

Swipe Left on Stereotypes: A Study on Dating App Usage and the Superficiality of Romantic Relationships among Chinese

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Abstract: This empirical study aims to investigate the contemporary romantic relationship landscape and the experiences of dating app users in China. In addition, this study examines whether there is a possible correlation between dating app usage and superficiality in post-modern relationships. A survey was conducted with 149 participants, analyzing their attitudes towards romantic relationships, experiences with superficiality, and dating app usage. Results showed that while individuals still prioritize romantic relationships, there may be a growing trend among women to place less importance on romance. The study found no significant correlation between dating app usage and superficiality, but a significant proportion of participants reported negative experiences and quit using dating apps. The study suggests changes are needed to address these issues and promote the continued use of dating apps. The study provides valuable insights into the romantic relationship landscape of modern Chinese.

Keyword: Social Media, Dating Applications, Romantic Relationships, Superficiality in Relationships

1. Introduction

Romance is something that humans have sought for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The dedication of the temple of Abu Simbel by Pharaoh Ramses II to his queen Nefertari serves as early evidence of the prevalence of romantic relationships since it was the first temple built for a queen in Ancient Egypt history. Besides these records, we also have great stories that have lasted over time and are still popular nowadays, like Shakespeare's famous Romeo and Juliet. The fact that these stories still captivate our attention and admiration shows that we still hold romance in high regard.

Romantic relationships play an important role in our lives as they provide emotional and physical intimacy, security, and support. They also bring a sense of belonging, happiness, and fulfillment. Although the idea of romance still exists in our society, the way we experience it has changed significantly due to the influence of social media. Apps like WeChat, Facebook, and Tinder have become a ubiquitous part of our society and the default method of communicating with others. In terms of romance, social media allows individuals to easily share pictures, videos, and updates with their partners, making it easier to keep each other informed about their lives and preserve memories and special moments.

Furthermore, the popularity of dating applications offers a new path for establishing a romantic relationship, as its advertisements claim that they provide algorithms that bring people the best matches. According to Pew Research, "30% of U.S. adults say they have used a dating site or app,

and 23% say they have ever had a date with someone they first met through such platform. ". Introverted adolescents also reported that dating applications and social media platforms provide them with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with new individuals, even better than in person. While such applications do provide people with easier access to relationships, many people state that sustained long-term relationships have become increasingly challenging for them to maintain. The phrase "Fast Food Relationship" has become popular on social media as a metaphor for relationships characterized by a lack of emotional depth and fleeting nature; people transition to the next partner once their initial curiosity and sexual attraction have been satisfied.

While there is a wealth of research on dating app usage in the United States, relatively little information is available in China. Based on a study conducted by iiMedia research, over 46% of the Chinese population reported using dating apps to expand their social circles. While popular dating apps like Tinder, Momo, and Tantan claim to provide realistic and convenient pathways to meaningful relationships, there are concerns about how they may affect the authenticity and longevity of these relationships. This study aims to investigate the contemporary romantic relationship landscape and the experiences of dating app users in China. Additionally, it seeks to examine whether there is a possible correlation between dating app usage and superficiality in post-modern relationships.

2. Literature Review: The Superficiality Aspect of Dating Applications

The effects of dating apps on the nature and quality of romantic relationships have been debated. Many studies have suggested that dating apps, such as Tinder and Grindr, encourage a culture of superficiality, where people prioritize physical appearance and instant gratification over deeper emotional connections. This literature review aims to analyze and synthesize the available research on the correlation between dating app algorithms and superficiality in post-modern relationships across the globe.

3. Understanding Dating Application

3.1. Defining Dating Apps

Dating applications, commonly referred to as dating apps, are software platforms that facilitate matchmaking and connecting people who are seeking romantic relationships or casual encounters.

