

Research Paper

A Comparative Correlational Study on Affectionate Communication and Well-being among Young and Middle-Aged Adults

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the scholarship of Floyd's affectionate communication, this study offers insight into the association between affectionate communication (AC) and well-being (WB) among heterosexual couples. Employing Pearson correlation and independent t-test, the study highlights intergenerational differences in the enactments of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged heterosexual couples in India. Using the affectionate communication index (ACI) and personal well-being index, the study surveyed a sample of 105 heterosexual adults involved in romantic relationships—49 middle-aged and 56 young—belonging to the age group of 18-35 and 36-50 years. The results demonstrate statistically significant positive correlation between affectionate communication and well-being among both young and middle-aged adults. Additionally, significant differences in the mean values of affectionate communication are observed between the two generations with younger generations reporting higher levels of engagements in non-verbal affectionate behaviors (e.g., holding hands, kissing on the cheek). The practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: *Affectionate Communication, Well-Being, Young Adults, Middle-Aged Adults, Romantic Relationships, India*

The assumption that human beings are essentially social animals and at the heart of social interaction lies the need to be validated, to feel a sense of belonging and ultimately to give and receive affection is well-established and empirically supported (Baumeister & Leary, 1995b). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory echoes this argument that the vast majority of human beings place the need to belong and love as paramount to their well-being and survival—Although in varying configurations and not sequentially to biological, self-esteem and self-actualization needs (Rojas et al., 2023). Thereby, it may be argued that at the core of need to belong is the desire to love and to be loved along with the need to articulate and enact various forms of affection. Floyd (2006) makes the distinction between affection and affectionate communication. Affection, he argues, is essentially an emotion like sadness, happiness and anger, but more importantly a social emotion like envy and hatred, that requires to be directed towards another being. On the other hand, affectionate communication is “behaviors through which affectionate feelings are encoded and displayed”

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(Floyd & Brandley, 2019). The emphasis is on the overt behavior and enactments, in contrast to simply feeling the emotion—that may or may not necessarily translate to explicit display of acts, perhaps due to the fear of unreciprocated affection.

The tripartite model of affectionate communication propounded by Floyd and Morman (1998), delineates affectionate expressions in terms of a) verbal statements, b) non-verbal gestures and c) socially supportive behaviors. In romantic couples, verbally affectionate communication can look like affirmations such as, “I love you”, “I care about you”, “you are my best friend”. Non-verbal gestures are overt displays of affections that are universal, such as kissing, hugging, and holding-hands. Lastly, socially supportive behaviors among couples are acts of service, that include offering favors, helping the partner with a project, or making time for each other.

In a similar vein, Chapman’s work “The 5 Love Languages”, partially aligns with this framework. In his work, Chapman outlines five love languages: 1) words of affirmation, 2) quality time, 3) receiving gifts, 4) acts of service and 5) physical touch, positing that partners speak different love languages based on how they communicate with their partner (expressed love language) and how they wish to receive affection to keep their emotional “love tank” full (felt love language). While these claims have been critiqued for lack of scientific grounding, it is nevertheless widely used by therapists and clinical psychologists to foster better understanding and solve relationship problems between couples. It is only recently that researchers are beginning to scientifically evaluate the framework (see Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Mostova et al., 2022).

Why Affectionate Communication Matters in Romantic Relationships

The ability to give and receive affection in verbal, non-verbal and socially supportive behaviors is a significant hallmark of a healthy relationship that fosters increased partner commitment and the perception that their relationship is of high caliber (Vasquez et al., 2023). Affectionate communication is often associated with intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988, cited in Vasquez et al., 2023) between partners, strengthening emotional connection and sense of safety, whereas lack of it is one of the most common reasons for seeking marital counselling and divorce (Doss et al., 2004; Amato & Previti, 2003 as cited in Floyd et al., 2022).

