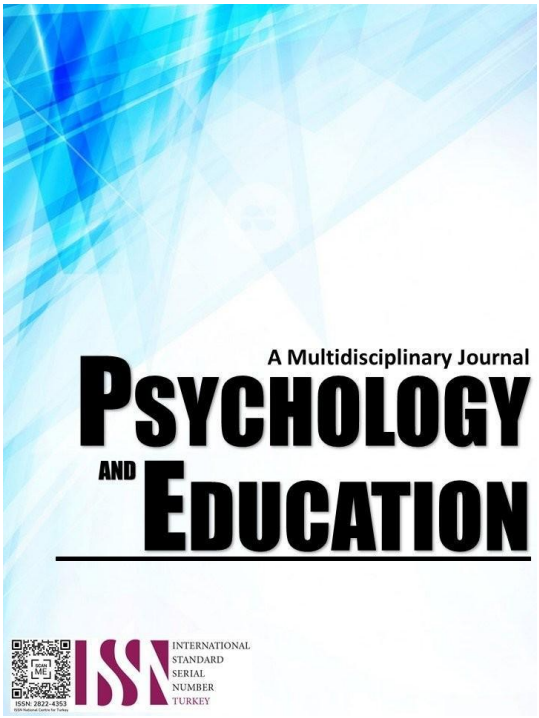
MEN'S VIRTUAL SELF-PRESENTATION IN ONLINE DATING APPS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY



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Research Article

Men's Virtual Self-Presentation in Online Dating Apps: A Multiple Case Study

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has led to transformative changes in how people connect and interact, with online dating apps becoming a major trend in contemporary relationship-building. This qualitative multiple case study explores the virtual self-presentation of Filipino young adult men and the challenges they encounter when using online dating apps. Four Filipino men aged 22–25, active users of dating applications in Metro Manila, participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. By examining the psychological impacts of virtual self-presentation, this research offers valuable insights for users and mental health professionals, guiding the development of targeted support strategies. The findings reveal that while crafting an idealized online persona can enhance attractiveness and facilitate connections, it also presents challenges such as difficulties in balancing desirability and authenticity, finding compatible matches, misunderstandings, and limitations of digital communication. The implications of these findings suggest that there is a need for improved support mechanisms within online dating apps. Recommendations include enhancing app interfaces with features that provide emotional support and clarity, fostering strong social support systems, and offering guidance on effective communication. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of virtual self-presentation and provides actionable recommendations for improving online dating experiences.

Keywords: *online dating apps, virtual self-presentation, Filipino young adult men*

Introduction

With the rise of technology, online dating apps have become a prevalent platform for individuals to connect, interact, and potentially form romantic relationships. Users strategically curate their online personas to present a positive and attractive image, aiming to attract matches and facilitate meaningful connections (Samonte et al., 2016).

According to Erik Erikson's Stages of Development, the virtue of love forms during the young adult stage (Cherry, 2024). Moreover, as of 2023, approximately 349 million people globally were using dating apps (Curry, 2024). In the Philippines, Metro Manila ranked number one as the most loving major capital and one of the top three places where individuals are more likely to find their love match online (Baclig, 2023).

Dating apps have changed how we connect with potential partners (Castro & Barada, 2020). Some individuals maintain online identities that differ from their "real world" (Belk, 2013; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Labor, 2020). According to self-discrepancy theory, the larger the gap between one's perceived and ideal selves, the greater the discomfort one may experience.

Moreover, this gap is linked to low self-esteem and negative emotions like disappointment and unfulfilled desires (Higgins, 1987). On the other hand, successful self-presentation on dating apps, such as garnering matches or positive interactions, might lead to a temporary boost in self-esteem through validation and social connection (Zhang et al., 2023).

