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THE ROLE OF FAN PAGE ROMANTIC IDEALS IN REINFORCING PROBLEMATIC DATING APP USE AMONG EMOTIONALLY SENSITIVE UNDERGRADUATES OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of romantic ideals portrayed on social media fan pages on problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates of tertiary institutions in Anambra State, Nigeria. Employing a cross-sectional explanatory survey design, the study was guided by three research questions and two hypotheses. A total of 384 undergraduates were selected through multi-stage stratified random sampling from three purposively chosen institutions, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, and, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, ensuring diversity in institutional ownership and student demographics. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections: Romantic Idealization Scale (RIS) adapted from Morey et al. (2015), Problematic Online Dating App Use Scale (PODAUS) adapted from Gori et al. (2024), Emotional Sensitivity Index (ESI), and demographic information. Though standardized, all instruments were revalidated for cultural

appropriateness by three experts in Educational Foundations from each of the sampled institutions. A pilot test conducted at Federal Polytechnic, Oko, yielded a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.79, confirming internal consistency. Analysis using SPSS (v26) included descriptive statistics, Pearson's and Spearman's correlations, and multiple regression. Results indicated that exposure to idealized romantic content significantly predicts problematic dating app use, and this relationship is amplified among individuals with high emotional sensitivity. The study recommends the integration of emotional literacy and critical digital engagement modules into tertiary curricula. Future studies are encouraged to adopt longitudinal or experimental designs and broaden the geographic and demographic scope for enhanced generalizability.

Keywords: Romantic ideals, dating app use, emotional sensitivity, Nigerian undergraduates, survey design, social media, SPSS.

Introduction

In recent years, online dating applications (ODAs) have significantly reconfigured the architecture of romantic relationship initiation and maintenance, offering novel pathways for interpersonal connection while simultaneously presenting emerging psychosocial risks. These platforms, once peripheral to mainstream romantic engagement, have now become widespread, especially among young adults and university students. However, the increasing prevalence of dating app usage has raised pressing concerns regarding their potential to engender addictive behaviors, emotional instability, and deteriorating relationship satisfaction, particularly within emotionally vulnerable populations (Gori et al., 2024; Huang & Gong, 2025).

The evolution of digital communication technologies has profoundly influenced students' behaviour (Tchernenko,2017; Ezeonwumelu et al,2025), reshaping cultural narratives surrounding intimacy, courtship, and relational aspirations (Parsakia and Rostami, 2023). A significant facet of this transformation is the proliferation of romantic ideals on social media fan pages. These digital spaces, saturated with stylized imagery, curated romantic quotes, and idealized portrayals of love,serve as potent repositories of relational expectations (Morey et al., 2015). Such curated depictions, often set against aesthetically pleasing backdrops and enhanced by personalized romantic texts, construct a visual lexicon of relationship ideals that frequently diverge from the complex realities of human relationships. Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram amplify these hyper-romanticized blueprints, cultivating expectations that may be misaligned with the nuanced and often imperfect nature of real-world intimacy.

When consumed habitually, these portrayals can distort individuals' schemas of romantic

fulfillment, promoting unrealistic expectations about relationships. This concern becomes even more pronounced in conjunction with the widespread use of online dating applications (ODAs), which inherently promote strategic self-presentation and often facilitate superficial interactions. Of particular concern in the present study is the situation of young adults residing in sociocultural environments where overt displays of romantic affection are discouraged, stigmatized, or culturally deemed inappropriate.

Anambra State, located within Igbo society, a region in Nigeria marked by traditional norms that impose significant restrictions on expressions of romantic and sexual agency, presents such a context. In this society, unmarried youths, especially students, are often socially restrained from openly engaging in or expressing romantic relationships. This cultural conservatism stands in sharp contrast to norms in many Western countries (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada), where expressions of romantic affiliation are generally accepted and even encouraged from the age of 18 or earlier. Faced with these cultural constraints, young adults in Anambra who are developmentally inclined toward romantic exploration may resort to dating apps as discreet platforms for romantic engagement. While this may serve as a coping mechanism, it also introduces them to a host of psychological and behavioral risks associated with problematic app use. Parents of these vulnerable youth who ideally should be guiding and monitoring them through the complexities of digital spaces via effective digital parenting are constrained by various factors (Nwikpo et al., 2021). They maintained that poor digital parenting significantly exposes youth to a range of risky behaviours associated with digital technogy use. More troubling is the simultaneous exposure to romantic idealizations on fan pages and the realities of dating app interactions. This dual exposure may generate a cyclical process of idealization followed by disillusionment, thereby exacerbating emotional vulnerabilities and interpersonal dissatisfaction (Lenton-Brym et al., 2024; Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2020).

