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Not to Date or How to Date? Disentangling the Association Between Dating Life and Depressive Feelings in College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of romantic relationships in mental health among college students who were in the stage of emerging adulthood. Specifically, we investigated five different dating categories: "in a relationship", "breakup", "singles, online dating", "singles, offline dating", and "singles, not dating" and their associations with depressive feelings. Moreover, the study examined how status satisfaction and family ties may influence these associations. We performed multiple linear regressions using the second wave of the COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study ($N = 1709$). Our results indicated that while partnered students reported fewer depressive feelings, singles could be happier than non-singles when satisfaction with their relationship status was taken into account. Among singles, offline dating was associated with the best mental health outcomes, followed by not dating, and then online dating. However, offline dating was linked to increased depressive feelings among those who were more concerned about getting (re-)infected with COVID-19. Strong family ties were more beneficial for singles than for partnered students, particularly for who were not dating. This study uniquely incorporates the often-overlooked groups of offline-dating and non-dating singles, alongside online daters, offering a comprehensive comparison of dating behaviors and their implications for mental health.

1 | Introduction

In contemporary society, students in higher education are navigating three intersecting phenomena: emerging adulthood, highly-accessible digital technologies, and increased singlehood, all of which are potentially linked to mental health concerns (Arnett et al. 2014; Auerbach et al. 2016; Potarca 2020; Sharp and Theiler 2018; van den Berg and Verbakel 2022). Emerging adulthood, typically defined as the period between ages 18 and 29 and often coined as the "age of possibilities," emphasizes the importance of having the freedom to explore life across various domains (Arnett 2015; Arnett 2000). With respect to romantic relationships, emerging adults tend to experiment with different forms of intimacy before committing to long-term partnerships, typically engaging in serial monogamy—a sequence of exclusive romantic relationships (Arnett 2000; Bogle 2007; M. Epstein et al. 2009; Pham 2017). Since the 2010s, the prevalence of Internet and digital tools has further transformed the landscape of romantic connections, offering new avenues for matching with potential partners (Potarca 2020).

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Emerging adulthood is often characterized as a stage of big dreams, identity formation, and love exploration, but it is also marked by uncertainties, instability, and feelings of anxiety (Arnett et al. 2014). Certain aspects of romantic relationships, such as rejections or the use of online dating apps, can have adverse effects on well-being (Her and Timmermans 2020). Moreover, such period of time is sometimes referred to as the "age of independence" (Rosenfeld 2007). While young people nowadays are more willing to explore and experience diverse romantic life options, recent research has indicated that individuals are single more frequently and for longer durations than in the past (van den Berg and Verbakel 2022). This trend might be concerning, as studies have found that being single is often associated with poorer mental health compared to being in a relationship (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008).

While singles are increasingly likely to engage in online dating to find a potential partner, it still does not represent the majority of them (Rosenfeld et al. 2019). However, scholars examining the effects of dating behavior on emerging adults' mental health have predominantly focused on online dating users, overlooking a significant portion of the single population—those who are not dating or who date offline. To address this gap, we aim to include various modes of dating, with particular attention to the understudied groups of non-dating and offline-dating singles, to provide new insights into how dating behaviors may affect mental health. In addition, we focus on the roles of relationship status satisfaction and family ties in explaining these associations. This approach allows us to distinguish between the effects of relationship status itself and satisfaction with that status, while also exploring how family solidarity may protect young adults in less advantaged dating groups from poor mental health outcomes. Taken together, our goal is to comprehensively examine the extent to which, and the ways in which, higher-education students in the life stage of emerging adulthood experience associations between relationship status, dating behavior, and mental health. We used data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications of which are discussed where appropriate.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Relationship Status, Dating Behavior, and Mental Health

Previous research has shown that being in a romantic relationship is associated with better mental and physical health across different populations (Greitemeyer 2009; Haring-Hidore et al. 1985; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008; Whitton et al. 2013). Two theoretical models explain this association: the *main effect model* and the *stress-buffering model* (Cohen and Wills 1985; Kawachi and Berkman 2001). The main effect model suggests that social relationships improve mental health through integration into social network, irrespective of stress levels. In contrast, the buffering model proposes that social ties have a stronger impact on mental health during stressful circumstances. Applied to relationship status, these models suggest that partnered individuals enjoy better mental health and life satisfaction due to the support and connection provided by their romantic relationship (Symister and Friend 2003; Williams and Umberson, 2004). Conversely, single individuals may experience reduced social support, unmet romantic or relatedness needs, and heightened vulnerability to poor mental health, particularly during stressful events (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Therefore, our first hypothesis posits.