Further study indicates that women are more authentic in their online profiles compared to men (Strimbu et al., 2021). Despite the growing use of dating apps in the Philippines, limited research has focused specifically on the lived experiences of Filipino men. Examining Filipino young adult men is academically necessary as cultural expectations surrounding masculinity, emotional expression, and romantic pursuit may uniquely shape how men present themselves and cope with online dating challenges in a collectivist society. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Filipino young adult men navigate virtual self-presentation and the psychological implications of their experiences. Given this context, this research aims to explore and understand the virtual self-presentation of men on online dating apps and the challenges they face. This research will provide valuable insights for users and mental health professionals by shedding light on the psychological interventions that the participants suggest for young adult men regarding virtual self-presentation and online dating, based on the findings.

Research Questions

The study is aimed at understanding the virtual self-presentation of young adult men in online dating apps. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do young adult men present themselves virtually using online dating apps?
2. What are the challenges that young adult men face using online dating apps in the context of virtual self-presentation?
3. Based on the results, what recommended psychological interventions could be suggested for young adult men in relation to virtual self-presentation and online dating?

Literature Review

Self-Presentation Strategies and Online Dating Apps

Self-presentation is the process through which individuals perceive and portray themselves to others (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). This aims to create a desired impression and facilitate relationship formation with others (Goffman, 1959; Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). Leary and Kowalski (1990) define two key processes in self-presentation, or impression management: impression motivation, the degree to which people are motivated to control how others see them, and impression construction, when people build the impression they want to create. Most of the research has focused on how people project themselves in face-to-face interactions (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019).

With the rise of technology and online dating apps, recent studies have delved into the various self-presentation strategies employed by users on these platforms, as these online dating apps have changed how we connect with potential partners and how we portray ourselves online. Online self-presentation is characterized by users describing themselves either verbally or through photographs (Toma & Hancock, 2010). In the Philippines, users strategically curate their online personas to present a positive and attractive image, aiming to attract matches and facilitate meaningful connections (Samonte, Reyes, & Labor, 2016). Additionally, users often edit their content before posting, giving them more control over their online presentation (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). Beyond how individuals manage impressions, the depth and manner in which they reveal personal information also play a crucial role in online dating interactions.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure, defined as "the act of revealing personal information about oneself to another" (Collins & Miller, 1994, p. 457), plays a vital role in online dating, where individuals present themselves to attract potential partners and build relationships. Altman and Taylor's (1973) "onion theory" of personality describes this process as gradual, with people revealing their private selves in layers as trust develops. In romantic contexts, this disclosure tends to be reciprocal and deepens over time. Physical attraction is a significant motivator for self-disclosure. Brundage, Derlega, and Cash (1976) found that people are more likely to disclose personal information to those they find attractive, a dynamic particularly relevant in online environments.

McKenna et al. (2002) expanded on this by demonstrating that those who expressed their "true self" online were more likely to form close relationships. They also predicted that the speed and stability of online relationships could surpass offline ones due to the accelerated intimacy fostered by self-disclosure—gender differences further influence how people disclose in online settings.

Chiou (2006) found that men tend to disclose more freely about sexual topics, while Yuan (2002) observed that women often feel more constrained about their sexuality in online spaces. Additionally, Griffin and Sparks (1990) highlighted that women are generally more open about their emotions, fears, and weaknesses compared to men. While self-disclosure can foster intimacy and connection, inconsistencies between one's online and offline selves may emerge as a consequence of selective self-presentation.

Discrepancies in Self-Presentation

Self-discrepancy arises when individuals perceive a gap between their actual self and their ideal or ought selves (Hu, Cao, & Wei, 2022). In the context of online dating, some users have been observed to craft profiles that reflect an idealized version of themselves, rather than their authentic selves (Belk, 2013; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Labor, 2020). This discrepancy is linked to low self-esteem and negative emotions like disappointment and unfulfilled desires (Higgins, 1987).

Conversely, successful self-presentation on these platforms, such as receiving matches or positive interactions, can temporarily boost self-esteem through validation and enhanced social connections (Zhang, Tang, & Liu, 2023). These discrepancies often lead to broader challenges that affect the quality of interactions and the sustainability of relationships formed online.

