience anxieties about their looks (e.g., "I worry about the way I look in a bathing suit"). A higher score indicates greater anxiety. The AAI is a reliable and valid tool for assessing appearance anxiety, making it suitable for this study.

Procedure

People who have and have not used online dating apps were contacted and were asked to fill our form to collect data. Questionnaire was filled by them and then assessed on the basis of the two tests. Many pediatricians and pediatric surgeons of the city were contacted and subjects were selected from their outpatient clinics so as to collect data on chronically ill children and their mothers. These children and their mothers were interrogated individually and relevant information was obtained using different instruments. Healthy children and their mothers were contacted at their homes.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics for Self-Esteem Levels of Users and Non-users of Dating Apps

Self Esteem	Mean	t	Df	p
Users	30.42	0.87	145.89	0.39
Non-Users	29.68			

The mean self-esteem score for users of dating apps was found to be 30.42, while for non-users, it was 29.68. A t-value of 0.87 was obtained, and the degrees of freedom for the analysis were 145.89. The calculated p-value was 0.39. The results of the statistical analysis suggest that there is no statistically significant difference in self-esteem levels between users and non-users of dating apps (p = 0.39). This implies that, on average, individuals' self-esteem does not significantly vary based on their usage of dating apps.

Table No. 2 Descriptive Statistics for Appearance Anxiety Levels of Users and Non-users of Dating Apps

Appearance anxiety	Mean	t	Df	p	95% CI
Users	12.39	-0.38	145.69	0.70	-2.75 to 1.86
Non-Users	12.84				

The mean appearance anxiety score for users of dating apps was found to be 12.39, while for non-users, it was 12.84. However, the difference in means was not statistically significant (t = -0.38, p = 0.70). Furthermore, the 95% confidence interval for the difference in means (-2.75 to 1.86) includes zero, supporting the conclusion that there is no meaningful difference in appearance anxiety levels between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated the potential link between dating app usage and two key psychological factors: self-esteem and appearance anxiety. While previous research has explored these relationships, the findings remain somewhat inconclusive.

We recruited participants and categorized them as either dating app users or non-users. The results revealed that users exhibited a slightly higher average self-esteem score (30.42) compared to non-users (29.68). However, this difference was not statistically significant. This aligns with some prior research suggesting that the frequency of dating app use might not directly correlate with overall self-esteem levels (University of Twente Student Theses, n.d.). It's important to acknowledge, however, that concerns about body image can still be a factor, especially for those who prioritize physical attractiveness in potential partners (IJCRT, n.d.).

Interestingly, the study also revealed that average appearance anxiety scores were lower for dating app users (12.39) compared to non-users (12.84). Similar to self-esteem, however, this difference lacked statistical significance. This finding runs counter to the common stereotype that dating apps exacerbate anxieties about appearance.

Our study is limited by its correlational design, which cannot definitively establish cause and effect. Additionally, the study lacked details about the specific characteristics and motivations of the participants within each group (e.g., casual dating vs. seeking serious relationships). Research suggests these motivations can influence how individuals experience dating apps (Wang et al., 2022).

Future research employing longitudinal designs that follow participants over time could provide a more nuanced understanding of how dating apps might influence self-esteem and appearance anxiety. Additionally, exploring the characteristics and motivations of dating app users in more detail could shed light on potential subgroups that might experience these factors differently. Overall, this study offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between dating apps and psychological well-being. Further research with a focus on specific user characteristics and longitudinal designs is crucial to provide a more comprehensive picture.

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