H1. *Students in a steady romantic relationship are more likely to have better mental health than those who are single.*

However, it is important to acknowledge that being in a relationship can also lead to psychological distress, particularly when the relationship becomes difficult to manage (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008). Similarly, not all singles experience depression; singlehood can offer greater opportunities to build and strengthen other social connections, such as with parents, friends, and siblings (Girme et al. 2016; Greitemeyer 2009; Musick and Bumpass 2012; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008). Beyond relationship status, individuals' dating behaviors are crucial to understanding emerging adults' mental health in modern society (Arnett 2015; Arnett 2000).

Online dating has become increasingly popular among young people seeking romantic partners (Castro and Barrada 2020; Potarca 2020; Rosenfeld et al. 2019). While it provides seemingly limitless options for romantic and sexual connections (Hobbs et al. 2017), online dating can negatively impact mental health, contributing to anxiety, depression, body insecurity, and reduced psychological well-being (Castro and Barrada 2020; Her and Timmermans 2020; Holtzhausen et al. 2020; Portingale et al. 2022). These effects may depend on factors such as users' success in online dating, their motivations, and attachment to the online environment (Her and Timmermans 2020). It is worthwhile to mention that most studies focus either exclusively on online dating users (Her and Timmermans 2020) or compare users to non-users (Holtzhausen et al. 2020; Portingale et al. 2022), leaving the mental health experiences of offline daters and non-dating singles underexplored.

A few studies comparing online and offline dating have focused primarily on the relational outcomes, showing that breakup rates were higher for couples who met online than couples who met through offline venues (Danielsbacka et al. 2020; Paul 2014). Yet, we do not know if they may influence people's mental health outcomes differently. *Social presence* refers to the degree to which a communication channel allows individuals to be aware of their relational partners during interactions (Fulk et al. 1987). According to the theory, communication modes vary in the level of social presence they afford, with face-to-face interaction offering the highest level and text-based communication the lowest (Fulk et al. 1987; Rice 1992). Offline communication may foster richer, more personal, and more intimate relationships, along with a greater perception of warmth and support (Whitty 2013). It is thus plausible that offline-dating singles experience better mental health than their online-dating counterparts. Those who are not dating may be shielded from the potential negative effects of online dating but also miss out on the positive interpersonal experiences that offline dating can offer. To fill this gap in the literature and examine how different dating behaviors relate to mental health, we propose the following hypothesis.

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H2. *Single students who engage in online dating are more vulnerable to poor mental health than those who engage in offline dating or are not dating at all.*

2.2 | Students' Status Satisfaction of Their Romantic Life

The well-documented link between relationship status and mental health has been challenged by Lehmann et al. (2015) with their introduction of *status satisfaction*—a concept referring to an individual's satisfaction with their current relationship status. Research has shown that status satisfaction is a stronger predictor of various mental health outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction, psychological distress, depressive symptoms) than relationship status alone (Adamczyk 2019; Lehmann et al. 2015). For instance, Adamczyk (2017) found that singles report lower status satisfaction compared to partnered individuals, and this dissatisfaction is associated with higher depressive symptoms and lower well-being.

Among singles, studies suggest that factors such as family support (Greitemeyer 2009), fear of being single (Adamczyk 2017), and high avoidance social goals (the desire to avoid negative relationship experiences; Girme et al. 2016) play a role in mental health outcomes. This implies that whether singles embrace singlehood significantly explains their well-being. For singles who are dating, satisfaction with their dating experience might also have a stronger impact on mental health than the type of dating they engage in. For example, online daters might experience worse mental health not inherently due to online dating but because of lower dating satisfaction. To deepen our understanding of the relationships between relationship status, dating behavior, and mental health, we aim to test the role of status satisfaction with the next hypothesis.

H3. *Students' satisfaction with their relationship status influences how their relationship status and dating behavior affect their mental health.*

2.3 | The Significant yet Underexplored Role of Family Relationship

Similar to romantic relationships, and in line with the main effect and stress-buffering models, family relationships provide social support and have beneficial effects on mental health, acting as a buffer against stressful life experiences (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). Throughout the life course, family members are connected in significant ways, serving as a vital source of social connection, influence, and emotional well-being (Bernardi 2003; Umberson et al. 2010). Substantial evidence highlights that family relationships contribute to a profound sense of meaning and purpose in life, alongside both tangible and intangible forms of social support (Thomas et al. 2017). However, family relationships can also involve conflicts, demands, and criticisms, which may create strain and harm well-being (Thoits 2010). Therefore, the closeness and quality of family ties significantly shape mental health outcomes.

