

## Dating Relationships among Emerging Adults: A Qualitative Exploration for a Problem Definition

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### ABSTRACT

Colloquially, with globalization, dating relationships in India have been gaining traction, leaving the construct understudied. Operationalization of dating relationships in previous literature appears to lack the all-important synergy of individual and contextual influences that could determine an individual's experience— a consideration that must be accounted for by emerging research. We offer a qualitative exploration of a problem definition for dating relationships contextualized to emerging adults in urban Bangalore, India. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 individuals, across two categories: 13 who identified as having dated before and 14 as not having dated. The thematic analysis of data emergent from an expert-validated interview schedule, concluded in four global themes spanning the individual and contextual factors influencing participants' understanding of 'dating relationships'.

**Keywords:** *Dating Relationships, Problem Definition, Contextual Influences, Emerging Adults, Urban Bangalore.*

Seeing someone, sleeping with, being a thing, flings, hookups, relationships - despite seemingly glaring differences between these terms, they are all indicative of dating relationships. This leads one to consider - What is a dating relationship?

Historically in the Western context, dating was used as a forethought for selecting a partner, however, individuals of the current generation adopt it as an experimental strategy, seeking compatibility (Villanueva, 2015). Tracking the evolution of social norms and individual experiences, researchers have attempted to unravel the science and art of dating relationships (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Given the evolving nature of contextual frameworks, the labels associated with dating relationships have also continued to adapt. The term dating relationship has been overused, misused, and commercialized (Villanueva, 2015) with no

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regard for embedded intersectional lenses such that the essence is often adrift. Seeking confirmation of similar trends in the sphere of academia, we reviewed literature concerning the themes of contextualized definitions, operational criteria and methodological issues surrounding dating relationships spanning the years of 1977 to 2019.

Despite emphasis on the keyword– “dating relationships”, a paucity was observed, instead returning results of romantic and marital relationships implying universal interchangeability in constructs. Of the few attempts made at categorizing dating relationships, Manning and colleagues (2006) noted distinctions between dating sexual relationships and casual sexual relationships. The authors suggested that dating in their view had evolved into something “informal” resulting in a wide variety of relationship types that may not necessarily fit into the larger classifications of “dating” or “one-night stands”. Aside from having laid out a few distinguishing factors, the authors do not define dating relationships, nor do they indicate having explored the same through their interview schedule. Although the use of substantive content theories such as adult attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) may be viewed as categorical definitions of dating relationships, neither does research use them as such, nor are the categories universally generalizable.

Supplemental literature focusing on questions of relationships in correlation with variables such as phubbing, adult attachment and stress amongst others, showed a methodological oversight in inclusion criteria and operational definitions (Collins et al., 2009; Halpern & Katz, 2017; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Authors neglect to define what in their view constitutes a dating relationship and the manner in which this relates to their sampling strategy. Further, it is plausible that participants sampled into such research could have differing positionalities on what constitutes a dating relationship. Thus, it is probable that variance in definitions of dating relationships may have contributed to decreased validity in results of studies that do not consider contextual systems. This especially merits concern given the landscape of dating relationships in present-day India.

Traditionally, relationships in the Indian culture are marked by arranged marriages and elder-approved partners that belong to similar intersectional lenses. However, with increasing exposure to Western culture, young adults are choosing to pursue dating relationships– sometimes at odds with their familial views, society and even political and legal governing bodies (The Guardian, 2016).

Perhaps, given the lacking societal approval, there is minimal literature regarding the view of dating relationships in the Indian population, reinforcing the necessity for contextual research. For instance, Collins and colleagues (2009) set about exploring romantic relationships in a sample between the ages of ten to twenty. Viewing this choice of cohort with reference to romantic relationships in the Indian context, ethics would merit parental consent from individuals that may not believe in or concede to their children engaging in dating relationships in the first place. In another illustration of the relevance of culture-specific research, Haglund and colleagues (2018) studied male and female Latino adolescents to find that within this collectivistic culture, parents acted as the primary source of information for understanding relationships. In fact, it was cultural factors that determined the appropriateness of behaviors in said relationships. Further, media portrayals have been pivotal socio-cultural influences in the recent past. With reference to social media consumption, there were positive, negative and even mixed effects on the perception of dating amongst the adolescent girls sampled (Howard et al., 2017).

