

Research Paper

Cohabitation among UG students: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cohabitation has been a subject of much debate and conflicting views. To gain a better understanding of this modern-day phenomenon, it is essential to examine the subjective experiences of individuals who are cohabiting. This research aimed to explore the richness of these experiences using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach, as part of a qualitative research design on the Indian youth. Semi structured interviews were conducted with six young couples pursuing their undergraduate degrees who had been cohabiting for more than four months. Several themes emerged from the study, including the reasons for cohabiting before marriage and the motivators behind it, the impact on relationships with partners, peers, and family, and sharing of household responsibilities. It was found that, of the six participants, five held positive and optimistic views about their experience of cohabitation, while one participant highlighted the negative aspects of cohabitation. The research outcomes present valuable insights into the subjective encounters of individuals engaged in cohabitation, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this contemporary social phenomenon.

Keywords: *Cohabitation, Subjective Experiences, Indian youth*

The rapid growth of cohabitation over the past quarter-century has necessitated studies of changes in cohabitation stability and outcomes. Cohabitation before marriage refers to the practice of unmarried couples living together in a shared household. Live-in relationships have been more popular recently as alternatives to marriage because they do not carry the same obligations as a formal union. This study attempts to understand how the development of cohabitation is taking place in a post-figurative society, where parents shape the learning of children or younger generations (Mead, 1972). In a study, both genders agreed that living together before marriage improves understanding and compatibility, however, many participants did not believe that living together automatically leads to marriage. Moreover, men were less likely to equate living together with getting married (Ghosh, 2021).

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Cohabitation has become increasingly common in many societies around the world as the societal attitudes toward cohabitation have evolved over time. However, attitudes can vary across cultures, religions, and generations. A study conducted by Manning and Cohen (2012) found that the majority of young adults in the United States viewed cohabitation as an acceptable and normal precursor to marriage. On the other hand, mixed-method research on Thai teenagers (Ounjit, 2023) indicates that cohabitation contradicts Thai tradition, causing teenagers to secretly date (47.20%). Lack of family affection (36.62%) and private dorm living encourages partner cohabitation (53.06%). Another study found religiosity to be negatively associated with positive attitudes towards cohabitation, while more liberal beliefs and values were positively associated with cohabitation (Thornton et al., 2007).

In India, live-in relationships are seen from a complex and multidimensional legal standpoint. There are several Supreme Court decisions that support live-in partnerships, while in many cases such relationships are considered poorly and occasionally even discredited by the high courts. Sometimes protection and sanctions granted to a couple who are in a live-in relationship can depend entirely on the mindset of the judges sitting on the bench (Goswami, 2021). The current research shows that the pooling of resources between partners of the opposite sex has been shown to have a "cohabitation-marriage gap," with cohabiters more likely than married people to keep their income and wealth separate (Vitali, A. & Fraboni, R. 2022). However, there was no substantial negative correlation between cohabitation and marriage stability among those who were planning on living with their future spouse. Additionally, there was a strong negative correlation between cohabitation and marriage quality, supported by sensitivity analyses (Jose et al., 2010).

This study attempts to identify the factors related to experiences of cohabitation among the Indian youth and analyze the determinants of cohabitation in a postfigurative society like India. Participants of this study may have personal beliefs, cultural norms, or societal expectations that influence their responses. We try to employ techniques to minimize bias, such as ensuring anonymity or establishing rapport and encouraging honest responses. It is crucial to recognize the limitations of generalizability in any research study.

METHODS

Design

This study aimed to identify what factors influence the experiences of cohabitation. The research design followed qualitative methods that are appropriate for exploring sensitive phenomena, such as the perspectives on cohabitation before marriage in a third-world country like India with a postfigurative culture predominance. Interpretive Phenomenological Approach was followed as it allows for an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon. This approach helped us to make meaning out of the subjective experiences of the cohabiters (Smith, 2005).

Sampling

The study involved a purposive sample of 6 couples from colleges in Bangalore, currently studying in their Undergraduate degree. The participants were selected on the basis of their cohabitation status i.e., couples who are currently living at one place were chosen for the purpose of this study. Each individual was asked to give their consent for agreeing to be a part of the interview and anonymity of the subject was maintained at all times.