Despite this, it remains unclear whether family solidarity mitigates the negative effects of relationship status and dating behavior on mental health. For example, partnered individuals might rely primarily on the love and support derived from their romantic relationship, rendering family closeness less crucial for their emotional well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008). In contrast, singles may naturally spend more time with family, making those ties especially important for their mental health (Greitemeyer 2009). Studies examining the moderating role of family relationships have yielded mixed findings. According to Adamczyk (2016), high perceived family support mitigated the negative impact of prolonged singlehood on romantic loneliness. Yet, Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) reported no evidence that a supportive network could compensate for the lack of a romantic relationship, suggesting that romantic ties may exert a unique influence due to their intimacy and emotional investment. Furthermore, little is known about whether family solidarity buffers the mental health effects of various dating behaviors—beyond simply being single or partnered—particularly in the context of online dating. In the attempt to unravel this, the last hypothesis is.

H4. *Strong family ties protect particularly individuals in the disadvantageous dating groups, namely singles, especially those engage in online dating from experiencing poor mental health.*

3 | Method

3.1 | Data and Sample

The study utilized data from the second wave of the COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study (C19 SWS) collected at the University of Antwerp, which examined various aspects of student well-being and social correlates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was sent to the students via email on 10 May 2021 (approximately 1 year into the pandemic in Belgium), and a reminder email was sent a week later, with data collection closing on 24 May. In total, it was recorded than more than 2700 students started the questionnaire. After a thorough clean-up, which includes straightening and omitting incomplete answers and answers submitted within an unrealistically short time, 2007 students who completed the entire survey remained. The survey included a focused module on students' relationship status and dating behavior, which comprises our main explanatory variables. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp, Belgium (reference number: SHW_20_38).

To align with the age range of emerging adulthood, the sample was restricted to students aged 18–29 years. Only complete cases based on the variables of interest and covariates (see Table 1 and the next section) were included. A design weight was applied to adjust for overrepresentation of certain faculties and gender,

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TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics (weighted).

Continuous variables	M	SD	α
Depressive feelings	10.92	5.07	0.872
Age	21.28	2.37	
Financial worries	1.57	0.87	
COVID-19 worries	3.67	2.52	
Family relationship	3.09	0.53	0.910
Relationship satisfaction	4.45	0.58	0.887
Single satisfaction	2.12	1.13	
Dating satisfaction	2.64	1.13	
Status satisfaction	3.23	1.41	
Categorical variables	***N***	**%**	
Gender			
Male	729	42.4	
Female	980	57.6	
Sexual orientation			
Exclusively heterosexual	1265	74.4	
Others	444	25.6	
Living situation			
Living at home	1219	71.7	
Not living at home	490	28.3	
Relationship status			
Single	934	54.7	
In a relationship	775	45.4	
Dating behavior			
In a relationship	766	45.1	
Breakup	41	2.4	
Single, not dating	576	33.8	
Single, online dating	118	6.9	
Single, offline dating	200	11.8	

Source: The second wave of the COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study (C19 SWS).

ensuring the analytical sample was more representative of the university's student population. The final weighted sample comprised 1709 students (57.6% female) with a mean age of 21.28 years (SD = 2.37). Among these, 54.9% were single, and 74.4% identified as heterosexual.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Depressive Feelings

Depressive feelings were measured using the shorter version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff 1977), an 8-item scale with good validity and reliability (Van de Velde et al. 2009). Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of having certain feelings or experiences in the past week on a 4-point Likert scales (0 = non or almost none of the time; 3 = all or almost all the time). The summated scores were used to assess depressive feelings, with higher scores indicating greater frequency of depressive complaints ($M = 10.92$, SD = 5.07, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.872$).

3.2.2 | Relationship Status and Dating Behavior

Relationship status was measured by whether the respondents were currently in a relationship or single. Next to relationship status, we computed a categorical variable, dating behavior, with five categories: (1) in a relationship, (2) breakup, (3) single, not dating, (4) single, online dating, (5) single, offline dating. This classification allows for a more nuanced understanding of the effect of relationship status combined with dating behavior. Respondents currently in a relationship who were also in a relationship within the past 12 months were categorized as "in a relationship". For the remaining categories, we used responses about dating behavior in the past 12 months. Respondents who had been in a relationship but were currently single were classified as "breakup". However, for this group, we lacked information on subsequent dating behavior. The "single, not dating" category included students who had been single for the past 12 months, had not gone on a first date, and were not currently dating. Respondents who met potential partners exclusively through online platforms (e.g., Tinder, Grindr, Pepper, Instagram) were categorized as "single, online dating". Finally, students who met potential partners offline (e.g., through school, work, or social gatherings) and were currently single were categorized as "single, offline dating". Those who engaged in both online and offline dating, although a minority (approximately 50 students), were also included in this group due to limited data on their specific dating behaviors (i.e., how active they were in online and offline dating).

