Swipe left or right? How social factors influence South Africans' online dating app experiences

As online dating apps gain worldwide traction, they are reshaping how South Africans approach romance. Yet, while extensive research explores global user behaviour, a gap exists in studies focusing on African perspectives, specifically how self-presentation affects app experiences in South Africa. New research conducted by Nthabeleng Mokitimi-Dlamini, a [Master's](#) student in the [Department of Marketing Management](#), sheds light on this topic, highlighting that social expectations and perceived alignment with other users play crucial roles in shaping South African users' online dating experiences.

The research explored how self-presentation on online dating app influences South African users' experiences. Particularly whether factors such as subjective norms, fear of negative evaluation, congruence with other users and misrepresentation affect users' experiences.

One key finding is that subjective norms—perceptions of whether important people in a user's life support or use dating apps—strongly impact brand experience. The study suggests that when users believe app usage aligns with societal expectations, their experience improves. This implies that broader social acceptance in South Africa plays a powerful role in influencing users' comfort levels and satisfaction with dating apps. For marketers, this points to a valuable opportunity: amplifying social validation can help boost positive user experiences.

The study also revealed that congruence, or the feeling of similarity with other users, significantly enhances brand experience. Users are more satisfied when they perceive a shared identity or connection with others on the app. This sense of belonging suggests that users value finding like-minded individuals, which dating apps could further encourage through features like interest-based groups or tailored matchmaking algorithms. By fostering a feeling of compatibility, dating apps can create more positive user experiences, potentially leading to greater user retention.

Although concerns about judgment or misrepresentation are present, the study found these factors less significant in overall brand experience. While users may worry about how they're perceived or the authenticity of their profiles, these concerns don't substantially diminish their enjoyment of the platform. This finding implies that other elements—specifically, social and relational factors—are stronger drivers of user satisfaction.

The study underscores the importance of culture in understanding online dating experiences. Social validation and a sense of congruence are more influential in South Africa, likely due to the emphasis on community and social cohesion within South African society. This insight suggests that brand experience in online dating is deeply tied to socio-cultural factors, a valuable consideration for app marketers aiming to tailor their platforms to specific markets.

For online dating apps with a South African user base, these findings indicate that emphasising social approval and similarity could enhance user experiences. Tactics such as showcasing success stories, using South African influencers, and creating in-app communities based on shared interests could help foster a positive brand experience. Prioritising these elements could ultimately lead to a more loyal and engaged user base. In conclusion, as dating apps evolve, understanding these nuances will be essential for creating engaging and culturally relevant platforms.

This research was conducted as part of the fulfilment of the [Master's degree](#) in Marketing Management in 2024 with the [Department of Marketing Management](#) by Nthabeleng Mokitimi-Dlamini under the supervision of [Prof Yolanda Jordaan](#).