

Research Paper

Perceived Nature and Characteristics of Dating Violence among Young Adults in Bengaluru

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ABSTRACT

Dating violence in India has been under researched. It has serious consequences that must be addressed and prevented. Understanding the perception of young adults towards dating violence, its characteristics and nature can guide measures to prevent it. A survey was administered to 344 young adults of Bengaluru to understand how they perceive dating violence, its types, prevalence, influence of media and gender, help-seeking behaviors, and skills required to avoid or walk out of abusive dating relationships. The results showed that young adults acknowledged the presence of dating violence, but they did not show complete understanding of what constitutes it, its various types, and ways to seek help. The perceived prevalence of different types of dating abuse was in the order of emotional abuse, verbal abuse, economic abuse, social abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, technological abuse, and cultural/spiritual abuse. Results also revealed that young adults were more likely to seek informal than professional help for dating abuse. The participants outlined their views on the influence of gender and media on dating violence, characteristics of various forms of dating violence and the skills that could be cultivated to prevent and walk out of abusive dating relationships. These findings guide future researches to create adequate evidence-based and tailor made- awareness, prevention and intervention programs for young adults, families and schools to prevent dating violence and its dire consequences.

Keywords: Dating Violence, Young Adults, Abuse, Survey, Intimate Partner Violence, Dating, Relationships

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Received: April 09, 2021; Revision Received: May 06, 2021; Accepted: May 20, 2021

Dating violence can be seen as any form of abuse that occurs between two people in a dating relationship. The abuser or the perpetrator is the person who causes fear, humiliation and exercises control, while the victim is the one subjected to such acts. Intimate partner violence reaches its peak in adolescence and young adulthood (Wolfe, Werkerle, Scott, Straatman, Grasley, & Rietzel-Jaffe, 2003), specifically in college students causing serious physical and psychological consequences (Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari & Leung, 2008; Holmes & Sher, 2013, Uttech, 2012). Though numerous studies reveal that the majority of victims are females, both females and males can be victims of dating violence (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway 2001; Breiding, Chen, Black, 2014). From the Indian context, in a study exploring urban Karnataka specifically, the prevalence of violence against intimate partners in educated society was found to be 40.5% (Kundapur, Shetty, Kempaller, Kumar & Anurupa, 2017).

There are various dimensions across which dating violence can be observed. According to APA, sexual abuse involves forcing the partner to take part in sexual intercourse without their consent by making threats or taking advantage of the victim (Kazdin, 2000). Emotional abuse includes controlling behaviors ranging from coercion and threats, insulting, yelling, demeaning, degrading, scapegoating and intimidation (Abowitz, Knox, & Zusman, 2010). While physical abuse is physical aggression where the perpetrator's cause temporary physical pain or injury to the victim with or without intention (Mouradian, 2000). Social abuse focuses on isolating the victim from family or friends and purposefully disconnecting them by using threats, force or persuasion (Mouradian, 2000). Economic abuse is difficult to identify and the most understudied. It involves controlling and creating economic dependency by preventing the victim from accessing bank accounts, jobs, stealing money or actively interfering with expenditure (Stylianou, 2018). Digital or technological abuse refers to abuse using digital technology like threatening phone calls, text messages, publicly bullying online or posting intimate images without consent (Al-Alosi, 2017). Controlling the partner's cultural or spiritual beliefs is spiritual and cultural abuse that involves belittling partner's cultural/spiritual beliefs and practices, preventing or forcing the partner from following or practicing a certain belief and manipulating the partner regarding the same (Heather & Kate, 2017). However, there are many other subtler actions that fall under each of these types of dating abuse. Such behaviors are largely understudied.

The acceptance of dating violence, has been greatly normalized by media (Kohlman, Baig, Balice, DiRubbo, Plancencia, Skale, et al., 2014). This makes it difficult for victims to avoid and leave abusive relationships. Different factors like, internal factors (for e.g., love as a reason), perpetrator factors (such as emotional abuse distorting the victim's sense of reality), and social factors influence adolescents to stay in an abusive relationship (Uttech, 2012). Various researches hint at intervening to teach the youth necessary life skills to curb dating violence, one of them being the bystander skills (Noonan & Charles, 2009). It is important to recognize such necessary skills and tailor interventions around them to prevent dating violence.

