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The Dynamics of Self-Quality and Partner Perception in Predicting Swiping Intentions

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Abstract. This qualitative study delves into the user's comprehension and interpretation of their own qualities and those of potential partners during the decision-making process of online dating applications. Employing an exploratory design, in-depth interviews were conducted with six purposively selected participants. The analysis employed a thematic approach, utilizing Saldaña's coding cycle. This approach commenced with initial/open coding and progressed to focused/axial coding. The study presents four key insights. Firstly, users construct their self-quality through a combination of physical appearance, personal competencies, and feedback received from other users. These factors collectively shape their self-image within the digital dating environment. Secondly, the quality of potential partners is assessed through rapid judgments based on photographs, profile information, personal values, and perceived compatibility. Thirdly, swiping decisions are influenced by subjective interpretations, emotional states, and reflections that arise after interactions. Lastly, users perceive the online dating environment as a competitive space that impacts their strategies, standards, and self-worth. Collectively, these findings indicate that swiping is not a mere technical action, but a cognitive and emotional process shaped by the interplay of individual factors, digital contexts, and social experiences.

Keywords: *partner quality, self-quality, swiping*

Introduction

Advancements in digital communication technology have revolutionized the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the process of partner selection. Swipe-based dating applications, such as Tinder and Bumble, not only provide novel avenues for meeting potential partners but also facilitate rapid, visually driven, and gamified interactions. Within these environments, users must make swift judgments based on limited profile information and photographs. Quantitative findings indicate that swipe-based evaluations are often made within extremely short timeframes, with users spending approximately 0.7 to 2 seconds per profile, and in many cases relying predominantly on the primary profile photo (Li et al., 2020). In fact, the majority of users

report making swipe decisions based primarily on the first photo alone, while profile biographies are consulted less frequently and often only after an initial visual attraction has been established (Ward, 2017).

Complementary qualitative and behavioral research further demonstrates that users frequently prioritize visual information over textual descriptions, with some individuals explicitly reporting that they ignore profile text unless initial attraction is established (Pidoux, 2023). This pattern is reinforced by large-scale behavioral analyses showing that profile photos account for the majority of initial swipe decisions, underscoring the dominance of visual heuristics in early-stage partner selection (Wang et al., 2025). Moreover, research shows that individuals can form attractiveness judgments within milliseconds, often under conditions of limited cognitive processing, which further supports the notion of fast, heuristic-based decision-making in swipe environments (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2019).

As observed by Bandinelli (2022) such platforms not only reshape the technical landscape of digital dating but also influence the expectations, motivations, and interpersonal meanings underlying contemporary mate-seeking practices. The swipe mechanism primarily relies on quick heuristics, facial appraisal, and initial impressions. Research on facial perception and swiping behavior indicates that left-right decisions are heavily influenced by rapid cognitive processes (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2022). From a qualitative perspective, this raises questions about how individuals comprehend their internal decision-making processes, interpret minimal cues, and integrate emotional and personal considerations into these choices.

Self-quality in mate selection is often conceptualized through constructs such as self-esteem, self-perceived mate value, and self-assessment accuracy. While previous studies (Harper et al. 2024; Erol & Orth, 2016) demonstrate the correlation between perceived self-worth and partner-selection strategies, a qualitative approach emphasizes how individuals articulate, justify, and negotiate their sense of value within digital contexts. Consequently, understanding how users interpret “self-worth” amidst a multitude of potential matches becomes paramount. Similarly, “potential partner

quality" extends beyond visible physical, socioeconomic, and personality cues. It encompasses how users form subjective interpretations of these signals. While visual cues dominate swipe-based platforms (Leesch et al., 2024; Xiao & Qian, 2020) qualitative inquiry enables a deeper examination of how meaning is assigned to photos, education, interests, or brief personal descriptions. Furthermore, these interpretations are shaped by social context, prior experiences, and marketplace dynamics.

