

Research Paper

Swiping vs. Scrolling: Examining the Impact of Dating Apps and Social Media on Self-Esteem in Delhi's Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall sense of self-worth and is shaped by social interactions, including those in digital spaces. This study examined the relationship between self-esteem, social media use, and dating app engagement among 121 young adults aged 18 to 29 from Delhi-NCR. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and self-reported patterns of digital usage. Statistical analyses revealed that dating app users showed significantly different levels of self-esteem compared to non-users. While no significant associations were found between time spent on social media or dating apps and self-esteem, a strong negative correlation emerged between experiences of rejection on dating apps and self-esteem. These findings shed light on how specific forms of online engagement can influence young adults' psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Social Media, Dating Apps, Self-Esteem, Young Adults*

Over time, self-esteem as a psychological construct has evolved under the influence of societal, technological, and cultural transformations. From early developmental theories to modern digital interactions, these shifts have shaped how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves. Recognizing this evolution is crucial to understanding contemporary challenges—especially in a digital era where self-worth is often influenced by online presence and interactions.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their worth, encompassing emotional responses, beliefs, and attitudes about oneself. It plays a fundamental role in shaping behavior, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. Self-esteem is not fixed; it fluctuates across time and contexts and is influenced by external feedback, social interactions, and personal experiences. It is a core component of psychological well-being and resilience.

Self-esteem is a multifaceted construct, consisting of global self-esteem, domain-specific self-esteem, and state self-esteem. Global self-esteem reflects an individual's overall sense of self-worth, while domain-specific self-esteem relates to particular areas such as physical appearance, social competence, or academic ability. State self-esteem refers to temporary

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changes in self-perception influenced by specific situations or feedback. Together, these dimensions determine how people interpret their self-image and respond emotionally to challenges or successes.

The rise of social media and dating apps has redefined how individuals view themselves and interact with others. Social media platforms encourage curated self-presentation, constant comparison, and the pursuit of validation through likes, comments, and followers. These factors can significantly influence self-esteem, especially among adolescents and young adults. Simultaneously, dating apps introduce a unique form of social interaction, where appearance-based judgments, swiping culture, and algorithmic matchmaking can contribute to fluctuating feelings of self-worth.

Social media promotes idealized representations of life and beauty, setting unrealistic standards that can result in self-doubt and dissatisfaction. Users are often drawn into comparison cycles, measuring their lives against highlight reels of others. Similarly, dating apps focus heavily on physical attractiveness and instant judgments, reinforcing external validation as a primary measure of self-worth. The process of matching or facing rejection can impact users' confidence, often leading to anxiety, emotional fatigue, or temporary boosts in self-esteem based on online responses.

While both social media and dating apps offer opportunities for connection, entertainment, and self-expression, they also present psychological risks. These digital platforms often blur the line between authentic self-worth and perceived online popularity. Users may struggle to maintain genuine self-esteem while navigating filtered realities, curated images, and performance-driven interactions. This digital environment fosters both connection and comparison—creating a complex dynamic that can either support or hinder self-esteem development.

Understanding the psychological effects of social media and dating apps is essential to address emerging mental health concerns. By exploring the interplay between online platforms and self-esteem, we can develop more effective interventions, promote digital literacy, and encourage healthier online habits that nurture authentic self-worth and emotional well-being.

The growing use of social media and dating apps has affected how young people see themselves and their self-esteem. Many researchers have studied this topic, especially in the Indian context.

Khandelwal and Bhambri (2024) studied young adults in India to understand how dating app use affects self-esteem and appearance anxiety. They found that people who used dating apps more often were more worried about their looks and had lower self-esteem. This shows that constantly being judged on these apps can make people feel worse about themselves.

Tewari (2024) looked at how social media use affects self-esteem in young adults. The study showed that spending more time on social media is linked to lower self-esteem. It suggested that seeing idealized lives and bodies online can make people feel less confident and unhappy with their own lives.

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Bansal and Sharma (2024) explored how self-esteem is connected to dating app use and attachment styles. They found that people with low self-esteem used dating apps more to seek approval. This also affected how they formed relationships, showing a link between self-worth and online dating behavior.