3.2.3 | Status Satisfaction

We created the status satisfaction variable based on three satisfaction measures: relationship satisfaction, single satisfaction, and dating satisfaction. For respondents in a relationship, relationship satisfaction was measured using a 9-item relationship quality scale from Chonody et al. (2018). Respondents rated their satisfaction on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We recoded the negative items so that the higher the score was the better the relationship quality. The mean score across items was computed to constitute the variable. For single respondents, single satisfaction was measured with the item "I want to be in a steady romantic relationship in the near future," rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). A higher score indicated greater satisfaction with being single (i.e., less desire for a relationship). For those who had been dating in the past 12 months, dating satisfaction was measured by asking how satisfied they were with their dating life, also on a 5-point scale. Status satisfaction was then constructed by combining these measures: for those in a relationship, it reflects relationship quality; for singles not dating, it reflects single satisfaction; and for singles who had been dating, it is the average of dating and single satisfaction. The measure showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.887.

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3.2.4 | Family Relationship

Family relationships was assessed using the General Functioning subscale (12 items) of the McMaster Family Assessment Device, which measures resilience, support, closeness, and emotional communication within the family (Boterhoven de Haan et al. 2015; Byles et al. 1988; N. B. Epstein et al. 1978). It is a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores representing better family functioning. The average of the 12 items were calculated to create the measure (M = 3.09, SD = 0.53), which showed excellent internal consistency (α = 0.910).

3.2.5 | Covariates

In addition to the variables of interest, we included a set of covariates previously found to be relevant to mental health. *Financial worries* were assessed by asking how much respondents agreed with the statement, "I have sufficient financial resources to cover my monthly costs," on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). *Living situation* was recorded as a dummy variable based on whether respondents lived at home with parents, in student housing, or had other arrangements. Given that data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and that related concerns could have an impact on mental health and well-being, we included *COVID-19 worries* as a covariate. Respondents were asked how worried they were about getting (re-)infected with COVID-19 and about the severity of illness, rated on a scale from 0 (not worried at all) to 10 (very worried). The mean score across these items was computed. We also controlled for respondents' *age* (as a continuous variable), *gender* (male/female), and *sexual orientation* (exclusively heterosexual/not exclusively heterosexual).

3.3 | Analytical Strategy

Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted using R 4.1.2 and SPSS 28 to examine the predictors of depressive feelings. Seven covariates were included: age, gender, sexual orientation, financial worries, COVID-19 worries, living situation, and family relationship. In Model 1 and Model 2, we separately assessed the effects of relationship status and dating behavior. Status satisfaction was added to Model 3 and Model 4 to determine whether the effects of relationship status and dating behavior on mental health persisted, diminished, or disappeared. In Model 5 and Model 6, interaction terms (product terms) were added to test whether family ties moderated the associations between students' mental health and relationship status or dating behavior.

Our main analyses were performed using the weighted sample, as weighted results are more representative of the broader student population at the University of Antwerp. To ensure robustness, unweighted results were also analyzed and are presented in the Appendix, as they may better reflect the analysis sample and be more applicable to similar populations. Given that students engaging in both online and offline dating were grouped with those exclusively engaging in offline dating, a sensitivity analysis was performed. This check compared regression results between the single, offline dating group and the single, both online and offline dating group. No significant differences were observed; the results of the single, both online and offline dating group closely mirrored those of the single, offline dating group. Thus, combining these categories was deemed appropriate.

4 | Results

The weighted results of Model 1 revealed several significant predictors of depressive feelings. Being female (b = 0.936, SE = 0.235), having financial worries (b = 0.747, SE = 0.134), being concerned about COVID-19 (re-)infection (b = 0.136, SE = 0.046), and having LGBTQ + sexual identity (b = 1.126, SE = 0.261) were all positively associated with higher levels of depressive feelings. Students' age and living situation were not connected to their mental health. For simplicity, these covariate results are not displayed in Table 2.