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Participant list

- **Case 1.** A 20- year old female undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with her partner from the past four months.
- **Case 2.** A 20- year old male undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with his partner from the past four months.
- **Case 3.** A 22- year old male undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with his partner from the past four months.
- **Case 4.** A 19- year old female undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with her partner from the past four months.
- **Case 5.** A 20- year old male undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with his partner from the past one and a half years.
- **Case 6.** A 20- year old female undergraduate student living in a cohabiting relationship with his partner from the past one year.

Data gathering procedure

Data was collected through semi- structured interviews and therefore, the data type was generated. The semi- structured interviews were conducted with six participants from the developmental age of young adulthood. This method also grants flexibility to our approach. Interviews were carried out in a conversational style starting from the present topics moving towards sensitive questions that appeared later in the interview. The interviews were tape-recorded, and mental notes were taken.

Tools

The tool used for this study was an interview guide along the line of the following themes:

- **Theme 1:** Motivation to start cohabitating
- **Theme 2:** Impact of cohabitation on relationships
- **Theme 3:** Family Support
- **Theme 4:** Influence of cohabitation on peer relationships
- **Theme 5:** Responsibilities sharing (Household responsibilities and finance- sharing)

Data Processing and Analysis

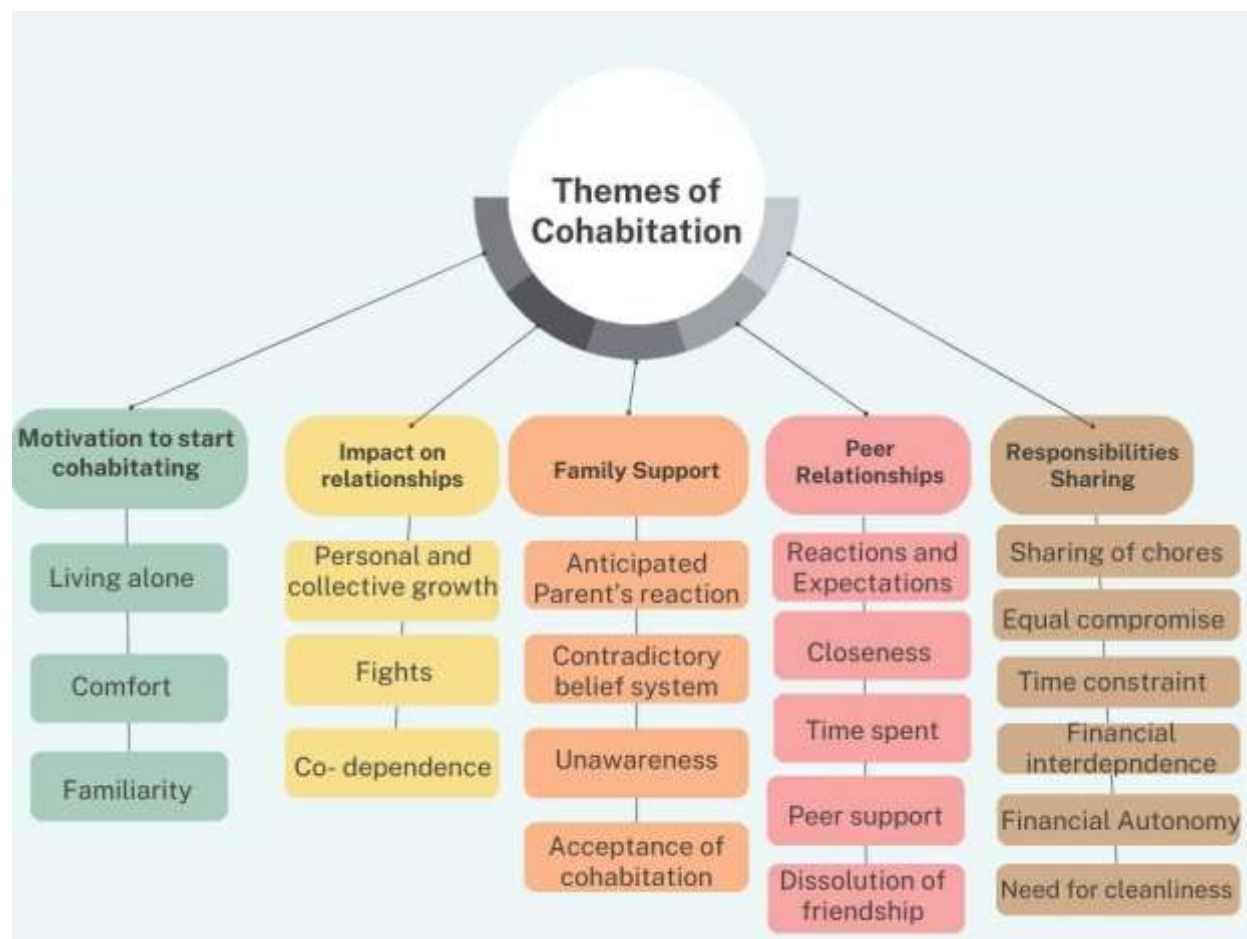
Analysis was done using a deductive thematic analysis approach, where the themes were pre- determined and the codes were identified based on the themes of the study. The supporting statements indicating the codes have been attached along with the code description. A final table of all the themes and the codes have been attached in the end. The results of this study have been attached below.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of debriefing and informed consent were followed in this study for the purpose of data collection. The collected data was kept confidential and anonymous at all times by using number coding for each participant. Bracketing of the preconceptions, biases and assumptions related to the phenomenon was ensured throughout the study to avoid any personal biases influencing the results of this study. Reflexivity in the form of self- awareness and critical reflection of one's own views was done throughout the study to be transparent and be aware of one's own subjective role in the study as a researcher.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Overall summary of thematic analysis