In addition to enhancing relationship satisfaction, affectionate communication also contributes to physical health of romantic partners. For instance, in their experimental study Floyd et al. (2009), examined the effects of romantic kissing in marital and cohabiting couples on blood lipids, perceived stress, depression, and relationship satisfaction. The experimental group that received instructions to engage in romantic kissing for a period of six weeks reported improvement in their perceived stress levels, relationship satisfaction and total serum cholesterol in contrast to the control groups that hadn’t received such instructions. Research also affirms that oxytocin or “love hormone” is often released during these affectionate interactions—provided relationships are of high quality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2014)—promoting feelings of closeness, bonding and trust, adding to a greater sense of well-being.

These simple acts of touch also have significant implications for the mental health of romantic couples. Affectionate touch is postulated to produce positive effects on individuals’ own and of their partners’ affective state, is shown to improve mood of pre and

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perimenopausal women, and more specifically, frequent hugging is often associated with general subjective wellness (Floyd et al., 2022).

Associations of Affectionate Communication with Well-Being

Over the past decade, scholars have proposed a wide range of theoretical arguments as to what constitutes a good life and well-being, ranging from subjective measures of well-being—hedonic and eudaimonic, psychological well-being, social well-being—to objective measures of well-being that assess material capital such as standard of living, neighborhood safety, community participation, and other economic indicators (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes 1998, as discussed in Ng & Fisher, 2013). In this study, well-being is operationalized as Quality of Life, embracing a multidimensional construct of economic, health, personal and social indices. Accordingly, grounded in Floyd's (2015) affection exchange theory (AET), affectionate communication fulfills a Darwinian 'utility' by promoting survival, adaptation and reproduction in humans (Shizgal, 1997, in Kováč, 2012). Here, affectionate communication in romantic couples serves the 'utility' function wherein partner's qualities, personality, culture and resources act as commodities that sustain and protect relationships from psychological hardship arising out of social and economic factors, ultimately enhancing their overall quality of life.

Therefore, building upon this framework the study poses the following research question:

1. **RQ1:** Do heterosexual adults (committed or married) who engage in higher levels of affectionate communication with their partner report higher levels of well-being?
2. **RQ2:** Are there intergenerational differences in the enactments of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged heterosexual romantic couples in India?

METHOD

Aim

This study investigates the relationship between affectionate communication (AC) and well-being (WB) among young and middle-aged heterosexual adults involved in romantic relationship, exploring potential intergenerational differences.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among young and middle-aged adults.
2. To investigate intergenerational differences in the engagement of affectionate communication

Research Hypotheses

- H_1 : There will be a statistically significant relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among a) Young adults and b) Middle aged adults
- H_2 : There will be statistically significant differences in the means of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged heterosexual adults.

Research Design

The present study is based on cross-sectional research design with a focus on comparative correlational study. This design allows for the examination of relationships between variables at a single point in time as it is cost-effective and easy to conduct (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The study employs a between group design where participants are categorized into two

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distinct age groups: young adults and middle-aged adults. The primary variables of interest are affectionate communication and well-being. This design enables the comparison of these two variables across the two generations, furnishing insights into potential differences and correlations.

Sample

Using a non-probabilistic convenience and purposive sampling method, this study recruited heterosexual participants who were romantically involved. Convenience sampling method allows for quick access of participants rendering the study economical. Purposive sampling on the other hand, involves recruiting participants having specific traits or characteristics that are of study's interest as the researcher assumes that the target population is homogenous (Etikan, 2016). In this particular study, homogeneity is reflected in the two categories of sample—young (age 18-35) and middle-aged (age 36-50), heterosexual (married or unmarried) adults. Participants were surveyed online using google forms. A total of 105 adults (49 middle- aged and 56 young) took part in the study.

Inclusion criteria

1. It was compulsory for the participants to be a heterosexual romantic partner/ spouse between the age of 18- 36.
2. Middle-aged (age 36-50) heterosexual couples who had love marriages were allowed to participate in the study.
3. Participants had to be urban educated English-speaking adults.

