

Voluntary Singlehood? Investigating the Relationship between Social Media Consumption,
Cynical Views, and Dating Motivation.

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Abstract

Today's heterosexual youth has been found to be unmotivated when it comes to actively dating, and with the ever-growing prevalence of social media in their lives it raises the question if social media consumption could be affecting young people's motivation to date. The goal of the present study was to answer this question. We hypothesised that there exists a negative relationship between the content consumed on social media and the motivation to date (H_1) and that the relationship between social media consumption and motivation to date is mediated by cynical views of the opposite gender (H_2). We tested these hypotheses via an anonymous survey administered to participants online ($N = 103$; $M_{age} = 22.51$). We asked participants to report the nature of the social media content they come across, their cynical views of the opposite gender, and their motivation to date using self-report scales. Our results failed to support our first hypothesis, indicating that people who consumed more social media content (about the opposite gender) were not less motivated to date. Despite this, our mediation hypothesis was supported by our findings which indicate that there exists an indirect relationship between higher social media consumption and lower motivation to date via the mediator, cynical views of the opposite gender. Some explanations for these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: dating, social media, cynicism, gender, youth

Introduction

In the age of social media, we come into contact with a countless number of opinions on a daily basis. It is perhaps the first time in human history that sharing ideas with the rest of the world has been this easy and instantaneous. As for the modern (heterosexual) youth, a topic of interest and discussion is that of the opposite gender, as they are trying to navigate their way through the dating world, especially considering that almost half (41%) of young adults nowadays are single (Brown, 2020). But, surprisingly, these online discussions might be producing some unexpected side effects as more than a third (37%) of today's young men and women purposely and consciously refrain from dating altogether (Brown, 2020). While there are many different reasons why so many singles are not actively looking to date, among the younger generation who spends a lot of their time on social media, the content they consume could be a contributing factor. More precisely, it could influence how they see the opposite gender and therefore, their motivation to date (Buttazzoni, 2023; Rosen, 2023). Online content and discussions among modern youth tend to have a cynical and hopeless undertone when it comes to how they perceive the opposite gender and dating in the modern age. These discussions can spark from and be fueled by the nature of the content they are being shown on their social media feeds on a daily basis, which promote cynical, sometimes even misogynistic and heteropessimistic (defined by Asa Seresin as "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience") views of dating the opposite gender (Garcia, 2023; Das, 2023; Seresin 2019). This coupled with being able to see how the opposite gender perceives them in return could be what breeds cynical views in youth, and in turn makes them less likely to engage in healthy dating behaviour (Spencer-Elliott, 2023). Currently, little is known about what could cause cynicism towards the opposite gender and its potential impact on dating behaviour and motivation. This is due to a lack of research into the relationships

between these constructs, which is what this research sets out to explore. As such, we ask if consuming social media content leads to the development of cynical views of the opposite gender. And could those views, in turn, negatively impact young people's motivation to date?

Social Media Consumption and Cynicism Towards the Opposite Gender

Cynicism is defined as the belief that other people are inherently self-interested and, hence, cynics have a negative view of others, often feeling anger, hatred, and contempt towards other people (Neumann & Zaki, 2022). In the context of this paper, we focus on cynical views of the opposite gender. This falls under group cynicism, which is when one believes a certain group of people (in this case, the opposite gender) to be motivated by self-interest (here in the context of dating). More specifically, however, this is a case of cynicism on an intergroup level, as one group (members of one gender) "holds inaccurate and overly hostile beliefs about another group" (members of the opposite gender), which causes them to see the other group's flaws in an exaggerated manner (Neumann & Zaki, 2022). In other words, any negative qualities or unfavourable behaviours are perceived to be more extreme and malicious by the cynical members of the other gender. Prior research on cynicism in close relationships has focused primarily on the causes underlying cynical attitudes in romantic relationships, which have been attributed to having negative experiences during early adolescent years and an avoidant attachment style (Simons et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2012). It has also been found that the relationship between cynicism and avoidant behaviour goes both ways, as Machiavellianism (which contains cynicism as a facet) leads to avoidant behaviours in relationships due to a lack of trust in other people (Ináncsi et al., 2015). However, a potential cause for developing cynicism in romantic contexts that research until now has failed to consider is the consumption of social media content, which, within the context of this paper, we will define as the content that today's youth consumes on a daily basis on various social media platforms (such as TikTok, Instagram, *etc.*). More specifically,

