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How does the use of dating apps relate to physical health behaviors and mental health? A narrative review

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Abstract

Background.

Dating applications have become a central component of contemporary romantic and social interactions, particularly among adolescents, young adults, and emerging adults. While these platforms offer opportunities for social connection, accumulating evidence suggests that dating app use may be associated with a range of mental health outcomes and physical health-related behaviors. Research in this area remains fragmented, with findings dispersed across psychological, behavioral, and public health disciplines.

Aim.

The aim of this narrative review is to synthesize and critically analyze existing research on the relationship between dating app use, mental health outcomes, and physical health behaviors.

Material and methods.

A narrative review of peer-reviewed literature was conducted using articles provided by the author. The included studies encompassed cross-sectional, longitudinal, diary-based, and review designs examining dating app use in relation to mental health indicators (e.g. depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem) and physical health behaviors (e.g. sexual risk behaviors, substance use, sleep patterns, body image-related behaviors). Findings were synthesized thematically.

Results.

The reviewed literature indicates that dating app use is associated with diverse mental health

outcomes, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem fluctuations. Additionally, dating app engagement has been linked to several physical health behaviors, such as risky sexual practices, sexually transmitted infection risk, alcohol and substance use, sleep disturbances, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors. Evidence suggests that these associations are influenced by patterns of use, individual vulnerabilities, and contextual factors.

Conclusions.

Dating app use appears to be meaningfully related to both mental health and physical health behaviors, although the direction and strength of these associations vary across populations and study designs. Further longitudinal and theory-driven research is needed to clarify causal mechanisms and to inform health education, prevention, and public health interventions.

Key words:

dating apps; mental health; physical health behaviors; online behavior; narrative review

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, dating applications have become a dominant modality for initiating romantic and sexual relationships. Their widespread adoption has been particularly evident among adolescents, emerging adults, and young adults, although increasing use has also been observed across broader age groups. Advances in mobile technology, location-based services, and algorithmic matching have transformed dating apps into highly accessible and visually oriented platforms that facilitate rapid interpersonal connections. As a result, dating apps have reshaped contemporary social and romantic practices, influencing how individuals form, maintain, and dissolve intimate relationships. [1]

Alongside their growing popularity, concerns have emerged regarding the potential health-related consequences of dating app use. Early research emphasized the social benefits of online dating, including increased opportunities for connection, perceived accessibility of partners, and reduced barriers to initiating contact. However, accumulating empirical evidence suggests that dating app use may also be associated with a range of mental health outcomes and physical health-related behaviors. These associations have become a focus of interdisciplinary research spanning psychology, psychiatry, public health, nursing, and behavioral sciences. [2]

Mental health outcomes linked to dating app use have been increasingly documented. Studies have reported associations between dating app engagement and symptoms of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and psychological distress, as well as fluctuations in self-esteem and well-

being. Body image-related concerns, including body dissatisfaction and appearance-based self-evaluation, have also been highlighted, particularly given the visual emphasis and appearance-driven feedback mechanisms inherent to many dating platforms. Moreover, experiences of rejection, ghosting, sexual harassment, and technology-facilitated sexual violence on dating apps have been identified as additional psychosocial stressors with potential adverse effects on mental health. [3] [4]

In parallel, research has begun to examine how dating app use relates to physical health behaviors. A substantial body of literature has explored associations between dating apps and sexual health behaviors, including condom use, number of sexual partners, and risk of sexually transmitted infections. Other studies have extended this focus to alcohol and substance use, suggesting that dating app-facilitated encounters may co-occur with increased consumption of alcohol or recreational drugs in certain contexts. [5] Additionally, emerging evidence links dating app use to sleep disturbances, sedentary behavior, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors, often mediated by body dissatisfaction and appearance-related pressures. [6]

Importantly, the relationship between dating app use and health outcomes does not appear to be uniform. Patterns of use, motivations for engagement, and individual vulnerabilities may play a critical moderating role. For example, compulsive or problematic use of dating apps has been associated with greater psychological distress, whereas more controlled or goal-directed use may be linked to neutral or even beneficial outcomes. Individual factors such as attachment style, rejection sensitivity, emotion regulation difficulties, and pre-existing mental health conditions have also been shown to influence how users experience and respond to dating app interactions. Contextual factors, including gender, age, sexual orientation, and exposure to online victimization, further complicate these associations.