3.2. Dating Application's Features

To better understand the unique aspects of online dating compared to traditional dating, it is important to examine the key features of dating applications. Specifically, access, communication, and matching are important considerations. In terms of access, online dating apps provide users with the ability to make connections with a larger pool of potential partners. In addition, the convenience aspect of these apps allows people to search for partners from the comfort of their homes [1]. People's preference for dating applications can be shown through the popularity of apps like Tinder, with over 75 million monthly active users from more than 197 countries. To initiate communication on Tinder, users engage in social penetration by gradually revealing information about their personalities through conversation after the initial matches. This process of self-disclosure is similar to peeling the layers of an onion, as each exchange of information brings them closer to each other and deepens the relationship [2]. Such a matching process in dating apps is based on a combination of user profiles, filters, and algorithms that analyze user behavior and preferences.

3.3. Matching Algorithms

It is important to consider the algorithms of dating applications in order to examine the relationships generated from these matches. Dating apps require users to create profiles that contain personal information, including age, gender, location, interests, and photos. This information is then utilized by the app's algorithms to suggest potential matches [2]. Users also have the ability to set filters that specify the characteristics of the person they are searching for, such as age range, distance, and education level. The algorithm takes these filters into consideration to narrow down the pool of potential matches [3].

Dating apps employ various types of matching algorithms, including collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and hybrid algorithms, to suggest compatible matches to their users [3]. Collaborative filtering suggests matches based on the preferences of other users with similar profiles, analyzing their behavior and recommending matches based on shared likes and dislikes. On the other hand, content-based filtering analyzes the user's profile and interests, recommending matches based on common interests, hobbies, or activities [3]. Hybrid algorithms combine both collaborative and content-based filtering to provide even more tailored matches. Some dating apps also employ machine learning algorithms to enhance their matching process, in which apps make changes to recommended matches based on users' past matching experience [4].

4. Post-modern romantic relationships

4.1. Defining Relationships

Healthy relationships are founded on mutual respect, trust, communication, and support, where partners prioritize each other's well-being and work together to navigate challenges and conflicts. Long-term relationships are those that endure over time, often spanning years or even decades. Committed relationships are partnerships in which both partners have agreed to be exclusive and dedicated to one another. They involve a level of commitment beyond just spending time together and often include shared goals and values for the future [5].

4.2. Changing Attitudes Towards Commitment

There is evidence to suggest that changing attitudes towards marriage and commitment are contributing to the perceived difficulty of maintaining long-term relationships in modern society. A study by the Pew Research Center found that younger generations are less likely to view marriage as an important milestone in life compared to previous generations [6]. For example, only 26% of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) consider getting married an important part of their life, compared to 36% of Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) and 48% of Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). People are waiting longer to get married and are more likely to cohabit before marriage, which suggests that people are becoming more accepting of non-traditional family structures and are not viewing marriage as the only path to a fulfilling life [6]. A study published in the Journal of Sex Research found that young adults today are more accepting of non-monogamous relationships compared to previous generations [7]. The study surveyed over 1,000 adults between the ages of 18 and 34 and found that 20% of respondents had engaged in some form of consensual non-monogamy, such as open relationships or polyamory. Furthermore, a quantitative study showed while many participants recognized the potential benefits of committed relationships, such as emotional intimacy and support, they also perceived significant costs, such as loss of independence and personal freedom. Some participants expressed a general skepticism about the value of committed relationships and viewed them as potentially limiting and restrictive [8].

5. Superficiality Aspects of Dating Applications

5.1. Limitations of Algorism and Superficial Relationships

Although dating applications have developed advanced matching algorithms and techniques to connect people with the most suitable partners, research suggests these matching techniques have limitations that can potentially encourage superficial relationships [9]. Firstly, the algorithms rely solely on the information users provide, which can be incomplete or inaccurate. While some people might not have a clear understanding of their personalities, others could be faking their profiles to make themselves more attractive [3]. Dating apps' untransparent algorithms can also play a role in such inaccurate profiles since it is challenging for users to comprehend how they are being matched. In addition, the algorithms used by these apps may also reflect certain biases, including racial or gender biases, which can result in unfair and discriminatory matching. Lastly, research shows that online dating algorithms oversimplify complex human interactions and preferences, as factors such as personality, values, and interests may be difficult to quantify and match accurately through an algorithm [10].

