The Swipe for Solace:

How Social Support and Emotional Needs Shape Dating App Use

Chae Yeon Kim, Chae Eun Kim, Chae Eun Kim

Abstract

This study explores whether dating apps function as a strategy to compensate for deficits in emotional support and intimacy in contemporary society, and analyzes how individuals' levels of social support shape their dating app usage and experiences. Focusing on the motivations and relational contexts behind usage, we investigate how perceived social support and emotional states affect dating app use through a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative survey results show that individuals with lower levels of perceived social support are more likely to use dating apps. Among users, positive perceptions of the app were significantly associated with lower levels of loneliness. Qualitative interviews revealed that dating apps often served as temporary emotional outlets in the absence of sufficient offline support. However, some users experienced emotional disappointment and heightened feelings of isolation, while others exhibited patterns of repeated use linked to emotional vulnerability. These findings suggest that dating app usage is not merely a matter of personal preference or curiosity, but often a strategic response to unmet social needs. The study offers a new sociological perspective on dating apps and contributes to broader discussions on digital intimacy and contemporary social belonging.

Introduction

In contemporary society, dating apps have become an integral part of how young adults initiate and manage social and romantic relationships. These platforms not only offer opportunities to meet new people, but also respond to broader shifts in how intimacy is pursued in late modern life. As individuals increasingly navigate life transitions—such as geographic mobility, academic pressures, and pandemic-related isolation—traditional sources of emotional support often become fragmented. Against this backdrop, dating apps have emerged as tools through which users actively seek to fill gaps in emotional connection and social belonging.

Giddens (1992) and Simmel (1955) have argued that, in modern contexts, individuals must take greater responsibility for constructing their own networks of intimacy and support. In this light, dating apps can be seen as adaptive responses to changing social landscapes—platforms through which users negotiate their needs for companionship, affection, and validation when conventional avenues may no longer suffice.

While much of the existing research has highlighted the negative psychological outcomes associated with dating app use—such as heightened depression, loneliness, and reduced self-esteem (Echevarria, 2022; Freire, 2023; Holtzhausen, 2020)—less attention has been paid to the motivations behind app use or the relational contexts in which it unfolds. Moreover, few studies have examined how variations in the *quality and depth* of app-based interactions, as well as life-course transitions, shape users' experiences and emotional outcomes.

This study seeks to address these gaps through a mixed-methods approach. Specifically, we ask:
 (1) Do dating app users experience higher levels of depression compared to non-users?
 (2) Do dating app users experience lower levels of social support compared to non-users?

(3) Why do people use dating apps, and how do their emotional states (loneliness, depression) and levels of social support shape these motivations?

By combining quantitative analyses of app usage patterns with qualitative insights into users' lived experiences, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how dating apps function as both social tools and emotional coping mechanisms in the lives of young adults.

Literature Review

As dating apps increasingly emerge as new channels for meeting new people, research aiming to illuminate the social and psychological phenomena surrounding them has also become more active. Most existing studies have focused on the psychological effects of using dating apps. For instance, Echevarria (2022) found that experiences of sexual harassment on dating apps were associated with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and lowered self-esteem. Similarly, Freire (2023) and Holtzhausen (2020) have highlighted the negative psychological impacts of app usage. However, these studies mainly concentrate on the outcomes of dating app use, often overlooking the motivations or social contexts that lead individuals to use them in the first place.

Methodology

To address our research questions, we employ a mixed-methods approach. The survey was designed to examine whether dating app users experience higher levels of depression and lower levels of perceived social support compared to non-users, and to analyze patterns of app usage and perceptions. In contrast, the interviews aimed to explore in greater depth why individuals use dating apps, how their emotional and relational contexts shape their experiences, and how they interpret the emotional outcomes of app use. This approach helps to explain the reasons behind dating app use and effectively captures the complexity of users' experiences and the psychological and emotional dynamics involved.

In this study, surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted with acquaintances of the researcher, using a convenience sampling method. The survey participants were female university students in their twenties, recruited through convenience sampling. Due to the nature of this method, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. If sufficient time and resources had been available, we would have preferred to adopt a quota sampling strategy, recruiting both dating app users and non-users in equal numbers, to enable more structured comparisons across groups.

Data

Covariates - Gender, age,and economic status were controlled in some regression models.Economic level was measured by asking participants: *"How would you describe your household's economic level at present?"* Response options included: *Upper (very financially comfortable), Upper-middle (somewhat comfortable), Middle (average), Lower-middle (somewhat difficult),* and *Lower (very difficult).* The variable for education level was not included in the regression analysis, as the sample was highly skewed toward current university students, and the small number of cases in other education categories led to unstable coefficient estimates and lack of statistical significance.

Social Support Measures- Social support was assessed using six items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The mean score of these six items was calculated to create the social support, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support.

