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Research Paper

A Correlational Study between Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences, and Dating Anxiety among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated correlational relationships between romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety among young adults in an Indian sociocultural context. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from a convenience sample of 90 single, heterosexual young adults (35 males, 55 females) aged 22–30 years residing in Pune, India. Participants completed three validated instruments: the Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS; Sprecher & Metts, 1989), the Mate Preferences Questionnaire (MPQ; Buss, 1989), and the Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Given non-normal data distribution as determined by the Shapiro- Wilk test, Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed for hypothesis testing, supplemented by simple linear regression. Results revealed a significant moderate positive correlation between romantic beliefs and dating anxiety ($r = .411$, $p < .001$), with romantic beliefs accounting for 11.7 % of the variance in dating anxiety scores. No significant correlations were found between romantic beliefs and mate preferences ($r = .052$, $p = .628$) or between mate preferences and dating anxiety ($r = -.008$, $p = .943$). These findings suggest that idealized romantic ideologies function as cognitive antecedents to dating-related emotional distress, while partner evaluation criteria operate as a relatively independent psychological system within this collectivist context. Implications for cognitive-behavioral interventions targeting romantic belief schemas are discussed.

Keywords: *Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences, Dating Anxiety, Young Adults, Correlational Study*

Romantic relationships constitute one of the most psychologically significant domains of young adult experience, shaping emotional well-being, identity development, and social functioning. In contemporary India, young adults navigate a uniquely complex relational landscape in which traditional frameworks of arranged marriage coexist with increasing exposure to Western romantic idealism through digital media and popular culture. This sociocultural duality creates a context in which romantic cognitions, partner evaluation criteria, and dating-related emotional responses assume particular psychological salience. Young adulthood, broadly spanning ages 22 to 30, represents a critical developmental stage characterized by identity consolidation, increasing autonomy, and the active negotiation of

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intimate partnerships (Arnett, 2000). It is during this period that cognitive schemas concerning romantic relationships crystallize and that emotional responses to dating contexts are most formative.

Romantic beliefs refer to the endorsement of idealized assumptions about the nature of love, including the conviction that one perfect partner exists for each person, that love can overcome all obstacles, that partners should be idealized, and that instantaneous attraction signals a predestined bond (Prager, 1989). These beliefs are operationalized through four dimensions of the Romantic Beliefs Scale: Love Finds a Way, One and Only, Idealization, and Love at First Sight. While moderate romantic idealism may motivate relationship investment and initial satisfaction, strongly held romantic beliefs have been shown to increase vulnerability to disappointment and emotional distress when relational experiences fail to conform to idealized expectations (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). From the perspective of cognitive schema theory (Beck, 1975), romantic beliefs function as relationship schemas that shape interpretation of and emotional response to romantic encounters. When these schemas are rigid or absolutistic, they may produce cognitive appraisals that transform ordinary dating situations into high-stakes evaluative tests, thereby intensifying negative affect.

Mate preferences refer to the set of characteristics individuals consider important when evaluating potential romantic partners, including physical attractiveness, emotional stability, financial prospects, intelligence, and compatibility. Grounded in evolutionary psychology, cross-cultural research by Buss (1989) identified both universal mate preference dimensions and culturally specific variations, with Indian samples showing heightened emphasis on family approval, religious similarity, and value compatibility reflecting the collectivist social structure in which partner selection is embedded. Factor-analytic work by Shackelford et al. (2005) identified four universal higher-order dimensions of mate preferences: Love and Commitment, Status and Resources, Dependability and Stability, and Education and Intelligence. In collectivist cultural settings, these preferences may be shaped as much by family expectations and social norms as by individual desire, potentially creating a functional dissociation between personal romantic ideals and practical partner-selection criteria.

Dating anxiety refers to fear, nervousness, and emotional discomfort experienced specifically in dating-related situations, encompassing fear of negative evaluation by potential partners, social distress in one-on-one romantic interactions, and anxiety in mixed-gender social contexts (Glickman & Greca, 2004). Dating anxiety is conceptualized as a domain-specific manifestation of social anxiety in which the evaluative stakes are heightened by the personal and identity-relevant nature of romantic appraisal. Glickman and La Greca (2004) validated the Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A), demonstrating that dating anxiety constitutes a psychometrically distinct construct with significant consequences for self-esteem, relationship formation, and psychological well-being. Recent Indian research by (Yogeesh & Davidson, 2025) confirmed elevated levels of dating anxiety among Indian college students, attributing this in part to the unique social pressures of family scrutiny, stigma around premarital dating, and ambiguity about appropriate courtship behavior.