Chopra and Sethi (2024) studied how social media addiction relates to self-esteem and personality. They found that people addicted to social media often had lower self-esteem. This means using these platforms too much might harm how people feel about themselves. These studies clearly show that too much time on dating apps and social media can negatively affect self-esteem. Indian research especially helps us understand how these issues affect young people in our own society.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

To examine the relationship between social media usage, dating app usage, and self-esteem among young adults in Delhi-NCR.

Sample

The sample comprised 121 young adults aged between 18 and 29 years, selected using purposive sampling. Participants were required to actively use at least one social media platform and/or dating app, be proficient in either Hindi or English, and reside in the Delhi-NCR region. This sampling strategy was adopted to ensure relevance and reliability in assessing digital platform engagement and its relation to self-esteem, focusing on individuals who are most likely to interact with such platforms in their daily lives.

Instrument

Developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely utilized instrument for evaluating an individual's overall perception of self-worth. It consists of 10 statements that reflect attitudes toward the self, including both positive and negative sentiments. Participants respond using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" (scored as 3) to "strongly disagree" (scored as 0). Items phrased negatively are reverse-scored to ensure consistency. Higher total scores reflect greater self-esteem, while lower scores suggest diminished self-regard. The scale has demonstrated high reliability, with internal consistency values typically falling between 0.77 and 0.88. Its construct validity has been supported through significant associations with related psychological variables such as depression, anxiety, and overall life satisfaction. In the current study, the original English version of the scale was administered.

Procedure

The study aimed to explore the relationship between social media usage, dating app usage, and self-esteem among young adults residing in Delhi-NCR. A total of 121 participants were recruited using purposive sampling through online platforms. Prior to participation, individuals were briefed about the study's objectives and procedures, and informed consent was obtained to ensure ethical compliance. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their involvement remained entirely voluntary, with the freedom to withdraw at any point. Data collection was conducted through structured online surveys. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) to assess global self-esteem, along with a self-developed questionnaire designed to capture their frequency and duration of social media and dating app usage, as well as experiences of rejection or

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negative interactions on such platforms. Following data collection, statistical analysis was carried out using Pearson's correlation to assess associations between variables, and independent samples t-tests were used to compare self-esteem levels between dating app users and non-users.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Mean, SD & t-value for Self-Esteem among Dating App Users and Non-Users

| Group | N | Mean | S.D | t-test | P- value |
|------------------|----|-------|------|--------|----------|
| Dating App Users | 60 | 11.71 | 3.20 | 5.38 | Sig. |
| Non- Users | 60 | 14.58 | 2.87 | | |
| 120 | | | | | |

* Significant at both levels (0.05 & 0.01)*

Table No. 2 Correlation between Time Spent on Dating Apps & Self Esteem

| Variables | N | Correlation Coefficient (r) | S.D | P- value |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|------|----------|
| Time on Dating Apps & Self-Esteem | 121 | -0.1155 | 3.20 | Insig. |

* Insignificant at both levels (0.05 & 0.01)*

Table No. 3 Correlation between Time Spent on Social Media & Self Esteem

| Variables | N | Correlation Coefficient (r) | S.D | P- value |
|------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|------|----------|
| Time on Social Media & Self-Esteem | 121 | -0.0246 | 3.20 | Insig. |

* Insignificant at both levels (0.05 & 0.01)*

Table No. 4 Correlation Between Rejection on Dating Apps and Self-Esteem

| Variables | N | Spearman's rho (ρ) | P- value |
|----------------------------------------|-----|--------------------|----------|
| Rejection on Dating Apps & Self-Esteem | 121 | -0.7983 | Sig. |

* Significant at both levels (0.05 & 0.01)*

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between dating app usage, social media usage, and self-esteem among young adults. Self-esteem, a key psychological construct, refers to an individual's overall subjective evaluation of their worth or value. It influences how people perceive themselves, how they relate to others, and how they navigate social environments. With the increasing prevalence of technology-mediated interactions, particularly through dating apps and social media platforms, it becomes essential to understand how such virtual experiences shape psychological well-being.

Dating apps are mobile-based platforms that enable individuals to interact, match, and form romantic or sexual connections based on profile information, photos, and brief conversations. These platforms often emphasize physical appearance and quick judgments, potentially fostering environments where users may experience validation or rejection at an intensified pace. Social media, on the other hand, includes broader platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat, where individuals share aspects of their lives, consume curated content, and engage in social comparison. Both platforms introduce unique psychological dynamics, especially related to self-worth and identity formation in young adults.