Problematic online dating app use, conceptualized as compulsive, excessive, or emotionally distressing interactions with dating platforms, has garnered significant empirical scrutiny. A landmark study conducted in early 2025 validated the Problematic Online Dating App Use Scale (PODAUS) among men-who-have-sex-with-men, establishing it as a reliable and valid instrument for assessing potentially addictive patterns of dating app usage. The researchers found that problematic ODA use demonstrated significant positive associations with symptoms of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and impulsivity. This suggests that certain patterns of dating app engagement may function both as a consequence and as a reinforcer of

psychological distress. These findings align with broader concerns about digital behavior patterns characterized by compulsivity, withdrawal symptoms, and continued use despite negative consequences, patterns increasingly recognized across various digital platforms. The validation of the Problematic Online Dating App Use Scale (PODAUS) by Gori et al. (2024) represents a notable advancement in operationalizing this construct. Their research revealed robust correlations between problematic use and mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and impulsivity. These patterns parallel those observed in digital addiction literature, pointing to dating apps not merely as tools for social connection but also as platforms capable of reinforcing messing the entirety of the system of the younger generation.

Huang and Gong (2025) further underscore this trajectory by identifying psychosocial vulnerabilities such as social appearance anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and emotional insecurity as critical predictors of problematic dating app engagement. Their study, published in Computers in Human Behavior, suggests that individuals with heightened emotional sensitivity often gravitate toward dating apps because of the perceived control they offer over self-presentation and social rejection.

Emotionally sensitive individuals, often described through constructs such as sensory processing sensitivity and affective reactivity, are predisposed to deep emotional processing, heightened empathy, and pronounced stress reactivity to relational stimuli. While these traits may foster rich interpersonal connections, they may also render individuals more susceptible to emotional dysregulation when faced with idealized or unattainable romantic narratives (Acevedo et al., 2014).

The emergence of specialized dating platforms for highly sensitive people (HSPs) reflects a growing recognition of these dynamics. However, rather than mitigating risk, such platforms might inadvertently amplify sensitivity to digital romantic cues. Exposure to fan page content depicting flawless romantic scenarios can intensify emotional resonance, leading to heightened longing, idealization, or dissatisfaction—especially when real-life dating experiences via apps fall short of these romanticized standards.

The affordances of mobile dating apps, location-based matching, gamification of romantic pursuit, asynchronous communication, have created environments where relational trajectories are fragmented and nonlinear. According to Baym et al. (2024), modern romantic development involves complex "modality weaving," wherein interactions span multiple digital platforms before culminating in offline meetings. This expanded digital ecosystem, saturated with romantic stimuli, amplifies users' exposure to idealized romance and

increases the likelihood of emotionally reactive behavior, particularly among sensitive individuals.

Moreover, dating app users often navigate contradictory impulses: the desire for authenticity versus the need for strategic self-presentation, or the pursuit of intimacy versus fear of vulnerability. These dialectics are especially fraught for emotionally sensitive users, who may interpret mismatches, ghosting, or delayed responses more acutely than their less sensitive peers (Lenton-Brym et al., 2024).

Although the literature on problematic dating app use has expanded considerably, scant attention has been given to the mediating influence of digital romantic content, particularly fan page romantic ideals, on emotionally sensitive individuals' use of dating platform, especially among undergraduates in Anambra State. Most existing studies focus on app design, user motivation, or general psychopathological outcomes. What remains underexplored is the interwoven factors of emotional sensitivity, romantic idealization, and compulsive digital behavior.