As shown in Model 1 (Table 2) and consistent with our expectations, being single, compared to having a steady romantic partner and having poor family relationships, were related to greater depressive feelings. This confirms H1 that partnered students tend to report better mental health than their single counterparts. In Model 2, we examined their relationship status and dating behavior in greater detail. Compared to students in a relationship, singles who engaged in online dating and those who had not been dating were more likely to feel depressed, with the effect being approximately twice as strong for the "single, online dating" group, supporting H2. While students who experienced a breakup also exhibited elevated depressive feelings, the effect was not statistically significant—likely due to the smaller sample size. Notably, we found no significant difference in depressive feelings between the "single, offline dating" group and those in a relationship. The predicted values of depressive feelings across all dating categories are illustrated in Figure 1. As shown, students in a relationship and those engaging in offline dating reported the lowest depressive feelings, highlighting the potential protective effect of offline dating. Students who recently had a breakup showed the highest level of depressive feelings, although the estimate had a wide confidence interval.

In Model 3, status satisfaction emerged as a significant predictor of depressive feelings (b = −0.596, SE = 0.127), indicating that higher satisfaction with one's romantic life was linked to lower levels of depressive feelings. Interestingly, after accounting for status satisfaction, the effect of relationship status reversed (b = −0.790, SE = 0.366). This suggests that single individuals may experience better emotional well-being compared to their happily partnered peers when satisfaction with their singlehood is high. In Model 4, we observed that after controlling for status satisfaction, being in the "single, offline dating" group was associated with lower depressive feelings (b = −1.218, SE = 0.451) compared to those in a relationship. In other words, status satisfaction was suppressing the beneficial mental health effect of

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TABLE 2 | OLS regression models predicting students' depressive feelings (weighted).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Relationship status (ref = relationship)	0.544* (0.232)		−0.790* (0.366)		1.505 (1.337)	
Dating behavior (ref = relationship)						
Breakup		1.409^{+}		0.022		−1.842
		(0.739)		(0.796)		(5.030)
Single, not dating		0.563*		−0.768^{+}		2.774
		(0.263)		(0.393)		(1.514)
Single, online dating		1.107*		−0.184		−0.133
		(0.458)		(0.537)		(2.679)
Single, offline dating		−0.043		−1.218**		−0.774
		(0.371)		(0.451)		(2.198)
Status satisfaction			−0.596***	−0.579***	−0.609***	−0.597***
			(0.127)	(0.128)	(0.127)	(0.128)
Family relationship	−3.142***	−3.144***	−3.098***	−3.099***	−2.706***	−2.714***
	(0.216)	(0.216)	(0.215)	(0.215)	(0.307)	(0.307)
Interactions						
Family relationship x relationship status					−0.755^{+}	
					(0.423)	
Family relationship x dating behavior						
Breakup						0.575
						(1.586)
Single, not dating						−1.162*
						(0.479)
Single, online dating						−0.017
						(0.872)
Single, offline dating						−0.159
						(0.703)
Observations	1709	1709	1709	1709	1709	1709
R^2	0.182	0.185	0.192	0.195	0.194	0.198
Adjusted R^2	0.178	0.180	0.188	0.189	0.189	0.190

Note: All models include the covariates: age, gender, financial worries, COVID-19 worries, sexual orientation, and living situation. Standard error in parenthesis.*Source:* The second wave of the COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study (C19 SWS).
$^{+}p < 0.10$.
$^{*}p < 0.05$.
$^{**}p < 0.01$.
$^{***}p < 0.001$.

offline dating. When accounting for that, offline dating showed a much stronger link to lower depressive symptoms. Singles who had not been dating also appeared to have fewer depressive symptoms, albeit at a marginally significant level ($b = -0.768$, SE = 0.393, $p = 0.051$). These findings imply that status satisfaction is at least as important as, if not more so than, one's relationship status or dating behavior, lending partial support to H3. Given the significant role of status satisfaction in previous models, it was included as a control variable in Model 5 onward.

Next, the results indicated that family ties moderated the relationship between relationship status and depressive feelings at the 10% significance level (Model 5). Strong family relationships appeared to shield singles from poor mental health more effectively than their partnered counterparts, while poor family relationships exacerbated depressive feelings among singles to a greater extent. Model 6 revealed that the negative association between family solidarity and depressive feelings was most pronounced among single individuals who had not been dating ($b = -1.162$, SE = 0.479). This finding suggests that lower levels of family support were linked to higher depressive feelings in this group. Overall, these results provided partial support for H4. The findings from the unweighted sample (Table A1) closely mirrored those of the weighted sample, demonstrating similar directions, magnitudes, and significance levels, thereby confirming the robustness of our results.

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In addition to testing the hypothesized associations, we found that the effect of dating behavior on mental health was moderated by an individual's level of COVID-19 worries (post-hoc analysis results). As aforementioned, the more concerned someone was about COVID-19 (re-)infection, the more depressed they felt. Our interaction results revealed that this effect was even stronger for those engaging in offline dating (the purple line of Figure 2). In other words, while offline dating was generally associated with better mental health, this was not the case for students who were worried about getting (re-)infected with COVID-19.