The items included: *"I can ask for help from people around me when needed," "There is someone willing to help me when I need it (e.g., physical help, care, money)," "People around me criticize my behavior," "I know someone who can give me advice when making important decisions," "I am satisfied with how often I meet and interact with friends or acquaintances,"* and *"There is someone who stays by my side when I feel lonely."*

The item *"People around me criticize my behavior"* was reverse coded.

Perception of Dating App - Participants' perceptions of dating apps were measured using four items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The items were: "Dating apps help alleviate loneliness," "Using dating apps has positively impacted my overall happiness or emotional stability," "Meetings via dating apps feel superficial," and "Being rejected on the app lowers my self-esteem."

Dating Apps Activities - Participants were asked whether they had engaged in the following activities on dating apps: *logging in to the app; swiping or browsing profiles; sending "likes" or showing interest; matching with others (mutual likes); chatting; voice or video calling; meeting in person; developing a relationship (e.g., dating); and maintaining the relationship (e.g., continued contact).*

Responses were measured on a frequency scale: *Never, Once a month, 2–3 times a month, 1–2 times a week, 3 or more times a week.*

This allowed us to identify the specific behaviors and usage patterns of dating app users.

Quantitative Research Results

Descriptive Statistics by Dating App Use
Comparison of demographic, social, and psychological variables

| Variable	Non-User N = 25[1]	User N = 19[1]	p-value[2]
Gender			0.016
Man	17 (68%)	5 (26%)	
Woman	8 (32%)	14 (74%)	
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	
Age (Years)	24.36 ± 2.34	24.11 ± 2.28	0.7
Living			0.7
Alone	7 (28%)	3 (16%)	
With Family	12 (48%)	11 (58%)	
With Roommates(s)	6 (24%)	5 (26%)	
Etc	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	
Education Level			0.4
Currently in University	23 (92%)	16 (84%)	
Graduate School	0 (0%)	2 (11%)	
Some College(2yr)	1 (4.0%)	0 (0%)	
University Graduate	1 (4.0%)	1 (5.3%)	
Economic Status			0.3
High	1 (4.0%)	2 (11%)	
Lower-middle	4 (16%)	0 (0%)	
Middle	9 (36%)	8 (42%)	
Upper-middle	11 (44%)	9 (47%)	
Feels Criticized	1.56 ± 0.71	2.05 ± 1.18	0.12
Overall Social Support	4.11 ± 0.71	3.87 ± 0.88	0.3
Depression	2.62 ± 1.18	3.16 ± 1.03	0.11
No. of Regular Contacts	6.74 ± 2.76	7.29 ± 2.90	0.5
No. of Emotional Contacts	3.42 ± 1.65	4.24 ± 3.09	0.3
Can Ask for Help	3.88 ± 1.13	3.74 ± 0.93	0.6
Someone Willing to Help	4.24 ± 0.78	3.95 ± 0.97	0.3
Has Someone to Advise	4.16 ± 0.75	4.00 ± 0.82	0.5
Meeting Frequency Satisfaction	4.16 ± 0.90	4.00 ± 1.11	0.6
Feels Accompanied	3.84 ± 1.18	3.63 ± 1.26	0.6
Relationship Satisfaction	4.08 ± 1.00	3.95 ± 1.08	0.7
Comfort in Conversations	3.76 ± 1.01	3.79 ± 1.27	>0.9
Difficulty Making Friends	2.64 ± 1.25	2.79 ± 1.03	0.7
Social Functioning	3.56 ± 1.02	3.50 ± 1.09	0.9

[1] n (%); Mean ± SD
[2] Pearson's Chi-squared test with simulated p-value (based on 2000 replicates); Welch Two Sample t-test

This table shows the descriptive statistics of the survey respondents. 45 participants responded to the survey and 19 people have used the dating apps before and 26 people have not participated in the dating apps. The significance of gender is attributed to the fact that most users (74%) were female. No significant differences were found for education or

economic status. The lack of significance in education level is likely due to the sample's structural skew—approximately 88% were currently enrolled university students, and the number of respondents in other education categories was too small to draw meaningful comparisons. There are other interesting variables that are not statistically significant but still show relatively low p-values: social support, depression, and feeling criticized. These will be discussed below.
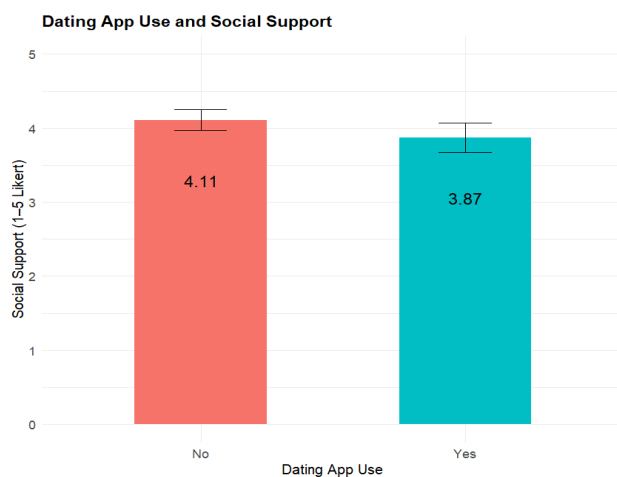