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Aside from socio-cultural factors, it is also pertinent to explore the contributions of physical and mental health on dating relationships. Mental health can be both a predictor or outcome of romantic relationships. Literature does, however, suggest that the relationship is stronger when mental health is the outcome and romantic relationships are the predictor. This would imply that bettering a relationship could better mental health, but bettering mental health need not necessarily better the relationship itself (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2016). Literature directs us to understand that mental health impacts both individuals in the relationship resulting in a multitude of negative effects inclusive of an emotional toll, an impact on romance and sexual intimacy, a lack of understanding, feelings of isolation and changed communication among others. That is to say, disorders such as depression may impact both partners (Jones & Asen, 2000; Leff et al., 2000; Whisman & Beach, 2012 as cited in Sharabi, Delaney & Knobloch, 2015; Price, 2016; Nahata et al., 2019). Similar effects are observed with respect to physical illnesses (Price, 2016). Effectively, experiences with health as occurring to any individual in a relationship can impact their partner's view of the relationship in general. The underlying premise, thus, is that there is a merit to a consideration of the mental and physical health of the sample considered in the present study.

Taking into consideration the multilayered factors that could impact an individual's understanding of a dating relationship, we decided to adopt a complexity lens—leaning on the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977). This theory identifies five interrelated systems that extend an influence on the development of an individual, thereby recognizing the relevance of individual factors, socio-cultural contexts and chronological factors. The theory leads one to understand that factors in everyday life may interact with, and influence each other synergistically. We hence tried to adopt this theoretical worldview in the design and subsequent analysis of this study. Given said frame of view, we believed it important to reveal certain details that could inform your reading of this paper and account for any potential biases. All authors of the study identify as female and of Indian origin. Further, diversity in terms of age, socio-economic status and disability were not present.

The present study, designed from the paradigm of subtle idealism seeks to construct the problem definition of dating relationships among emerging adults in Urban Bangalore, India through an intersection of contextual spaces. Our findings could potentially act as a framework for future studies that hope to explore facets of dating relationships in a population that is in the midst of a “dating revolution” (The Guardian, 2016).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Procedure*

In this qualitative study, we utilized a semi-structured interview schedule formulated based on research questions and limited available literature. We then gave the schedule to subject matter experts such as counselors who typically worked with dating relationships and individuals who had previously studied relationships for validation. Based upon feedback provided, we then modified the interview schedule. Alongside our research assistants, we conducted all interviews telephonically or via video calls based upon participant preference.

### *Sample*

Based on Arnett's theory of Emerging Adults (2000), we selected a purposive sample of young adults between the age range of 18-25 years from the urban, English-speaking population of Bangalore. A consent form was given to all participants with details of the

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time necessary, a description of their role in the study and a provision to withdraw from the study as and when they felt the need to do so. Additionally, much of the research focusing on themes of dating relationships appear to sample individuals who have experienced them. However, it would be presumptuous to believe that individuals who have not experienced dating relationships would not have constructed an opinion, and so we sampled these individuals as well.

The sample included a total of 30 individuals who were identified, of which 27 continued throughout the study. Sampling was halted at 30 individuals as the authors began to hear similar statements across interviews.

Of the initial 30, 15 individuals belonged to the dating category as defined by the participants and 14 belonged to the non-dating category as defined by the participants. From the total sample, one interview of a male belonging to the dated category, could not be transcribed due to technical difficulties; and one male belonging to the dated category, left the study for personal reasons and were therefore excluded from analysis. Further, 13 of the above participants ascribed to being female and 16 of the above participants ascribed to being male. The sample also included individuals across sexual orientations of homosexual, bisexual, bi-romantic demisexual, demisexual and heterosexual. All participants appeared to originate from nuclear families, and most were students. Some individuals were diagnosed with physical and mental health illnesses.