Carrying out this study among undergraduates in Anambra State is particularly critical given the region's sociocultural context. Anambra State, situated within Igbo society, as earlier described, is characterized by significant restrictions on the open expression of romantic and sexual agency—especially among unmarried youths. Public displays of affection are often stigmatized, and discussions around romantic involvement may be culturally discouraged. This creates a unique psychological and social landscape in which young adults, who are developmentally inclined toward romantic exploration, may resort to more discreet digital avenues such as dating apps. When coupled with the pervasive influence of idealized romantic portrayals on fan pages, this can produce a cycle of romantic idealization, covert engagement, and potentially problematic app use.
This study seeks to address that critical gap by exploring the extent to which exposure to romantic idealizations on social media fan pages reinforces problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of dating app culture among Nigerian youth has introduced new patterns of romantic behaviour, often influenced by idealized portrayals of love disseminated through social media fan pages. These fan pages typically promote highly curated and often unrealistic images of romantic relationships characterized by intense affection, materialism, and effortless compatibility. Emotionally sensitive undergraduates, due to their heightened emotional responsiveness and vulnerability to external stimuli, may be especially susceptible to internalizing these ideals.

In Anambra State, where traditional Igbo norms encourage emotional control and pragmatic relationship approaches, emotionally sensitive students may

experience a cultural and psychological dissonance. This dissonance can drive them toward problematic dating app behaviors, such as compulsive usage, emotional overinvestment, or distress from unmet expectations. However, there is limited empirical data examining the specific nature of these behaviors or the extent to which exposure to romanticized fan page content influences them.

Furthermore, the role of emotional sensitivity as a moderating factor, potentially intensifying the relationship between idealized online romance and dating app misuse, remains underexplored in Nigerian contexts. Without this understanding, educational institutions and mental health stakeholders lack the contextual insight needed to design culturally appropriate interventions that address digital romantic behaviors among emotionally sensitive youths.

Purpose of the Study

The broad purpose of this study was to explore the influence of social media fan page romantic ideals on problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the common problematic dating app use behaviors exhibited by emotionally sensitive undergraduates.
2. Examine the correlation between exposure to fan page romantic ideals and problematic dating app use.
3. Determine the moderating role of emotional sensitivity in the relationship between romantic idealization and problematic dating app engagement.

Through this investigation, the study sought to generate empirical data that will inform culturally nuanced digital literacy education, mental health interventions, and policy recommendations aimed at supporting healthy digital romantic engagement among Nigerian undergraduates.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study was guided by 3 research questions and 2 null hypotheses. They are;

Research Questions:

1. What are the common problematic dating app use behaviours exhibited by emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State?
2. How does exposure to fan page romantic ideals correlate with problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State?
3. To what extent does emotional sensitivity moderate the relationship between romantic idealization and problematic dating app engagement

Research Hypotheses:

1. There will be no significant positive relationship between exposure to fan page romantic ideals and problematic dating app use.
2. Emotionally sensitive individuals will not demonstrate stronger associations between romantic idealization and problematic app use compared to less sensitive peers.

Research Method

This study employed a *cross-sectional explanatory survey design*, which allows for the collection of data from a population at a single point in time to examine relationships between variables. As defined by Lavrakas (2008), a cross-sectional explanatory survey design is "a non-experimental research design used to gather data to identify and explain patterns of relationships among variables in a population at one point in time." This design is particularly appropriate for the present study as it facilitated the investigation of naturally occurring associations among exposure to romantic ideals on social media fan pages, emotional sensitivity, and problematic dating app use. It enabled the exploration of how these variables interact within the sociocultural context of emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria.

The study was conducted across three tertiary institutions in Anambra State, each representing different institutional types and student demographics. These included Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (a federal university), Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli (a state university), and Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe (a state college). The institutions were purposively selected to ensure the inclusion of students from diverse socio-academic environments.

The target population comprised approximately 4,800 undergraduates from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Education, and Arts across the three institutions. A multi-stage stratified random sampling approach was employed to achieve demographic and academic representativeness. Initially, stratification was done based on faculty and gender. Subsequently, 150 students were randomly selected from each institution using a table of random numbers, resulting in a preliminary sample of 450. After the exclusion of invalid questionnaires (incomplete or improperly filled), the final valid sample consisted of 384 students; 141 from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 132 from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, and 111 from Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe. This sample size met the statistical threshold for a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. The research was guided by three questions and two hypotheses that addressed the prevalence and types of problematic dating app use, the relationship between exposure to romantic ideals and dating app behaviors, and the potential moderating role of emotional sensitivity.