According to Corriero, the design of dating apps may encourage users to make snap judgments based on surface-level qualities, such as physical appearance [9]. Although these factors may hold some importance in the early stages of a relationship, they do not necessarily signify long-term compatibility. Yang argues that dating algorithms might even impede the formation of stable, long-lasting relationships by fostering a "shopping mentality" among users [10]. When presented with a vast pool of potential matches, with a limited set of criteria, users may view potential partners as easily replaceable and dispensable. Research also suggests that the oversimplification of dating algorithms may not give people more crucial factors that could truly contribute to long-term relationship success, such as shared values, communication skills, and emotional intelligence (1.2). Similarly, Lee's research shows that the "cool" factor of apps like Tinder may contribute to a culture of misogyny [11]. Since users are encouraged to display their wit and humor in their profiles, a competitive culture that objectifies potential partners could be a result. In such an environment, women are seen as objects to be conquered instead of individuals deserving respect and admiration. Furthermore, the emphasis on convenience and instant gratification in dating apps can discourage users from investing time and effort, which is the most important aspect of building meaningful connections [9]. Although online dating offers the ability to match and communicate with numerous potential partners, it limits how much time people can dedicate to a single partner.

5.2. Linking Dating Apps to Casual Sex

The superficiality aspect, reinforced by dating app algorithms, has contributed to a "hookup culture" where users are more interested in casual sex than long-term relationships. Research suggests that individuals who use dating applications are more inclined towards casual sexual encounters and less likely to pursue committed long-term romantic relationships. For example, a study conducted on 163 Tinder users between the ages of 18-45 revealed that most users (70%) used the app to find casual sex partners. In contrast, only 20% used it to find committed relationships [12]. Additionally, those who primarily used the app for casual sex reported higher levels of sexual desire and a lower interest in emotional intimacy than those who primarily used it for committed relationships. The study also found that those who used Tinder for casual sex reported higher levels of perceived sexual risk and were less likely to use condoms than those who used it for committed relationships [12].

Similarly, a quantitative study conducted on dating app users in Indonesia showed that users participated in casual sex more frequently than non-users, with 38.2% of users reporting having had

a one-night stand compared to only 7.9% of non-users. These users were also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors such as having unprotected sex and having multiple sexual partners [13].

The prevalence of frequent and varied sexual encounters on dating apps reinforces a culture of casual sex and superficial connections, which can lead to negative consequences for individuals and society at large [7]. Additionally, this focus on superficiality and casual sex may have broader implications for social norms and gender expectations, as users in certain cultures may face challenges related to these factors that can impact their experiences and the success of their relationships [14].

5.3. Research Gap

These findings suggest that dating apps are transforming the landscape of romantic and sexual relationships. While the apps offer new opportunities for building connections with people, they also present challenges related to lack of depth, hookup culture, and cultural expectations that must be addressed to promote healthy and meaningful relationships in the digital age. Even though there has been extensive research on the superficiality of dating applications, few studies have examined the usage of dating apps and their superficial feature in post-modern romantic relationships among people in China. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate dating app users' experiences and the superficiality of romantic relationships among Chinese people.

6. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using survey questions to investigate the relationship between dating app usage and superficiality in romantic relationships among Chinese participants. A sample of approximately 150-200 participants was recruited through social media recruitment methods. The survey questions included multiple-choice/scale and free-response questions and were distributed through social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and WeChat. To avoid biased answers, dating app questions were hidden toward the end of the survey.

The survey began with demographic questions about participants' age, gender, education level, and relationship status. Following this, the survey included questions that evaluated participants' attitudes towards romantic relationships, including the importance on having a romantic relationship for their mental and emotional well-being. Questions were also asked about participants' real past romantic relationship experiences, including the number of romantic relationships/long-term relationships they had participated in. This helped to distinguish between attitudes and actions to avoid participants who believed in healthy relationships but did not participate in them. In addition, the survey evaluated the characteristics of superficiality through questions that asked participants to rate the importance they placed on appearance, economic status, the duration of relationships, and their tendency to cheat in past relationships. To ensure reliability, the survey was shared on WeChat by five people in various locations and age groups to limit the limitation of results based on snowballing.