### *Data Analysis*

Post data collection, we transcribed the audio data, member checked them and then engaged in the process of thematic analysis. Following this, we coded the data to form global themes, themes, sub-themes and verbatims. We initiated ethical considerations and reliability measures in the form of peer-reviewing, member-check and reflexive notes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis conducted, concluded in four global themes spanning the individual and contextual factors influencing the participants' understanding of 'dating relationships'.

### **Idiosyncrasies**

Idiosyncratically we discovered that there were distinctions between individuals sampled from the dating and non-dating pool pertaining to sub-themes of their idea of a dream date and dating expectations.

### *Dream Date*

Within the expanse of dream date, participants who had been in more than one relationship gave explicit importance to subjective nuances and ideologies (DG 1), while those who had been in fewer dating relationships directed their attention to environmental necessities of a date (NG 2).

*"I just want like, quality time (DG 1)"*

*"...based on movies and TV shows? I'm gonna say movie and dinner (NG 2)"*

### *Date Expectations*

Juxtaposed against "dream date", participants belonging to the dating and non-dating categories coalesced into three overarching dating expectations- overall dating relationship, referring to preferences of an ideal dating relationship (DG 6); value proposition, (DB 6)

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focusing on one's judgment of what is important (Oxford Languages, 2020) in dating relationship and; partner checklist, the criteria compiled in hopes of an ideal partner (DB 6).

*"a space where people grow together, in particular direction (DG 6)"*

*"...mutual respect and admiration (DB 6)"*

*"sense of humor, confidence, comfortable with sexuality (DB 6)"*

### **Personal Account of Dating**

#### **Dating to Me**

*"...a dating relationship is when you spend time with somebody you're interested in, and would like to get to know them more. It is what you do before making a commitment (DB 4)"*

The participants in the study upheld stereotypes in their general perception of dating relationships. Intriguingly, individuals seemed to believe that "casual" dating was extremely prevalent in their social framework, but their select intention to avoid these was unique. This finding is analogous to the phenomenon Pluralistic Ignorance or the mistaken notion that one's belief is non-conforming (Katz & Schanck, 1938 as cited in Synder & Lopez, 2007, pp.459).

*"hookup culture that we live in...and how it's that a lot more relationships are casual these days (DB 6)"*

With respect to personal preferences, there were certain foundational similarities in wanting companionship and mutual respect, however, differences were noted in boundaries set by participants within the space of their [ideal] dating relationships.

*"...I don't think I'll ever date, someone who's not in the same stage of life as me, if I'm a student, that person has to be a student (DG 4)"*

*"organic if a friendship blooms into a relationship...I'll be comfortable, and I feel safe, because I know this person now, and I don't feel like I'm vulnerable to a stranger (DG 5)"*

Further when asked about the tie between dating and romantic relationships (NB 2), some explicitly stated that there were no differences (DG 6), few felt uncomfortable distinguishing the two and others viewed dating as a stepping stone to a romantic relationship (NB 3).

*"All romantic relationships are dating (NB 2)"*

*"I'm not comfortable in differentiating dating and romantic relationship (DG 6)"*

*"So a romantic relationship is more of the... when you know that dating has turned into something very meaningful for you...(NB 3)"*

#### **Dating in Affirmative**

This theme focused on individuals who believed dating to be a necessary experience, citing instances of dating as a tool of growth and self-discovery relating to the idea of self-expansive theory of love as given by Aron and Aron (1986).

*"...dating is super important because you also learn a lot about yourself... you learn about how you deal with conflict and how you deal with interaction in general...So just learning about human behavior in general is really important, especially as you become an adult (DG 4)"*

#### **Dating in Negatory**

Finally, some individuals focused on the negatory, describing dating as an unneeded or organically occurring process not meriting force.