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to understanding the interrelationships among these constructs. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987)

proposes that early caregiver experiences shape internal working models that serve as templates for adult romantic functioning. Individuals with anxious attachment, characterized by a negative self-model and hypervigilance to signs of rejection, may be especially prone to endorsing absolutistic romantic beliefs as cognitive compensations for attachment insecurity, and to experiencing dating anxiety as the situational expression of dispositional fears about partner responsiveness. Cognitive-behavioral theory (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1962) provides a complementary framework, proposing that idealized romantic beliefs function as domain-specific cognitive schemas that generate heightened appraisals of evaluative threat in dating contexts. Oltean and David (2017), in a meta-analysis of 37 studies encompassing over 8,000 participants, found that maladaptive romantic beliefs were associated with elevated psychological distress ($r = -.28$), supporting the CBT account of romantic beliefs as a source of emotional dysfunction.

Despite substantial individual literatures on these three constructs, no published study has simultaneously examined romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety within a single empirical investigation, particularly in the Indian context. The limited existing work on pairwise relationships suggests that romantic beliefs may elevate partner evaluation standards (Bejanyan et al., 2014) and heighten the psychological stakes of romantic encounters (Regan et al., 1998), while mate preference dimensions have shown inconsistent relationships with dating-related affect (Conroy-Beam et al., 2019). The present study addresses this gap by simultaneously examining all three constructs in a sample of single Indian young adults. Three hypotheses were tested: (H1) romantic beliefs and mate preferences will be positively correlated; (H2) mate preferences and dating anxiety will be positively correlated; and (H3) romantic beliefs and dating anxiety will be positively correlated.

Statement of the Problem

To study the Correlation between Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences, and Dating Anxiety in young adults.

Objectives

1. To examine romantic beliefs among single young adults.
2. To assess mate preference dimensions among single young adults.
3. To measure dating anxiety among single young adults.
4. To investigate the relationship between romantic beliefs and mate preference dimensions in young adults.
5. To investigate the relationship between romantic beliefs and dating anxiety in young adults.
6. To investigate the relationship between mate preference dimensions and dating anxiety in young adults.

Rationale and Significance

This study holds theoretical significance by addressing a key literature gap integrating romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety, typically studied separately, to clarify their interconnections among Indian young adults in a collectivist context shaped by family involvement, arranged marriage norms, career pressures, and media-driven romanticism. Empirically, it extends cross-cultural validation of Western measures (RBS, MPQ, DAS-A) to non-Western settings, revealing context-specific patterns such as limited dating exposure. Practically, findings inform counselling via cognitive-behavioral

restructuring of maladaptive romantic schemas to alleviate dating anxiety, while mate preferences guide therapists addressing partner selection dilemmas amidst familial expectations. Developmentally, young adulthood (22–30 years) marks identity consolidation and autonomy emergence, when romantic attitudes shape long-term relational trajectories, equipping practitioners to support emerging adults effectively.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There will be a positive correlation between romantic beliefs and mate preferences among young adults.
- **H2:** There will be a positive correlation between mate preferences and dating anxiety among young adults.
- **H3:** There will be a positive correlation between romantic beliefs and dating anxiety among young adults.

Sample

The study included 90 participants (N = 90; DAS-A: N = 89 due to one missing value) who were single, heterosexual young adults between 22 and 30 years. Participants were recruited using convenience (incidental) sampling from college campuses, as this method allows for accessible, cost-effective data collection from a readily available population of young adults. There were 35 male and 55 female participants in this study.

Inclusion Criteria

- Age between 22 and 30 years
- Identifies as heterosexual
- Currently single or in a non-exclusive dating situation
- Has been single for at least the past 3 months
- Willing to provide informed consent
- Fluent in English

Exclusion Criteria

- Currently in a committed exclusive romantic relationship or recently ended one (within past 3 months)
- Currently undergoing psychiatric treatment for a severe mental illness
- Active severe mental health crisis
- Under 18 or over 30 years of age
- Severe language barriers preventing comprehension of scales
- Identifies as LGBTQ+

Research Design

A correlational design was chosen because the research questions address associations between naturally occurring psychological variables—romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety.