Despite the growing body of literature, research on dating apps and health remains fragmented. Mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors are often examined separately, and findings are dispersed across diverse disciplines and methodological approaches. Many studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference, while others focus on specific subpopulations or single health domains. As a result, an integrated synthesis that considers both mental health and physical health behaviors within a unified framework is still lacking. [7]

Given the central role of dating apps in contemporary social life and their potential implications for individual and public health, a comprehensive narrative review is warranted. By synthesizing existing evidence across mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors, such a review can clarify emerging patterns, identify key mechanisms and moderating factors, and highlight gaps in the current literature. This integrated perspective is particularly relevant

for informing health education, preventive strategies, and public health interventions aimed at promoting healthier digital relationship practices. [8]

Research objective

The objective of this narrative review is to synthesize and critically examine existing research on the associations between dating app use, mental health outcomes, and physical health behaviors.

Research problems

The review seeks to address the following research problems:

1. How is dating app use associated with mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, and body image?
2. What physical health behaviors are linked to dating app use, including sexual health behaviors, substance use, sleep patterns, and weight-control practices?
3. What psychological, behavioral, and contextual mechanisms may explain the observed associations between dating app use and health-related outcomes?

2. Research materials and methods

2.1. Study design

This article is a narrative review aimed at synthesizing existing research on the relationship between dating app use, mental health outcomes, and physical health behaviors. A narrative approach was selected due to the heterogeneity of study designs, populations, outcome measures, and theoretical frameworks present in the existing literature. This method allows for a comprehensive and integrative examination of findings across psychological, behavioral, and public health domains.

2.2. Literature sources

The literature included in this review consists of peer-reviewed articles provided by the author. The analyzed studies were originally retrieved from major academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. The final corpus encompassed empirical studies, systematic and scoping reviews, and theoretical papers addressing dating app use in relation to mental health and physical health behaviors.

2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were included in the narrative synthesis if they met the following criteria:

published in peer-reviewed academic journals;

written in English;

focused on the use of dating applications or online dating platforms; examined associations with mental health outcomes (e.g. depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, body image) and/or physical health behaviors (e.g. sexual health behaviors, substance use, sleep, eating-related behaviors).

No restrictions were imposed regarding study design. Cross-sectional, longitudinal, diary-based, cohort, qualitative, and review studies were all considered eligible. Articles focusing exclusively on social media platforms not related to dating or lacking health-related outcomes were excluded.

2.4. Data extraction and synthesis

Relevant information from each article was extracted manually, including study design, population characteristics, key variables related to dating app use, mental health outcomes, physical health behaviors, and principal findings. The synthesis was conducted thematically rather than quantitatively. Studies were grouped according to major outcome domains, namely mental health outcomes, physical health behaviors, and proposed psychological or contextual mechanisms linking dating app use to health-related outcomes.

Given the narrative nature of the review and the diversity of methodologies, no formal quality appraisal or meta-analytic procedures were applied. Instead, findings were interpreted with attention to methodological strengths and limitations, including study design, sample characteristics, and potential sources of bias.

2.5. Ethical considerations

As this study is based exclusively on the analysis of previously published literature, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

2.6. Use of artificial intelligence tools

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to support linguistic refinement and improve the clarity and academic quality of the English language. All substantive content, interpretation, and final decisions regarding the manuscript were made by the author.

3. Results

3.1. Dating app use and mental health

The reviewed literature indicates that dating app use is associated with a wide range of mental health outcomes, although the direction and magnitude of these associations vary across studies. Frequently examined outcomes include depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, body image concerns, and overall psychological well-being.