Ethical Considerations

This study implemented various measures for upholding the ethics of research. Informed consent was taken from all the participants who took part in the study. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point in time. Additionally, the details provided by the participants were kept confidential to protect their privacy.

Instruments

1. **Affectionate Communication:** Affectionate Communication Index (ACI) designed by Floyd & Mormon (1998), is a self-report measure that assesses verbal (e.g., "I love you") and non-verbal expressions of affection (e.g., hugs and holding of hands) coupled with affectionate social support (e.g., helping partner with tasks) among romantic partners. It consists of 18 items organized into three clusters: verbal statements, nonverbal gestures, and socially supportive behaviors. The responses are recorded on a scale of 1 (never or almost never do this) to 7 (always or almost always do this), based on frequency of engagement on affectionate communication with their beloved. Scores are recorded by summing up the total expressed affectionate communication score.
2. **Well-Being:** Using the Personal Well-Being Index-Adult Scale developed by the International Well-being group (2013), this study recorded well-being/ quality of life responses for individuals of age 18 and above. It's a seven-item scale on a 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (no satisfaction at all) to 10 (completely satisfied) measuring satisfaction levels on living standards, health, achievement in life, personal relationships, safety, community and security. The average of the total scores is calculated for statistical analysis.

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Operational Definitions

1. **Affectionate Communication** refers to portrayals of verbal, non-verbal and socially supportive behaviors exhibiting fondness and positive regard towards one romantic partner. The variable is quantified using the Affectionate Communication Index (ACI) developed by Floyd and Morman (1998). Higher scores on this variable demonstrate higher levels of engagement in affectionate communication with the participant's romantic partner.

2. **Well-Being** is operationalized using self-reported measures on quality of life wherein participants appraise their own level of satisfaction with life in relation to economic, social and personal indicators. The current study quantified well-being using the Personal Well-Being Index-Adult Scale developed by the International Well-being group (2013). Higher scores on this variable demonstrate a higher satisfaction level of well-being among the participants.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS version 26, descriptive statistics are presented in the form of mean and standard deviation. For inferential statistics, Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between the two variables and independent *t*-test was employed to examine statistically significant differences in the means between the two generations for affectionate communication. The study set the significance level of ($p < .01$) and ($p < .05$) for inferential analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Affectionate Communication and Well-Being

Variable	Generation	M	SD	N
Affectionate Communication	Young adults (18-35)	104.57	14.90	56
	Middle-aged adults (36-50)	95.77	22.23	49
Well-Being	Young adults (18-35)	7.34	1.71	56
	Middle-aged adults (36-50)	7.83	1.77	49

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *N* = Sample Size.

The above table displays the mean and standard deviation of the two variables; affectionate communication and well-being among young adults and middle-aged adults. Young adults tend to report higher affectionate communication ($M = 104.57$) than middle aged adults (95.77). Further, the scores of middle-aged adults on affectionate communication are more spread out ($SD = 22.23$) compared to young adults ($SD = 14.90$). To determine whether this difference is statistically significant, an inferential statistical analysis is necessary. However, no significant differences in the mean values of young ($M = 7.34$) and middle-aged adults ($M = 7.83$) are observed for well-being, with their standard deviation being roughly the same; Young adults ($SD = 1.71$) and middle-aged adults ($SD = 1.77$).

Table 2: Correlation Between Affectionate Communication and Well-Being Among Young Adults ($N = 56$) and middle-aged adults ($N = 49$)

Variables	Generation	r	p
Affectionate Communication and Well-Being	Young adults	.615**	.000
	Middle-aged adults	.621**	.000

Note. $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).

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H_{1a}: There will be a statistically significant relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among young adults.

As demonstrated in table 2, the results indicate that there is a statistically significant strong positive relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among young adults ($r = .615$). Therefore, *H_{1a}* is supported.

H_{1b}: There will be a statistically significant relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among middle-aged adults.