Challenges of Self-Presentation

A challenge in online dating is balancing attractiveness with authenticity. Many users feel pressured to highlight only their positive traits, omitting negative aspects to attract potential partners. Selective self-presentation often leads to profiles that do not accurately reflect users' identities, making it difficult to form genuine connections (Tong et al., 2019). Miscommunication is another significant challenge, which arises due to the absence of non-verbal cues typical in face-to-face interactions. Hall et al. (2010) found that men often misrepresent personal assets, relationship goals, and interests, while women are more likely to misrepresent their weight. The difference between online personas and real-life desires contributes to the challenge of finding compatible matches, as profiles may not align with users' true preferences.

Moreover, without non-verbal cues common in face-to-face interactions, users may misinterpret each other's intentions or profiles, leading to misunderstandings. Text-based communication is limited in conveying the full range of personality and emotion, often resulting in incomplete or inaccurate impressions (Tong et al., 2019). In response to these challenges, individuals develop various coping strategies to manage their online dating experiences.

Coping Strategies

The participants often adjusted their self-presentation on dating platforms based on their goals—whether seeking a casual date or a long-term relationship. While some viewed their online profiles as a true reflection of their offline selves, others believed the digital medium could never fully convey their authenticity. In order to navigate these challenges, most of the participants relied on close friends for advice, using them as a sounding board to refine profiles or messages, especially when communicating with someone they were genuinely interested in (Carey, 2021).

Seeking feedback from others can help daters align their self-presentation with how they are perceived by potential matches, reducing the likelihood of misrepresentation. Additionally, crafting profiles with genuine, diverse representations of one's interests and lifestyle—through both pictures and descriptions—can minimize superficial judgments. Effective communication is also essential, with clear, honest exchanges setting the stage for deeper, more meaningful connections and reducing the risk of misunderstandings that often arise in digital interactions.

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher used a Multiple Case Study Research Design. It is a qualitative research approach that delves deeply into a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2014). This method was appropriate for this study as it aimed to understand the virtual self-presentation of young adult men in online dating apps.

Participants

The participants of this study are Filipino young adult men aged between 18 and 40 who are active users of online dating apps and residents of Metro Manila for at least one year. In order to recruit participants, the researcher employed non-probability sampling techniques, including purposive and snowball sampling. Thus, the snowball sampling was used to allow research participants to assist in identifying other potential subjects (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Based on Erik Erikson's Stages of Development, the virtue of love develops during the young adult stage, which is why men aged 18 to 40 are chosen for the study. Active users of online dating apps and residents of Metro Manila for at least one year are selected to provide valuable insights into user experiences on these platforms. The top major capital in the Philippines for finding love matches online and is considered one of the top three places globally for online dating success is Metro Manila (Baclig, 2023). Therefore, participants must have lived in Metro Manila for at least one year, ensuring that the data collected is relevant and up-to- date. The researcher determined the sample of the study based on the principles of case study and data saturation. Following recommendations by Creswell (2013), four interviewees were chosen to ensure a thorough exploration of the research topic.

Instrument

The research instrument for this study was an in-depth interview with a semi-structured questionnaire. This allowed participants to freely share their experiences on the study's topic, with probes and spontaneous questions used to delve deeper and clarify responses. The questions aimed to capture participants' experiences, challenges, and suggested psychological interventions in relation to virtual self-presentation and online dating apps. The instrument underwent content validation by three experts in psychology and qualitative research, who assessed the questions for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback. A pilot interview was not conducted since the interview guide had already undergone expert validation, and the study employed a flexible semi-structured format, allowing the researcher to clarify, probe, and refine questions during the actual interviews as needed.

Procedure

The researcher disseminated publication materials on social media platforms to reach potential participants. Interested individuals were initially screened through an online pre-survey to ensure that they met the study's inclusion criteria. A follow-up email survey was then conducted to assess participants' availability.

After completing the pre-survey, eligible participants underwent an orientation session, during which the research process, study objectives, and procedures were explained, and any questions or concerns were addressed. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, affirming voluntary participation and granting permission for audio recording during the interviews.