Despite extensive research on self-quality and partner preference, few studies have examined how these elements are jointly understood and enacted in everyday experiences on swipe-based dating applications. Prall & Scelza (2022) highlight the intricate dynamics of navigating online partner markets, yet users' interpretive frameworks, emotional responses, and internal decision processes remain insufficiently explored. Additionally, phenomena such as mate value discrepancy and perceived alternative availability underscore the competitive and uncertain nature of digital dating (Nascimento et al., 2024). Therefore, swiping is not merely a technical act but a socially and emotionally significant process. Each right or left swipe reflects subjective evaluations, interpretations of digital cues, and self-reflections associated with romantic expectations and past experiences. These dynamics provide the rationale for the present study, which adopts a qualitative approach to explore how users comprehend self-quality, potential partner quality, and swiping decisions within digital dating environments.

In the context of partner selection on swipe-based online dating applications, several interpretive issues arise regarding how users interpret their own experiences. Firstly, users possess preexisting perceptions of their self-quality, such as self-perceived mate value or beliefs about their own worth, which influence their evaluation of potential partners' profiles. Prior research in non-digital mating contexts has consistently demonstrated that self-perception plays a central role in shaping mate preferences and selection strategies. For instance, individuals with higher self-perceived mate value tend to exhibit greater selectivity and preference for partners with similarly high desirability, reflecting patterns of assortative mating (Arnocky, 2018). Empirical

findings indicate that such individuals prioritize attributes such as attractiveness, social status, and long-term compatibility, suggesting that internal self-evaluations function as a benchmark against which potential partners are assessed (Zhang & Santtila, 2024).

More recent work further refines this perspective by emphasizing the role of accuracy in self-assessment. Harper et al. (2024) argue that individuals who possess more accurate self-perceptions are better able to optimize mate choice decisions, as they align their expectations with realistic opportunities in the mating environment. This highlights that self-perception is not merely about inflated or diminished self-worth, but about calibration processes that influence partner selection outcomes. In contrast to these non-digital interaction settings, the present study extends this framework by examining how such self-evaluative processes are narratively constructed and enacted under conditions of rapid, image-driven decision-making in swipe-based dating environments.

Research conducted by Arnocky (2018) and Harper et al. (2024) elucidates various patterns of self-perception in mate selection; however, few studies investigate how users narrate these experiences when confronted with rapid decision-making on dating applications. The central question is not merely whether an individual feels "valuable," but rather how they articulate their self-evaluative processes and how such narratives guide their swiping behaviors.

Secondly, users assign meaning to the attributes displayed by potential partners. Nevertheless, from a qualitative perspective, it is crucial to explore how users interpret these signals what they deem relevant or irrelevant, and how these interpretations fluctuate based on personal experiences, expectations, or situational contexts. In essence, the quality of a potential partner is a subjective construction shaped through an interplay between personal perceptions and the limited information provided by the application.

A third, more intricate dynamic pertains to the ways perceived self-quality and potential partner quality intersect within the swiping experience. (Nascimento et al. (2024) propose that discrepancies between self-perceived mate value and market conditions may motivate individuals to seek "superior" alternatives. From a qualitative standpoint, however, the primary focus lies in comprehending how users elucidate such

discrepancies, how they respond to them emotionally, and how they negotiate their expectations when their experiences on the application do not align with their idealized preferences.

Consequently, this study focuses on the following research inquiries: (1) How do users derive meaning from their self-perceptions when utilizing swiping functionality on online dating applications?; (2) How do users interpret the quality of potential partners based on the limited information presented in digital profiles?; (3) How do subjective processes, emotional experiences, and personal considerations influence users' swiping decisions?; and (4) How do users comprehend the interplay between self-perception, perceptions of potential partners, and the dynamics of the digital dating marketplace?

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the primary theoretical lens employed in the analysis, namely Social Cognitive Theory. Developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, Social Cognitive Theory posits that human behavior is the consequence of a dynamic, reciprocal interaction among personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns a process known as reciprocal determinism. Within the context of this study, swiping behavior on online dating applications is influenced not only by personal characteristics, such as self-quality (including self-perceived mate value and self-esteem), but also by environmental cues such as the presentation of potential partners' profiles and the social norms inherent within the platform. Bandura (1986) underscores that individuals are not passive recipients of environmental stimuli; rather, they actively interpret, observe, and modify their behavior in response to their experiences and social reinforcement. Consequently, the theory provides a pertinent framework for comprehending how users process visual and social information when making decisions to swipe right (accept) or swipe left (reject).