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire segmented into four sections. Section A captured demographic details such as age, gender, institution, and, faculty. Section B employed the Romantic Idealization Scale, adapted from Morey et al. (2015), to measure the degree of romantic ideal internalization based on fan page content. Section C used the Problematic Online Dating App Use Scale (PODAUS), developed by Gori et al. (2024) and adapted for local relevance. Section D featured the Emotional Sensitivity Index (ESI), a 15-item Likert-type instrument adapted to assess the depth of emotional processing and sensitivity

to relational stimuli within the study population.

Though the instruments were previously standardized, they underwent revalidation for cultural appropriateness. Expert panels from the Departments of Educational Foundations at each institution reviewed the instruments. The Content Validity Indices (CVI) were 0.82 for Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 0.73 for Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, and 0.80 for Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, and demonstrating satisfactory validity. A pilot study conducted at the Federal Polytechnic, Oko, yielded a Cronbrash's alpha coefficient of 0.79, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data collection was conducted over six weeks, facilitated by six trained research assistants, two per institution. Questionnaires were distributed during scheduled academic periods to minimize disruption. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and data confidentiality was maintained throughout the process.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize patterns of problematic dating app use. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation and Spearman's Rank Correlation were applied to examine linear and monotonic relationships among the variables. Multiple linear regression analysis assessed the predictive influence of romantic idealization and emotional sensitivity on problematic dating app use and tested for moderation effects.

Informed consent was received from all respondents. The study adhered to ethical standards regarding anonymity and confidentiality, with respondents who experienced emotional discomfort during the study referred to appropriate counseling services.

Results and Interpretation of Findings

Research Question One: What are the common problematic dating app use behaviours exhibited by emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State?

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Problematic Dating App Use Behaviors among Emotionally Sensitive Undergraduates (n = 384)

Problematic Behavior	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Compulsive checking of dating apps	245	63.8%
Lying on profile to attract more matches	168	43.8%
Ghosting (abruptly cutting off communication)	219	57.0%
Anxiety when not receiving matches or responses	204	53.1%
Dating app use interfering with academic work	191	49.7%
Loss of sleep due to late-night app engagement	225	58.6%

Note: Participants could report multiple behaviours; percentages reflect proportion of total sample (N=384).

The findings show that emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State exhibit several forms of problematic dating app behaviors, with the most commonly reported

being compulsive checking of dating apps (63.8%), followed by loss of sleep due to late-night engagement (58.6%) and ghosting behaviors (57.0%). Over half of the respondents also reported experiencing anxiety when not receiving matches or responses (53.1%), indicating a potential psychological dependency on feedback from app interactions. Furthermore, nearly half reported that dating app use interfered with their academic performance (49.7%). These results suggest a high prevalence of behaviors that align with compulsive, deceptive, and emotionally destabilizing patterns associated with problematic dating app use.

Research Question 2: How does exposure to fan page romantic ideals correlate with problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State?

Table 2: Spearman Correlation between Exposure to Romantic Ideals and Problematic Dating App Use

Variables	Spearman's ρ	p-value	Interpretation
Exposure to Fan Page Romantic Ideals & Problematic Dating App Use	0.47	0.000	Moderate positive correlation (significant)

Interpretation:
The result in Table 2 shows a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between exposure to fan page romantic ideals and problematic dating app use ($\rho = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). This implies that undergraduates who are more frequently exposed to romantic content on fan pages tend to exhibit more problematic behaviors related to dating app use. This supports the assumption that media-based romantic idealization may shape and intensify students' use of dating platforms in potentially maladaptive ways.

Research Question 3: To what extent does emotional sensitivity moderate the relationship between romantic idealization and problematic dating app engagement?

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Problematic Dating App Use from Romantic Idealization, Emotional Sensitivity, and their Interaction

Model Step	Predictor Variables	R^2	ΔR^2	F-Change	P-value	Interpretation
Step1	Romantic Idealization, Emotional Sensitivity	0.36	—	—	<.001	Main predictors significantly predict the outcome
Step 2	+ Interaction Term (Idealization × Sensitivity)	0.42	0.06	10.21	0.002	Interaction term significantly improves the model

Interpretation:
The hierarchical regression analysis indicates that emotional sensitivity moderates the relationship between exposure to romantic idealization and problematic dating app use.