Four qualified participants then engaged in face-to-face or online interviews via Google Meet, each lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. During the interviews, a protocol for managing distress in the context of a research interview was followed.

Following data collection, the responses obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for recognizing and interpreting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participant confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms in all presentations and publications. Access to the data was limited to authorized researchers only, ensuring the integrity and privacy of the information collected. Study records were securely stored for a minimum of one year upon completion of the study and subsequently destroyed.

Data Analysis

The responses obtained from the interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, a method for recognizing and interpreting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes aligned with the research objectives.

To ensure credibility and accuracy, member-checking was conducted as the validation process. Participants were asked to review the identified themes to confirm that these accurately represented their experiences and perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

The research underwent an ethics review, and ethical approval was secured from the Research Management Office of the Philippine Normal University with the REC Code 2024-199. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their involvement in the study, ensuring voluntary participation and explicit consent for audio recording during interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences, and the procedure for withdrawal was clearly explained. Precautions were taken to manage potential biases involving participants who had personal connections to the researcher or mentor, such as relatives, friends, or students, ensuring the objectivity and credibility of the research findings. To avoid conflicts of interest, the student researcher and faculty mentor took steps to ensure that neither financial nor non-financial interests influenced the study's conduct or outcomes. Finally, participants underwent a debriefing session to resolve any questions or concerns related to the research process and to provide comprehensive information about the study's objectives and procedures. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the study ensures compliance with the appropriate research ethics standards for research involving human subjects.

Results and Discussion

This section outlines the finalized themes and subthemes, along with their descriptions, resulting from the thematic analysis. To provide deeper insights into the participants' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and psychological interventions, relevant sample statements from the transcriptions will be presented.

Self-Presentation Strategies and Profile Content

Virtual self-presentation pertains to how individuals construct and convey their identities, either verbally or through imagery, in digital environments (Toma & Hancock, 2010). In the context of the Philippines, users of online dating applications intentionally curate their online personas to project appealing images that can facilitate both attraction and meaningful connections (Samonte, Reyes, & Labor, 2016).

Phases and Evolution of Presentation

Participants reported evolving their presentation strategies over time, reflecting a shift from casual to more serious dating goals. Paulo described his experience as transitioning from a phase focused on casual encounters during college to a more serious, relationship-oriented approach. In contrast, Isaac viewed his online dating journey as an opportunity for experimentation and self-discovery:

Paulo (M, 25): "Noong college hoe phase. Ginagamit ko yung dating app to get hook-ups lang, to get casual dates lang. And then eventually, change of heart. So parang ginagamit ko yung mga apps na yun na to date lang. Yung mga pics na ginagamit ko noong hook-up is like different from the normal yung mga selfies. " [During my college 'hoe phase,' I used dating apps just to get hook-ups and casual dates. But eventually, I had a change of heart. So I started using those apps just for dating. The pictures I used when I was looking for hook-ups were different from my normal selfies.]

Isaac (M, 22): "Parang mostly naman is self-discovery lang tsaka experimentation. Gusto ko lang din i-try para may experience." [It was mostly just self discovery and experimentation. I just wanted to try it out for the experience.]

Profile Content and Personalization

Participants varied in their approach to profile content, with some emphasizing detailed personalization and others opting for simplicity. Paulo highlighted the importance of comprehensive profile details, including physical attributes and personal preferences. In contrast, Luis emphasized balancing high-quality photos with showcasing his personality.

Paulo (M, 25): "Fini-fill upan ko siya lahat even yung zodiac sign, yung mga first questions... ginagamit ko siya as screening process din." [I fill out everything, even my zodiac sign and the initial questions... I also use it as a screening process.]

Luis (M, 22): "I always try to show my personality aside from my best photos. " [I always try to show my personality aside from just my best photos.]