According to Bandura (2002) three fundamental components of Social Cognitive Theory are observational learning, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations. Within the context

of swiping behavior, observational learning manifests when individuals emulate dating patterns observed in their digital social environments. For instance, they may adopt the strategies employed by friends or influencers on dating applications. Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's confidence in their ability to attain desired outcomes, also plays a pivotal role. Users with high self-efficacy in domains related to social attractiveness or romantic success may exhibit greater confidence in swiping right on high-quality profiles, assuming their capability to attract such partners (Wong et al. 2020) Conversely, users with low self-efficacy may adopt more cautious or defensive strategies, such as avoiding profiles perceived as excessively attractive due to a sense of mismatch a phenomenon associated with mate value discrepancy.

The concept of self-regulation, integral to Social Cognitive Theory, further elucidates how individuals modify their behavior in relation to goals and continuous feedback (Bandura, 1991). Within the context of swiping, self-regulation encompasses the user's ability to recalibrate their partner-selection criteria based on prior experiences. For example, they may adjust their expectations after receiving multiple matches or repeated rejections. Nascimento et al. (2024) discovered that positive online dating experiences tend to enhance users' self-perceived mate value, thereby encouraging more exploratory behavior when selecting partners. Negative experiences, however, may diminish confidence and lead to overly selective or avoidant swiping patterns. These findings underscore the significance of positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms, central to Social Cognitive Theory, in shaping habitual swiping behaviors.

The perspective of Social Cognitive Theory, the digital environment itself functions as a social reinforcement system. Features such as likes, matches, and messages serve as social rewards that reinforce specific behaviors. Research conducted by Ranzini & Lutz (2017) suggests that Tinder users unconsciously adjust their swiping strategies to maximize social recognition. This implies that the social reinforcement embedded in virtual environments can influence users' self-beliefs and perceived self-worth. Receiving a significant number of matches may enhance users' perceptions of their self-quality, while repeated unsuccessful attempts may diminish self-esteem and

subsequently alter their swiping strategies. Social Cognitive Theory also emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisal the process by which individuals evaluate their abilities and situational factors prior to action (Bandura, 1989). In dating applications, cognitive appraisal involves assessing a potential partner's profile including photographs, descriptions, and indicators of social status to determine whether the profile aligns with the user's perceived self-quality. Findings from Arnocky (2018) indicate that individuals with higher self-perceived mate value are more inclined to engage in aspirational behavior, seeking partners of higher quality. However, Social Cognitive Theory clarifies that such aspirational behavior is moderated by self-efficacy, implying that users will only swipe right on highly desirable profiles when they believe they can successfully compete for the partner's attention.

To strengthen the explanatory scope of this study, it is important to complement Social Cognitive Theory with additional theoretical perspectives commonly used in mate selection research. Relying on a single theoretical lens may limit the interpretive richness of qualitative inquiry, which is inherently exploratory rather than confirmatory. Therefore, this study also draws on Social Exchange Theory and Interpersonal Attraction perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of swiping behavior.

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, mate selection is conceptualized as a process of evaluating costs and rewards, in which individuals seek partners who maximize benefits relative to their own resources (Bajnaid et al. 2019). In online dating contexts, this implies that users assess potential partners based on attributes such as attractiveness, social status, and perceived compatibility, while simultaneously considering their own self-quality. This aligns with the notion that individuals tend to pursue partners whose perceived value is comparable or slightly higher than their own, reflecting strategic decision-making in digital mating markets (Bruch & Newman, 2018).