- In Step 1, both romantic idealization and emotional sensitivity independently and significantly predicted problematic dating app use ($R^2 = 0.36$).
- In Step 2, the interaction term between romantic idealization and emotional sensitivity was significant, explaining an additional 6% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06$, $p = 0.002$).

This suggests that the influence of romantic idealization on dating app use is amplified for undergraduates with higher levels of emotional sensitivity. Emotionally sensitive individuals appear more susceptible to internalizing idealized romantic messages, potentially reinforcing maladaptive dating behaviors.

Hypothesis 1: There will be no significant positive relationship between exposure to fan page romantic ideals and problematic dating app use ($r \leq .30$, $p \geq .05$

Table 4:

Variables	Pearson r	p-value	Decision
Exposure to Romantic Ideals & Problematic Dating App Use	0.324	< .001	Reject H_0 (Significant Positive Correlation)

Interpretation:
There is a moderate, statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to romantic ideals and problematic dating app use ($r = .324$, $p < .001$), suggesting that increased exposure is associated with greater problematic use.

Hypothesis 2: Emotionally sensitive individuals will not demonstrate stronger associations between romantic idealization and problematic app use compared to less sensitive peers ($\beta \leq .45$, $p \geq .01$).

Table 5: Multiple Linear Regression for Hypothesis 2

Predictor	Beta (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Romantic Ideals	0.3700	< .001	Significant predictor of problematic app use
Emotional Sensitivity	0.0200	0.69	Not a significant predictor
Romantic Ideals × Emotional Sensitivity (Interaction Term)	0.0023	0.017	Significant moderator; sensitivity amplifies effect

Interpretation:
Romantic idealization is a significant predictor of problematic dating app use. Although emotional sensitivity alone does not significantly predict problematic use, it significantly moderates the relationship between romantic idealization and problematic app behavior, indicating that emotionally sensitive individuals are more susceptible to the reinforcing effects of romantic ideals

Discussion of Findings

Prevalence and Nature of Problematic Dating App Use

Descriptive findings indicate that problematic dating app use is prevalent among undergraduates in Anambra State, with emotionally sensitive students showing a higher propensity for maladaptive engagement. This high prevalence, and its accompanying psychological implications, may be partially attributed to the sociocultural context of Anambra State, which is situated within Igbo society. In this context, overt expressions of romantic affection, especially among unmarried youths, are often considered taboo or culturally inappropriate. This cultural restraint stands in contrast to many Western societies (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada), where romantic relationships are more openly expressed and publicly acknowledged from the age of 18 or even earlier. As a result of these sociocultural constraints, young adults in this environment, who are developmentally primed for increased romantic and sexual expression, may turn to dating apps as a discreet outlet for romantic engagement. However, this coping strategy can expose them to various psychological and behavioral risks associated with problematic app use. The most frequently reported behaviors in the study included compulsive checking of dating apps (63.8%), sleep disruption due to late-night usage (58.6%), and ghosting (57.0%), followed closely by anxiety over a lack of responses (53.1%) and interference with academic responsibilities (49.7%).

These behaviors reveal a pattern of compulsive, avoidant, and emotionally destabilizing usage, with potential negative consequences for psychological well-being and academic performance. These findings align with prior research by Zlotnick et al. (2023), who found that emotionally vulnerable students, particularly those with elevated rejection sensitivity, often engage with dating apps as a coping mechanism. Similarly, Hobbs et al. (2022) reported that avoidant behaviors such as ghosting and selective self-presentation are more common among socially anxious users. In addition, the observed sleep and academic disruptions are consistent with findings by Masur et al. (2021), who linked nighttime media use to reduced sleep quality and impaired daily functioning in young adults.

It is important to note, however, that not all emotionally sensitive individuals experience negative outcomes from dating app use. Strubel and Petrie (2023) found that some emotionally sensitive users actually benefit from such platforms, reporting increased confidence in self-expression and relational engagement. This suggests that the impact of dating app use is not uniformly detrimental; rather, individual coping styles, user

motivations, and the context of engagement play crucial roles in shaping outcomes.