Comparison between dating app users and non-users revealed several notable patterns. Overall, users reported lower levels of perceived social support (M = 3.87, SD = 0.88) compared to non-users (M = 4.11, SD = 0.71), despite having a greater number of regular and emotional contacts. This suggests that the quantity of social interactions does not necessarily guarantee qualitative support.
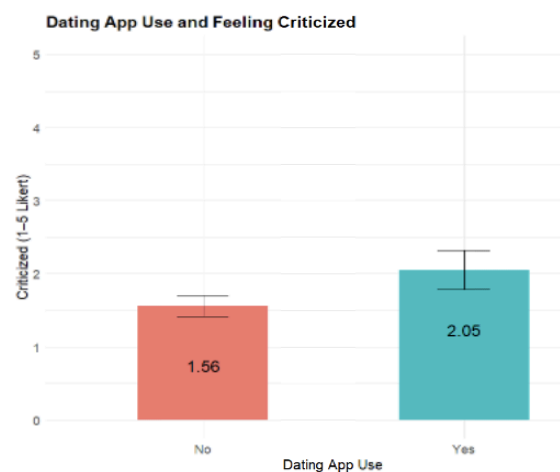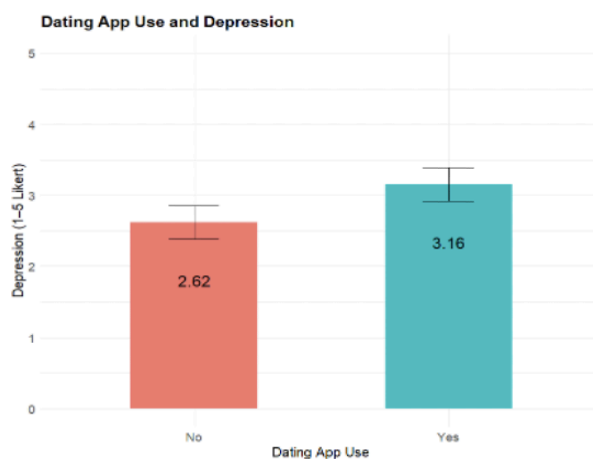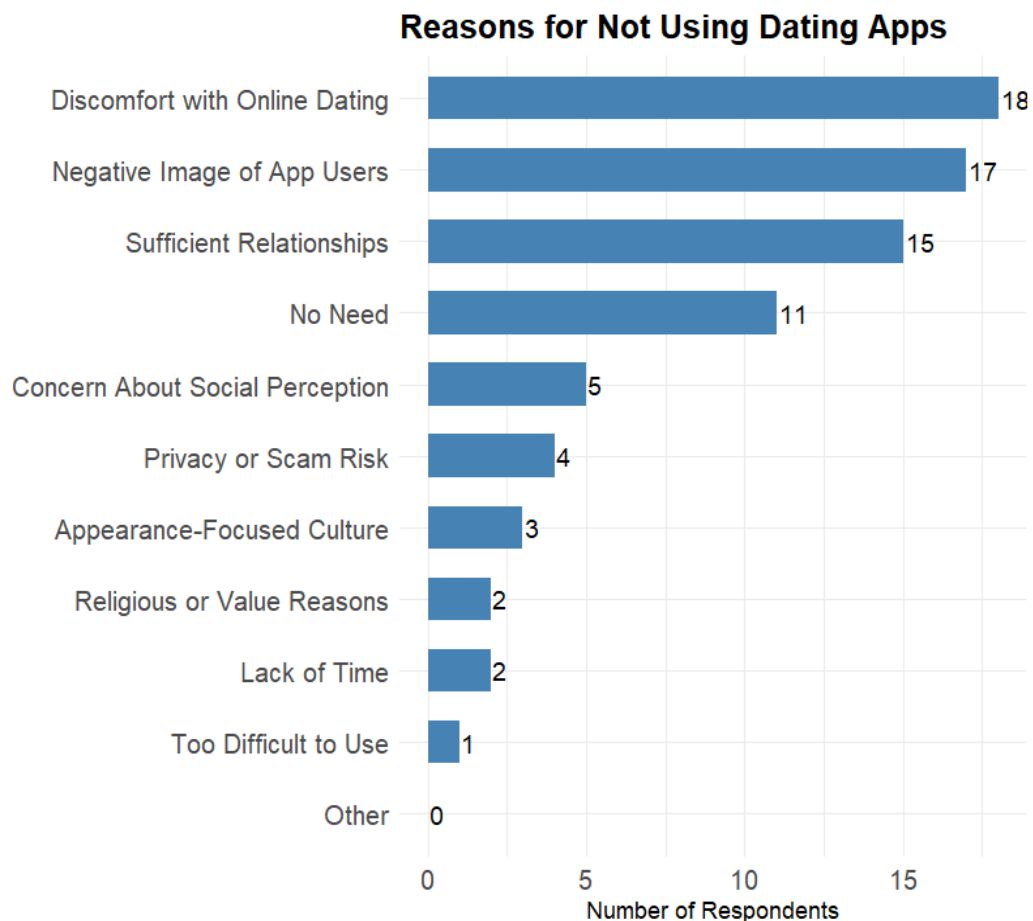
Users also reported higher levels of depression (M = 3.16 vs. 2.62) and a stronger sense of being criticized by others (M = 2.05 vs. 1.56). Although these differences were not statistically significant (p > .05), the trends suggest that dating app users may be more emotionally vulnerable.

