

Social Comparison Experiences among Emerging Adults Using Dating Applications: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Jyothika Nair¹ & Fr. Dr. Johnson Joseph²

¹M.Sc. student, Postgraduate Department of Psychology, Kuriakose Elias College, Mannanam, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

²Associate Professor, Postgraduate Department of Psychology, Kuriakose Elias College, Mannanam, Kottayam, Kerala, India

Abstract

The widespread use of dating applications has transformed the way emerging adults establish and maintain romantic relationships while simultaneously creating new opportunities for social comparison. This qualitative study explored how social comparison experiences on dating applications influence users' self-perception, emotional well-being, and behavioural responses. A qualitative exploratory research design was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 emerging adults aged 18–29 years who had experience using dating applications. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, leading to the identification of five major themes: comparison triggered by curated profiles, upward social comparison and negative self-evaluation, social validation through matches and online interactions, emotional consequences of comparison, and behavioural adaptations following comparison. The findings indicate that dating applications function as environments that encourage continuous self-evaluation through appearance-based and social comparisons, resulting in both positive outcomes, such as enhanced confidence, and negative outcomes, including reduced self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. The study highlights the importance of promoting healthy digital engagement and provides valuable implications for mental health professionals, educators, and developers of dating platforms.

Keywords: Dating applications; Social comparison; Emerging adults; Self-esteem; Thematic analysis; Digital relationships; Qualitative research.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital dating platforms has fundamentally altered the way young adults initiate and maintain romantic relationships. Applications such as Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, and similar platforms rely heavily on visual presentation, profile curation, and algorithm-driven matching systems. These features encourage users to evaluate both themselves and others based on perceived attractiveness, lifestyle, achievements, and social desirability.

Emerging adulthood (18–29 years) is a developmental period characterized by identity exploration, relationship formation, and heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation. During this stage, individuals often

seek social approval and compare themselves with others to assess their own worth. According to Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, people evaluate their abilities and attributes by comparing themselves with others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable.

Dating applications create an environment where such comparisons occur continuously. Users are exposed to carefully selected photographs, edited images, descriptions of achievements, and indicators of popularity such as matches, likes, and responses. This may lead to upward social comparison (comparing oneself with perceived superior others) or downward social comparison (comparing oneself with perceived inferior others), each influencing self-esteem, emotional well-being, and behavioural choices.

Although quantitative studies have examined dating app use and mental health outcomes, relatively few studies have explored how users subjectively experience social comparison during dating app interactions. The present study addresses this gap through an in-depth qualitative investigation.

Research on social networking sites has consistently shown that exposure to idealized online content is associated with lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms. Users tend to compare their appearance, social life, and achievements with selectively presented online images.

Studies indicate that dating app users often experience increased concern regarding physical appearance and attractiveness. Match rates and response patterns can serve as indicators of perceived desirability, influencing confidence and self-worth.

Existing literature primarily relies on survey methods and focuses on correlations between app usage and psychological outcomes. There is limited qualitative evidence explaining the processes through which social comparison occurs and affects users' emotions and behaviours.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the social comparison experiences of emerging adults using dating applications.
- To identify the emotional responses associated with these comparisons.
- To examine behavioural changes resulting from social comparison on dating platforms.
- To understand the role of online validation (matches, likes, and responses) in shaping self-perception.

Research Questions

- How do emerging adults compare themselves with other users on dating applications?
- What emotional experiences arise from upward and downward social comparisons?
- How does online validation influence users' self-esteem and perceived desirability?
- What behavioural adaptations occur following comparison experiences?

2. Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences.

Participants

Fourteen emerging adults (7 males and 7 females) aged between 18 and 29 years who had used dating applications for at least six months participated in the study.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with relevant experience of dating app usage.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting 35–50 minutes were conducted. Interview questions focused on comparison experiences, emotional reactions, and changes in self-perception.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis procedure: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the report.

Major Findings of the Study

Theme 1: Comparison Triggered by Curated Profiles

Participants described dating apps as spaces where people present idealized versions of themselves. Professionally edited photographs, travel images, fitness-oriented content, and carefully written bios frequently triggered comparison.

“I knew people were showing their best side, but I still ended up comparing my life with theirs.”
(Participant 3)

Theme 2: Upward Social Comparison and Negative Self-Evaluation

Many participants compared themselves with users perceived as more attractive, successful, or socially desirable. This often resulted in feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-confidence.

“When I saw profiles of people who looked perfect, I started questioning my own appearance.”
(Participant 8)

Theme 3: Social Validation through Matches and Interactions

Matches, likes, and messages were interpreted as indicators of personal worth. Positive feedback increased confidence, while low engagement was often perceived as rejection.