our definition is focused on content that deals with depictions of the opposite gender and dating; be it dating advice, dating experiences of peers, observations, or jokes (memes) about dating. This kind of content can serve as a daily reminder of one's own prior negative experiences with dating the opposite gender (e.g. being disrespected) which has been found to fuel cynical beliefs (Stavrova et al., 2020). It is therefore not hard to imagine that today's young adults get reminders several times a day about how they were once disrespected by the opposite gender in a romantic context, as they report spending an average of more than four hours on social media apps every day (Briggs, 2023). Based on this, we expect to find a potential link between social media consumption by the modern youth and their cynical views of the opposite gender.

Gaps in Literature

As for the consequences of cynical views, cynicism has been found to hinder responses that would otherwise promote healthy relationships, such as trusting one's partner and commitment to the relationship (Inesi et al., 2012). Taking that into consideration, it would be interesting to know if domain-specific cynicism (cynicism towards the opposite gender) also hinders responses and motivations that would otherwise promote dating (as a preceding step to getting into healthy relationships). Aside from the work of Inesi et al. (2012), there is a considerable literature gap when it comes to studying cynicism and its relationship to dating, or more specifically the motivation to date. Similarly, the link between social media and cynicism in general has not received much attention in social psychology research up until this point. As for the research on cynicism, it has mostly focused broadly on general cynicism or social cynicism, with domain-specific cynicism, such as cynicism towards a specific group of people, having received much less scholarly attention.

Overview

With the aforementioned literature gaps in mind, the present study aims to fill these gaps by studying a type of domain-specific cynicism and its link to dating motivation. More specifically, we will investigate the link between social media consumption, cynical views of the opposite gender, and dating motivation, and pose the question: Does social media consumption affect modern youth's motivation to date, and is this mediated by cynicism towards the opposite gender? To answer this question we have come up with two hypotheses, in the first hypothesis (H_1) we propose that there exists a negative relationship between social media consumption and the motivation to date. Expanding on that, our second hypothesis (H_2) suggests that the relationship between social media consumption and motivation to date is mediated by cynical views of the opposite gender. Beyond filling existing literature gaps, our study offers practical contributions as well. Specifically, in this modern age of social media, it is crucial to investigate how today's youth, who spend most of their time online and on social media, is impacted by it. As having positive dating experiences leads to healthy committed relationships which is an essential component of a happy life (especially for young adults) knowing more about the factors that impede such experiences is key (Khattab & Fenton, 2009). In order to better help today's youth attain happiness, it is in our interest to study the potential causes of their low motivation to date (Brown, 2020).

Method

Sample

In order to determine the desired minimum sample size for this study, an a priori power analysis was conducted. The power analysis for the first hypothesis stating that there will be a negative relationship between social media consumption and motivation to date was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). The aim was to detect a small-to-medium effect of at least $f^2 = .05$. This value was chosen based on the findings of Richard et al. (2003), who determined the typical effect size in the field of social psychology to be $r = .21$. This