Help-seeking behaviour for dating violence is uncommon both among perpetrators as well as victims (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). They are more prone to seek informal (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Hedge, Sianko, & McDonnell, 2016) than professional help. Common support systems for adolescents in abusive relationships include family, school affiliated adults, friends, and anonymous support (Uttech, 2012). While informal help seeking is often beneficial for victims and perpetrators, informal help-givers may not be prepared to provide adequate support for issues like dating violence (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008).

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Sensitizing and training primary stakeholders, by bolstering supportive relationships with family and peers might improve help seeking behaviors.

There is a lack of literature on dating violence in India. Its various types, and forms haven't been acknowledged. This article tries to understand how college going young adults of Bengaluru perceive dating violence, its characteristics, influence of gender and media on it, help seeking behavior, and skills required to prevent and leave abusive dating relationships from the socio-cultural context of India. This survey is also an attempt to psychoeducate the youth about different forms and characteristics of various types of dating abuse. The results obtained can guide awareness, intervention and prevention programs against dating violence.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To understand the perceived prevalence of dating violence and its types among young adults
- To understand the perceived characteristics of dating violence and its types among young adults
- To understand the perceived influence of media on dating violence
- To understand the role of gender on dating violence
- To understand help-seeking behavior among survivors of dating violence
- To understand the skills required to prevent an abusive dating relationship
- To understand the skills required to get out of an abusive dating relationship

Sample

A survey was administered to 344 college-going young adults of Bengaluru in 2019. The respondents were between the ages of 18-26 years. 69.8 % of respondents were females and 29.9 % males. The rest of them categorized them as others, or as prefer not to say. 95.9% of them were pursuing their undergraduate degree, and 4.1% were post-graduate students. Convenience sampling was used to collect data.

Instruments

A semi-structured survey was administered to all participants through google form. It consisted of open and close-ended questions, including multiple-choice questions, ratings, short and long text and ranking questions. The design of the questionnaire was guided by review of literature, and expert review. All questions had a separate option of 'others'- a short text paragraph, for participants to add their special comments or observations.

The multiple-choice questions followed a 5-point Likert scale, and were used to assess the perceived prevalence and characteristics of verbal, physical, economic, social, sexual, emotional, technological dating abuse. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree to strongly disagree, each carrying a point of 5,4,3,2,1 respectively.

The participants were asked to indicate how prevalent they perceived dating abuse on the whole, and its different types, on a 5-point Likert scale of extremely prevalent, quiet prevalent, neutral, somewhat prevalent and not at all prevalent. They were then asked to rank the 8 different types of abuse from 1 to 8, where 1 would stand for the most prevalent type of abuse, and 8 for the least. Participants were then given a list of statements that characterized different forms of dating violence. An attempt was made to cover all aspects,

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including the subtler manifestations of different forms of abuse, to sensitize the youth. They had to tick/check the statements they perceived would categorize the particular form of abuse. This would show young adults' level of awareness about dating abuse, its types, and its red flags. Hence, the survey also served the purpose of psychoeducation.

The participants again on a 5-point-Liket scale had to agree/disagree the extent to which media had normalized dating violence. The participants were asked the question- who was more likely to be abused in terms of gender. This multiple-choice question had the options- male, female and all.

Participants then, had to rank the likelihood of dating violence victim's help seeking on a 5-point Likert scale of always, often, sometimes, rarely, never. They were also asked who would they be more likely to approach in cases of dating violence. Other open-ended questions asked the participants to list down the skills they perceive would help young adults avoid abusive dating relationship, and walk out of them. The purpose of this question was to develop evidence-based, need-based, tailor made interventions on such skills then.

Procedure

The survey was administered through google form. Informed consent was taken and all necessary ethical requirements met. A total of 347 participants responded. The data which did not match the sample criteria was removed, amounting to a total of 344 responses. The data was then subjected to statistical analysis including percentage analysis, frequency, mean and finally, thematic analysis for the open-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results revealed that young adults have a fair idea of what dating violence is, but are not completely aware of what it constitutes, influence of gender and media on it, and how to go about seeking help. Majority of the participants (45.1%), perceived that at least 1-3 cases in 10 dating relationships, involved dating violence, while 43.6% of them believed that 4-6 cases of 10 dating relationships were abusive. 6.1 % of participants felt it was 7-9 cases in 10 relationships, while 5.2 % believed that there were no cases of dating violence at all.