5 | Discussion

In the current study, we explored the extent to which and how college students' relationship status and dating behavior may benefit or harm their precarious position in terms of mental health. Next to examining online dating, we considered whether they were dating offline, not dating, and the role of status satisfaction and family solidarity, offering a perspective that is often absent in the current literature.

Our findings first indicated that being in a relationship, compared to being single, was associated with lower levels of depressive feelings, in line with the well-documented expectation that romantic relationships provide social support and intimacy, which are beneficial for mental health (Cohen and Wills 1985; Kawachi and Berkman 2001). Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, one can expect the stress-buffering effect of being in a relationship to be stronger. However, the effect reversed after accounting for status satisfaction. This aligns with previous studies showing that how individuals feel about their

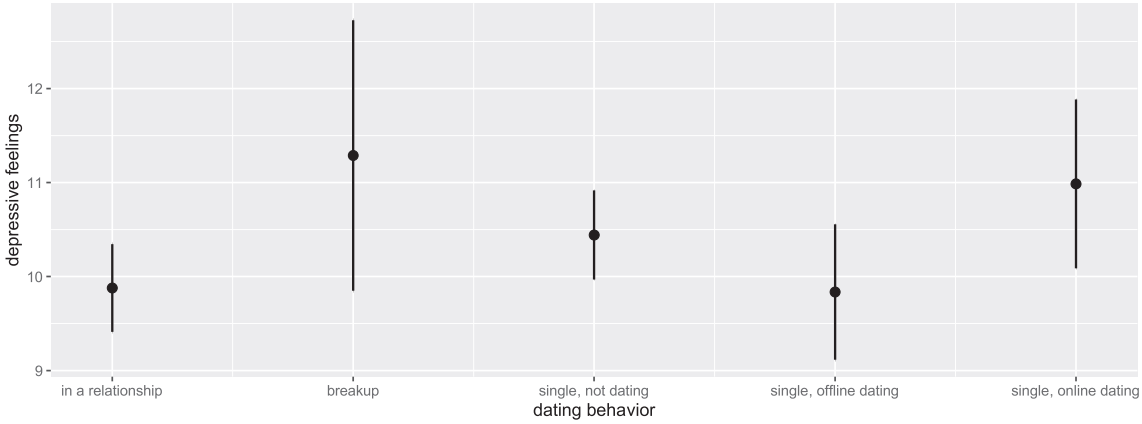


FIGURE 1 | Predicted values of depressive feelings by dating behavior on the *x*-axis (Model 2 of Table 2). *Source:* The second wave of the COVid-19 international student well-being study (C19 SWS).

