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The Influence of Dating Apps on Self Esteem across Age and Gender

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Abstract

The popularity of dating apps has grown rapidly in recent years, offering a new platform for individuals to connect with others romantically or sexually. The present examined the relationship between dating app use and self-esteem, with a particular focus on gender differences. We predict that people who use dating apps will have lower self-esteem and self-concept clarity than people who do not use dating apps. There was no significant difference in self-esteem or self-concept clarity dating apps use or gender.

Introduction

Existing research has produced mixed findings regarding the association between dating app use and self-esteem. Some studies have suggested that dating app use may lead to higher self-esteem, as it provides users with an opportunity to increase their social interactions and feelings of attractiveness (Toma et al., 2015). However, other studies have suggested that dating app use may be linked to lower self-esteem, particularly among women and non-binary individuals (Alper et al., 2020). We predict that men who use dating apps will have a higher self-esteem than women and non-binary people who use dating apps. We also predict that younger participants will report lower self-esteem than older participants.

Method

Participants

Ninety-eight participants completed an online survey. The average age of the participants was 21.9 years. The gender distribution was 39 males, 58 females, and 1 non-binary participant. Of the 52 participants using data apps, Tinder was most preferred (35.04%), followed by Hinge (33.33%), and Bumble (27.35%).

Materials

Participants were asked to use an electronic device to take an online survey in Qualtrics. The survey included demographic questions, the State Self Esteem Scale, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale, and questions about participants' experiences with dating apps.

Procedure

Participants were reached through emails or through social media and were given a direct link to the survey. Participants were asked for their consent. Consenting individuals were asked to take a survey that lasted approximately 15 minutes. After participants completed the survey, they were debriefed about our research.

Results

No significant difference in self-esteem was found between those who used dating apps and those who did not use dating apps, $F(1,94) = 1.07$, $p = .304$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. There were no significant difference found in self-concept clarity scores between participants that use dating apps and participants who do not use dating apps, $F(1,89) = 2.08$, $p = .154$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. A significant main effect was found between self-esteem and enrollment status in college. Participants enrolled in college (younger age group) had higher self-esteem ($M = 58.65$) than those not enrolled (older age group) in college ($M = 50.90$), $F(1,94) = 7.99$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$.

Table 1

Means for Self-Esteem by Dating App Usage and Age Group

Dating App Usage	Younger age group (in college)	Older age group (not in college)
YES	58.58	53.80
NO	58.71	48.00
Marginal Means	58.65a	50.90b

Note. Maximum self-esteem score = 100, higher numbers indicate higher self-esteem. Means not sharing a subscript significant differ at $p < .05$.

No significant effect was found between self-esteem and gender, $F(1,93) = .40$, $p = .527$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, or between self-concept clarity and gender, $F(1,88) = .01$, $p = .911$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. There was no differences in dating app usage by whether or not participants were enrolled in college, although there were many more participants in college ($n = 85$) than not in college ($n = 13$), $X^2(1, N = 98) = 1.28$, $p = .257$, *Cramer's V* $= .11$, indicating a small effect size.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentage of Dating App Use by Age Group

Age Group	Use Dating Apps	Do Not Use Dating Apps
Younger age group (in college)	*n*=47 55.30%	*n*=38 45.70%
Older age group (not in college)	*n*=5 38.50%	*n*=8 61.50%

A weak negative correlation was found between age and self-esteem, as age increased, self-esteem decreased, $r(98) = -.31$, $p = .002$. A weak negative correlation was found between age and self-concept clarity, as age increased, self-concept clarity decreased. $r(93) = -.40$, $p = <.001$. A moderate positive correlation was found between self-esteem and self concept clarity, as self-esteem increased, so did self-concept clarity, $r(93) = .58$, $p = <.001$ (see Table 3).

Table 3

Correlations Between Age, Self-Esteem, & Self-Concept Clarity

Variables	Age	Self-esteem	Self-concept clarity
Age	---	-.31*	-.40**
Self-esteem		---	.58**
Self-concept clarity			---

Note. *p<.01; **p<.001

Discussion

Our first hypothesis was that if people used dating apps, they would have lower self-esteem than people who did not use dating apps. Secondly, we predicted that females would have lower self-esteem than men who used dating apps. Our results did not align with our hypotheses, as there was no significance for either one. The convenience sampling limited our data to a small range of ages 18-23 and was primarily localized to Boston University students. Social desirability also may have caused the participants to respond more positively to fit social norms.

We found that the self-esteem of those who attended college was significantly higher than participants who did not, possibly due to social and academic comparisons in general and when using dating apps. We also saw a moderate negative correlation between age and self-esteem for dating app users. This could be attributed to a depiction of oneself not conforming to the social norms of having a stable relationship in later adulthood.

In future research, random sampling should be used to acquire a larger range of ages and parts of the country rather than just Boston. Isolating age and self-esteem would be helpful, as some data suggests that people who use dating apps at an older age have lower self-esteem. Similarly, research on those who use dating apps for validation seeking could be focused on as this population might not be looking for a relationship but instead using the apps to boost their self-esteem.