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The first hypothesis (H1) investigated whether there was a difference in self-esteem between dating app users and non-users. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference in self-esteem scores, with dating app users ($M = 11.71$) scoring lower than non-users ($M = 14.58$). The p-value obtained was highly significant ($p < .001$), indicating that this result is unlikely to be due to chance. This supports the hypothesis that dating app usage is associated with lower self-esteem. One possible explanation could be the constant exposure to appearance-based evaluations and the comparison-driven nature of these apps, where individuals may internalize rejection or lack of matches as a reflection of their self-worth. Additionally, the gamified format of dating apps can create cycles of validation-seeking and disappointment, which may cumulatively erode one's self-image.

The second hypothesis (H2) explored the correlation between time spent on dating apps and self-esteem levels. The Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be -0.1155 , indicating a very weak negative correlation. However, the p-value was not statistically significant ($p = 0.075$), suggesting that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the amount of time spent on dating apps directly affects self-esteem. While the direction of the correlation aligns with the hypothesis—that more time spent on dating apps may be linked to lower self-esteem—the weak strength and lack of significance imply that time alone may not be the determining factor. It is plausible that the nature of interactions, perceived success on the app, and personal expectations may play more substantial roles than the duration of use.

The third hypothesis (H3) examined the relationship between time spent on social media and self-esteem. A very weak negative correlation was observed ($r = -0.02459$), and the p-value ($p = 0.06$) indicated non-significance. These findings suggest that, in the current sample, social media usage time does not significantly correlate with self-esteem. This contrasts with some existing literature that highlights the negative psychological impacts of prolonged social media use, particularly through mechanisms like upward social comparison or exposure to idealized images. However, it is important to consider that the effects of social media may vary greatly depending on how individuals use these platforms—whether passively scrolling or actively engaging, and whether their experiences are affirming or invalidating.

The fourth hypothesis (H4) focused on the relationship between rejection experienced on dating apps and self-esteem. A strong negative correlation (Spearman's $r = -0.7983$) was found, and the p-value ($p = 0.02$) indicated statistical significance. This suggests that higher levels of perceived or actual rejection on dating apps are strongly associated with lower self-esteem. Unlike the total time spent or general usage, this variable directly taps into the emotional outcomes of digital interactions. Rejection, especially when it occurs repeatedly or without clear reasons (e.g., no match or unresponsiveness), can be internalized by users and may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and reduced self-worth. The intensity of this correlation points to the psychological sensitivity surrounding online romantic engagement and highlights the importance of addressing the emotional impact of virtual rejection.

Overall, the study found that while the use of dating apps and the experience of rejection on these platforms are significantly related to lower self-esteem, the amount of time spent on either dating apps or social media does not show a statistically significant impact. This distinction emphasizes that qualitative experiences, such as being rejected or accepted, matter more than just screen time in determining psychological outcomes. The findings

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contribute to the growing body of literature examining the mental health implications of technology-mediated social interactions and suggest that targeted interventions should consider the emotional dynamics of online platforms, rather than focusing solely on usage frequency.

These results also have practical implications for mental health professionals, educators, and app developers. Raising awareness about the potential psychological effects of dating app use, especially rejection sensitivity, can help young adults develop healthier coping mechanisms and self-evaluation frameworks. Additionally, dating platforms could incorporate features that reduce harsh judgment dynamics or promote more positive, inclusive interactions to mitigate adverse outcomes on users' self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The present research aimed to examine the relationship between dating app usage, social media engagement, and self-esteem among young adults. Notably, the findings revealed that dating app users exhibited significantly lower self-esteem compared to non-users. While the overall time spent on dating apps or social media did not show a statistically significant correlation with self-esteem, a strong negative association was found between perceived rejection on dating apps and self-esteem levels. This highlights the emotional weight of virtual rejection and its potential impact on psychological well-being.

Limitations include a cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reports, and a limited sample scope. Future research could explore platform-specific effects and the role of personality or emotional resilience. Despite limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the emotional impact of digital interactions on self-esteem.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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