Note. Themes and codes underlying cohabitation as identified and reported by the participants.

Motivators for cohabitating

1. Living alone

The participants started living with their partner because one of them had an independent house and therefore living alone acted as a motive here as quoted in the excerpts below:

“my partner is living alone here. Because he had issues with his roommates earlier. So he shifted here alone.” (Line 2, Question 4, participant 1)

“Like I used to stay alone in my house. And like basically when I came, shifted to this place, I was all alone. (Line 1, Question 2, Participant 2)

2. Comfort with the partner

Partners have spent so much time with each other that they were comfortable living at one place together. As it is mentioned and I quote:

“ And we were already in a space where we knew that about each other, we were comfortable enough. So it didn't feel like we were taking a big step, it felt very natural to us” (Line 3, Question 2, Participant 4)

3. *Familiarity*

The participant knew their partner for a long time that acted as a motivator for living together.

“We have been best friends for years and it was always a plan that for our undergraduate we will shift to the same city.” (Line 1, Question 1, Participant 5)

Impact of cohabitation on relationships

1. *Personal & collective growth of relationship:*

With time, sharing, communication and understanding has been improved for these 4 participants because of spending more time together.

“now that we spend so much time together, it's not always us doing something interesting. Like we spend time together silently doing our own work as well.” (Line 1, Question 6, Participant 3)

“when he's not saying anything or even when I'm not saying anything, we know what's going on in the other person's mind. So we've gotten more understanding.” (Line 3, Question 3, Participant 4)

2. *Fights*

Living together has steered up a lot of fights between the couples in case of these two participants.

“there are fights which affect me very badly. It stays with me. Some of the things he says, some of his actions that have affected me and I know I will never forget it in my life.” (Line 3, Question 6, Participant 1)

“because of the fights and the differences that are to be accommodated, they create a lot of trouble. At times, there are frequent fights. At times, you just don't want to go back home. You need that sense of personal space.” (Line 1, Question 4, Participant 5)

I'm getting angry again. Because of the disagreements. It's a constant chaos.” (Line 15, Question 7, participant 5)

3. *Co-dependence:*

In this case, the participant felt that their partner and they have become more dependent on this relationship, which wasn't the case previously.

“Before this whole living started, I feel like it was a little less codependent.” (Line 1, Question 7, Participant 5)

Family Support

1. *Anticipated Parent's reaction*

The participants expected negative/harsh reactions from their parents as quoted in the excerpts below:

“It will not be such a pretty good response. But I think my parents will scold me at first.” (Line 1, Question 10, Participant 2)

“If they know about that because of Indian culture and stuff, they might react a bit harshly, hence they don't know.” (Line 6. Question 3, Participant 6)

2. *Contradictory belief system*

The participants stated that their parents are not aware of the individual being in a cohabiting relationship due to their contradicting beliefs as quoted in the excerpts below:

“They are against the concept of relationships with us. So, living in is like five steps ahead of that.” (Line 5, Question 7, Participant 3)

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“No, they know we're very close, they know we're like best friends, they don't know about our relationship.” (Line 3, Question 4, Participant 4) “Because my family is not even good at having friends who are of the opposite gender. So, my family is very conservative like that.” (Line 4, Question 4, Participant 4).