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion. To ensure anonymity and protect participant confidentiality, the survey was anonymous, and participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point. A note about the anonymous characteristic of the survey was also placed in every sensitive question to promote honest and comfortable answers. To ensure the clarity and comprehension of the survey questions, a cognitive study was conducted with six participants aged 16 to 45 to evaluate their comfort level and understanding of the survey questions. Feedback was collected to re-evaluate the survey questions, including offering an additional option for every question that considered those who had never participated in any romantic relationships, changing the phrasing of certain questions (participation - tendency), and adding definitions to every specific terminology to avoid confusion.

Outliers and inconsistent answers were removed from the dataset, and the research findings provided insights into the current romantic relationship landscape of Chinese people, their past experiences and attitudes towards dating usage, and the possible correlation between dating app usage and superficiality in romantic relationships among Chinese participants.

7. Results

7.1. Demographic Overview

In total, 157 individuals responded to the survey, and after data cleaning, 149 responses were used in the analysis. Of the participants, 61% were female, 37% were male, and 1% identified as non-binary. Regarding age, 46% of participants were aged 15-18, 32% were aged 19-25, 14% were aged 26-35, and the remaining 5% were from other age groups. Regarding education, 52% of participants reported they had completed high school, 8% had attended technical school, and 30% had completed college, with less than 5% reporting other educational background levels, e.g., that they were in middle school or college. Regarding relationship status, 56% of participants reported they were single, 27% said they were currently in a romantic relationship, 14% said they were married, and 1% checked the “other” category.

7.2. People’s attitude toward romantic relationships

The survey’s first main research question explored the importance people placed on having a romantic relationship for their mental and emotional well-being on a scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating that they perceived it to be very important and 1 indicating that they thought it was unimportant. The results showed that more than 55% of participants rated romantic relationships as important or very important (see Figure 1). This suggests that individuals still value and prioritize romantic relationships in their lives.

When examining the data by age group, there was no statistically significant difference in responses to this question. However, when reviewing the data by gender, it was found that more than 82% of participants who rated romantic relationships as not important or not important at all were women (see Figure 2). This finding may reflect a growing trend in which women place less importance on romance, potentially influenced by social media and feminism. Further investigation into this growing attitude is warranted.

A cross-study with participants' past relationship experiences was also conducted. The results showed that individuals who rated romantic relationships as less important for their mental and emotional well-being tended to have fewer past romantic relationships. Specifically, 95% of participants who selected "not important" or "not important at all" had no romantic relationship experience or had experienced fewer than four relationships.

On a scale of 1-5, how important do you consider having a romantic relationship for your mental and emotional well-being?

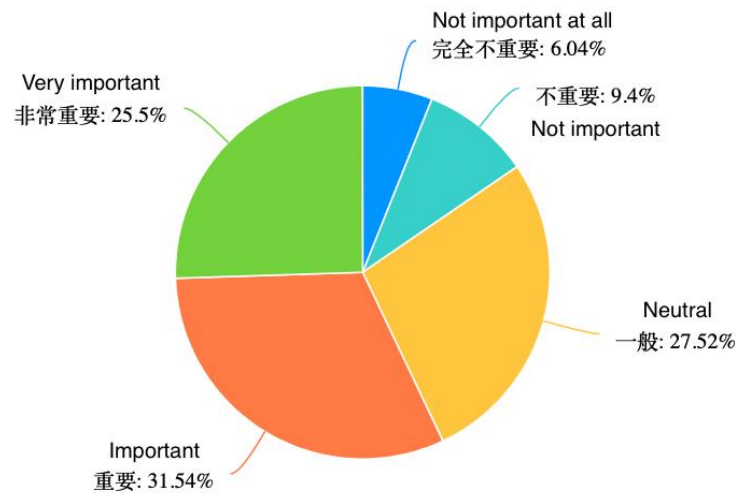


Figure 1: Importance Placed on Romantic Relationship.