The study's participants exhibited diverse strategies regarding profile content, highlighting how young adult men personalize their profiles to fit their dating goals. For instance, Paulo's focus on detailed profiles for screening potential matches is consistent with research suggesting that comprehensive profiles can enhance the quality of online interactions by aligning expectations among users

(Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007). In contrast, Luis's approach of striking a balance between appealing visuals and genuine personality traits reflects a growing emphasis on authenticity in online dating profiles, where individuals are encouraged to convey not only their best selves but also their true character (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

Self-Presentation and Emotional and Social Fulfillment

Participants demonstrated strategies in crafting their personas on dating apps, often curating images that may differ from their real-life selves. Paulo's strategy involves presenting a more intriguing and mysterious persona compared to their typical self. This suggests a deliberate attempt to create an appealing image that captures interest and attention in the virtual dating environment.

Paulo (M, 25): "Pine-present ko lang yung self ko sa mga apps na yun as someone na hindi, kunwari, yung typical self ko... Parang gusto ko medyo mysterious type ako dun sa mga apps." [I present myself on those apps as someone who isn't exactly my typical self... Like, I want to come across as a bit of a mysterious type on those apps.]

Luis reflects a focus on authenticity and privacy. While aiming to be as genuine as possible, he also set clear boundaries around what he revealed. This reflects a strategic filtering process that balances honesty with personal security, ensuring that they remain safe while engaging with others online.

Luis (M, 22): "Always try to... be as authentic as possible with also being cautious about how I present myself. Kaya yun yung sinabi ko kanina, I always filter. Like, and yeah, I always put boundaries na hanggang dito lang muna ha, kasi wala pa naman."[I always try to be as authentic as possible while also being cautious about how I present myself. That's why, as I mentioned earlier, I always filter. And yeah, I always set boundaries, like, 'This is as far as it goes for now,' since there's nothing serious yet.]

Existing literature supports these findings, indicating that online daters often engage in strategic self-presentation to navigate the challenges of digital interactions. For instance, Toma et al. (2008) note that individuals tend to present curated versions of themselves to align with the expectations of their audience while minimizing the risks of misrepresentation. Additionally, research highlights the vital role of self-disclosure in forming romantic connections, emphasizing the need for balance in sharing personal information to foster genuine relationships (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Thus, young adult men's strategic approach to self-presentation is a crucial element in their online dating experiences.

Emotional and Social Fulfillment

Dating apps also serve as platforms for fulfilling emotional and social needs. Participants use these apps for emotional release, connecting with strangers, and exploring relationships based on shared values. Luis demonstrates how motivations for using dating apps can evolve over time. Initially seeking validation, he later uses the platform to combat boredom and as a reward after accomplishing tasks. This shift illustrates how dating apps can adapt to various emotional needs, reflecting changes in personal priorities and circumstances. Researchers have found that "to pass time" and "boredom" were motives for using online dating apps (Chan, 2017; Timmermans & Caluwé, 2017).

Cali highlights using dating apps for emotional release and connection. He find comfort in sharing personal thoughts and experiences with strangers who are perceived as less judgmental. This usage emphasizes the role of dating apps in providing emotional support and a sense of peace through online interactions.

Cali (M, 22): "Para may sort of peace kapag sinishare mo siya sa mga taong di mo kilala."[So that there's a sense of peace when sharing things with people you don't know.]

Isaac seeks connections with individuals who share similar values and interests, aiming for deeper, more meaningful relationships. This approach reflects a desire for genuine connections that align with their personal beliefs and interests, indicating that dating apps are used to find compatibility and potential romantic partners.

Isaac (M, 22): "Makaka-vibe mo yung parang may similar values tsaka interest."[You'll vibe more with someone who has similar values and interests.]

Research supports the notion that dating apps serve numerous purposes for their users. For instance, studies indicate that motivations for using dating apps can evolve over time, reflecting changes in personal experiences and emotional needs, a phenomenon documented in the literature (Sumter et al., 2019). By catering to this adaptive and varied landscape of user motivations, dating apps can enhance their relevance and effectiveness in meeting the social and emotional needs of their users, supporting an ongoing evolution of user engagement and satisfaction.