Variables in the Study

- The current study examines three variables: romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety. Age was treated as a control variable.
- Predictor Variable: Romantic Beliefs
- Criterion variable: Dating Anxiety and Mate Preferences

Tools

- Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS; Sprecher & Metts, 1989): 15-item scale assessing idealized love cognitions across four subscales (Love Finds a Way, One and Only, Idealization, Love at First Sight; 7-point Likert; $\alpha = .81$).
- Mate Preferences Questionnaire (MPQ; Buss, 1989): 18-item measure rating partner trait importance (e.g., physical attractiveness, intelligence, resources; 0-3 scale; cross-culturally validated).
- Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004): 26-item scale measuring dating-specific distress (e.g., fear of negative evaluation, social distress; 1-5 Likert; $\alpha = .92$)
- Personal Data Sheet: Collected demographics (age, gender, relationship status, dating history).

Procedure

Data were collected via paper-and-pencil administration. Following ethical approval and institutional permission, potential participants were approached on college campuses and provided with written information about the study. All participants provided signed informed consent prior to completing the instrument battery. Participation was voluntary and unpaid, and participants were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. The complete battery, comprising the personal data sheet, RBS, MPQ, and DAS-A, was administered in a fixed order in group settings.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Range for Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences, and Dating Anxiety (N = 90)

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Romantic Beliefs	67.74	13.595	-.158	-.028
Mate Preferences	33.40	8.353	-.811	1.984
Dating Anxiety	69.74	17.915	.781	.369

The above table explores descriptive statistics for Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences, and Dating Anxiety.

For Romantic Beliefs, the mean score is 67.74, the median is 68, with a standard deviation of 13.60. The skewness value was -0.158 and the kurtosis value was -0.028. These values indicate that the sample endorsed a moderately high level of romantic idealism. Participants showed meaningful agreement with beliefs such as love overcoming all obstacles, the existence of a singular destined soulmate, idealization of partners, and love at first sight. The near-zero skewness (–0.158) and near-zero kurtosis (–0.028) confirm that scores were approximately symmetrically distributed around the mean, suggesting the sample was representative of a range of romantic orientations without extreme clustering.

For Mate Preferences, the mean score is 33.40, the median is 34, with a standard deviation of 8.35. The skewness value is -0.8111 and the kurtosis value is 0.369.

This indicates a moderate level of mate selectivity. The negative skewness (–0.8111) reveals that a larger proportion of participants clustered toward the higher end of mate preferences, suggesting that most participants placed considerable importance on partner characteristics.

For Dating Anxiety, the mean score is 69.74, the median is 64, with a standard deviation of 17.92; the skewness value is 0.369, and kurtosis value is +0.781.

This indicates moderate levels of dating anxiety in the sample population. The positive skew (+0.781) indicates that the majority of participants reported low-to-moderate dating anxiety. This distributional pattern suggests that dating anxiety is not universal in this sample.

Table 2 Correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Mate Preferences among young adults.

	Mate preferences
Romantic beliefs	.052

In the above table, the correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Mate Preferences is not significant. The near-zero correlation indicates that the degree to which a young adult endorses romantic ideals has no relationship with the degree to which they value specific partner characteristics in this research.

Table 3 Correlation between Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety among young adults

	Dating Anxiety
Mate Preferences	-.008

The above table presents the correlation between Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety. The essentially zero correlation (r = –.008) indicates that the importance an individual places on partner characteristics has no meaningful association with the level of anxiety they experience in dating situations.

Table 4: Correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety among Young Adults

	Dating Anxiety
Romantic Beliefs	0.411**

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

The above table presents the correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety. The correlation coefficient is r = 0.411 ($p < 0.001$), which means that there is a positive correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety.

Table 4.1: Regression between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety

Model	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean squares**	**F**	**Sig.**	**Adjusted R-squared**	**Standardised coefficient (β)**
Regression	3596.685	1	3596.685	12.696	.001[b]	.117	.357
Residual	2464.372	87	283.292				
Total	28243.056	88					

1. Dependent variable: Dating Anxiety
2. Predictors: (Constant), Romantic Beliefs

The above table presents the regression analysis of the relationship between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety in young adults. The R-squared value is 0.127, and adjusted R-squared is 0.117. Therefore, Romantic Beliefs explains 11.7% of the variance in Dating Anxiety among young adults.