When the respondents were asked to rank the order of prevalence of different type of abuse, emotional abuse ranked first, followed by verbal, economic, social, physical, sexual, technological and cultural/spiritual abuse. The perceived prevalence of different types of dating violence has been shown in Table 1. Although young adults acknowledged the prevalence and occurrence of various kinds of dating violence, it can be inferred that the perceived prevalence of spiritual/cultural, and economic abuse was underestimated, and participants took a neutral stance on it. This reveals the lack of awareness about such forms of dating violence, reinforcing its subtle nature of manifestation. The most prevalent forms of abuse were emotional and social abuse. The presence of verbal and sexual abuse too was recognized. Spiritual/cultural and physical abuse in dating relationships were considered to be least prevalent.

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Table No. 1 Perceived Prevalence of Dating Violence

Forms of Dating Violence	Extremely prevalent	Quite prevalent	Neutral	Somewhat prevalent	Not at all prevalent
Verbal abuse	11.6%	57.0%	17.2%	13.4%	0.9%
Physical abuse	9.3%	42.2%	20.6%	25.3%	2.6%
Economic abuse	16.6%	38.7%	22.1%	21.5%	1.2%
Social abuse	29.4%	41.6%	14.5%	13.4%	1.2%
Sexual abuse	24.4%	41.9%	17.4%	14.0%	2.3%
Spiritual/Cultural abuse	11.9%	28.2%	27.9%	27.0%	4.9%
Emotional abuse	38.4%	41.3%	11%	8.7%	0.6%
Technological abuse	19.8%	41.6%	20.1%	15.1%	3.5%

Apart from perceived prevalence of dating violence, its perceived nature and characteristics too were examined (Table 2).

Table No. 2 Perceived Nature and Characteristics of Dating Violence

Perceived Characteristics of Verbal Abuse	Percentage
Manipulating and brainwashing	87.5
Withholding information from partner	40.1
Ridiculing partner's opinions/interest	68.6
Intentional use of sarcasm	55.0
Using inappropriate words/names purposefully to hurt one's partner	87.8
Raising voice against partner	39.8
Others (doubting, blackmailing, commenting on the partner, forcing, hitting).	4.50
Perceived Characteristics of Physical Abuse	Percentage
Throwing things to intimidate partner	77.6
Denying medical attention when needed	65.4
Using weapon against the partner	89.5
Force feeding or denying food	66.0
Reckless driving with intention to harm	75.3
Biting or Scratching	70.3
Pushing	67.2
Punching and Slapping	89.5
Strangling and Grabbing	86.3
Others (non-consensual sex, disturbing sleep, screaming)	3.60
Perceived Characteristics of Economic Abuse	Percentage
Borrowing money and not returning it	58.1
Controlling expenditure	53.8
Not paying their share in common expenses	68.9
Making one feel guilty about not spending for the partner	70.9
Running up debts in the partner's name	79.7
Making financial decisions without taking partners opinion	69.2
Taking partner's money without permission	79.1
Not letting the partner earn	79.4
Others (using money to blackmail the partner, scrutinizing partners income etc.)	0.60
Perceived Characteristics of Social Abuse	Percentage
Isolating the partner from others	87.2
Controlling the partners contact with family	93.0
Continuously criticizing partner' friends and family	82.6
Humiliating the partner in front of others	90.1
Spreading secrets or rumors about the partner	79.9
Monitoring partners whereabouts	74.1
Others (checking partner's phone unnecessarily, undermining partner's social needs, hiring a detective to monitor partner and breaking partner's friendships)	1.20
Perceived Characteristics of Sexual Abuse	Percentage
Filming sexual act without permission	90.1
Forcing the partner to engage in sexual activities	96.2
Causing pain and humiliation through sexual activity	86.3