Exposure to Romantic Ideals and Problematic Dating App Use

A moderate positive correlation (Spearman's $\rho = 0.47$, $p < .001$) was found between exposure to romantic ideals and problematic dating app use. This association was statistically supported by inferential testing ($r = .512$, $p < .001$), confirming Hypothesis 1—that exposure to idealized romantic portrayals contributes significantly to problematic app engagement. These findings align with prior research indicating that romantic media shape users' expectations and behaviors in romantic interactions. Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that exposure to romantic media can foster unrealistic beliefs about relationship dynamics, such as mind-reading or effortless compatibility. Dating apps, with their rapid and curated interactions, may serve as platforms to seek these idealized forms of connection (Hefner & Kahn, 2014).

Bonilla-Zorita et al. (2021) further emphasized that motivations such as boredom and self-esteem regulation are key predictors of problematic dating app behaviors, reinforcing the idea that psychological needs rooted in romantic idealization can drive maladaptive engagement. Recent findings by Smith et al. (2025) and Hu and Rui (2023) also point to broader psychosocial risks—including sexual objectification and impaired emotional well-being among frequent app users exposed to idealized digital interactions.

Emotional Sensitivity as a Moderator

The study found that emotional sensitivity significantly moderated the relationship between exposure to romantic ideals and problematic dating app use ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06$, $p = .002$; $\beta = .472$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. This suggests that emotionally sensitive individuals are especially vulnerable to the psychological influence of romantic idealizations encountered on fan pages. This dynamic mirrors findings by Huang and Gong (2025), who identified social appearance anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and interaction anxiety as predictors of problematic app use, particularly due to the emotional safety afforded by digital platforms. The emotionally regulated and aesthetically curated nature of fan pages may exacerbate internalized romantic scripts among sensitive users, shaping expectations that rarely align with real-world relational outcomes (Gori et al., 2024; Zhang & Zhao, 2025). Chen et al. (2025) similarly found that individuals with high social anxiety and rejection sensitivity tend to gravitate toward dating apps, where controlled interactions mitigate interpersonal threat, but may foster dependence and compulsive behaviors.

This is further corroborated by findings from Lenton-Brym et al. (2024), who observed that individuals with elevated social anxiety reported increased negative affect following poor feedback (e.g., low match rates) on dating apps. These emotional disruptions often exacerbate compulsive checking, over-engagement, and a cycle of digital reassurance-seeking. Such behavior reflects

an emotional coping mechanism rather than a pursuit of relational connection in itself.

Contrastingly, some research suggests a nuanced perspective. Hance et al. (2018) noted that emotionally sensitive users who find digital platforms conducive to self-disclosure may actually form deeper, more authentic connections. For these individuals, the digital space can reduce the social burden of real-time, high-stakes interaction, thus enhancing their relational engagement. This suggests that emotional sensitivity, while predictive of problematic use in some contexts, does not uniformly translate to negative outcomes. Rather, the nature of the engagement, compensatory or expressive, mediates its adaptiveness. Adding further complexity, Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al. (2020) noted that while social anxiety is a predictor of online dating use, the relationship is not linear. Factors such as user personality, app features, and social support systems were found to mediate the association. Their study emphasizes the multifaceted nature of emotionally sensitive users' engagement with dating platforms—pointing out that while some may develop problematic behaviors, others may use the platforms adaptively or as tools for social coping.

Integrative Reflection

Collectively, these findings reveal that problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates is driven by a convergence of external media influences and internal emotional predispositions. Exposure to fan page romantic ideals fosters idealized expectations, while emotional sensitivity amplifies susceptibility to these narratives, leading to maladaptive patterns of app use. However, the impact of emotional sensitivity is not monolithic; its effects are moderated by individual motivations, relational goals, and emotional regulation capacities.Thus, while the study confirms the moderating role of emotional sensitivity, it also highlights the potential for adaptive use under certain conditions.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study offer valuable implications for digital literacy programs, mental health advocacy, and university counseling services in Nigeria. First, the demonstrated influence of fan page romantic ideals on dating app use underscores the importance of **critical media literacy** among students. Educators and policymakers should emphasize awareness of how idealized online portrayals can distort romantic expectations and encourage compulsive digital behaviors.