3. Unawareness

The participants revealed that their parents aren't aware of their relationship at all as quoted in the excerpts below:

“No, my parents don't know I am committed to him. His parents know everything. Even his sister knows I'm committed to him. My parents don't know.” (Line 1, Question 9, Participant 1)

4. Acceptance of cohabitation

The participant's family is aware and is in support of their cohabitation relationship as quoted in the excerpts below:

“My mom does. Her parents know.” (Line 4, Question 8, Participant 5)

Influence of cohabitation on peer relationships

1. Reactions and Expectations

Five of the reports show that the friends were not surprised to see that the two couples were moving in together as they saw this as an expected step.

“They had an idea. If I was like, I'm going to tell you something, don't be surprised, they knew it. Somewhere they knew it at the back of the mind. So it wasn't surprising for them. And all of them were very happy. They just said all the best for the future. It was nice.” (Line 6, Question 14, Participant 1).

“So, it was a very expected step.” (Line 8, Question 6, Participant 6)

2. Closeness

Not many changes have been noticed in the friends' behavior due to participants starting to cohabitate.

“No, because they're friends with both of us. If at all they were only friends with me and he was coming along” (Line 36, Question 8, Participant 4).

“But then now things are all fine. It's been adjusted and stuff. So now I spend time with them equally.” (Line 19 Question 7, Participant 6).

3. Time spent with friends:

Most of the participants never really had a dynamic relationship with their friends and hence after the couple decided to cohabitate, their relationship with their friends changed.

“Honestly, no, it's like very rarely. Mostly with him only. And I had issues with friends also. So, it's like, I don't know. I feel like even if I don't spend much time with them if I'm here with others, I don't know if it's possible to have that fun like before, not sure about it.” (Line 19 Question 16, Participant 1).

4. Peer support

Most of the participants have had a positive response from their friends regarding their relationship.

“They have a very good response. I think 80% of them are in a positive response.” (Line 5 Question 14, Participant 2)

“Our friends think that it's a good relationship. (Line 10, Question 5, Participant 4).

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“My friends are also fully supportive of it. Like most of my friends are like friends with him and vice versa” (Line 2 Question 5, Participant 6)

5. Dissolution of friendship

Some of the participants lost contact with their friends after they started the relationship with their partner.

“I lost terms with them. It's a completely shattered group.” (Line 35 Question Participant 5).

Responsibilities Sharing (Household Responsibilities and Finance Sharing)

Common in all the six cases:

1. Sharing of household chores

In all of the six cohabiting individuals, it is observed that there is a division of responsibilities among the couple to get household chores done. Each individual contributes in the daily household chores. But, in certain circumstances, one sometimes does more than the other and helps each other in the process. Common household chores are doing the laundry, dishes and cleaning the house. Since all the individuals in the study are undergraduate students, due to assignments and exams, they tend to divide responsibilities according to their circumstances. The participants share the household chores in different ways like in the excerpt below:

“We basically have a schedule of who does what work. And that's how we go about it most of the time.” (Line 1, Question 13, Participant 3)

“Household chores, we pretty much divide everything. Like today morning, I made the breakfast today morning. He did the dishes, he did the laundry and everything. So it's very balanced.” (Line 1, Question 9, Participant 4).

2. Equal compromise

It has been observed that in most of the cases, there has been change in household division of chores due to certain circumstances. There is an understanding between the cohabiting couples whenever there are difficult circumstances faced by one of them. There is a compromise between them and one does more work than the other because of such situations. The excerpts which highlight the compromise are:

“If one of us is busy, then the other will give them space and will help them with whatever they can. So usually during my mid-sem, he helped with the cooking and cleaning and all. And I don't have to bother with anything.” (Line 1, Question 9, Participant 6)

3. Time constraint

Due to extreme workload being an undergraduate student, the participants faced difficulties in managing household chores. The excerpts are:

“We make sure that if, say for example, I have a lot of work from not only studies but also, say for example, some organization that I'm working in. If he knows that I'm under a lot of work, he'll make sure that he does my part of the household chores also because he knows that I'm working a lot. And if he's relatively free.” (Line 2, Question 9, Participant 4).