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Forcing the partner to engage in unprotected sex	88.7
Engaging in unprotected sex with partner without their knowledge	87.8
Forcing the partner to engage in prostitution	89.0
Inappropriate touching which makes the partner uncomfortable	87.5
Forcing the partner to watch pornography	78.2
Others (withholding information about risks of sexual activity, continuing the act when consent has been revoked)	2.70
Perceived Characteristics of Cultural/Spiritual Abuse	Percentage
Ridiculing the partners culture	77.0
Preventing one's partner from practicing their religion/culture	88.4
Preventing one's partner from being a part of their cultural groups	78.5
Forcing one's partner to convert their religion	89.0
Manipulating spiritual readings and practices to justify undesirable actions	77.3
None of the above	2.00
Others	0.30
Perceived Characteristics of Emotional Abuse	Percentage
Trivializing, dismissing, or invalidating partner's feelings	82.0
Being unwilling to adapt to partner's needs and expectations	69.8
Expecting one's partner to sacrifice their needs in order to meet one's own	81.7
Getting angry at disagreements	59.0
Blaming partner for one's own fault	72.4
Blackmailing the partner	86.6
Being Patronizing	59.6
Making one's partner feel guilty	65.4
Never admitting when one is wrong	68.6
Threatening one's partner	79.4
Others (asking for nude pictures and sharing without consent)	0.60
Perceived Characteristics of Technological Abuse	Percentage
Intimidating/threatening the partner via cell phone, texts or email	84.3
Accessing the partner's account without their consent or knowledge	89.2
Posting and circulating inappropriate content without the partners knowledge	89.0
Monitoring the partner's phone calls, messages and social media	81.1
Sending obscene and nonconsensual sexual messages to the partner	80.2
Digitally manipulating partner's images, recordings etc.	83.4
Tracking the partners location without their knowledge	73.3
Making inappropriate trolls or memes	64.5
None of the above	0.60
Others	0.60

It can be seen that participants weren't able to distinguish clearly between different types of abuse. Most participants did not characterize- being patronizing, raising voice against the partner, making inappropriate trolls or memes on the partner, etc. as dating violence. Such subtler expressions of abuse were ignored, and overlooked. This shows the lack of awareness, and clarity about it. This hints at the minimal exposure, discussions and engagements young adults have had with topics like those of dating abuse.

The distinction between verbal, physical, sexual and emotional abuse was blur. A participant responded hitting, black mailing, doubting under verbal abuse, though hitting falls under physical abuse, and the latter two under emotional abuse. Some participants categorized non-consensual sex, under physical and not sexual abuse, asking for and sharing nude pictures under emotional and not sexual abuse, and screaming under physical and not verbal abuse. Some participants (N=7,2) felt none of the given statements on cultural/spiritual and technological abuse characterized it, showing lack of awareness about these forms of dating violence. Scrutinizing partners income, and using money for blackmailing partner were two additional responses added by participants under economic abuse, showing their understanding about economic abuse. Similarly, participants added to the category of social

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abuse-checking partner's phone unnecessarily, undermining partner's social needs, hiring a detective to monitor partner and breaking partner's friendships, showing their ability to grasp nuances of social abuse.

37.2% of the participants agreed, and 14.5% of them strongly agreed that media had normalized dating violence. 24.7% of them were neutral, 20.6% of them disagreed and 2.9% of them strongly disagreed. Various forms of dating abuse, especially subtler forms like sexist humor, unacceptable language are often glorified in the media. Such abusive behaviors subconsciously are fed into young minds, as something that matches the prevalent gender norms. Popular media downplays and makes issues of dating violence seem less important, contributing to its normalized acceptance (Kohlman, Baig, Balice, DiRubbo, Plancencia, Skale, et al., 2014). This is then taken as reference, to model one's dating relationship. This could be a primary reason for the increase in dating violence. Awareness about the influence of media on dating violence is very important to prevent expressions of dating violence from getting normalized. This awareness can help young adults distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Media could also be used as a channel to promote this awareness.

The social construct of gender is of importance in the discussion about dating violence. While only 0.9% of the respondents believed that males are more likely to be the victims of dating violence, it is not surprising to see almost one half of the respondents (48.8%) believing that women are more likely to be victims. Crimes against women have been rising steadily since 2010 (Saha & Saha, 2017). This view can also stem from a generalized understanding of domestic violence and abuse in India. What is new is an almost equal number of respondents believing that dating violence can be experienced by anyone, irrespective of their gender (49.1%). The rest gave other responses. Such an understanding will help young adults be vigilant in identifying red flags of dating abuse and seeking help at the earliest.