*"I don't think it's necessary. I mean, a lot of people are happy getting into romantic relationships through arranged marriages or through other ways (NB 3)"*

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*"naturally happens, then it's fine...I don't think it should be forced on anyone or imposed (DG 6)"*

### **Intersectional Vistas of Dating**

Giving credence to intersectional lenses, analysis of our data revealed that dating relationships cannot be viewed as unidimensional. We found that multilayered societal contexts proved to influence perspectives and experiences of dating relationships.

### **Multilayered Societal Influences**

*"Growing up, I always thought it was just something you did, like you dated people, and then you married them.... it took me a little while to realize...mostly in India, you just meet people, through your parents....(NG 1)"*

It was apparent that the umbrella term "culture" was widely interpreted to hold diverse meanings to the individuals in our sample— the Indian culture, religious notions, caste-related concerns and even pop-culture. It was seen that with the exception of the latter, the rest tended to play a dissuading role in dating relationships, encouraging marital ones instead.

*"...my family, I can tell you that they're outrageously religious conservative Catholics ...concept of dating doesn't exist, the concept of marriage does...(DG 3)"*

Individuals in the non-dated category tended to gauge their understanding of dating through vicarious perspectives of media, friends, or families in the case that they approved of the notion. This reliance was found to be lesser in the dated category of individuals who focused more on personal experience rather than social factors. Further, exceptions aside, those who have dated tended to rely on media influences much less as compared to when they were younger and single. In lieu of friends, while there were initial mixed opinions on the role played by peers, the data analyzed implicitly suggested that the influence of peers reduced with age and experience—vicarious or otherwise—for most participants. Families in India tended towards either the extreme of supporting the cause of dating, or the one of labeling it as a taboo— with no apparent middle-ground. In an illustration of the extremities, some appeared to be influenced by their parents' or siblings' relationships, while on the other end, parental display of confusion (DG 4) with the fundamental concept of dating relationships appeared to have its own implications.

*"I did date him for longer because of like, the concept of peer approval (DG 6)"*

*"...my parents are a little bit confused with the concept of dating... they've asked me...so it's just like, you're friends with him, right?...why can't you just call him your friend then?(DG 4)"*

### **Individual Factors**

*"...lot of undertides that goes into because you have to be equally responsible for your response as well as their feeling...dealing with somebody who's ill, physically or mentally you have to put a lot of thought into that before you talk (DB 8)"*

Speaking to Bronfenbrenner's categorization of individual factors within societal contexts, the analysis of our data hints at the downstream and upstream implications of societal influences on the physical and mental health factors.

*" attractiveness is a huge factor for someone to just approach another person (NG 4)"*

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*"it doesn't matter... any sort of physical impairment, I don't think it would be a problem (DB 7)"*

With respect to physical factors, interpreted to mean health, intimacy and attractiveness, there was a conflict in that some believed physical health to be a roadblock to dating relationships and others disagreed. However, all participants appeared to unanimously agree to the influence of mental health factors in a dating relationship.

*"my mood can change literally based on like, the state of our relationship (DG 2)"*

Further, two findings of mental health distinctly stood out to the authors. Those who experienced mental health concerns displayed more insight than others who did not. There was also a distinct binary gendered difference seen— with cisgendered men exhibiting a ‘Savior Complex’, believing that it was up to them to step in and help their partners through the experience (NB 7), while all individuals ascribing to being female— regardless of sexuality— were more sensitive to the meanings and responsibilities associated with mental health irrespective of their experiences with it.

*"... despite the fact that they are, you know, mentally little unstable, I'd try to make them stable (NB 7)"*

That is to say, in the dating sphere, each layer of the environment is seen to play a prominent role - a microsystem consisting of mental and physical health factors as relating to the individual and the significant others; the exosystem consisting of media and professional influences, macro system comprising of cultural and religious ideologies and finally the chronosystem represented in zeitgeist contextualized to the COVID-19 pandemic.