4. Financial Interdependence

There is a two-way understanding between the couples whenever there is a situation concerning finance. It depends on the individual, if the person does not seem to have money, the other covers the charges at that particular time. In these excerpts, it has been shown that there is a concept of sharing of their finances when in need:

“We are trying to save money. We are trying to reduce the regular spending. We just started a joint account. But in case if there is a crisis, then we will not do it. In case of finances, since

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we are college students, we don't have that many expenses.” (Line 1, Question 10, Participant 6).

5. *Financial Autonomy*

There is a strict understanding between the couples regarding finances. In these excerpts, there are boundaries formed whenever there are circumstances involving money. The participants prefer to have individuality when it comes to finance.

“When it's finances between the both of us, we use this app called splitwise where we track our expenses.” (Line 1, Question 8, Participant 3)

“So my money is my money, his money is his money. We're not sharing it and I don't think even in the future we require sharing our money.” (Line 6, Question 10, Participant 4)

6. *Need for Cleanliness*

In two cases, it has been observed that in one of the couples, there is an issue with being messy and the other being neat and clean. There is an understanding in such situations in different couples. The excerpts are:

“I feel like he's very messy, so he keeps his things very scattered, his clothes, his books, everything. And I don't like it scattered. I am also messy to an extent, but I want things in a particular place.” (Line 1, Question 20, Participant 1)

“I used to be a lot more messier. He is very clean. He is a neat freak. So I had to learn to be more clean.” (Line 2, Question 11, Participant 6)

DISCUSSION

The research focuses on the determinants of cohabitation as well as attempts to identify its influence on an individual's micro-level system- family, peers, and household factors. It identified five themes and explores the factors underlying those themes as discussed below:

In the first theme, exploring the motivations behind cohabitating, we have noticed a trend- the primary driving force is the establishment of comfort and familiarity between partners. This trend takes two forms: for some, the impetus to cohabitate arises primarily when both individuals feel a strong sense of ease and familiarity, prompting a joint decision to change living arrangements. In contrast, if one partner already lives alone, it serves as a motivator for both individuals to consider living together.

Based on Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-Determination Theory, this trend demonstrates the dual influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in the cohabitation decision-making process. The context of living alone serves as a fundamental trigger prompting consideration for shared living arrangements, which is the extrinsic motivation. The intrinsic motivators, on the other hand, manifest in the form of the comfort and familiarity established between partners, which significantly contribute to the desire to cohabit. These intrinsic factors, which are based on personal connections and emotional bonds, significantly influence the decision to live together, supplementing extrinsic motivators.

The second theme analyzes the impact of cohabiting and shows a wide range of experiences from personal growth of the individual as well as that of the relationship to having more fights after beginning to live together. Amongst this spectrum there lies the aspect of codependency experienced by a participant that is quoted as the extreme case.

Thibaut and Kelley's Social Exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) proposes that people weigh the costs and benefits of their relationships. The cases highlight the benefits of cohabitation, such as improved communication, understanding, and support. This is

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consistent with the principle that people stay in relationships when the benefits outweigh the costs. For example, the improvement in communication and understanding observed in the four cases suggests that cohabitation has a positive effect on the quality of these relationships. Furthermore, the increased conflicts and fights in some cases are consistent with research indicating that increased proximity can lead to more disagreements and conflicts. Attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 2014) resonates with the extreme case of co-dependence, in which one participant expresses a perceived increase in dependency. According to this theory, early attachments and experiences influence how people bond and connect with others. The participant's observation of the partner being spoiled and the effect on cleanliness reflects a shift in roles and dependencies within the relationship.

The third theme discusses the family support that the participants have and the financial support received. Family support, both emotional and financial, plays a crucial role in the lives of undergraduate students, especially when they are cohabitating. It can help them curb stress and have a more strong relationship with the family and partner.