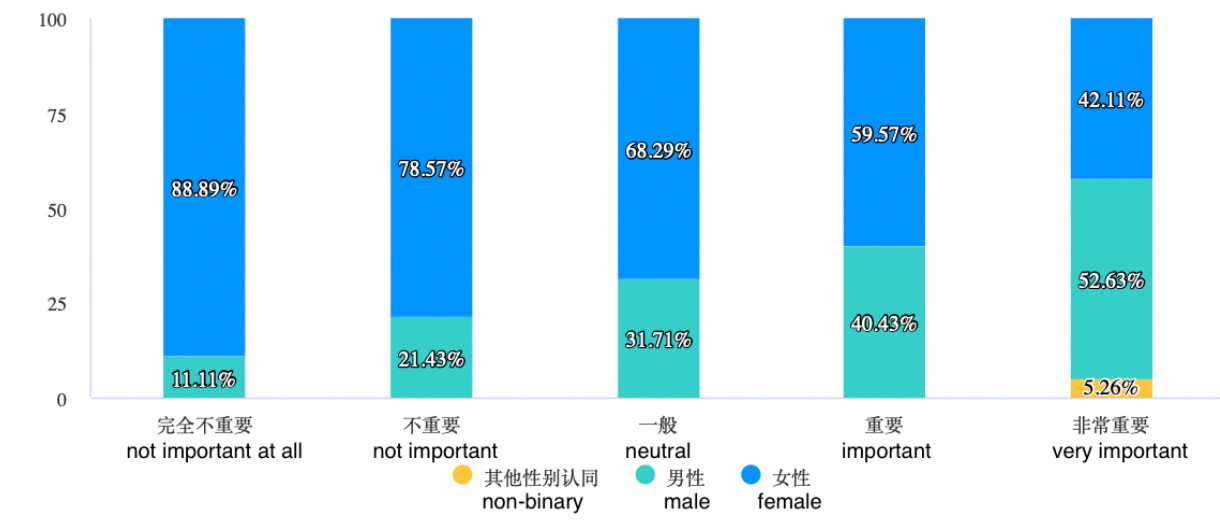


Figure 2: Importance Placed on Romantic Relationships Based on Gender.

7.3. Dating application usage and Superficiality in romantic relationships

The second set of research questions explored the superficiality of current romantic relationships and people's dating app usage. The result will be used to conduct a cross-study to compare dating app usage with people's belief in physical appearance & economic status, the number of romantic relationships they reported having had, the importance they placed on physical intimacy, the number of one-night stands they reported, the longevity of their past relationships, and their experience with and tendency towards infidelity. Surprisingly, out of 149 participants, 59% reported that they had not used a dating app within the past year (see Figure 3). Such results do not reflect the data on dating application usage in China, provided by iiMedia (46%), that dating apps are highly popular. In this study, only 8 % of the respondents reported using dating apps either often (once a day to a few times a week) or very often (more than once a day). The study also found that among those who did admit to using dating applications, roughly a third said they had never established a romantic relationship

through a dating app, and half said that they had established either one or two romantic relationships via a dating app.

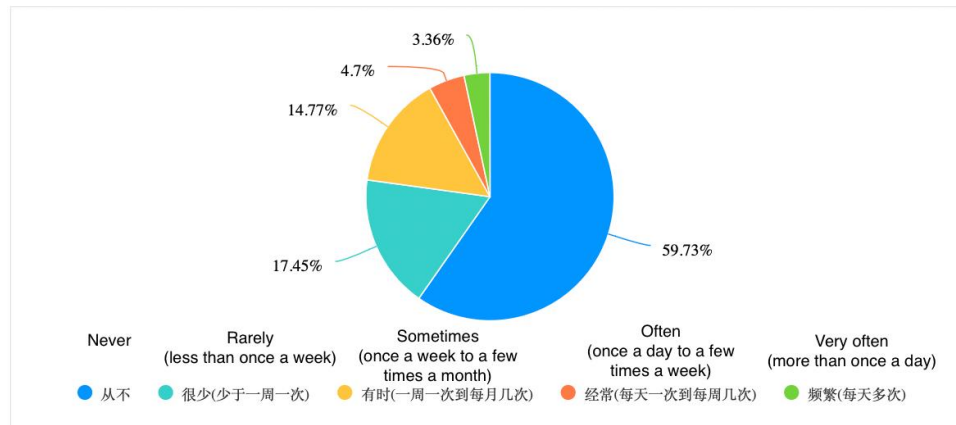


Figure 3: Frequency People Uses Dating App.