Purposes of Using Dating Apps
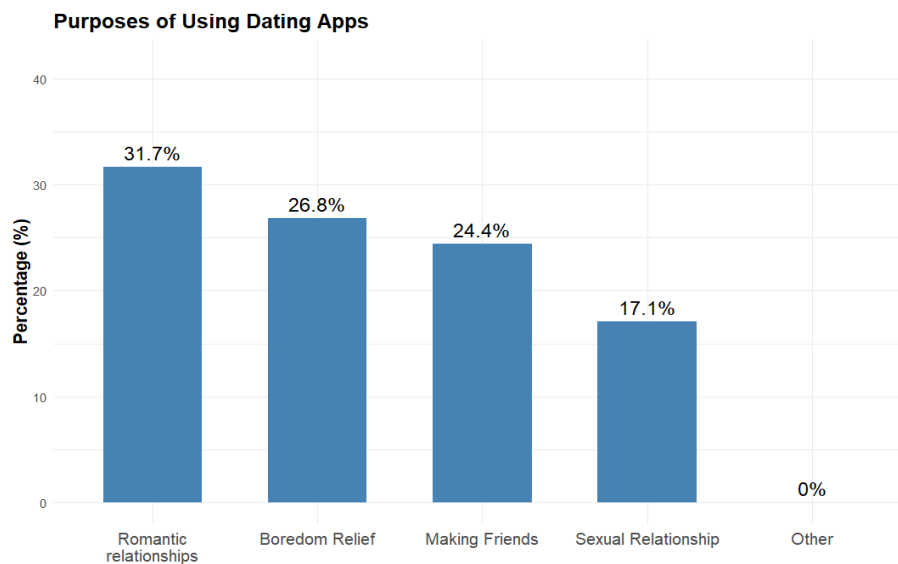
As for reasons for using dating apps, the most frequently cited was romantic relationships (31.7%), followed by boredom relief (26.8%) and making friends (24.4%). Sexual relationships accounted for 17.1%, indicating that dating apps are being used as one of many ways to meet people.

Perceptions of Dating Apps Among Users (Mean ± SD)
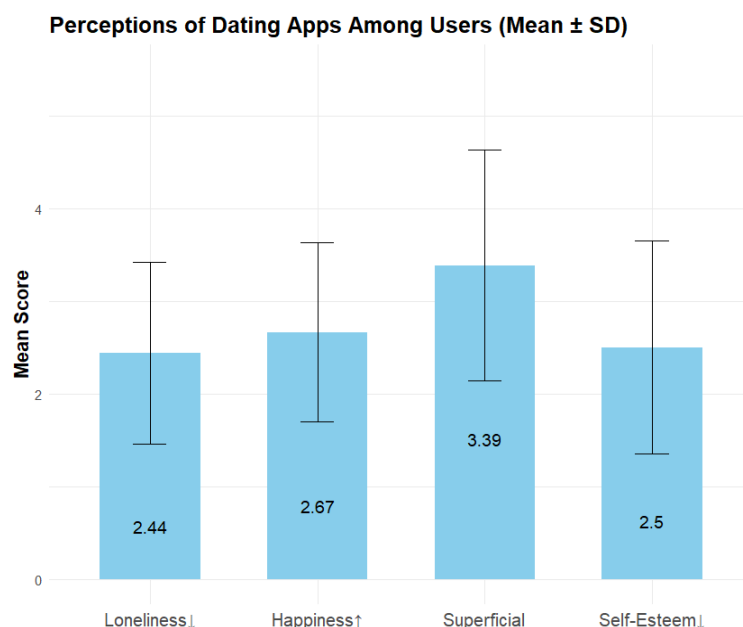
Users reported mixed perceptions of dating apps. While some agreed that the apps helped reduce loneliness (M = 2.56) or contributed positively to emotional stability (M = 2.72), many also viewed them as superficial (M = 3.39) or believed that being rejected on the app negatively impacted their self-esteem (M = 2.50). These findings show the emotionally ambivalent nature of dating app use.