One of the most common themes that we can see in five out of six cases is that they all expected harsh or negative reactions from their family. Due to this reason they hold back from telling their parents about their cohabitation and for some they refrain from telling about the relationship itself. One of the participants attributed the Indian culture as a factor to why their parents won't accept a cohabiting relationship while another participant said that their parents are very conservative and hence it won't be accepted too. These values are passed down from generations and hence what their parents deem as right and wrong may not be the same (Huang, 2019). This can be aligned with the Modernization theory where it talks about a society's need to evolve which can be contradictory with traditional values causing a shift in cultural norms (Goorha, P., 2017).

There was an extreme case where the participant did not expect any harsh reactions from the family and had full support from the family for the cohabiting relationship. There were three cases where the family was aware about the relationship as such while the others weren't. But individually they had support from the family and were close to them. Financially, four of the cases were dependent on the family to support them. But the two extreme cases were supporting themselves completely without any family support.

The fourth theme showed that since the participants were already in a relationship it was not a surprising turn of events when they had informed the friends about their cohabitation. Most of them seemed to be supportive friends throughout their relationship. Since the relationship between the participants and their friend groups varied those who were close before stayed close even after their cohabitation and some of them who weren't extremely close before became close after some time and in some other cases friends grew apart after knowing about the relationship. This could be explained better by using the social exchange theory which states that people evaluate the costs and benefits of the relationship (Cook et al., 2013). This means that those friends who had stayed together from the beginning, being supportive of the relationship through hard times too, have bigger chances of staying together than those who had problems along the way.

The fifth theme mentions the household responsibilities shared by the cohabiting couples. There is basic sharing of household chores in all the cases. But it's only based on equal compromise and understanding between the couples in five cases. Time constraint is a major factor between the cohabiting couples due to the workload from college assignments. It has

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also been stated that there is a need for cleanliness for two participants which becomes a major part in cohabitation.

The theme aligns with the Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) which states that social exchanges based on which the partner takes on tasks at which they excel and the other will reciprocate in the same way based on their individual preferences and abilities. This is true for all cases in the above excerpts.

When it comes to finance, there are two contrasting theories which are Financial Interdependence theory and Financial Autonomy theory. The Financial Interdependence theory states that cohabiting couples share their financial well being and make joint decisions about money. Depending on the relationships involved and the resources at hand, financial interdependence can have positive or negative effects (Anvari-Clark & Miller, 2023). In contrast to this, Financial Autonomy theory which is mainly based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) in which children observe and model behavior of adults and learn the financial practices in this case. Like many young adults, college marks the commencement of a journey towards financial self-sufficiency, signaling a heightened responsibility to make wise financial choices. For numerous young individuals, college serves as their initial chance to live independently and take on significant financial responsibilities, demanding financial self-confidence and independence in their decision-making (Vijaykumar, 2021). Thus, there is a rising trend that can be observed in this research where undergraduate students are trying to establish financial autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Cohabitation is a new topic to be researched in a post-figurative society like India, where the flow of information transfer is from adults to younger generations. It does not appear that the trend might change in the near future. Despite the contradictory belief system held by the older generation, the development of cohabitation can be easily noticed in the urban areas, from undergraduate students to working professionals. The present study aimed to study the development of cohabiting relationships among undergraduate students and analyzes its motivators as well as its impact on the microlevel system of the organism such as the family and peer support, as well as the organization of cohabiting relationships and the sharing of responsibilities (household chores and finance sharing)- which is usually observed among the married couples.

Our study shows a mixed result about the positive and negative influence of cohabitation on an individual's micro-level environment. However, it has been noted that most of these experiences are perceived to have more positive effects when the duration is less (about four months) and moving forward it can take various turns like development of an extreme attitude towards the partner or stabilization of relationship. During the initial phase, partners tend to validate even the negative experiences with their partner. The extreme forms can be a result of disruption in individuals personal and social life as well as can be perceived as intrusion of privacy if the partner does not contribute equally to the responsibilities- sharing. However, if a proper balance is achieved between the social roles and responsibilities, the cohabiting couples can achieve a balance in their relationship.

The validating of negative experiences can be linked to the neurological basis of hormones, which a neuroscience study can explore better. The developmental studies can identify the various developmental phases of cohabitation and its outcomes. Moreover, there is scope for

further research in the area of cohabitation in India and other collectivistic cultures including its effect on mental health and conscience.

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Conflict of Interest

We, hereby declare that there are no conflicts of interest with regards to this paper between individuals or third- party organizations.

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