Challenges in Virtual Self-Presentation

Balancing Desirability and Authenticity

Paulo faces the challenge of balancing authenticity with the desire to attract specific types of people in online dating apps. This often involves selectively editing his profile to enhance its appearance, which can lead to a disconnect between his real self and the persona presented online.

Paulo (M, 25): "As much as possible, syempre kapag I am presenting myself, sharing my pictures, my informations as much as possible. Yung magsswipe right sa akin is someone na type ko din. Kasi, di ba, parang, sometimes, I eliminate those factors na tingin ko na hindi siya kagusto-gusto ng mass people. So, ine-edit ko siya na ito ako, ito ako. So, tinitimpla ko yung profile ko na magugustuhan siya ng specific type of group of people."[As much as possible, when I present myself—sharing my pictures and information—I want the ones who swipe right on me to be people I also find attractive. Because, you know, sometimes I filter out aspects that I think might not be appealing to the majority. So I edit it to say, 'This is me, this is who I am.' I fine-tune my profile so that it appeals to a specific group of people.]

Paulo's strategy of tailoring his profile to appeal to certain groups sometimes results in an edited version of himself that may not fully reflect his true identity. This struggle highlights the tension between creating an attractive online persona and staying true to one's authentic self. Moreover, he also uses emotional detachment as a coping mechanism, separating his real self from his online persona to manage rejection and maintain self-esteem.

Struggles with Finding Personality Matches

Finding matches who resonate with one's personality can be challenging, especially when the participant's personality is vibrant and dominant. This difficulty is exacerbated by the often superficial interactions on dating platforms, which can make it hard to find meaningful connections.

Luis (M, 22): "Minsan sobrang taas ng energy ko and I feel like sometimes people cannot keep up with it... Siguro hirap ako makahanap ng gano'ng personality." [Sometimes, my energy is really high, and I feel like people can't always keep up with it... Maybe that's why I struggle to find someone with a similar personality.]

Luis's high-energy personality can be mismatched with others on the platform, making it difficult to find compatible matches who can complement his vibrant nature. To cope, Luis has shifted his focus from external validation to a more internal understanding of self-worth.

Misinterpretation Based on Appearance and Humor Misalignment

Cali highlights the difficulty of overcoming initial misimpressions and mismatched humor with potential matches. The challenge lies in navigating these discrepancies to foster better understanding and connections.

Cali (M, 22): "Minsan kasi yung ibang tao pagkakamalan kang ganito based lang sa looks mo... hindi kayo makakasundo talaga sa humor." [Sometimes, people assume things about you based only on your looks... but in reality, you might not even get along, especially when it comes to humor.]

Limitations of Text and Images in Conveying Personality

Isaac discusses the limitations of using text and images to convey one's true personality, which can lead to premature judgments and difficulties in establishing genuine connections, especially for socially inclined individuals who thrive in face-to-face interactions.

Isaac (M, 22): "Siguro limited yung text tapos sa images din siguro... Parang kasi kapag pangit yung background mo sa picture parang sa simula palang may judgement na kaagad na makukuha sakanila." [Maybe it's because text is limited, and images also play a big role... Like, if your photo has a bad background, people might already form a judgment about you right from the start.]

Research indicates that the use of dating platforms often exacerbates existing mental health issues such as anxiety and self-doubt, highlighting the significant emotional implications of online dating experiences. Bhave (2019) discusses the paradox of connectedness in online dating, indicating that while individuals seek connections, they frequently feel isolated due to superficial interactions and judgments derived from profile pictures and text descriptions. This phenomenon underscores how the very platforms designed to foster connection can also perpetuate feelings of loneliness.

Recommended Psychological Interventions

Enhancing User Experience Through Interface and Notifications

Paulo suggested improvements such as notifications for unmatched connections and words of affirmation. Implementing these features could help users manage their experiences more effectively by providing clarity and emotional support during interactions. Notifications about changes in matches could reduce confusion and offer closure, while words of affirmation could comfort users experiencing rejection or disappointment. Paulo (M, 25): "Siguro good lang sa mga apps if they'll notify you if this person unmatched you." [Maybe it would be good if the apps notified you when someone unmatched you.]