"How frequently do you use dating apps to meet new people?". Surprisingly, while conducting a cross-study with the importance people place on romantic relationships and metrics of superficiality (importance they place on physical appearance, economic status, and past relationships), there was no statistical correlation with respondents' answers about people who use dating apps place more/less importance on romantic relationships, appearance, economic status, amount of experience. Moreover, this study contradicts the previous literature review by failing to identify any discernible pattern between individuals' consistency in dating app usage and their inclination to engage in infidelity within romantic relationships. Although the survey revealed limited correlations between dating app usage and the perceived superficiality in post-modern romantic relationships, its findings shed light on a compelling pattern and trend that characterizes such relationships in China. Notably, out of the 149 participants, a staggering 67% placed significant importance on the physical appearance of their romantic partner, encompassing attributes like face and height. In contrast, a mere 6% considered it as not important at all (see Figure 4). Additionally, when analyzing the responses in relation to demographic factors, no statistically significant differences were observed in terms of gender or age group. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that over 50% of the participants regarded economic status and physical intimacy, including sexual encounters, as important or very important aspects of their romantic relationships. On a scale of 1-10, how much importance do you place on physical appearance (such as face and height) in your romantic partner?

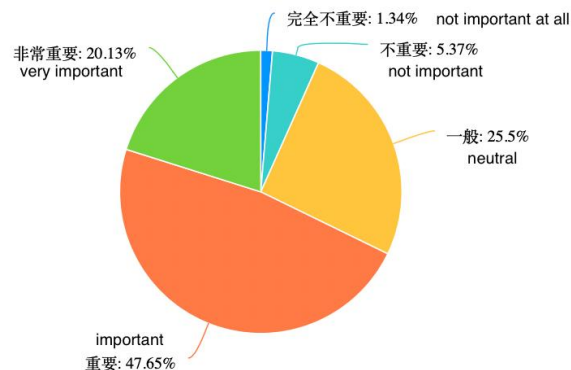


Figure 4: Importance of Physical Appearance of Romantic Partner.

The results of the survey on the question "Which of the following durations do you consider as indicative of a long-term romantic relationship?" reveal an interesting trend. While a significant portion of the respondents considered a duration of more than one year to signify a long-term relationship, it is noteworthy that 25% of the population still perceives a duration of more than 3 months or 6 months as sufficient. This finding suggests the presence of a cultural phenomenon where short-lived and quickly consumable relationships persist, with some individuals considering anything beyond 3 months as qualifying for a long-term romantic commitment (see Figure 5). Which of the following durations do you consider as indicative of a long-term romantic relationship?

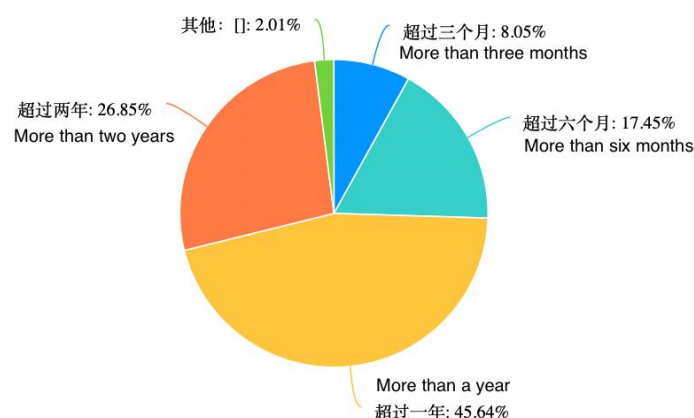


Figure 5: Qualification of a Long-term Romantic Commitment.

Furthermore, intriguing insights were obtained regarding infidelity within romantic relationships. A notable 30% of respondents acknowledged having experienced infidelity, while nearly an equivalent percentage (28%) admitted to tending to cheat themselves. Among those who reported any form of infidelity, 36% confessed to engaging in online cheating, while 50% revealed that their encounters occurred through in-person interactions. Although a greater number of individuals participated in infidelity through real-life encounters, the substantial proportion of those who met online and engaged in illicit communications cannot be overlooked. These experiences could contribute to respondents' lack of trust in online relationships, a topic that will be further explored in the subsequent section.