The results indicate that there is indeed a statistically significant strong positive relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among middle-aged adults, ($r = .621$). Therefore, *H_{1b}* is supported.

Table 3: Independent sample t-test for differences in means between Affectionate Communication and Well-Being among Young Adults (N = 56) and middle-aged adults (N=49)

Variable	Young Adults (N= 56)		Middle-aged Adults (N=49)		t (103)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
AC	104.57	14.90	95.77	22.23	2.346	.021*
WB	7.34	1.71	7.83	1.77	1.413	.161

Note. AC: Affectionate Communication; WB: Well-Being; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation. $p < 0.05$ (2- tailed)

H₂: There will be statistically significant differences in the means of affectionate communication between the two generations.

From the above table the results demonstrate that there are statistically significant differences in the means of affectionate communication between the young and middle-aged adults. The mean value is found to be greater among young adults ($M = 104.57$, $SD = 14.90$) compared to the mean value among middle-aged adults ($M = 95.77$, $SD = 22.23$). This indicates that young adults in romantic relationships use greater levels of affectionate communication with their partners than middle-aged adults, $t(103) = 2.346$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, *H₂* is supported.

Table 4: Intergenerational differences in the means of the subdomains of Affectionate Communication between Young and Middle-Aged Adults (N_y=56, N_m=49)

Variable	Young Adults (N= 56)		Middle aged Adults (N=49)		t (103)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Verbal	27.53	6.53	25.40	8.67	1.42	.156
Non-verbal	44.62	9.27	39.04	11.75	2.71*	.008
Social Support	32.41	2.58	31.32	4.94	1.43	.155

*Significant at 0.05 level. (2 tailed)

To further locate the subdomain in which statistically significant differences in the means are observed, an independent sample t-test was run for verbal affection, non-verbal affection and social support. As table 4 reports, statistically significant differences in the means are observed in non-verbal domains of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged adults with young adults scoring higher on this domain $t(103) = 2.71$, $p < 0.05$. However

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no statistically significant differences are found for verbal affection and social support between the two generations, implying that young and middle-aged adults engage in similar levels of expressions in these two subdomains.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to find associations between affectionate communication and well-being in young and middle-aged heterosexual adults involved in romantic relationships in India. In addition, the study made efforts to ascertain differences in the modes of enactments of affectionate communication between the two generations in verbal, non-verbal and socially supportive affectionate communication. In light of this, the following research questions were proposed:

- **RQ1:** Do heterosexual adults (committed or married) who engage in higher levels of affectionate communication with their partner report higher levels of well-being?
- **RQ2:** Are there intergenerational differences in the enactments of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged heterosexual adults in India?

To investigate these questions, we collected data through surveys on google forms using affectionate communication index (ACI) scale by Floyd & Mormon (1998), and personal well-being Index by International Well-Being Group (2013). Using a purposive and convenience sampling method the survey was distributed through direct message channels of WhatsApp and Instagram to target heterosexual romantic couples pan India. Participants were majorly from urban cities of Delhi, Karnataka, West-Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point in time and confidentiality of their data was ensured. Statistical analysis for descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics of Pearson product moment correlation and independent t-test was employed using the SPSS version 26.

Findings are discussed below in relation to the research hypotheses and existing literature.

H₁ predicted that there would be a statistically significant relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among a) Young and b) Middle-aged heterosexual adults. Results confirmed this hypothesis, showing that acts and expressions of affectionate behaviors (E.g., saying “I love you”, holding hands, and offering favors) towards one partner significantly correlate with well-being across various domains, including health, relationships, and future security. The strong positive correlation observed in both age groups suggests that affectionate communication is consistently associated with higher well-being regardless of generational differences.