Pearson's r value (when converted) is equal to Cohen's $f = .20$ and therefore, equal to Cohen's $f^2 = .05$, which is a small-to-medium sized effect (as it is equal to Cohen's $d = .43$). G*Power indicated a minimum sample size of 159 was required in order to detect a small-to-medium-sized effect $f^2 = .05$ with 80% power and an alpha level of .05, in a simple regression analysis with one predictor. For the second hypothesis, which states that the relationship between social media consumption and motivation to date will be mediated by cynical views of the opposite gender, we consulted Fritz and MacKinnon's sample size simulations for mediation (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). This helped determine that a sample size of 148 participants would provide 80% power to detect an indirect effect in a mediation with small-to-medium sized α - and a small-to-medium β -path ($\alpha = .26$, $\beta = .26$), when using a bias-corrected bootstrap approach. Since there was no previous literature with the same or sufficiently similar variables on which to base the effect size, we opted for a small-to-medium effect size for both paths. This was once again based on the aforementioned typical effect size of $r = .21$ (Richard et al., 2003) as this value is closest to the value of the small-to-medium effect size ($r = .26$), determined by Fritz and MacKinnon (2007). When taking into account both minimum required sample sizes (159 and 148, respectively) and also compensating for possible drop-outs and exclusions, the aim was to recruit at least a total of 180 participants.

In order to recruit our participants, we used opportunity sampling. More specifically, we shared our survey among family, friends, fellow students, and colleagues, and asked them to fill it in and distribute it among their social circles. Additionally, we posted links to the survey on social media platforms. In total, we ended up with 313 participants who filled in our survey, of whom 103 were eligible for data analysis after data cleaning. This involved excluding 75 participants who had not agreed to the informed consent and filtering out 71 participants who did not successfully complete the attention check. Additionally, we excluded all participants who did not indicate their age, those whose age was below 18 or above 35,

which resulted in the exclusion of a further 43 participants. This was done because this current study is focused on studying the dating motivation of young people in particular, which we have defined here as ages 18 to 35. Initially, we had planned to narrow down this definition to people in their 20s but we did not have enough participants to afford doing so. Hence, the definition of “youth” was widened to be able to achieve more statistical power. Lastly, 21 participants who indicated themselves to not be attracted to the opposite gender were excluded due to the nature of this study, where our focus is on cynicism towards the opposite gender and dating motivation among heterosexual single individuals. Even though the participants had to indicate their relationship status as “single” in order to be shown questions regarding their cynical views on the opposite gender, it must be noted that participants who indicated themselves to be in relationships were not explicitly excluded during the data cleaning process and instead treated as missing values where applicable.

Our sample consisted of 103 participants ($N = 103$), whose mean age was 22 and a half years ($M_{age} = 22.51$) with a standard deviation of 3.50 years ($SD_{age} = 3.50$). In total, we had 64 female participants (making up 62.1% of the sample) and 39 male participants (37.9% of the sample). We had a wide variety of nationalities from across the globe, totalling 18 different nationalities. Education-wise, the highest level of education achieved by 58 of our participants was secondary education (i.e. high school diploma), followed by 35 participants with a Bachelor’s degree and 10 participants who had obtained a Master’s degree. Most of our participants (60 people out of 103) claimed to be proficient in English, 20 to be intermediate, 14 were native speakers, and nine had a basic comprehension of the language.

Social Media Consumption

In order to measure the frequency with which participants come across content about the opposite gender on social media platforms, we had them rate five statements on a Likert scale (from 1 = “never” to 4 = “all the time”). These statements reflected themes of dating the

opposite gender and their presentation on social media. An example item is “I come across people sharing their negative experiences about dating the opposite gender on social media.”. A higher score on this scale reflects a higher frequency with which participants come across content displaying (dating) the opposite gender in a negative light. This self-made scale showed good reliability in our sample, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .77.

Cynical Views of the Opposite Gender

Participants’ cynicism towards the opposite gender was measured with a modified version of the Cynical Distrust Scale (Cook & Medley, 1954; Greenglass & Julkunen, 1989). This scale consists of eight items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 5 = “strongly agree”). We adapted each of the items to reflect cynicism towards people of the opposite gender, for example, the item “It is safer to trust nobody” (Cook & Medley, 1954) was changed to “It is safer to not trust men” for female participants, and vice versa for male participants. A higher score on this scale reflects higher levels of cynicism towards the opposite gender. The adapted cynicism scale showed good reliability in our sample, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .83 for women’s cynicism towards men and a Cronbach’s alpha of .87 for men’s cynicism towards women.