Several studies have reported positive associations between dating app use and depressive symptoms, anxiety, and psychological distress. Users who engage more frequently with dating applications, particularly in a compulsive or emotionally driven manner, tend to report higher levels of depressive mood, social anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Loneliness has emerged as a particularly consistent correlate of dating app use, with evidence suggesting that individuals who use dating apps more intensively or experience negative interactions on these platforms report greater feelings of social isolation.

Body image-related outcomes represent a prominent mental health domain in the literature. Dating apps often emphasize visual self-presentation and appearance-based evaluation, which may intensify self-objectification and body dissatisfaction. Several studies have found that frequent dating app use is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, heightened appearance comparison, and negative affect, particularly among women and adolescents. These effects appear to be exacerbated by repeated exposure to profile evaluation, swiping mechanisms, and perceived rejection. [9]

Self-esteem has been shown to fluctuate in relation to dating app experiences. Positive feedback, such as matches or messages, may temporarily enhance self-esteem, whereas lack of matches, rejection, or ghosting may contribute to self-doubt and reduced self-worth. For some users, especially those with high rejection sensitivity or insecure attachment styles, dating app interactions may reinforce negative self-perceptions and emotional vulnerability.

Experiences of sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and technology-facilitated sexual violence on dating apps have also been linked to adverse mental health outcomes. These experiences have been associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, stress, and trauma-related responses. Certain groups, including women, sexual minorities, and individuals with pre-existing mental health difficulties, appear to be disproportionately affected.

At the same time, the literature suggests that dating app use is not uniformly detrimental to mental health. Some users report neutral or positive psychological experiences, particularly when app use aligns with clear goals, is limited in duration, and results in meaningful social connections. This heterogeneity underscores the importance of individual and contextual factors in shaping mental health outcomes.

3.2. Dating app use and physical health behaviors

A substantial portion of the reviewed literature focuses on physical health behaviors associated with dating app use, with particular emphasis on sexual health, substance use, sleep, and eating-related behaviors.

Sexual health behaviors constitute the most extensively studied physical health domain. Dating app use has been associated with a higher number of sexual partners, increased likelihood of casual sexual encounters, and, in some studies, lower consistency of condom use. These behaviors have been linked to an elevated risk of sexually transmitted infections, although findings vary depending on population characteristics, app usage patterns, and contextual factors. Some studies highlight that dating apps may also facilitate access to sexual health information and testing services, suggesting a complex relationship between app use and sexual health outcomes.

Alcohol and substance use have been frequently examined in connection with dating app-facilitated interactions. Evidence indicates that dating app use is associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption and recreational drug use in certain contexts, particularly during first dates or app-initiated social encounters. These behaviors may serve social or coping functions but may also increase exposure to health risks.

Emerging research has linked dating app use to sleep disturbances and fatigue. Prolonged app engagement, nighttime use, and compulsive checking behaviors have been associated with reduced sleep duration and poorer sleep quality. Such patterns may contribute indirectly to broader physical and mental health consequences.

Eating-related behaviors and weight-control practices have also been identified as relevant physical health outcomes. Several studies report associations between dating app use, body dissatisfaction, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors, including restrictive eating, fasting, and other disordered eating practices.[10][11] These associations appear to be mediated by appearance-based comparison and perceived social evaluation, reinforcing the interconnectedness of mental and physical health domains.

3.3. Psychosocial mechanisms and moderating factors

Across the reviewed studies, several psychosocial mechanisms have been proposed to explain the observed associations between dating app use and health-related outcomes. Social comparison processes play a central role, as users are frequently exposed to idealized images and profiles that may shape self-evaluation and expectations. Reward-based app designs, including swiping and matching systems, may further reinforce compulsive engagement and emotional dependence.