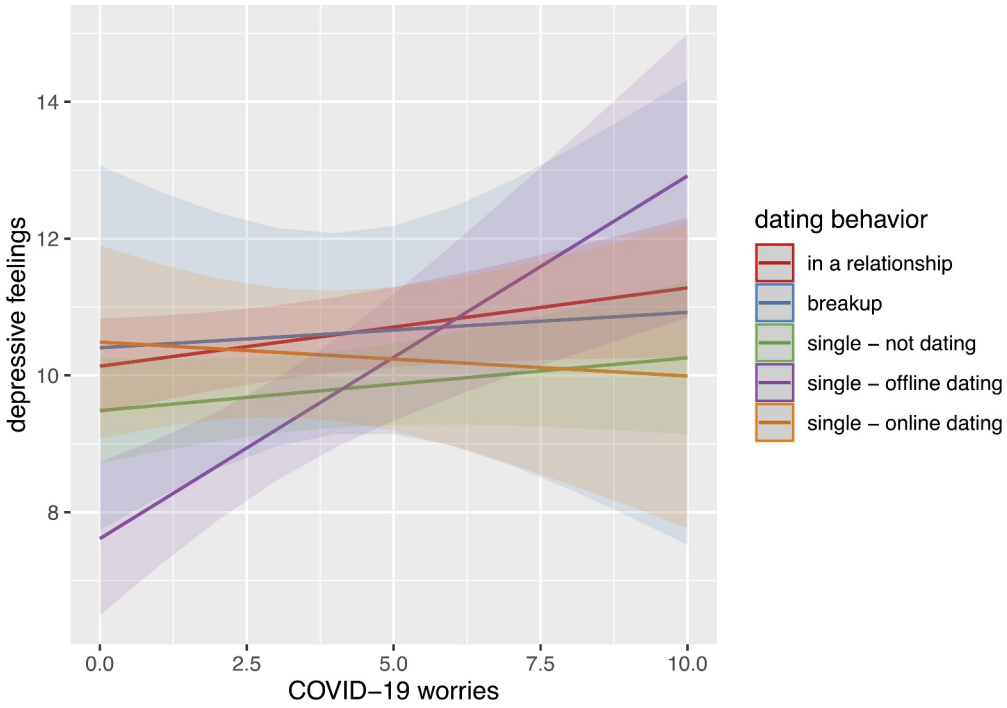


FIGURE 2 | Predicted values of depressive feelings by dating behavior and COVID-19 worries (post-hoc analysis results). *Source:* The second wave of the COVID-19 International student well-being study (C19 SWS).

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relationship status—whether single or partnered—is a stronger predictor of mental health than relationship status itself (Adamczyk 2017; Lehmann et al. 2015). Relationships can also be stressful, requiring considerable mental energy when difficulties arise (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008), Thus, unsatisfied singles may, in fact, be happier than unsatisfied non-singles. This is especially relevant given that the data were collected during the pandemic. Social distancing and lockdowns may have added stress to relationships, especially for couples who were not living together or those forced to spend more time together, potentially increasing interpersonal stress (Balzarini et al. 2020; Karney et al. 2005; Tepeli Temiz and Elsharnouby 2022).

Second, we observed that experiencing a breakup, engaging in online dating, and not dating at all were associated with increased depressive feelings compared to being in a steady romantic relationship. It was not surprising that online daters reported the most significant negative mental health effects, aligning with several recent studies (Castro and Barrada 2020; Her and Timmermans 2020; Holtzhausen et al. 2020; Portingale et al. 2022). However, once status satisfaction was considered, these negative effects weakened, suggesting that how satisfied individuals are with their relationship and dating status plays a bigger role in mental health than the mere status per se. Notably, singles who engaged in offline dating had fewer depressive complaints, similar to those in a relationship. This effect was particularly pronounced after controlling for status satisfaction, indicating that offline dating is uniquely linked to better mental health independent of how satisfied they were with the dating mode compared to other relationship and dating categories.

Overall, our results suggest that for single students, offline dating or a combination of online and offline dating may be associated with better mental health, followed by not dating and engaging in only online dating. More than merely being single, those who engage in online dating may experience negative situations—such as unsolicited photos, dating fatigue, and rejection—that can harm their well-being (Pronk and Denissen 2020; Thompson 2018), depending on the frequency and success of their dating efforts (Her and Timmermans 2020). The experience of online dating may thus be mentally exhausting. In contrast, offline dating, appears to offer students positive experiences of companionship, fun, and intimacy (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Mongeau et al. 2007), as well as opportunities for romantic exploration that emerging adults particularly crave (Arnett 2015; Arnett 2000), without the psychological strain associated with online dating. This corresponds to the social presence theory, which posits that face-to-face interactions offer richer emotional cues, greater warmth, and less impersonal exchanges than online-based media (Rice 1992; Whitty 2013), which may in turn support better mental health.

As for the interaction effects, we found some overarching trends. Having a supportive family relationship was associated with fewer depressive feelings, particularly among single students as opposed to those in a relationship, and among singles who had not been dating compared to the other dating categories. The stronger their family ties, the less likely they were to experience depressive feelings. This finding aligns with the main and stress-buffering effect models and previous research showing that family functioning benefits mental health by providing social support, meaning, and purpose in life (Kawachi and Berkman 2001; Thomas et al. 2017). Students who were in a relationship or engaged in dating may have already received the needed social support through their interactions, which could explain why family relationships were most crucial for singles who were not dating (Greitemeyer 2009; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008). Contrary to expectations, family relationships did not appear to offer greater protection for singles who engaged in online dating. This suggests that family support may not be sufficient enough to counteract the negative mental health impact associated with online dating. Overall, our findings support the idea that the effects of relationship and dating status on mental health vary depending on individuals' family connections, corroborating previous research (Adamczyk 2016).

Our post-hoc analysis showcases how pandemic-related health concerns may play a role in shaping mental health outcomes associated with dating behavior. While offline dating is typically associated with better mental health, this benefit appears to diminish—and may even reverse—when individuals are highly concerned about COVID-19 (re-)infection. In such cases, offline dating may become a source of additional stress, potentially due to perceived health risks or anxiety around in-person interactions. Such finding challenges the assumptions of the stress-buffering model, which posits that social relationships protect individuals from the adverse effects of stress (Cohen and Wills 1985). Rather than buffering against pandemic-related worries, offline dating may intensify them, leading to poorer mental health outcomes. This underscores the importance of context in evaluating the psychological effects of dating behaviors, particularly during periods of heightened health uncertainty.