Dating Motivation

Participants’ motivation to date was measured with a scale consisting of statements reflecting one’s views on dating and current dating habits. This scale consists of five items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 5 = “strongly agree”). An example item is “I think dating is a waste of time when you are in your 20s.” (reverse-coded). A higher score on this scale reflects higher levels of dating motivation. This self-made scale showed a low reliability in our sample, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .25.

Procedure

The study consisted of an anonymous online survey, made using Qualtrics (Qualtrics XM - Experience Management Software, 2023). The survey started with an informed consent letter, which participants had to agree to in order to proceed with the rest of the study. They then had to fill in demographic questions regarding their age, gender, nationality, education level, sexual orientation, relationship status, and proficiency in English. It was then followed by various scales, which were presented in a randomised order to prevent order effects. The scales relevant to this paper were as follows: social media consumption, dating motivation, and cynical views of the opposite gender. Several attention checks were included throughout the various scales. After filling out the scales, the participants were thanked and debriefed about the nature and purpose of the study.

Analysis Plan

This study looked at three variables, where the independent variable is social media consumption, the mediator is cynical views of the opposite gender, and the dependent variable is dating motivation. We wanted to first see whether consuming social media content that displays dating the opposite gender in a negative light would be negatively related to one's motivation to date, and secondly, whether this relationship would be mediated by one's cynical views of the opposite gender. The first hypothesis (H_1) was tested using simple regression in SPSS. The second hypothesis (H_2) would be tested by running a mediation analysis (multiple regression) with the help of PROCESS in SPSS (Hayes, 2022).

Results

Overview

The data analysis for this study was conducted using IBM's SPSS Statistics program (Version 27). When looking at the correlations between the main variables, only one of them was statistically significant. This was the correlation between social media consumption and cynical views of the opposite gender that produced a coefficient of $.42$ ($r = .42, p < .001$).

However, neither the correlation between social media consumption and dating motivation, nor the correlation between cynical views of the opposite gender and dating motivation were statistically significant. These correlations, along with means and standard deviations, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Main Variables.

$N = 103$	1	2	3
<i>1 = Dating</i>	<i>M = 2.70</i>	-	-
<i>Motivation</i>	<i>SD = 0.56</i>		
<i>2 = Social Media</i>	.10	<i>M = 2.03</i>	-
<i>Consumption</i>		<i>SD = 0.55</i>	
<i>3 = Cynical Views of Opposite Gender</i>	-.18	.42**	<i>M = 2.46</i>
			<i>SD = 0.93</i>

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Hypothesis Testing

To test H_1 we ran a simple regression analysis in SPSS, in order to see if the consumption of content about the opposite gender on social media negatively predicted dating motivation. Prior to this, the following assumptions for simple regressions were tested: absence of outliers, independence of observations, normality, and homoscedasticity. All but one were satisfied, homoscedasticity being the only violated assumption, which reduces the accuracy of our results. As a response to the homoscedasticity assumption being violated, we ran a robust regression analysis (Astivia & Zumbo, 2019). While the initial simple regression analysis provided a standard error of .10 (assuming homoscedasticity) ($SE = .10$), the new and heteroscedastic-consistent standard error came to be .11 ($SE = .11$). As for the regression