In addition, Interpersonal Attraction Theory offers further insight into how individuals form preferences during initial encounters. Attraction is influenced by multiple factors, including physical attractiveness, similarity, and perceived social value. The matching hypothesis, for instance, suggests that individuals are more likely to form connections

with partners of similar levels of social desirability, particularly in terms of attractiveness (Walster et al., 1966). In digital environments such as dating applications, this process is accelerated, as users make rapid judgments based on limited profile cues. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals' stated preferences often align with their actual selection behavior, particularly regarding attractiveness and social status (Li et al., 2013).

Method

This qualitative study employed an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how self-perceived qualities, perceived qualities of potential partners, and contextual features of dating applications influence swiping behavior in partner selection. This study specifically adopts a phenomenological approach within qualitative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaging in swiping behavior on dating applications. Phenomenology is best aligned with the present study's aim to capture users' internal cognitive and emotional processes during partner evaluation and decision-making in digital dating contexts (Creswell, 2013). This approach enables the researcher to identify common themes and the underlying essence of swiping intentions as experienced by participants.

The research was guided by four central questions: (1) How do users interpret and construct their self-qualities when engaging in swiping on dating applications? (2) How do users assess the qualities of potential partners based on the limited information available in digital profiles? (3) How do subjective processes, emotional experiences, and personal considerations influence users' swiping decisions? and (4) How do users perceive the interplay between self-perception, partner perception, and the dynamics of online dating markets? A qualitative design was chosen because it provides the flexibility needed to capture the cognitive processes, subjective preferences, and psychosocial considerations that unfold during individuals' swiping activities.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with six informants selected using purposive sampling, based on their experience with swipe-based dating applications. The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be active users of swipe-based dating

applications within the past six months, (2) have prior experience in making partner selection decisions through swiping features, and (3) be willing to articulate their perceptions and experiences in detail. Meanwhile, individuals who had never actively engaged with swipe-based interaction features or who used such applications only passively were excluded. Interviews were conducted and analyzed concurrently, allowing the researchers to monitor the emergence of themes continuously. Although the study involved six informants, the decision to stop data collection was based on the point at which no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating saturation.

The decision to include six informants aligns with the view of Young & Casey (2018) who suggest that six qualitative interviews are sufficient to identify core codes and represent initial thematic patterns. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of their self-qualities, their strategies for evaluating potential partners appearing on the application, and their decision-making processes during swiping. Additionally, the interviews investigated the broader usage context, including perceptions of interface design, the abundance of available alternatives, and the extent to which these factors shape users' tendencies toward rapid or selective decision-making. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to preserve the richness and depth of participants' narratives.

Data analysis employed a thematic approach guided by Johnny Saldaña's coding cycle framework, as outlined in The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. During the initial coding phase, the researcher applied open coding to segment the transcripts into fundamental units of meaning and generate preliminary labels pertaining to self-qualities, partner attributes, swiping decisions, and contextual elements of the application. This stage facilitated the identification of salient components emerging organically from the data. In the subsequent coding phase, focused or axial coding was utilized to refine and cluster the most pertinent codes, establish overarching categories, and develop relational patterns between concepts (Saldaña, 2021). These analytical

integrations culminated in the formulation of central themes that construct the theoretical narrative and comprehensively address the four research questions.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative study, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were systematically applied, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data and the use of in-depth interviews that allowed participants to articulate their experiences in detail. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences, the research context, and the dynamics of dating application use. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear and systematic research process, including detailed documentation of data collection procedures, coding steps, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was achieved by minimizing researcher bias through reflexive practices, including the use of analytic memos and documentation of interpretive decisions throughout the coding process.

Result

Interviews conducted with the six informants yielded data that reached a point of saturation, which refers to the stage in qualitative data collection where no new themes, categories, or insights emerge from additional interviews, indicating that the data has become sufficiently comprehensive to address the research questions. The mechanism of saturation was operationalized through continuous comparative analysis during the interview process. After each interview, the researcher conducted preliminary coding and compared emerging patterns across participants. When subsequent interviews consistently reproduced previously identified codes related to self-quality and partner perception in swiping intentions, and no new conceptual dimensions were identified, the researcher determined that saturation had been achieved.