Reasons for Not Using Dating Apps

Reason	Number of Respondents
Discomfort with Online Dating	18
Negative Image of App Users	17
Sufficient Relationships	15
No Need	11
Concern About Social Perception	5
Privacy or Scam Risk	4
Appearance-Focused Culture	3
Religious or Value Reasons	2
Lack of Time	2
Too Difficult to Use	1
Other	0

Among non-users (n = 25), the most common reasons for not using dating apps were discomfort with online dating (n = 18) and negative perceptions of app users (n = 17). These suggest continued distrust in the platform itself, and a strong social stigma associated with its users. Other reasons included having sufficient existing relationships (n = 15) and perceiving no need to use the app (n = 11), indicating that people who are socially or emotionally satisfied are less likely to seek new connections through apps.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation Between Prior Dating Apps Experience and Social Support and Depression

Variable	Correlation	P_value
Feels criticized by others	0.257	0.092
Felt hopeless recently	0.237	0.121
Has someone to help	-0.169	0.273
Felt lonely recently	0.165	0.285

The Relationship Between Dating App Activities and Psychosocial Factors

Variable1	Variable2	Correlation	P_value
Developed into relationship	App lowers loneliness	0.614	0.009
Phone or video call	App lowers loneliness	0.567	0.022
Phone or video call	App feels superficial	-0.552	0.027
App makes me feel happier	Felt lonely recently	-0.53	0.024
Developed into relationship	Rejection in apps lowers self-esteem	0.525	0.031
App makes me feel happier	Has someone for advice	0.277	0.266

Several meaningful correlations are found. Perceived criticism was positively correlated with dating app use (r = 0.257, p = 0.092), indicating a marginal significance. Among users, those who believed the app increased their happiness reported lower loneliness scores (r = -0.53, p = 0.024). Moreover, those who had engaged in phone or video calls through the app were more likely to perceive the app as reducing loneliness and as being less superficial. Users who developed romantic relationships via the app were also more likely to report that the app reduced their loneliness, and that rejection experiences hurt their self-esteem.

These findings suggest that the depth and quality of dating app use are more closely linked to both user perceptions and emotional outcomes rather than mere usage. Positive perceptions of the app were significantly associated with reduced loneliness, implying a potential emotional benefit. Moreover, users who had experienced deeper interaction (e.g.,

phone/video calls or actual romantic development) showed stronger beliefs that the app mitigates loneliness. Those who developed serious relationships were also more likely to feel hurt by rejection, suggesting they approached the app with serious intentions. This implies that the emotional depth of relationships formed through dating apps may contribute to users' psychological fulfillment.

Logistic Regression: Predicting Dating App Use

Logistic regression was used to identify predictors of dating app use (1 = user, 0 = non-user). Three models were estimated:

Logistic Regression Results: Predicting Dating App Use (Models 1–3)						
Variable	Model 1 Coef. (SE)	Model 1 p-value	Model 2 Coef. (SE)	Model 2 p-value	Model 3 Coef. (SE)	Model 3 p-value
Intercept	-5.654 (4.602)	0.219	0.546 (0.981)	0.581	2.495 (6.789)	0.713
Gender: Woman	1.892* (0.742)	0.011	0.433** (0.140)	0.004	2.573** (0.970)	0.008
Age	0.098 (0.161)	0.544	-0.005 (0.032)	0.868	-0.085 (0.202)	0.672
Economic Level	0.568 (0.470)	0.227	0.181. (0.094)	0.061	1.431* (0.711)	0.044
Has Someone to Help			-0.202* (0.087)	0.026	-1.554* (0.774)	0.045
Feels Criticized					0.253 (0.501)	0.614
Felt Lonely					-0.392 (0.381)	0.304

Model 1: Gender was a significant predictor, with women being more likely to use dating apps (β = 1.892, p = 0.011). Neither age nor economic status was significant, likely due to the narrow age range of the sample (mean ≈ 24).

Model 2: The addition of the social support variable ("I have someone who can help me") yielded a significant negative association (β = -0.202, p = 0.026), meaning that those with lower perceived social support were more likely to use dating apps.

Model 3: When perceived criticism and loneliness were added, they were not statistically significant. However, economic status emerged as a significant predictor (β = 1.431, p = 0.044), suggesting that material resources may also influence access and willingness to use dating apps. Notably, the social support variable remained significant (β = -1.554, p = 0.045),

reinforcing its consistent role in predicting app use, even after controlling for emotional variables.

In summary, these models show that dating app use is more closely associated with a lack of social support than with subjective feelings like loneliness or criticism. Economic resources may also facilitate app use, especially in contexts where using the app entails costs—whether financial or reputational.