Individual differences have consistently emerged as important moderators. Attachment style, rejection sensitivity, emotion regulation difficulties, and pre-existing mental health conditions influence how users interpret and respond to dating app interactions. For some individuals,

dating apps may serve as a coping mechanism for loneliness [12] or distress, whereas for others they may exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities.

Contextual factors such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and exposure to online victimization also shape health outcomes. Women and sexual minority users often report higher levels of harassment and psychological distress. Adolescents and emerging adults appear particularly sensitive to appearance-related pressures and social evaluation, while individuals with affective disorders may experience symptom aggravation associated with dating app use.

Overall, the results suggest that the health implications of dating app use are best understood as the product of dynamic interactions between platform features, individual characteristics, and social contexts, rather than as direct or uniform effects. [13]

Domain	Women	Men
Mental health outcomes	More frequently report depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional distress associated with dating app use; higher vulnerability to negative affect following rejection or lack of matches	Mixed findings; some studies report lower emotional impact overall, though increased distress is observed among men with high rejection sensitivity or low perceived desirability
Self-esteem and body image	Greater body dissatisfaction, appearance-based comparison, and self-objectification; stronger associations with unhealthy weight-control behaviors and disordered eating	Less consistent associations with body dissatisfaction; self-esteem more closely linked to perceived success, number of matches, and partner availability
Exposure to negative experiences	Higher exposure to sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and technology-facilitated sexual violence;[14] stronger associations with anxiety, stress, and trauma-related symptoms	Lower reported exposure to harassment; negative experiences more often related to rejection, ghosting, or perceived lack of interest
Dating app motivations	More likely to report relational or emotional motivations alongside appearance-related pressures	More frequently report casual dating or sexual motivations; app

		use often linked to perceived partner abundance
Sexual health behaviors	More cautious sexual behaviors reported in some studies; nevertheless, increased exposure to risk due to partner behaviors and power imbalances	Higher number of sexual partners and greater likelihood of engaging in casual sexual encounters in some samples [15]
Substance use	Alcohol use often reported in dating contexts[16]; associations with coping motives in response to negative experiences	Higher likelihood of alcohol and recreational drug use during dating app-initiated encounters
Problematic or compulsive use	More likely to experience emotional consequences of compulsive use (e.g. rumination, distress)	More likely to engage in frequent or intensive use linked to reward-seeking and impulsivity
Moderating factors	Gender norms, appearance-based evaluation, exposure to harassment, and safety concerns	Perceived desirability, success metrics, and competitive dynamics

Table 1. Gender differences in mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors associated with dating app use.

Gender-related differences were evident across multiple domains of dating app use. Women more frequently reported adverse mental health outcomes, particularly body dissatisfaction like acne [17], anxiety, and emotional distress associated with appearance-based evaluation and exposure to harassment. In contrast, men's experiences were more often linked to perceived dating success, partner availability, and engagement in risk-related behaviors, including higher levels of casual sexual activity and substance use. These findings highlight the importance of considering gender as a key moderating factor in understanding the health-related implications of dating app use. [18]

4. Discussion

The findings of this narrative review indicate that dating app use is meaningfully associated with both mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors, although these relationships are complex, heterogeneous, and strongly influenced by individual and contextual factors. Rather than exerting uniform effects, dating apps appear to function as environments that may

amplify existing vulnerabilities or, in some cases, support social connection and well-being, depending on patterns of use and user characteristics.

A central observation emerging from the reviewed literature is the close interconnection between mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors in the context of dating app use. Psychological factors such as loneliness, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and emotional distress often co-occur with health-related behaviors, including risky sexual practices, substance use, sleep disturbances, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors. [19] This overlap suggests that mental and physical health consequences of dating app use should not be conceptualized as separate phenomena but rather as interrelated dimensions of digital relationship experiences. [20]