Emotional and Social Support Systems

Luis highlighted the importance of having a strong social support system from friends. A supportive social network provides emotional resilience and practical advice, helping individuals navigate the challenges of online dating. Research highlights that individuals who perceive higher levels of social support report better mental health outcomes, particularly in coping with rejection and relationship dissolution (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Luis (M, 22): "Siguro sa friends... I am very blessed with such friends na napaka-supportive and

uplifting. Super lucky ako na may friends ako na nandyan nung mga panahong I didn't know any better."[Maybe it's my friends... I feel very blessed to have such supportive and uplifting friends. I'm super lucky to have them, especially during the times when I didn't know any better.]

Feedback for Personal Growth

Cali emphasized the role of constructive feedback in improving self-presentation and online dating strategies. Constructive feedback is essential for improving online dating strategies and self presentation, helping individuals make informed improvements and increase their effectiveness. Cali (M, 22): "Para sa akin, feedback. Dahil yung feedback para sa akin, nakakatulong talaga para ma-improve na yung sarili mo. Which is kung ano dapat kailangan mo i-maintain or baguhin."[For me, feedback is important. It really helps in improving yourself—knowing what you should maintain or change.]

Guidance on Communication Techniques

Isaac suggested that guidance on maintaining meaningful conversations could improve engagement and relationship-building on dating apps. Effective communication techniques can enhance the quality of interactions, leading to more satisfying and successful connections. Isaac (M, 22): "Pag-maintain ng meaningful conversation. Kasi parang through that, gumaganda yung mood ng pag-uusap ninyo." [Maintaining a meaningful conversation is important because it helps set a good mood for the discussion.]

The suggested psychological interventions highlight the importance of enhancing user experiences in various ways. Improvements in app design, such as notifications and words of affirmation, could provide users with better clarity and emotional support. Emotional and social support systems, including strong friendships, play a crucial role in managing the challenges of online dating. Constructive feedback and guidance on communication techniques offer valuable tools for personal growth and more effective interactions on dating apps.

Conclusions

Virtual self-presentation on online dating apps allows young adult men to craft and manage personas that reflect their ideal selves. These platforms offer a sense of control and freedom in how users are perceived by potential matches. Through profile photos, bios, and curated interests, individuals can highlight traits they believe are most attractive. This process enables them to project an idealized version of themselves that can help capture attention and increase perceived desirability.

However, this idealization often creates a gap between users' true selves and their online representations. Maintaining a curated identity can become emotionally demanding, especially when individuals feel pressure to live up to the image they have created. This discrepancy raises concerns about authenticity, as users may struggle to reconcile who they are online with who they are in real life. Over time, this tension can lead to emotional strain and uncertainty in forming genuine connections.

While crafting an idealized image may improve initial attractiveness, it also brings several challenges. Participants commonly experience difficulty finding compatible matches, misunderstandings based on profile information, and the limitations of digital communication in expressing real personality. These issues can lead to frustration, disappointment, and feelings of rejection. As users face repeated mismatches between expectations and reality, their self-esteem may gradually be affected.

Addressing these challenges requires psychological and structural support. Enhancing app interfaces with features such as notifications for unmatched connections and positive affirmations may provide users with emotional clarity and reassurance. Strong social support systems and constructive feedback mechanisms can help users process their experiences more healthily. Guidance on maintaining meaningful and respectful conversations may also improve interaction quality and overall satisfaction.

Overall, the study highlights the ongoing tension between authenticity and desirability in online dating. Users constantly negotiate between presenting their true selves and shaping images that attract attention. This struggle shows the importance of creating digital spaces that support emotional well-being alongside romantic connection. Practical recommendations are therefore needed to make online dating more humane, honest, and supportive.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, and focusing only on heterosexual men in Metro Manila restricts applicability to other groups and contexts. Future research should include more diverse participants in terms of gender, sexuality, and location. Expanding the scope will provide a deeper and more inclusive understanding of virtual self-presentation and its psychological impact.

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