Linear Regression: Predicting Loneliness Among Users

Linear Regression Results: Predicting Loneliness Among Dating App Users (Model 4)		
Variable	Coefficient (SE)	p-value
Intercept	7.087 (4.029)	0.109
Economic Level	0.056 (0.406)	0.892
Gender: Woman	-0.759 (0.648)	0.269
Age	-0.004 (0.111)	0.970
Perceived Less Loneliness	0.644. (0.316)	0.069
Perceived Happiness	-0.660* (0.276)	0.038
Perceived Superficiality	-0.056 (0.210)	0.796
Perceived Rejection	-0.251 (0.231)	0.303
Relationship Satisfaction	-0.616* (0.240)	0.028

Among dating app users only, a linear regression model was conducted to examine predictors of loneliness: The belief that the app increased happiness significantly predicted lower loneliness (β = -0.660, p = 0.038) and higher relationship satisfaction also predicted lower loneliness (β = -0.616, p = 0.028). These results echo the findings of the correlation analysis and emphasize that positive experiences and fulfilling relationships formed through the app are more closely tied to reduced loneliness than the mere use of the app itself.

Quantitative Research Conclusion

The analyses consistently show that individuals with lower perceived social support are more likely to use dating apps, and that among users, those who positively perceive the app experience lower levels of loneliness. This suggests that dating apps may function as a supplementary social tool, compensating for unmet needs in users' existing networks. Additionally, users who engaged in deeper interactions (e.g., video calls, romantic development) tended to hold more positive views of the app and were more emotionally affected by rejection. This indicates that many users approach dating apps not as a casual pastime but as a serious pathway to meaningful relationships. In conclusion, dating app use can be interpreted not simply as a matter of preference but as a strategic response to perceived deficits in social support. The emotional impact and subjective benefit of app usage depend largely on the quality and depth of the relationships formed, which in turn influences users' psychological well-being.

Qualitative Research Results

Two of the interviewees were Korean, while the other two were international students from Denmark and Türkiye. All participants were women in their twenties, currently enrolled in four-year university programs. One of the Korean participants identified as a sexual minority, while the remaining three identified as heterosexual. Although they came from different social backgrounds and had varying experiences with dating apps, they all shared a common experience of loneliness and emotional deprivation to some degree.

Firstly, regarding their level of social support, the participants maintained diverse social networks—consisting of family members, friends, and peers from academic departments or clubs—but had a limited number of individuals they could emotionally rely on. One participant shared, "I rely on my parents and two to three close friends whom I contact frequently. I feel comfortable leaning on them when I can be honest and share discomfort." Another participant stated, "Because of trust issues, I don't rely 100% on anyone. I lean

more on people who give logical advice rather than emotional support." Overall, the presence of strong emotional support figures tended to correlate with lower levels of loneliness and emotional instability.

Commonly cited causes of loneliness and depressive feelings included uncertainty about career paths, familial conflicts, social isolation, and the impact of COVID-19. Participants coped with these emotions through conversations with friends or romantic partners, spending time alone, and engaging with SNS or online communities. Some also used dating apps as a form of emotional coping.

Regarding dating app usage, participants mentioned interpersonal motivations such as forming romantic relationships or making new friends. However, psychological states like loneliness, emptiness, and boredom were also commonly cited as driving factors. One participant shared, "Although I was satisfied with my existing social network, I felt a strong desire to connect with others during the COVID-19 pandemic, when face-to-face interactions were limited. It was a kind of 'skin hunger' that led me to use dating apps as a way to meet people."

While some participants initially experienced curiosity and excitement, they gradually felt discomfort and disappointment due to superficial conversations, lack of trust, and unwanted sexual attention. Dating app use was described as a dual experience, combining both anticipation and anxiety. Some expressed skepticism about the nature of these platforms, particularly when the outcomes of face-to-face meetings did not meet expectations, making it difficult to sustain relationships.

Nonetheless, there were participants who had positive experiences, successfully forming romantic relationships through dating apps. They recalled these experiences with satisfaction and continued to use the apps afterward. These findings suggest that dating apps offer highly individualized experiences, wherein both positive and negative emotions coexist, revealing complex patterns of usage.

1. Individuals with lower levels of social support tended to use dating apps as a means of coping with loneliness.

Participants who experienced insufficient emotional support from friends, family, or other close relationships reported a higher tendency to use dating apps during such periods. Especially when they spent more time alone, they expressed a heightened longing for a sense of connection. One participant reflected on how her feelings of loneliness intensified after moving away from home:

"Since I started living far from my parents, I've been feeling much lonelier this semester. There are people around me, but I don't feel like I have deep relationships with them. I wanted to build a close emotional bond, like a real romantic relationship, so I started using a dating app."

This statement suggests that the motivation to use dating apps stemmed not merely from curiosity about meeting new people, but rather from a desire to alleviate emotional deprivation experienced in daily life. Another participant shared how emotional instability caused by environmental changes and family issues led her to use dating apps:

"While preparing for employment, my values started to differ from those of my friends, and we talked less. That made me feel very lonely. I was also dealing with family issues at the time, which made me feel even more depressed. I thought having a romantic partner might help, so I tried using a dating app. I also thought I might make new friends through it."