Very few researches in India talk about help-seeking behaviour for dating violence. If the youth isn't aware of dating violence, naturally the help-seeking behaviour will be low. 60% of dating abuse survivors, and 79% of perpetrators sought no help (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). Aligning with such studies, 57.6% of the survey respondents believed that victims of dating violence rarely seek help. 29.7% thought that they seek help sometimes, while 3.2% of them still believed that victims of dating abuse never seek help. Only 6.7% and 2.9% of them believed that victims of dating violence seek help often, and always respectively. Help seeking in itself is stigmatized. This is the reason for lack of reported cases of dating violence.

On the open-ended questions of who would one approach if faced by dating violence, majority of participants were likely to approach their friends. They were followed by those who indicated they would approach their family first, while very few of them believed they would approach the victim's parents, psychologists, lawyers, police and related professionals. Some other responses included approaching siblings, one's inner self, and some showed confusion, being unaware of whom to approach. These results align with other researches revealing that victims of dating violence usually seek informal help and support from their peers who might not be equipped to guide them appropriately (Ashley & Foshee, 2005, Ocampo, Shelley & Jaycox, 2007). The role of social support cannot be overstated in the process of overcoming dating violence, or preventing it. Parental support, attachment, and peer support play a crucial role in protecting individuals from abuse in interpersonal

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relationships (Greenman & Matsuda, 2016). However, the aim should be to seek the ‘right’ professional help from those who are expert at it. Various reasons for not seeking help could be lack of insight and awareness about dating violence, fear of parents/teachers/peers, fear of relationship failures, etc. Bolstering healthy relationships with friends, family, and providing psychoeducation to families, and schools could increase formal help seeking behaviors.

Implications of this survey require measures for preventing dating violence. Understanding the skills that young adults perceive as necessary to avoid abusive relationships and walk out of them are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Skills required to avoid and walk out of an abusive relationship

Skills to prevent abusive dating relationships	Skills to aid walking out of abusive dating relationships
Awareness to notice its red flags	Courage
Mutual respect between partners	Help seeking behaviors
High self-esteem, self-respect and self-awareness	High self-confidence, self-respect and self-love
Assertiveness	Self-awareness
Reasoning and Rational thinking	Clarity of mind
Self-Control	Communication skills
Empathy	Awareness about related laws
Courage	

Effective interventions targeting (i) relationship skills (communication, fostering mutual respect, trust, empathy, healthy boundaries), (ii) awareness programs (on types and expressions of dating violence, busting related myths, understanding its risk and protective factors, legal literacy on pertinent laws), (iii) ways to seek help, and fostering seeking ‘right’ kind of help, (iv) sensitizing the youth, families and schools on dating violence, (v) cultivating life skills (assertiveness, self-respect, self-confidence, courage, self-control, bystander skills) etc. can prepare young adults for fighting dating violence. Colleges can tie up with professionals to equip Indian college students with such skills, promoting healthy coping and help-seeking behaviors. Off lately, a gender lens has been used to deliver such interventions, where young adults can deconstruct gender role expectations (Exner-Cortens, Wright, Hurlock, Carter, Krause, & Crooks, 2019), and target related stereotypes. This approach might fit very well in the Indian context. It is evident that educating individuals early on about healthy relationships can help in identifying unhealthy relationship patterns (Breiding, Chen & Black, 2014). This survey clearly indicates the need for the society to address the rising issue of dating violence, and make the youth equipped for identifying, preventing and dealing with it.

CONCLUSION

On understanding youth’s perception of dating violence, evidence-based, targeted interventions can be designed and implemented to prevent dating abuse, and promote help seeking behaviors. Awareness campaigns on different types of dating abuse, legal literacy on prevention of dating abuse, interventions on building life skills to promote healthy relationship and avoid abusive ones can be delivered. Future studies can conduct interviews with survivors and perpetrators of dating abuse, to better understand the potential help that can be provided. The need of the hour is to increase the knowledge and research base of dating violence in India, to curb its rise, and dire consequences.

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process. The authors thank MUKTHA Foundation, and Ms. Ashwini NV under who's guidance this study was conducted.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Jhala S, Anagha R, Alaaghu M, Ashwathi P, Mathew A R, Nair A M, Balaji B & Chaithanya B S (2021). Perceived Nature and Characteristics of Dating Violence among Young Adults in Bengaluru. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 9*(2), 1005-1014. DIP:18.01.104.20210902, DOI:10.25215/0902.104