7.4. Negative Attitude Toward Dating app usage experience

Incorporating an open-ended question in the survey yielded an unexpected result, as most participants (over 80%) expressed a negative attitude toward their experiences with dating apps. This stark contrast to the promotional claims made by dating app advertisements and online platforms highlights a notable discrepancy between expectations and reality. The respondents frequently utilized terms like "inauthentic" and "unreliable" to describe their encounters. More than half of the participants believed their interactions on dating apps lacked authenticity and considered these platforms unreliable for establishing meaningful relationships. Their concerns primarily stemmed from the prevalence of internet fraud and the unreliability of the individuals they encountered through the apps. Several participants provided typical responses that exemplified these sentiments, such as: "There are fewer fraudsters offline, and it feels like online dating itself is not quite right," "Offline is more authentic," "Online dating carries greater risks," "Emotions formed through offline relationships are deeper," and "Online, there is too much possibility of encountering insincere individuals."

In light of the unexpectedly high level of negative sentiment expressed towards dating app usage, a supplementary follow-up interview was conducted with five individuals who had provided detailed

responses to the open-ended question. Each of the five participants had prior experience using dating apps, initially enticed by the promises and allure portrayed in online advertisements. Intriguingly, two out of the five individuals revealed that they discontinued using dating apps within a month of starting due to unpleasant private messages and encounters with peculiar individuals. On the other hand, the remaining three participants shared their attempts to find a romantic partner through dating apps, only to encounter partners or potential matches who provided inaccurate information or were incompatible. As a result, all five participants ultimately decided to cease using dating apps altogether. These firsthand accounts provide insights into the reasons behind their negative perceptions and offer valuable insights into the challenges and pitfalls encountered within dating apps.

Then, another 25 (age 15-45) participants were surveyed in the form of a short question about their attitude toward dating apps regardless of their experience. 92% of participants reported that dating apps were not a good way for people to meet potential partners. This follow-up investigation may illuminate the negative responses to the last question and suggest reasons why only 8% of the people reported that they use dating applications often or very often. The findings from these three surveys contradict the advertisements put out by dating apps. In short, these findings record significant changes in the public's attitude toward dating app usage and posit some reasons for those shifts.

8. Limitation and Discussion

There are some limitations to this research paper that must be considered while examining the data and results. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, fewer than 200 people and most participants lived in urban areas. The survey does not, of course, represent the opinions of the entire population of China. The study relied on self-reported data, and the result might be affected by social desirability and recall biases. Although the survey was posted through various social media platforms by different people in different age groups and social circles to minimize the snowballing effect, there are still possibilities of it happening. Furthermore, the study did not explore the specific dating apps or features that participants used, which may also have influenced the results. Future research could be conducted to address these limitations by using a larger and more diverse sample size, collecting data from multiple sources, and conducting more in-depth analyses of specific dating apps and features. In addition, it would be beneficial for future researchers to compare the attitudes toward dating applications and past romantic experiences of those who never used dating apps to those who used them constantly to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of dating app usage on romantic relationships.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study examines the relationship between dating app usage and superficiality in romantic relationships among Chinese participants. A quantitative research design was employed, using survey questions consisting of both multiple-choice/scale and free-response questions. A total of 149 participants completed the survey, 5 more were separately interviewed, and 25 were further surveyed. This essay outlined the findings both in charts and narratively. The findings revealed that individuals still highly value and prioritize romantic relationships in their lives, but there is a growing trend among women to place less importance on romance. The research also found that participants who rated romantic relationships as less important for their mental and emotional well-being tended to have fewer past romantic relationships, indicating changing societal attitudes toward romantic relationships. The study revealed no relationship between dating app usage and superficiality in postmodern relationships with the limited number of people currently using dating apps. However, the study did find that most people who have used dating apps have a negative attitude towards them, and only a small proportion of people continue to use them. Numerous individuals

have quit using dating apps due to their negative experiences. The findings suggest that people's actual experiences with dating app usage contradict the advertisements of these apps, leading to a continuous decrease in the number of users. To address this issue, changes are necessary, such as improving the design, algorithm, and selection process of dating apps to prevent the continuous decline of users and promote their usage. Future research could address the issues related to dating app usage and investigate more deeply the negative attitudes that people have toward dating apps.

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