The purpose of this study was to find a correlation between Romantic Beliefs, Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety. Three tools were used: the Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This tool measures endorsement of romantic idealism, such as beliefs in one true love, love conquering all obstacles, and idealized partner expectations. The Mate Preferences Questionnaire (MPQ; Buss, 1989) assesses the importance participants give to different partner characteristics when choosing a romantic partner. It typically includes traits such as good looks, education, financial prospects, family orientation, and other mate-selection preferences, and the Dating Anxiety Scale adapted for young adults (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004) this tool measures anxiety in dating-related situations, especially fear of negative evaluation, discomfort in romantic interactions, and social distress in dating contexts. The present study examined the relationships among romantic beliefs, mate preferences, and dating anxiety in a sample of 90 single, heterosexual young adults aged 22–30 years who were residents of Pune. Non-parametric statistics were used with the help of SPSS as data was found to be not normally distributed.

The study's strongest and most theoretically important finding aligned with the hypothesized correlation between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety among young adults. Table 4.3 shows a Spearman's Rank correlation coefficient of r = .411. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between romantic beliefs and dating anxiety. Spearman's correlation indicated a moderate relationship, and regression analysis further showed that romantic beliefs accounted for a meaningful proportion of 11.7% variance in dating anxiety. This finding supports the proposition that stronger endorsement of romantic ideals is associated with greater emotional vulnerability in dating contexts. Individuals who strongly believe in notions such as soulmates, love conquering all obstacles, or idealized partners may perceive dating as a highly evaluative and psychologically demanding experience rather than as a gradual process of mutual exploration. This result is consistent with cognitive-behavioural perspectives on emotional distress. Romantic beliefs can function as rigid cognitive schemas that influence how dating situations are interpreted. When such beliefs are highly idealized, an ordinary social encounter may be appraised as a test of one's worth, desirability, or ability to meet romantic expectations. Such appraisal patterns are likely to intensify fear of negative evaluation, which lies at the core of dating anxiety. The findings are also consistent with prior research by Oltean and David, who showed that maladaptive romantic beliefs are associated with psychological distress, and by Glickman and La Greca, who conceptualized dating anxiety as fear of negative evaluation in dating situations.

Within the Indian context, this relationship may be especially prominent because romantic beliefs are embedded in a social environment that combines idealised love narratives with strong family, cultural, and practical constraints. The present findings suggest that when romantic beliefs are rigid or idealized, they may heighten the sense of emotional stakes attached to dating. This can increase self-consciousness, anticipation of rejection, and anxiety about not meeting the standards one has internalized for love and partnership. From a counselling perspective, this indicates that romantic belief systems may be a useful target for cognitive intervention, particularly when clients struggle with worry, avoidance, or fear in romantic settings.

It was hypothesised that "There will be a positive correlation between Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety". From Table 4.3, Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was r = -.008, indicating no significant correlation between Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety. This suggests that having preferences for particular partner qualities does not necessarily produce anxiety in dating situations. Rather, mate preferences appear to function more as evaluative criteria for partner selection than as emotional triggers in themselves.

This finding is meaningful rather than merely absent. One reasonable explanation is that mate preferences remain abstract unless they are tested in actual dating situations. In the present sample, 39.6% of participants had never dated, and many others had only limited dating experience. As a result, partner preferences may not yet have been translated into emotionally charged expectations or disappointments. Another explanation is that in collectivist settings such as in India, mate preferences are often shaped by family values, social norms, and practical considerations rather than by private emotional anxiety alone. Thus, the content of preferences may be culturally important without being directly linked to dating-related fear.

The sample context also supports this interpretation. The pie charts illustrating career priority, family disapproval, and dating app use suggest that many participants were navigating a socially constrained and relatively low-frequency dating environment. In such a setting, mate preferences may be more closely tied to future planning and social identity than to present-day anxiety. Therefore, the absence of correlation does not imply that mate preferences are irrelevant; rather, it suggests that they operate through different psychological pathways than dating anxiety.

It was hypothesised that there would be a correlation between romantic beliefs and mate preferences among young adults. Table 4.3.1 reveals a Spearman's Rank order correlation coefficient of r = .052, which is means no significant correlation was found between romantic beliefs and mate preferences. This finding indicates that Romantic Beliefs and Mate Preferences may operate as separate psychological systems, rather than as two expressions of the same underlying romantic orientation. Romantic beliefs are primarily ideological and emotionally loaded, whereas mate preferences are evaluative, pragmatic, and often socially regulated.

