

Experiences of Initiating and Maintaining Romantic Relationships Among Adults with Acne: A Qualitative Study

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Why is this research important?

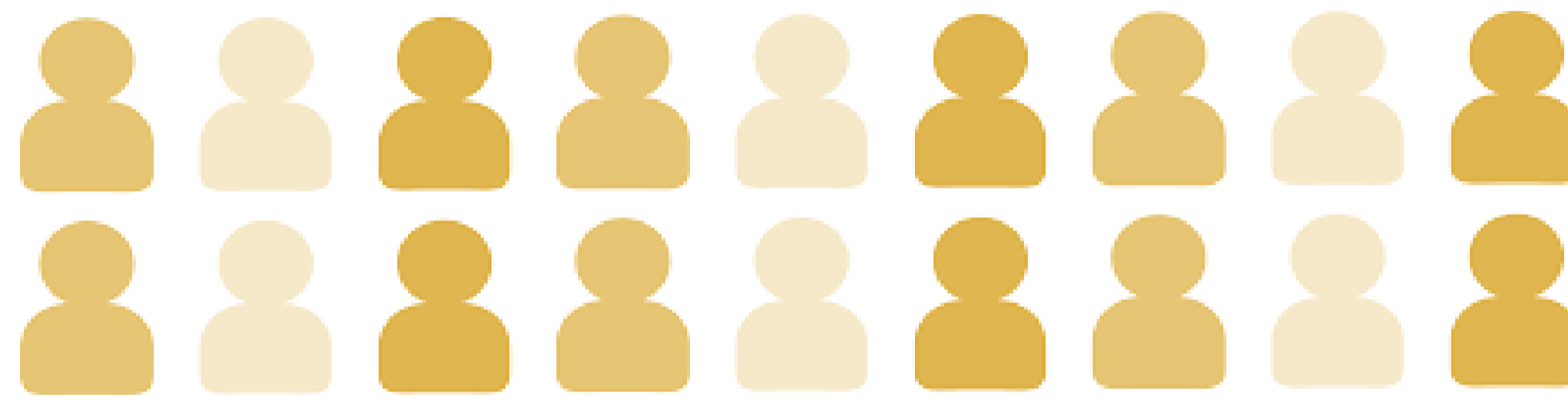
Acne can significantly affect individuals' quality of life and those with acne may encounter negative stigmatisation from others (1; 2). Previous research shows that those with acne may experience an impaired sense of attractiveness, negative body image views, avoidance of intimacy and sexual acts, and feelings of romantic rejection (3). There is little qualitative research on how acne impacts romantic relationships among adults carried out in the UK.

Aim:

To explore the experiences of initiating and maintaining romantic relationships among adults with acne in the UK

How was the research conducted?

15 participants



Participants were recruited through social media, acne charities, and snowball sampling before being checked against the inclusion criteria:



- Aged 18+
- Has acne or acne scars
- Lives in the UK

- Aged between 20 and 36 years old ($M = 23.2$ years old)
- 7 females, 8 males
- Ethnicity; White British ($n = 9$), Black British ($n = 2$), Black American ($n = 1$), Mixed ($n = 2$), and Asian ($n = 1$)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and inductive reflexive thematic analysis (4) was carried out.

"It (acne) would just make me more, self-conscious and, not wanting to like, leave the house and then like I said, just miss out on doing stuff with the partner"
(Male, 20, medium severity)

Participants explained how they sometimes received negative reactions from peers and the wider society. This would cause them to withdraw from social situations and, at times, this affected their intimacy with their significant other. Participants expressed feelings of powerlessness over their acne and employed a variety of coping strategies, including concealment of visible acne during intimacy. Participants' self-confidence in their visual appearance improved as time spent in their romantic relationships increased.

"I'd worry that like, he would look at me and just think, oh gosh like, don't really wanna, you know, do anything with her cause, like, yeah, so, mostly just my-my biggest thing was like he would look at me and think I was ugly."
(Female, 20, low severity)

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What did the participants say?

"Will this person accept the acne? Will this person accept me for who I am or like .. am I too like ugly for them kind of thing and then like that kind of effects how I would choose ... my next partner. Like I might kind of, go for someone who ... I wouldn't find necessarily attractive, but like I would be like, well, you know, if I don't find them attractive and you know, then I'm setting the bar low and I'm kind of like, saving my own heart, if that makes sense, like ... I don't wanna be rejected. So if I choose someone who I don't find attractive, then ... because of the acne then ... I'd feel like a bit safer in a relationship." (Male, 22, low severity)

"it (acne) can make you feel a little bit less secure, a little bit less confident in yourselves. And in how attractive your partner finds you." (Female, 22, low severity)

What are the implications of this study?

These results suggest that negative reactions from peers and the wider society can negatively impact an individual's self-confidence to engage in romantic relationships and intimacy. Furthermore, their current and potential significant other's perception of their appearance held great importance and often created a barrier to forming and maintaining social relationships, especially romantic ones. Self-management interventions and healthcare professionals should provide individuals with acne advice and support to enhance their psychological and sexual well-being.

SUPPORT

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