Second, the moderating role of emotional sensitivity suggests that interventions should be psychologically tailored. University counseling centers and units in Anambra State and beyond could benefit from integrating modules on emotional regulation, rejection sensitivity, and self-worth in digital spaces. Emotionally sensitive students may need specialized support in navigating online social environments without becoming overly reliant on them for validation or intimacy.

Finally, dating app developers and social media platforms should consider

incorporating in-app features that encourage healthier use such as usage reminders, reflection prompts, or emotional well-being check-ins, particularly for younger and emotionally vulnerable users.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into the relationship between exposure to fan page romantic ideals, emotional sensitivity, and problematic dating app use among undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria. However, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research:

1. Limited Geographical Scope

The sample was restricted to undergraduates in Anambra State, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, including students from other Nigerian states or different cultural contexts globally. Variations in cultural norms, media exposure, and emotional coping mechanisms could influence the patterns observed. Future research should incorporate cross-regional or cross-cultural comparative analyses to assess the consistency and variability of these dynamics.

2. Potential for Self-Report Bias

Data collection relied on self-reported measures, which are inherently susceptible to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies. Participants may have underreported or over reported certain behaviors, particularly those related to emotional vulnerability or compulsive media use. Utilizing mixed-methods approaches, such as in-depth qualitative interviews or passive digital behavior tracking, could improve data reliability in future investigations.

3. Cross-Sectional Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences or assess the directionality of relationships among variables. For instance, it remains unclear whether exposure to romantic ideals leads to problematic app use, or whether individuals prone to problematic use are more drawn to idealized content. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal sequences and potential causal pathways.

4. Lack of Longitudinal Insight

Related to the design limitation, the study does not account for how dating app behaviors or emotional sensitivity may evolve over time. Emotional development, relationship experiences, or repeated exposure to media may influence the psychological outcomes associated with app use. A longitudinal framework would enable a more dynamic understanding of how these patterns unfold and interact over extended periods.

5. Cultural Specificity of Findings

While culturally grounded insights are a strength of this study, the specific sociocultural dynamics of Anambra State may not mirror those in other contexts. The

state is situated within Igbo society, where overt expressions of romantic affection, particularly among unmarried youths, are often considered taboo or culturally inappropriate. This contrasts with norms in many Western societies (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada), where romantic relationships are openly expressed and publicly acknowledged from the age of 18 or even earlier. In such societies, dating app use may be shaped more by personal preference than by cultural restriction, influencing both the prevalence and psychological implications of digital romantic behavior. As such, findings from this study may not fully translate to populations in more liberal sociocultural environments. Future cross-cultural investigations are necessary to understand how differing norms around romantic expression shape the psychological outcomes of dating app use.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that fan page romantic ideals significantly correlate with problematic dating app use among emotionally sensitive undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria. More importantly, emotional sensitivity was found to moderate this relationship, intensifying the effect of romantic idealization on app engagement.

These findings offer evidence that emotionally vulnerable students may be especially susceptible to the unrealistic portrayals of love frequently disseminated through social media fan pages, which could reinforce unhealthy dating behaviors. While some studies have shown that online dating environments can provide comfort and authenticity for sensitive users, the present research highlights the dual-edged nature of digital romance.

Recommendations

1. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and university curriculum committees should integrate digital literacy modules into the General Studies (GST) curriculum. These modules should emphasize critical thinking skills specifically related to interpreting idealized romantic content in media and understanding its psychological impact.
2. University counseling centers and student affairs divisions should develop and implement mental health programs tailored to emotionally sensitive students. These interventions should include periodic workshops on emotional regulation, self-esteem building, managing social anxiety, and navigating digital romantic relationships.
3. The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), in partnership with online dating app developers, should initiate policy dialogues and ethical design collaborations aimed at enhancing in-app emotional safety features. This

includes incorporating prompts for mental health resources, implementing anti-ghosting features, and providing user education on healthy digital interactions.

4. Academic research bodies such as the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) and university research ethics boards should fund and support further studies on the psychological mechanisms underlying romantic idealization and dating app behaviours. Emphasis should be placed on longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs to capture nuanced behavioral trends across diverse populations.

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