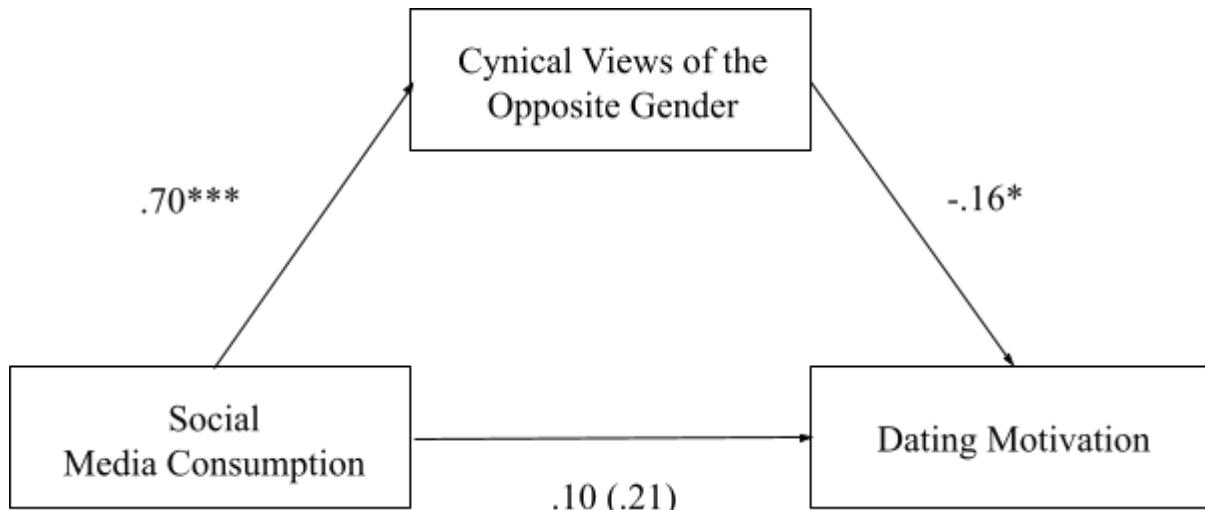
itself, the model was found to be non-significant ($F = .99$, $df = 1$, $p = .323$, $R^2 = .01$).

Additionally, social media consumption was found to not be a significant predicting variable for dating motivation ($b = .10$, $t = .10$, $p = .323$). According to the simple regression analysis, social media consumption was not able to negatively predict dating motivation.

To test H_2 , we ran a mediation analysis with the help of PROCESS for SPSS Version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022). Before the mediation analysis was done, eight assumptions for multiple regression were tested: the presence of a continuous dependent variable, two or more independent variables (which are continuous or categorical), independence of observations, linear relationships between independent and dependent variables, homoscedasticity, lack of multicollinearity, no significant outliers, and normally distributed residuals. As all of these assumptions were met, we proceeded with the mediation analysis. We found a significant mediation effect, as the indirect effect of social media consumption on dating motivation via the mediator cynical views of the opposite gender was found to be significant, since the bootstrapped confidence interval did not include zero (CI [-.24; -.01]), therefore supporting our mediation hypothesis (H_2). Upon a closer look at each individual path (see Figure 1), the α -path between social media consumption and cynical views of the opposite gender was significant ($b = .70$, $t = 4.67$, $p < .001$) as was the β -path that runs between cynical views of the opposite gender and dating motivation ($b = -.16$, $t = -2.47$, $p = .015$). However, the direct path (c') that runs between social media consumption and dating motivation was found to be insignificant ($b = .21$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$). Therefore, this qualifies as a full mediation, as the effect of social media consumption on dating motivation is completely only passing through the mediator (cynical views of the opposite gender) and there is no direct influence of social media consumption on dating motivation.

Figure 1

Mediation Analysis with Unstandardized Coefficients. Effect of Social Media Consumption on Dating Motivation, Mediated by Cynical Views of the Opposite Gender.



Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

Discussion

This research aimed to answer the question: Is social media consumption negatively associated with the modern youth's motivation to date and is this relationship mediated by cynicism towards the opposite gender? Firstly, we hypothesised that there would be a negative relationship between social media consumption and the motivation to date (H₁). Secondly, we hypothesised that the relationship between social media consumption and dating motivation would be mediated by cynical views of the opposite gender (H₂). In our simple regression analysis we found no significant relationship between social media consumption and dating motivation, therefore the data did not support our first hypothesis (H₁). However, the mediation analysis found a full mediation effect as there was a significant indirect effect between social media consumption and dating motivation via the mediator 'cynical views of the opposite gender' supporting our second hypothesis (H₂). Similarly, there was a significant correlation between social media consumption and cynical views of the

opposite gender, which would be in line with the findings of Stavrova et al. (2020) that being reminded of past disrespect deepens cynical beliefs.