Gender differences represent one of the most consistent themes across studies. Women more frequently report adverse mental health outcomes, particularly anxiety, depressive symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and distress related to appearance-based evaluation and exposure to harassment. These findings likely reflect broader gendered social norms surrounding physical appearance, safety concerns, and sexual objectification, which may be intensified in dating app environments. In contrast, men's experiences are more often shaped by perceived dating success, partner availability, and competitive dynamics, with negative outcomes emerging primarily in relation to rejection, low match rates, or unmet expectations. These gendered patterns underscore the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives in research and intervention efforts. [21]

Several psychological and behavioral mechanisms help explain the observed associations. Social comparison processes appear to play a key role, as users are continuously exposed to curated profiles and idealized images that may influence self-evaluation and expectations. Reward-based design features, such as swiping and matching systems, can reinforce repeated engagement and emotional investment, potentially contributing to compulsive use. For individuals with high rejection sensitivity, insecure attachment styles, or difficulties with emotion regulation, these mechanisms may intensify emotional reactivity and psychological distress. [22]

The reviewed studies also highlight the relevance of problematic or compulsive dating app use as a distinct construct. Users who report difficulty controlling their app use, frequent checking, or reliance on apps for mood regulation tend to experience poorer mental health outcomes. Importantly, problematic use does not appear to be solely a function of time spent on apps but rather of the motivations and emotional processes underlying engagement. This distinction has

important implications for prevention and intervention, suggesting that reducing harm may require addressing underlying psychological needs rather than simply limiting screen time.

From a public health perspective, the associations between dating app use and physical health behaviors warrant careful consideration. While dating apps may facilitate social and sexual connections, they may also increase exposure to sexual health risks and substance use in certain contexts. At the same time, some evidence suggests that dating apps can serve as platforms for health promotion, including dissemination of sexual health information and facilitation of testing services. This dual role highlights the need for balanced, evidence-based approaches that acknowledge both risks and potential benefits. [23][24]

Several limitations of the existing literature should be noted. Many studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference and raising the possibility of reverse or bidirectional relationships. Self-reported measures of app use and health outcomes may be subject to recall and social desirability biases. Additionally, much of the research focuses on young adults in Western contexts, reducing generalizability to other age groups and cultural settings. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, experimental approaches, and greater inclusion of diverse populations. [25]

Overall, the findings of this review suggest that dating app use is best understood as a multifaceted phenomenon with implications that extend beyond romantic outcomes to broader aspects of mental and physical health. Integrating psychological, behavioral, and public health perspectives is essential for advancing understanding and informing effective educational and preventive strategies. [26] [27]

5. Conclusions

This narrative review demonstrates that the use of dating applications is associated with a broad range of mental health outcomes and physical health behaviors. Evidence suggests that dating app use is linked to depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and fluctuations in self-esteem, as well as to health-related behaviors such as risky sexual practices, substance use, sleep disturbances, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors. These associations are complex and heterogeneous, varying according to individual characteristics, patterns of use, and social context. [28] [29]

Importantly, the findings indicate that mental and physical health outcomes related to dating app use are closely interconnected. Psychological distress and emotional vulnerability may both contribute to and result from health-risk behaviors occurring in dating app–facilitated contexts. Gender emerged as a key moderating factor, with women more frequently experiencing adverse mental health outcomes related to appearance-based evaluation and harassment, while men’s

experiences were more closely associated with perceived dating success and engagement in risk-related behaviors. [30][31]

The reviewed literature highlights the role of psychosocial mechanisms such as social comparison, reward-based app design, rejection sensitivity, and emotion regulation difficulties in shaping users' experiences. These mechanisms suggest that potential harms associated with dating app use are not solely attributable to the platforms themselves but also to the ways in which individuals engage with them and interpret feedback.

From a public health and educational perspective, these findings underscore the need for interventions that promote healthier digital relationship practices. Such efforts may include digital literacy education, mental health-informed app design, and targeted prevention strategies addressing sexual health, substance use, and body image concerns. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and theory-driven approaches to clarify causal pathways and to inform evidence-based recommendations for individuals, healthcare professionals, and policymakers.

Disclosure:

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