This distinction is particularly meaningful in the Indian context. A young adult may strongly endorse romantic ideals such as destiny, one true love, or perfect compatibility while simultaneously valuing practical partner characteristics such as education, responsibility, family background, or stability. The pie charts showing family-related concerns and career prioritization reinforce this interpretation, suggesting that romantic life in this sample is shaped by both personal ideals and broader social realities. As a result, romantic beliefs do not necessarily translate into stronger mate preferences, because the two may serve different functions: one reflects emotional aspiration, while the other reflects partner-selection criteria. (Bejanyan et al., 2014) found that collectivism and family-related factors shape mate preferences in collectivist contexts. The findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that in collectivist cultures, romantic beliefs and pragmatic mate preferences can coexist rather than contradict each other (Le et al., 2012). The present study therefore contributes to theory by showing that romantic cognition and mate-selection criteria are not automatically aligned, even though both are central to romantic psychology.

The demographic profile of the sample is important for interpreting these findings. The attached charts indicate that the participants were predominantly young adults aged 22 to 30 years. The age distribution confirms that the sample was drawn from emerging adulthood, a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, future planning, and relational uncertainty. At the same time, the large proportion of never-dated participants which is 39.6% and non-users of dating apps which is 81% indicates that dating was not a highly active behaviour. This matters because dating anxiety may be experienced differently when romantic situations are imagined rather than repeatedly lived through. 63.8% of the sample population also reported that academic or career demands left little time or energy for social or romantic activities, and 39.5% endorsed the importance of avoiding family disapproval in romantic decision-making.

In addition, a 43.1% number of the sample population reported past negative romantic experiences. Taken together, these characteristics suggest that romantic experiences in this sample were often anticipatory rather than actively relational, and that romantic attitudes were being shaped within a context of career priorities, limited dating involvement, and family-related social expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

- No significant correlation was found between Romantic Beliefs and Mate Preferences among young adults.
- No significant correlation was found between Mate Preferences and Dating Anxiety among young adults.
- A significant positive correlation was found between Romantic Beliefs and Dating Anxiety.
- Romantic Beliefs significantly predicted Dating Anxiety, explaining 11.7% of the variance in dating anxiety scores.

Implications

- The finding that Romantic Beliefs predict Dating Anxiety has direct relevance for counselling practice. Mental health professionals working with young adults experiencing dating-related distress may benefit from assessing the nature and intensity of their clients' romantic belief systems as part of the intake and case conceptualization process.
- Cognitive restructuring of maladaptive romantic beliefs - including psychoeducation about the unrealistic nature of "one true soulmate" narratives, love at first sight, and idealized partner expectations, may serve as an effective intervention strategy for reducing dating anxiety in young adults. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) frameworks, which directly target irrational beliefs, may be particularly appropriate (Oltean & David, 2017).
- Interventions targeting romantic beliefs need not necessarily address partner selectivity, and vice versa.
- Educational institutions may benefit from incorporating awareness programs about the psychological impact of idealized media portrayals of romantic love, which are a primary source of romantic belief formation in young adults. Such programs could help students develop more realistic and flexible views of relationships before they enter the dating arena.

Limitations

Several limitations temper the interpretation of these findings. First, the sample of 90 participants recruited through convenience sampling from a single urban Indian city limits the generalizability of findings to the broader young adult population in India. Second, the study included only single, heterosexual individuals, excluding LGBTQ+ young adults whose experiences of romantic beliefs and dating anxiety may differ meaningfully. Third, all measures relied on self-report, which is susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly for topics as socially sensitive as dating in the Indian cultural context. Fourth, the MPQ was analysed as a total score, potentially masking differential associations between specific mate preference dimensions and the other study variables. Fifth, potential confounders including general social anxiety, attachment style, self-esteem, past relationship experiences, and media consumption were neither measured nor controlled for. Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the direction of the observed associations.

Suggestions for Future Studies

- Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, including participants from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic regions (urban and rural), and educational settings, to improve the generalisability of findings across the Indian young adult population.
- Longitudinal study designs would be valuable in establishing the directional and potentially causal relationship between romantic beliefs and dating anxiety — specifically, whether romantic beliefs precede and predict the development of dating anxiety over time, or whether the reverse pathway also operates.
- Subscale-level analyses of the Mate Preferences would allow future researchers to explore whether specific dimensions of mate preference particularly those tied to appearance or social status — show differential relationships with dating anxiety and romantic beliefs, which the total score approach in the present study could not detect in the present study.
- Future studies could include measures of attachment style, self-esteem, social anxiety, and media consumption habits as additional variables to build a more comprehensive model of the predictors of dating anxiety in young adults.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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