Subsequently, by (Saldaña, 2021) all interview data underwent an analysis process guided by the stages proposed by. To ensure a more systematic presentation of the data,

several technical adjustments were implemented. The researcher initially organized the most pertinent interview excerpts based on each research question before proceeding with the First Cycle Coding (initial/open coding) and the Second Cycle Coding (focused/axial coding). The coding process for each informant is presented in the following table:

Table 1.
Representation of Interview Excerpts and Coding Results for All Informants (FR, OM, CME, CA, RDN, and MBS)

No	Interview Excerpt	Initial/Open Coding	Focused/Axial Coding
How do users make meaning of their self-quality when swiping?			
1	"My strengths are in physical appearance… an ideal body… extroverted but shy… optimistic." (FR)	Physical self-assessment; Self-care; Confidence; Awareness of personal traits	Construction of self-image (self-presentation)
2	"I started using dating apps after a heartbreak… wanted to increase my value… wanted to know how people out there see me… After some time, I realized I'm 'not that bad' and became more confident." (OM)	Seeking self-validation; Self-esteem; Self-evaluation through others' responses	Recovery and reinforcement of self-worth through digital interaction
3	"I was not confident in my physical appearance… but it turned out I got many matches." (CME)	Negative self-perception; Increased confidence; Market response	Shifts in self-perception through match validation
4	"The first thing is personality… I feel I am mature enough… good at self-control." (CA)	Self-regulation, emotional maturity, relational competence	Self-perceived quality framework
5	"Sometimes I feel insecure because of my height, my skin isn't smooth… I talk a lot… it makes me less confident." (RDN)	Physical insecurity; Personality-related insecurity	Self-perception and insecurity
6	"My strongest qualities… first my looks… then my career as a host… those three are my best traits." (MBS)	Appearance as value; Career as social asset; Communication skills; Awareness of strengths	Self-presentation strategy
How do users interpret the quality of potential partners based on limited digital profiles?			

7	"The first thing I pay attention to is the photo… then the bio that shows interests and character." (FR)	Photo as main indicator; Interests/character from bio; Quick visual judgment	Rapid evaluation through visual and textual cues
8	"Upload several clear photos… first impression of appearance is important… religion… hobbies… ethnicity… and the writing style. If the writing is messy… to me that's freaky… I won't swipe right." (OM)	Multidimensional evaluation; Identity-based assessment; Rejecting "red-flag" writing	Digital profile heuristics for assessing partner quality
9	"I usually look at age, religion, and status." (CME)	Partner assessment; Key initial indicators	Core criteria for partner evaluation
10	"First I look at age… then the photo… then the bio… many write FWB, so the bio is very important." (CA)	Quick filtering; Risk avoidance; Value alignment	Digital cue-based evaluation
11	"First is height… second no drinking… third exercises… fourth physical traits like handsome, sharp nose, curly hair… and finally being Muslim." (RDN)	Physical criteria; Religious preference	Profile-based filtering
12	"The photo carries the most weight… it determines my decision in the first second… followed by the bio. If the photos are unclear or just scenery, I avoid them." (MBS)	Photo as main indicator; Snap judgment; Visual quality shaping decisions	Digital impression formation
How do subjective processes, emotional experiences, and personal considerations shape swiping decisions?			
13	"Emotional involvement… not only rational… has a strong influence." (FR)	Emotional role; Non-rational decision-making; Interpersonal sensitivity	Dominance of emotion in decision-making
14	"I used dating apps when I was heartbroken… as an outlet… to distract myself…" (OM)	Initial emotional state; Swiping as coping; Non-romantic motivation	Emotional conditions influencing app usage
15	"When we chat but don't connect… that becomes a consideration." (CME)	Evaluating conversation; Filtering based on comfort	Post-match interaction evaluation
16	"If the conversation flows and does not lead to inappropriate things, I continue… but if it leads to sleeping together, I skip." (CA)	Boundary setting; Emotional comfort; Conversational fit	Affective–moral decision process