Implications

These findings might give us a clue as to a possible indirect relationship between social media consumption and dating motivation. However, it seems that social media content, even one that displays dating the opposite gender in a negative light does not have a direct significant impact on today's youth's motivation to date. To explain the lack of a direct relationship between the two variables, there are arguably plenty of other reasons as to why young adults might avoid dating in this day and age, such as financial struggles and loneliness (Rosen, 2023). This study makes its small contribution by bringing awareness to the aforementioned indirect effect, and similarly, the positive correlation between social media consumption and cynicism (towards the opposite gender). However, our research did not find a significant negative correlation between cynicism and romantic behaviour (in this case dating motivation) as previous literature has found between cynicism and behaviours promoting healthy romantic relationships. More specifically, prior research has found that cynicism leads to avoidant behaviours and low commitment in relationships (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Inesi et al., 2012). Reverse causality for the correlation between social media consumption and cynicism must be considered as well, as it is possible that cynical views of the opposite gender cause the youth to seek out and consume more of the type of content that confirms the validity of their cynical beliefs, as a type of confirmation bias. It is our hope that our findings help young adults become (self-)aware of the cynical beliefs they hold towards the opposite gender, and therefore, inspire them to have a healthier outlook on the members of the opposite gender and dating.

Alternative Explanations, Limitations & Future Directions

The findings of this study must be considered with caution as the study has several considerable limitations which will be discussed in the following. It is possible that due to these limitations, this study failed to find some real effects (albeit small ones). Firstly, the limiting ways in which we chose to define and operationalise our variables could have been one reason why we failed to find any clear significant effects to support our first hypothesis. An example of that would be measuring social media susceptibility instead of social media consumption. This might have been a better measure as it focuses more on the type of person consuming the content and if or to what extent that content might actually significantly impact their views (of the opposite gender in this instance). This is a different approach to the operationalization of variables that we propose that future research could consider. Secondly, the scales created to measure social media consumption and dating motivation likely had low construct validity as they were not based on any existing validated scales, and this could have affected the likelihood of finding statistically significant results. As for other limitations, a significant issue in this study was the notably small sample size ($N = 103$), one that was below what the power analysis had indicated would be necessary to find small-to-medium-sized effects. This is important considering that the correlations between our variables (such as $r = .10$ and $r = -.18$) which we found via simple regression could have been significant given a large enough sample. This is another indicator of the low power of our research. Another issue with the sample was the skewed gender ratio, with nearly two thirds of the sample consisting of female participants and only one third of the sample being male participants. Since this study had an emphasis on gender, a more or less equal (50/50) gender ratio would have proved beneficial. Going off of the limitations of this study, the scales devised for this research could be improved upon and validated to ensure a higher construct validity in future studies that may want to use these scales. Similarly, it would be useful to replace social media consumption with another relevant variable – such as time

spent on social media or social media susceptibility – and see whether this would change the obtained results. Or, if these same variables were studied but with a different model, such as a moderation model instead of a mediation model, where social media content (or susceptibility) serves as a moderator to the relationship between cynicism towards the opposite gender and dating motivation.

Conclusion

This research investigated the relationship between social media consumption and dating motivation, and whether this relationship was mediated by cynical views of the opposite gender. We found that social media consumption is not directly associated with the modern youth's motivation to date, but that there is a mediated indirect relationship between the two variables where the mediator is cynicism towards the opposite gender. Following this, the first hypothesis was not supported by our findings but the second hypothesis was. While this may indicate that social media consumption does not have a direct influence on one's motivation to date, it must be considered that the limitations of our research, such as for example a small sample size and the operationalization of our constructs, could have prevented us from detecting small effects between the variables. Notably, we did find a significant mediated relationship between said constructs and a significant positive effect of social media consumption on cynicism towards the opposite gender, hinting at the possibility of the existence of smaller yet undetected effects between the constructs. We hope that future research will tackle the questions raised in the current study, improving upon the groundwork laid in this research using better tools, improved measures, and a larger, more representative sample. It is our hope that our research also inspires the young adults of today to become aware of their cynical outlooks and encourages them to adopt a healthier outlook on dating.

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