Being the first to contrast mental health of online dating users with individuals engaging in offline dating and those who do not date, this research offers significant insights into the evolving nature of romantic relationships in the digital age. With singlehood rates on the rise across European countries (van den Berg and Verbakel 2022) and emerging adulthood recognized as an "age of independence" (Rosenfeld 2007), understanding the mental health of singles across diverse dating contexts is increasingly important. For those seeking romantic relationships, offline dating or a combination of online and offline dating appears more beneficial for mental health than exclusively online dating. Meeting new people face-to-face offers opportunities for meaningful connection and exploration while mitigating some of the adverse experiences often associated with digital platforms. Conversely, singles engaging in online dating should approach it cautiously, being mindful of its potential mental health challenges. For individuals who do not prioritize dating, fostering strong family relationships may serve as a protective factor for mental health by providing emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to establish causality. While relationship status, dating behavior, and status satisfaction may influence mental health, the reverse direction is equally plausible (Falconier et al. 2015). Second, the dataset lacked detailed information about the dating behaviors of

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participants who experienced a breakup and did not account for other sources of social support, such as friendships. Third, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, particularly in discussing sensitive topics like mental health and romantic life. Moreover, the data only captured the modes of dating the participants engaged in, without exploring the quality, frequency, motive, or success of these interactions. This limits a nuanced understanding of the differential effects of online versus offline dating. Offline dating's apparent mental health benefits, as suggested by this study, particularly merit further exploration. Additionally, the large proportion of "single, not dating" participants (approximately 75% of all singles), possibly influenced by the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the need for more research on this understudied group. Future studies, especially those using longitudinal designs, are encouraged to investigate how relationship status, dating behavior, and mental health evolve over time. Finally, the socioeconomic and demographic variation of our sample is limited, based on social selection related to university enrollment. It is important to keep in mind that our results may be more generalizable to college students in high- or middle-income countries, particularly those in Europe, and less so to the less privileged emerging adult population.

In the age of the internet, participation in online dating may feel inevitable. It is undeniably a convenient way to meet and connect, particularly with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Cacioppo et al. 2013; Potarca 2020). However, our findings suggest that offline dating is more strongly associated with better mental health outcomes than online-only dating. This raises intriguing possibilities for platforms like *Breeze*, a new mobile dating application designed to blend online convenience with offline connections by facilitating in-person dates and reducing online interactions. Such hybrid models may represent a critical innovation in the dating landscape, potentially addressing some of the adverse mental health effects linked to exclusively online dating. Future research could explore the specific mechanisms through which these platforms operate, examining whether they provide healthier dating experiences by combining the exploration and intimacy of offline dating with the diversity and accessibility of digital interactions.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp, Belgium (reference number: SHW_20_38).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Appendix

TABLE A1 | OLS regression models predicting students' depressive feelings (unweighted).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Relationship status (ref = relationship)	0.615** (0.232)		−0.601 (0.371)		2.733* (1.328)	
Dating behavior (ref = relationship)						
Breakup		1.564*		0.330		1.881
		(0.710)		(0.769)		(4.594)
Single, not dating		0.622*		−0.598		3.762*
		(0.262)		(0.398)		(1.498)
Single, online dating		1.055*		−0.117		0.992
		(0.467)		(0.548)		(2.812)
Single, offline dating		0.099		−0.978*		0.595
		(0.376)		(0.459)		(2.212)
Status satisfaction			−0.542***	−0.528***	−0.561***	−0.552***
			(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.131)
Family relationship	−3.086***	−3.085***	−3.043***	−3.041***	−2.478***	−2.482***
	(0.215)	(0.215)	(0.214)	(0.215)	(0.304)	(0.304)
Interactions						
Family relationship x relationship status					−1.097**	
					(0.420)	
Family relationship x dating behavior						
Breakup						−0.524
						(1.456)
Single, not dating						−1.430**
						(0.474)
Single, online dating						−0.370
						(0.916)
Single, offline dating						−0.529
						(0.707)
Observations	1709	1709	1709	1709	1709	1709
R^2	0.179	0.182	0.188	0.190	0.191	0.194
Adjusted R^2	0.176	0.177	0.184	0.184	0.186	0.187

Note: All models include the covariates: age, gender, financial worries, COVID-19 worries, sexual orientation, and living situation. Standard error in parenthesis.Source: The second wave of the COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study (C19 SWS).
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

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