17	"The first second determines everything, definitely the photo… I swipe right immediately… then check job, height, education." (RDN)	Impulsive swiping; Prioritizing photos; Quick judgment	Instant impression decision-making
18	"I'm happy when many people chat… it boosts confidence, but when I swipe right first and it's not a match, it feels bad… emotions play a big role." (MBS)	Confidence affected by responses; Feeling of rejection; Emotion influencing decisions	Emotion-based decision-making
How do users understand the relationship between self-perception, partner perception, and online market dynamics?			
19	"A large circle means many choices but they don't always match expectations… a small circle means limited options and being more cautious." (FR)	Dating market dynamics; Market size influence; Selectivity based on environment	Influence of market structure on partner-selection strategies
20	"It's like gacha… so at least choose someone attractive… why settle for average if the reach is wide?" (OM)	Probability logic; Market rationality; Perceived competition	Understanding the app as a romantic marketplace
21	"Having many matches influenced my life… it turns out people look for someone with my physical type." (CME)	Market dynamics; Shift in self-perception; External validation	Dating market supply–demand and self-positioning
22	"In some places I don't turn on the app… but at my boarding house I turn it on because my standards match there." (CA)	Market filtering; Location-based strategy; Perceived match quality	Digital market ecology
23	"In this city there are very few dating options… it affects my standards… but I still choose based on my criteria." (RDN)	Adjusting standards; Expectations vs. market reality	Market dynamics and selective adjustment
24	"I'm aware of my own standard… people who are interested in me are usually on the same level… better to increase my value than lower my standards." (MBS)	Self-perception as market value; Equal matching; Maintaining standards; Self-improvement strategy	Market–value alignment

Source: Researcher (2025)

The interview excerpts in Table 1 illustrate that this perception is dynamically constructed through ongoing interaction with the digital dating environment. For instance, participants such as OM and CME described how feedback in the form of

matches and interactions shaped their self-evaluation, indicating that self-quality is not a fixed trait but a situationally activated perception influenced by immediate digital responses. This narrative aligns with the coding results under themes such as construction of self-image, shifts in self-perception through match validation, and self-presentation strategy, which collectively demonstrate that users interpret their own value in relation to how they are perceived within the swiping context. Therefore, the findings consistently indicate that users' perception of self-quality while swiping the screen, together with their evaluation of potential partners and sensitivity to online market dynamics, forms an integrated and context-dependent framework that underlies swiping intentions on dating applications.

1. Users' Perception of Self-Quality During Swiping

The findings reveal that users construct their understanding of self-quality through reflections on physical appearance, personal traits, and social competencies. The majority of informants associated their self-quality with the self-image they strive to project on dating platforms. For instance, FR described his strengths in terms of an "ideal body posture" and personality traits such as being "optimistic" and "extroverted but shy," illustrating a self-image shaped by both physical and dispositional characteristics.

Other informants interpreted their self-quality through external evaluations based on responses from other users. OM explained that dating applications served as a space for self-validation, where receiving more matches made him feel that he was "not that bad," suggesting that digital interactions can either reinforce or alter one's self-perception. A similar experience was expressed by CME, who initially felt "not confident in my physical appearance," but whose self-perception shifted positively after receiving multiple matches.

Beyond physical appearance and external validation, self-quality was also understood through personal capacities such as emotional maturity and self-regulation. CA emphasized that he felt "mature enough" and capable of "controlling myself," indicating that self-quality encompasses emotional readiness and relational competence. Conversely, RDN demonstrated insecurities stemming from height, skin condition, and

personality traits such as "talking too much," reflecting the interplay between physical and personality-based insecurities. MBS viewed his self-quality as the "version of myself that sells," referring to appearance, career, and communication skills revealing a strategic approach to emphasizing personal strengths. Overall, this theme suggests that users comprehend self-quality through the construction of self-presentation, validation from digital interactions, and assessments of personal competencies within the competitive environment of online dating.

2. Users' Interpretation of Potential Partner Quality in Digital Profiles

The findings indicate that users engage in rapid evaluation, or snap judgment, when assessing potential partners. They draw upon a combination of visual and textual cues within profiles. For most informants, the profile photo served as the most prominent indicator of partner quality. For instance, FR and MBS both stated that the photo was "the determining factor in the first second," highlighting the pivotal role of visual quality in shaping swiping decisions.