*"We are currently in the COVID pandemic. Dating has just become a platform for time pass...people are bored. They want people to talk to apart from their friends (DB 1)"*

Each of these spheres interact with one another to create a person's unique understanding of dating in Urban Bangalore.

### ***The Ingredients of Dating Relationships***

Viewed as a coalition of two spectrums, we found that dating relationships can be represented in terms of experience and boundaries set. With respect to experience, the understanding of a dating relationship was contingent upon between group distinctions among dated and non-dated categories of individuals, and within group distinctions across relationship status in the dated category of individuals.

*"...I think I've understood what it means only once I got into something...once you experience something in real life is only when you actually know it (DG 3)"*

Further, the data viewed together implies that dating spaces could ideally be defined as a boundary-setting exercise in that, while for one person a dating relationship may constitute certain factors, it can vary for another. Therefore, there appears to be a necessity for individuals in a dating relationship to converse and agree upon boundaries that define their space.

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*"...If you want to be like monogamous, then that's great. But if you want to, like, say that you want to be open and also, like, do physical stuff with other people, that's just a boundary that like you, that's between you too...you're allowed to set the boundaries differently (DG 4)"*

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Arising from the research question of exploring the prevalence of dating violence in India, the authors discerned the absence of contextually relevant definitions of dating relationships in South East Asian collectivistic cultures. Hence, through this paper we provide a unique contextual perspective to exploring emerging dating spaces in India, paving the way for future research in said population.

Given the emphasis on contextual features, we thought it imperative to consider to whom this definition would likely be applicable. Thus, we contend that this will be so for those ascribing to the sample characteristics used in this study. Further, if tested for reliability and validity, this might also be relevant to most any emerging adult living in an urban Indian setting.

This has been the first forage into the creation of a contextually relevant definition of dating, to our knowledge. We therefore envision future research in India going on to explore the mechanisms of the synergy and interaction of the multilayered societal factors on one another, as well as on the individual factors. In addition, if converted into a quantitative measure, one might explore to what extent this contextual relevance extends across the sub-continent— providing a framework for researchers working with dating relationships in India. Considering the heavy influence of socio-cultural factors, one might find differences across urban locations, and even see distinctions between urban and rural regions of the country. With respect to further in-depth exploration of biological factors, large scale cohort studies could be conducted to further test for statistical associations. In the design of studies in the future, it would be helpful to further increase diversity in gender and sexual orientations— as there is always scope for better representation.

#### ***Problem Definition***

In accordance with the data analyzed, the authors of the present study propose the definition to be,

*“Dating in the urban Indian Context, appears to be a boundary setting exercise mutually undertaken by individuals in dating relationships demarcating space, labels, and limits of the relationship. Existing as an overarching concept, the nuances of dating relationships are better understood once exposed to its subjective realities that are influenced by multilayered societal factors.”*

Boundary setting in this context may refer to idiosyncratic preferences, previous experience, or even the likelihood of associating a dating relationship with a romantic relationship. That is to say, the individual factors of physical and mental health, idiosyncratic preferences of a partner checklist and values may hinge on the multilayered societal influences of peers, family, culture and media, and together inform an individual’s understanding of dating relationships. Adding further dimensionality to the process, the individuals in said relationship, then mutually define what their shared dating space would look like given the confluence of their particular individual and societal factors. That is, while trying to study dating relationships in India, it is necessary to acknowledge that variable boundary setting across individuals is heavily influenced by personal experiences of dating— altogether suggesting, bottom-line, people should not be studied in silos.



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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors of this study whose names are listed above certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organizations with financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

### **Ethics Statement**

The authors of this study sought informed consent from all participants who engaged with the study voluntarily. The authors also seek to respect confidentiality and anonymity, and thus will provide deidentified excerpts.

### **Data Availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Apoorva Nag, upon reasonable request.

### **Patient Consent Statement**

All participants in this study provided consent to participate in interviews and have their contributions reproduced anonymously in print media.

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