Some participants expressed general satisfaction with their existing social networks but emphasized that external circumstances hindered their ability to feel supported. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, limited opportunities for in-person interactions and deepened emotional distance, thereby undermining the effectiveness of existing support systems. One participant, who had taken a gap year after graduating from high school, described the sudden onset of the pandemic as an "unexpected emotional disconnect":

"Because of COVID, I couldn't meet people much. I was satisfied with my social relationships in theory, but due to the situation, I ended up not being satisfied. All my friends were in relationships and seemed to have someone to rely on emotionally, but I didn't. That made me feel even lonelier, and I think that's when I started using dating apps more."

Another participant added:

"I only contact my parents when there's a problem, and there's hardly anyone I can trust 100% among my friends…Because I live far from my parents, and my relationships here are not that deep, I often feel lonely…I didn't really have many opportunities to meet new people outside of school."

This illustrates how external disruptions to social connections intensified participants' sense of emotional deprivation. As a response, they turned to dating apps to fill the emotional void. While these apps provided temporary comfort and a sense of connection, many participants came to realize that such interactions did not lead to sustained or meaningful emotional relationships. Dating apps, though initially effective in alleviating loneliness, often failed to provide long-term emotional fulfillment and, in some cases, even contributed to emotional exhaustion.

2. Individuals with higher levels of social support tend to show lower dependence on dating apps.

In contrast, participants who had strong social networks that provided consistent emotional support demonstrated relatively low dependence on dating apps. Even when they used such apps, their motivations tended to be temporary or experimental, and they often returned quickly to offline relationships. One participant described her situation as follows:

"I have friends I talk to and see every day, and I live with my family, so I can talk to them or get help anytime. I did feel a bit lonely when my friends started dating, so I tried a dating app

once and met someone briefly. But I stopped using it because meeting people in person felt more comfortable."

Another participant similarly noted:

"I usually talk to my friends when I feel lonely. Overall, I'm satisfied with my relationships. I've used a dating app occasionally when I felt lonely, but in the end, offline interactions felt more stable. Apps are convenient, but it's hard to build a deep connection there."

Another participant added:

"Since I started spending more time with my boyfriend, I naturally began using the app less."

Participants with high levels of social support generally perceived dating apps as supplementary tools rather than essential ones, and they believed that emotionally significant relationships were formed primarily offline. These findings suggest that the level of social support plays a significant role in determining both the persistence of dating app usage and users' emotional reliance on such platforms.

3. Dating apps are not a complete substitute for emotional support and can even lead to emotional disappointment.

Many participants initially turned to dating apps in hopes of fulfilling their emotional needs. However, they often reported dissatisfaction and, in some cases, increased emotional isolation. They described their experiences of disappointment and discomfort with notable specificity. One participant shared:

"At first, I thought it would be easy to meet people. And while I did feel a little less lonely, it was really hard to find a meaningful connection. That made me feel even lonelier. I started wondering, 'Do I really have to go this far just to date someone?' and 'Is this really the only way?'—and I started feeling kind of pathetic."

Another participant emphasized the gap between her expectations for forming relationships and the reality she encountered:

"I was excited about the idea of connecting and communicating with someone. But when the actual meeting didn't meet my expectations, it felt even more disappointing. I kept seeing the same kinds of people, and even when conversations went well, we often weren't compatible in real life. That made me feel increasingly drained. I realized I wanted a deeper connection, but the app just wasn't delivering that."

Some also reported more direct experiences of discomfort or distress:

"A lot of the men I met through the app only seemed interested in sex. They'd ask inappropriate questions during conversations, and in person, some even tried to initiate unwanted physical contact or sex. I was hoping for an emotional connection, but I just became more disillusioned."

Another participant mentioned:

"I met someone who looked okay on the profile, but in person, their behavior and conversation were disappointing… Sometimes I was chatting with five to ten people at once, but it all felt so empty and tiring… There were guys who tried to initiate unwanted physical contact, which made me uncomfortable."

These examples indicate that rather than offering emotional support, dating apps can sometimes deepen users' emotional wounds or heighten feelings of disillusionment. For those seeking genuine connection, repeated negative encounters amplified the gap between expectation and reality, leading to increased skepticism and emotional fatigue regarding relationship formation through digital platforms.

4. Some participants exhibited a pattern of repeated dating app use cycle linked to emotional vulnerability.

Interestingly, despite experiencing negative outcomes, some participants showed a tendency to return to dating apps repeatedly. These individuals displayed a cyclical usage pattern, often re-engaging with the app during emotionally difficult periods. This suggests that while dating apps may offer short-term emotional relief, they fall short in providing long-term satisfaction or stable relationships. One participant explained:

"I first started using the app because I was lonely and bored. At one point, it even led to a real relationship. But when that ended, I felt lonely again, so I went back to the app. It just keeps happening."

Another participant noted:

"When you're using a dating app with the intention of finding a relationship, someone can quickly come into your inner circle. But if that connection suddenly breaks, the emotional void becomes really hard to bear. So I find myself using the app again to fill that gap—to find someone else who can provide that emotional closeness."