In addition to photos, users also assessed partner quality based on biodata, including interests, values, and personal identity markers. OM evaluated a diverse range of elements, including religion, hobbies, ethnicity, and writing style. They considered "messy writing" as a red flag, suggesting that textual presentation carries moral and social significance. More specific criteria emerged among other informants: CME prioritized age, religion, and marital status; CA utilized the bio as an indicator to avoid interactions misaligned with her expectations, such as profiles hinting at FWB (Friends with Benefits). RDN demonstrated structured preferences based on height, drinking habits, exercise routines, and specific physical characteristics, while MBS avoided profiles with unclear photos due to insufficient visual cues for forming an initial impression.

Overall, users interpret partner quality through a combination of visual signals, identity information, personal values, and preference compatibility. This process forms

a rapid and efficient evaluative heuristic that is influenced by visual biases and individual value systems.

3. Subjective Processes, Emotional Experiences, and Personal Considerations in Swiping Decisions

These subjective processes should be understood as complementary to, rather than separate from, the identified patterns of self-quality evaluation and partner perception. The present findings emphasize that these cognitive evaluations are continuously intertwined with emotional states, prior relational experiences, and situational motivations.

Swiping decisions were influenced not only by rational evaluations of profiles but also by emotional states, motivations for using the application, and interaction experiences. FR emphasized that "emotional involvement… has a strong influence," suggesting that swiping decisions often combine cognitive judgment with intuition and interpersonal sensitivity. Initial emotional conditions also significantly contributed to app usage. OM utilized dating applications as a coping mechanism after heartbreak, making swiping a form of emotional release and distraction. Conversely, conversation experiences after matching played a crucial role in determining the continuation of interactions. CME assessed whether a conversation "flowed," while CA established moral-emotional boundaries, discontinuing conversations that shifted toward sexual intentions.

Certain users engaged in impulsive swiping. RDN indicated that decisions occurred "in the first second," suggesting a strong reliance on rapid, photo-based judgments. Simultaneously, emotions stemming from acceptance or rejection also influenced swiping patterns. MBS expressed happiness upon receiving numerous messages, which enhanced confidence, yet experienced discomfort when swiping right did not result in a match illustrating how swiping can impact emotional well-being and self-esteem. Collectively, this theme demonstrates that swiping is shaped by a combination of logic, emotion, conversational experience, and personal or moral boundaries.

4. The Relationship Between Self-Perception, Partner Perception, and Online Dating Market Dynamics

The final theme elucidates that users interpret themselves and potential partners through the lens of the digital dating market, which operates as a competitive ecosystem. FR and OM recognized the application as a space where "market size" is a significant factor: larger user bases provide greater options but also intensify competition and unpredictability. OM likened partner selection to "gacha," reflecting a probabilistic and gamified perspective on swiping.

Market dynamics also influenced self-perception. CME's understanding of his value in the dating market was shaped by the number of matches that his physical traits were desirable. CA adopted a location-based strategy, activating the app only in environments where she believed potential partners aligned with her standards. RDN observed that limited options in smaller cities affected his standards, although he maintained his personal criteria. MBS perceived himself as possessing a certain "market value" and believed that personal improvement was preferable to lowering partner standards, reflecting a supply-demand logic in romantic matching.

This demonstrates that users evaluate themselves and potential partners not only individually but also within an online market context influenced by expectations, strategies, and perceived probabilities. Self-perception, partner perception, and market evaluation operate interdependently in shaping swiping decisions.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that swiping behavior is shaped by complex social cognitive processes in which users evaluate their own self-quality before deciding whether to like or reject a profile. The evidence that users construct their self-image through physical appearance, external validation, and personal capabilities aligns with the concept of personal factors in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Users do not merely reflect on themselves passively; rather, they actively interpret how they

are perceived within the digital environment. When users receive numerous matches, their self-esteem and self-perceived mate value increase, subsequently influencing their future swiping behavior. Conversely, users with lower self-perceptions tend to engage in more cautious or defensive evaluations, reflecting reciprocal determinism, in which personal factors and environmental feedback interact dynamically.