“Getting several matches made me feel attractive and wanted.” (Participant 11)

Theme 4: Emotional Consequences of Comparison

Participants reported a range of emotions, including anxiety, disappointment, jealousy, loneliness, and self-doubt. Some also experienced temporary boosts in mood following positive interactions.

Theme 5: Behavioural Adaptations Following Comparison

Comparison experiences influenced behaviour. Participants reported editing photos more frequently, changing bios, spending additional time on grooming, and increasing app usage in search of validation.

“I changed my profile several times because I thought others looked more appealing.” (Participant 5)

3. Discussion

The findings strongly support Social Comparison Theory. Dating applications provide constant exposure to comparison targets, making self-evaluation an integral part of the user experience. The prominence of upward comparisons explains the frequent reports of diminished self-esteem and perceived inadequacy.

The role of matches and responses as forms of social validation is particularly significant. Unlike traditional social interactions, dating apps quantify desirability through visible indicators, intensifying users' reliance on external feedback. This aligns with previous research linking digital validation to fluctuations in self-worth.

Behavioural adaptations observed in the study suggest that users actively modify their self-presentation in response to comparison experiences. Such adaptations may reinforce a cycle in which individuals continuously seek validation while simultaneously becoming more vulnerable to further comparison.

4. Implications of the study**Mental Health Practice**

- Counsellors should assess the impact of dating app use on clients' self-esteem and body image.
- Psychoeducation on social comparison processes can help users develop healthier digital habits.

Educational Settings

- Universities can include digital well-being and online relationship literacy programmes.
- Students may benefit from workshops on self-worth independent of online validation.

Platform Design

- Developers may consider features that reduce excessive appearance-based evaluation.

- Promoting authentic self-presentation could mitigate harmful comparison effects.

Limitations

- Small sample size ($N = 14$).
- Participants were drawn from a limited geographical and cultural context.
- Self-reported experiences may be influenced by recall bias.
- The qualitative design does not allow causal conclusions.

Future Research

- Conduct mixed-method studies combining thematic analysis with psychological scales.
- Examine gender differences in social comparison on dating applications.
- Investigate longitudinal effects of prolonged dating app use.
- Explore relationships between social comparison, body image dissatisfaction, and anxiety.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that dating applications function as powerful social comparison environments for emerging adults. Through exposure to curated profiles and quantified forms of social validation, users frequently engage in comparisons related to appearance, lifestyle, personality, and desirability. These comparisons produce significant emotional outcomes, ranging from increased confidence and social acceptance to anxiety, inadequacy, and self-doubt.

The findings extend Social Comparison Theory into the context of contemporary digital dating by illustrating how platform design and online interactions shape users' self-evaluations. Understanding these processes is essential for promoting digital well-being and developing interventions that encourage healthier engagement with dating technologies.

References

1. Barrada, J. R., & Castro, Á. (2020). Tinder users: Sociodemographic, psychological, and psychosexual characteristics. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(21), 8047.
2. Blackhart, G. C., Fitzpatrick, J., & Williamson, J. (2014). Dispositional factors predicting use of online dating sites and behaviors related to online dating. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 113–118.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
4. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140.
5. Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2016). Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 1–5.
6. Her, Y., & Timmermans, E. (2020). Tinder blue, mental flu? Exploring the associations between Tinder use and well-being. *Information, Communication & Society*.

7. Leary, M. R., Tambor, E. S., Terdal, S. K., & Downs, D. L. (1995). Self-esteem as an interpersonal monitor: The sociometer hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(3), 518–530.
8. Orosz, G., Tóth-Király, I., Böthe, B., Melher, D., & Griffiths, M. D. (2018). The personality, motivational, and need-based background of problematic Tinder use. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 7(2), 301–316.
9. Ranzini, G., & Lutz, C. (2017). Love at first swipe? Explaining Tinder self-presentation and motives. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 5(1), 80–101.
10. Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.
11. Schmuck, D., Karsay, K., Matthes, J., & Stevic, A. (2019). Looking up and feeling down: The influence of mobile social networking site use on upward social comparison, self-esteem, and well-being. *Telematics and Informatics*, 42, 101240.
12. Strubel, J., & Petrie, T. A. (2017). Love me Tinder: Body image and psychosocial functioning among men and women. *Body Image*, 21, 34–38.
13. Thomas, A. G., et al. (2023). 99+ matches but a spark ain't one: Adverse psychological effects of excessive swiping on dating apps. *Computers in Human Behavior*.
14. Toma, C. L. (2022). Online dating and psychological well-being: A social compensation perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, 101293.
15. Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206–222.