Another participant added:

"The chances of meeting a good person are low but not impossible. I would use the app again if I needed to… I first started using the app because of loneliness and boredom, but over time, it felt like a waste of time and emotionally tiring."

These narratives highlight how emotional deprivation following the end of a relationship often drives users back to the app, revealing that dating apps may function as more than just platforms for meeting new people. They may also serve as tools for emotional reassurance. Such repeated use patterns suggest the potential for dating apps to become objects of emotional dependency, especially among individuals navigating vulnerability or seeking comfort amid relational instability.

5. Dating apps as emotional coping and opportunities for meaningful connection during periods of social transition and isolation

In addition to the general patterns of dating app use described above, participants undergoing major life transitions—such as living abroad, taking a gap year, or entering unfamiliar work environments—reported somewhat distinct experiences. Their reliance on dating apps was shaped not only by emotional deprivation but also by their unique situational contexts.

As one participant described:

"As a student living abroad, I was hoping to find someone who could be like a best friend, family, and boyfriend all in one… most of my friends already had boyfriends, so I felt even lonelier… when my boyfriend prepared a heartfelt letter and gifts for my birthday, it made me realize it wasn't about me not being worthy of love—it was just that the people I'd met before weren't the right ones."

Another participant reflected on her experience during a gap year spent working in her home country:

"I was used to seeing people every day, but during my gap year and with COVID, my social life became limited… dating apps felt like a treat and a way to meet people and regain some of that interaction."

While these participants also described patterns of emotional gap and repeated app use similar to those noted previously, they emphasized that dating apps could also offer positive and emotionally meaningful experiences. One participant explained:

"It's like when you see your friends so happy with their partner, you also want that kind of connection… so sometimes I use the app again, but if I can't find that deeper connection, I stop for a while."

Another noted:

"When a relationship ends or a close connection fades, it leaves an emotional gap… and using the dating app again becomes a way to try to fill that gap."

This cycle of emotional deprivation → app use → temporary relief → new emotional gaps underscores the dual role of dating apps as both a coping mechanism and a potential source of emotional dependency. For young adults navigating transitional life stages or periods of social isolation, dating apps served not only as tools for meeting people but also as ways to cope with emotional voids during times of change.

Importantly, participants also emphasized the potential for positive outcomes. One participant reflected on how her current romantic relationship, formed through a dating app, helped her regain confidence and a sense of emotional worth. Another shared that even casual interactions on dating apps could provide comfort, entertainment, and temporary feelings of connection during difficult times. These accounts suggest that, while dating apps may contribute to cycles of emotional dependency for some users, they also offer valuable opportunities for emotional support and meaningful relationships—especially for individuals navigating life transitions.

Overall Conclusion / Discussion

This study explored, through a mixed-methods approach, why people use dating apps, how social support is related to dating app usage, and how emotional states such as loneliness and depression shape usage patterns. This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the emotional dynamics surrounding dating app use.

The quantitative findings revealed that individuals with lower levels of perceived social support were significantly more likely to use dating apps, suggesting that dating apps may serve to fulfill unmet social needs. Furthermore, individuals who reported stronger agreement with the statement "I have someone to help me when needed" were less likely to

use dating apps, highlighting that richer offline social relationships can reduce the likelihood of seeking support through such platforms—consistent with the qualitative findings that users often turn to dating apps to seek deeper connections when offline support is lacking.

Importantly, individuals who progressed to in-person meetings tended to evaluate their app experiences more positively, and those who perceived dating apps as enhancing their happiness and well-being reported lower levels of loneliness. These findings suggest that positive dating app experiences can contribute to happiness and serve as a source of emotional relief.

Qualitative findings provided a more layered and nuanced picture. While many participants initially used dating apps to seek emotional connection, their experiences were varied and complex—ranging from temporary emotional relief to disappointment, emotional fatigue, and patterns of repeated use linked to emotional vulnerability. Patterns in the interviews suggested that participants with stronger offline social networks often described using apps more casually or experimentally, whereas those experiencing periods of isolation described heavier reliance on apps to find deeper connections. Moreover, some participants described cycles of repeated app use, particularly during emotionally vulnerable periods following relationship breakups or social isolation. These patterns suggest that for some users, dating apps can become both a source of emotional relief and a potential source of dependency.

Notably, both quantitative and qualitative findings highlighted that positive app experiences can meaningfully contribute to emotional well-being. Taken together, these findings suggest that dating app usage is shaped not simply by individual preferences or casual curiosity, but by a complex interplay between emotional needs, relational contexts, and social support.

This study also has several limitations, including the narrow sample composition (all qualitative participants were women in their twenties), the lack of gender, age, and cultural diversity, and the limited ability to analyze differences based on usage purpose or goals. These limitations constrain the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should expand to include more diverse age groups, genders, and cultural backgrounds, and should analyze differences in experiences according to usage motivations and expectations. As technologically mediated intimacy becomes increasingly normalized in late modern society, a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial dynamics involved in seeking emotional support through dating apps will be all the more important.

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