In evaluating the quality of potential partners, the findings highlight the central role of observational learning and outcome expectations. Users quickly process visual and textual information, relying on heuristics based on photos, interests, religion, or writing style to assess compatibility. This is consistent with Bandura (2002) view that individuals learn by observing behavioral patterns within their social digital environments, including aesthetic norms, ideal profile presentations, and interaction conventions in dating applications. Users with high self-efficacy feel more confident swiping right on profiles perceived as "high quality," whereas those with low self-efficacy tend to avoid profiles they believe are "too competitive." This pattern supports the findings of Wong et al. (2020) regarding the role of self-efficacy in aspirational romantic behavior.

The subjective and emotional processes underlying swiping behavior can also be explained through self-regulation and social reinforcement mechanisms. The finding that swiping is sometimes used as an emotional response to heartbreak or as a coping strategy shows that the behavior is not purely rational but is shaped by past experiences and emotional states. In Social Cognitive Theory, self-regulation enables individuals to adjust their standards and strategies based on interaction outcomes for example, lowering criteria after repeated rejection or becoming more selective after receiving many matches. The findings echo those of Nascimento et al. (2024), who showed that positive experiences increase perceived mate value, while negative experiences reinforce cautious or strongly filtered behaviors. Thus, users' emotional experiences serve not merely as contextual factors but as integral components that regulate digital behavior.

The digital environment of dating applications functions as a social reinforcement system that shapes users' confidence and swiping strategies. Features

such as likes, matches, and messages operate as social rewards that reinforce certain behaviors (Ranzini & Lutz 2017). Users' emotional reactions such as feeling pleased when receiving many messages or feeling "uneasy" when their right swipes do not result in matches—illustrate the dynamics of positive and negative reinforcement. In line with Social Cognitive Theory, these responses modify users' behavior: individuals who frequently receive reinforcement tend to broaden their selection targets, while those who obtain fewer matches tend to tighten their criteria or adopt more defensive filtering strategies.

In summary, the interplay between self-perception, perceptions of potential partners, and the dynamics of the online dating market reinforces the principle of reciprocal determinism, the core of Social Cognitive Theory. Swiping behavior is not merely the outcome of evaluating partner quality; rather, it constitutes a recurring social–cognitive process influenced by the digital environment and accumulated experiences. Users who receive many matches tend to elevate their standards and swipe more assertively, whereas those who receive fewer matches adapt their behavior by lowering expectations or modifying location-based strategies. Swiping behavior thus reflects the dynamic interaction between personal factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, mate value), environmental factors (profile cues, platform norms, market structure), and actual user behavior. Applying Social Cognitive Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how self-quality and perceived partner quality interact to shape swiping decisions within digital dating applications.

Conclusion

This study elucidates that swiping behavior on online dating applications arises from the dynamic interplay between users' self-perceptions, their interpretations of potential partners' attributes, and their emotional experiences within the digital realm. Users assess their self-quality through a confluence of physical appearance, social validation, and personal capacities such as emotional maturity. Simultaneously, they

conduct rapid evaluations of potential partners' profiles by drawing upon visual and textual cues, as well as value-based and identity-related preferences. Swiping experiences including receiving matches or encountering rejection contribute to an ongoing reevaluation of personal standards and partner-selection strategies. Consequently, swiping decisions are not static but are shaped by prior experiences and the evolving dynamics of the digital dating market.

From the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory, swiping behavior can be comprehended as a social-cognitive process governed by reciprocal determinism, wherein personal factors, behaviors, and environmental influences continuously interact. Social reinforcement features embedded in dating applications such as likes and matches serve as stimuli that modify self-beliefs, self-efficacy, and perceived mate value. Consequently, swiping decisions constitute an adaptive process shaped by the interplay between self-quality, perceived partner quality, and the structural characteristics of the digital dating environment. This study underscores that partner selection in dating applications reflects ongoing social learning, self-regulation, and cognitive evaluation occurring concurrently within virtual interaction spaces.

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