These results align with Affection Exchange Theory (Floyd, 2015), which proposes that reciprocal exchange of affectionate behavior among romantic couples serves the adaptive strategy for survival and fertility. Beyond its evolutionary function, it acts as psychological and social resources to buffer against the toll of modern life, providing a sense of security and safety. At a neurological level, studies point to a calming effect induced by the nervous system when partners complement each other. Telling one’s partner something nice lights up areas in the brain associated with reward and empathy reinforcing relationship safety (Eckstein et al., 2023). Furthermore, partners also influence and shape each other's energy levels. Research demonstrates that humans’ nervous systems are not self-contained, but attuned to people around and close to them wherein individuals mutually experience ‘limbic resonance’, where partners connect emotionally, influencing the fostering and maintenance of

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the relationships. Thereby, affirming the present findings that higher levels of engagement in reciprocal exchange of affectionate communication influence well-being in romantic partners.

However, Floyd (2015) cautions such communicative behaviors can be enacted insincerely—what he terms ‘deceptive affection’. While these expressions may momentarily sustain relationships, they can however ultimately lead to emotional dissonance and reduce relationship satisfaction, highlighting the need to consider other important factors that contribute to long-term well-being.

H₂ predicted statistically significant differences in the means of affectionate communication between young and middle-aged heterosexual adults. Results confirmed this hypothesis, highlighting that young adults exhibit higher levels of affectionate communication in comparison to middle aged heterosexual married adults in India. More specifically, youth significantly demonstrate higher levels of non-verbal affectionate communication (e.g., holding hands, kissing, sitting closer with arms around one’s partner’s shoulder) than middle-aged adults. However, no statistically significant differences were found between the two age groups in verbal and socially supportive affectionate communication behaviors. Sternberg’s triangle theory of love (1986) can be useful in accounting for these general differences between the two generations. Young adults often in their early stages of relationships may display more non-verbal affection anchored in passion, such as hugging and other forms of physical touch, whereas this passion may fizzle out with age in middle-aged adults transitioning into companionate love marked by emotional intimacy and commitment. Additionally, despite lower mean levels, the greater variability in affectionate behaviors among middle-aged heterosexual adults suggests that their display of affectionate behaviours may be context-dependent, shaped by individual differences, duration and quality of relationship and life circumstances.

In the Indian context, cultural norms and expectations also play a significant role in non-verbal communication. The younger generation often termed as ‘digital natives’ owing to significant time spent online, are constantly exposed to diverse perspectives due to time-space compression in transnational flow of ideas. Exposure to Western and social media trends drastically reshape ideas about expressing affectionate communication likely manifesting in Public Display of affection (PDA) within peer circles or in urban spaces—practices that were previously stigmatized and considered a taboo. This highlights that while traditional norms and conventions of reserved display of affection prevail in middle-aged heterosexual romantic adults, younger generations increasingly emphasize individual agency in openly expressing affection.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has certain limitations. First, as a cross-sectional correlational design, it does not allow for the evaluation of causal inferences enabling only tentative conclusions. This limitation restricts the internal validity of the study. Second, due to small sample size, the generalizability of the findings to a larger Indian population is limited. However, the study yielded a statistically strong positive relationship between affectionate communication and well-being among young and middle-aged heterosexual adults. Moreover, qualitative studies could provide rich insights into the discourse of romantic love among these age groups. Such studies could explore how different generations interpret affection and the importance of affectionate communication with their partner, blending global influences with local traditions to reimagine love, intimacy and relationships standards.

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Implications

The study offers valuable theoretical insights into the intergenerational differences in affectionate communication between the young and middle-aged heterosexual adults in India. Unlike previous research, which was predominantly conducted in the Western contexts, this study confirms the association between affectionate communication and well-being in the Indian setting. Furthermore, the findings have practical implications. They highlight the importance of raising public awareness about emotional expressions in relationships for better health and well-being. Deprivation of affection can have a significant long-term impact on health, underscoring the need for interventions. Additionally, the study informs therapists and researchers to give weight to affection-based counseling and therapies for couples suffering from commitment and marital discord. Such interventions, like L'abate's (2008) hugging, holding, and cuddling (3HC) intervention, are already being implemented in clinical settings, in the West (Hesse et al., 2020).

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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