Original Article

Love at first byte: A mixed-method study about online dating in India

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Abstract

The advancement in social media has influenced how we communicate in daily lives, especially towards our partners and romantic relationships. It is important to understand how people present themselves and perceives others, how we relate to each other during the process of online dating.

The aim of the study was to explore the attitude of Indians towards online dating and to explore the qualities of a potential partner and self-concept of the respondents.

An online cross-sectional survey was done using a self-report questionnaire. The study was conducted by Whatsaap and Gmail and included only volunteers.

The study found that the majority of people (90%) would come for chatting with other people and the most common traits among the desirability of the people to be loyalty and honesty followed by understanding and sense of humor. It also found that the majority of the people were looking for a long term, stable relationship.

As online dating and matchmaking have become rampant, people should try to keep themselves informed and proceed to the world of online dating with a little caution.

Introduction

Although there has been an effort from a long time to intervene in the process of love and romantic relationships of people as the saying goes, "love defies all calculation". The explosion in the use of Smart phone applications such as dating apps has significantly transformed many aspects of society, communication, and relationships among people. Online dating (also known as internet dating) is referred to as an alternative to meet the potential partner through various media such as through dedicated websites or online dating application such as Tinder,

Happn or Grindr, OkCupid, etc. via smart phones to develop personal and romantic relationships (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

The development of technology has considerably changed the patterns of communication and so has the equation of romantic relationships (Sassler, 2010). The advancement of the technology and explosion in the usage of smartphones has changed the way we deal with the outside world by their various applications (Lee & Bruckman, 2007). According to a national survey regarding dating and relationships in the digital era, 11% of American adults especially singles (38%) and looking for relationships in the US, have used Online Dating agencies or dating applications. European countries also rely heavily on online dating (38%) as an effective method for choosing their romantic interests (Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016).

According to a survey done in 2018, almost half (46%) of the daters had found their partner online through dating apps, and men are more likely to fall in love and get married to their online romances than women while online dating. 52% of the user base accepted that dating apps made them more judgmental to physical appearance and peoples' looks (Lykens et al., 2019).

The users of online dating services have admitted that 53% have lied in their online dating profile. Women lied more than men and the most common dishonesties being about looks and physical appearance and in their profile, posted edited photos and photos of their younger selves while men mostly lie about their financial status (Heino et al., 2010).10 % of online dating profiles are fake and online romance scam is on top 10 out of 1000 scams, reported in Consumer Sentinel (Economic times, 2017). In 2018, 2.7% of people in India used an online dating service. This tripled the amount over 2017. 20-30% of users are from small-town and the majority of the user base is of the age of 24 years or younger. The most popular dating sites in India are 'Tinder' female-friendly app 'Bumble' and 'OkCupid' and they have made an effort to penetrate the India dating market (Heino et al., 2010). In India, the majority (74%) of the users are men while only 26% of users are female.

A data given by Tinder uses and revenue statistics revealed that there are 57 million Tinder users in 190 countries and its available in 40 languages and per week 20 million users go on date. About 95% of the user base of Tinder meet their matches within in a week. 2% of male Tinder profiles identified as homosexual or bisexual, compared with 0.01% of female profiles (Clement, 2020). In selecting the partner for dating women prefer mates with high socioeconomic status while men prefer physically attractive women. Overall, users valued interpersonal communication more than sex appeal (Menkin et al., 2015). A survey reported that the use of dating apps has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reportedly 82% of single daters turned online for their dating needs during the self-quarantine in their homes. Half of the people reported their preference for dating online, in the beginning, to get acquainted with their potential partners to avoid the spread of COVID-19 and remain safe. 30% of the users said that they are going to just stick with messaging and chatting with matches until they can meet up in person. Only 5% of singles reported that they are going to stop dating altogether until the virus passes (Kar, 2020).

People with low self-esteem and who engage in risky sexual behaviors are more likely to be involved in online dating ((Sasson & Mesch, 2014). A study identified that adults have six motivations to use online dating: love, casual sex, ease of communication, self-worth validation, thrill of excitement, and trendiness. These motivations differ according to one's age and gender. Tinder was recognized as a hookup app without emotional intimacy, bonding or a committed relationship (Sumter et al., 2017).

Online dating websites has its disadvantages too as it involves issues related to limited social presence, distrust in the protection of personal information, time-consuming, most of the time unrelated physical presence. A study found that those who engage in online relationships tend to have low levels of concern and people with risky sexual behaviors are more likely to be involved in online interaction (Heino et al., 2010).

Earlier, online dating sites were stigmatized as a venue for the desperate. Now it has become a popular platform to meeting mates. The study of current trends of online dating and a high user base can provide insight regarding this phenomenon. Finding partner on online dating system have much larger pools because of its credibility, depth of information shared in profiles and the sentiment that it is a more natural environment where people with the same interests can meet and interact (Hamilton, 2016).

The involvement of people with online dating websites or applications may also be related to their attitudes and perceptions about it, the people believe that they could easily build relationships online and can interact in an environment without meeting them in person (Heino et al., 2010). Hence, the study aimed to explore the attitude of Indians towards an online dating or internet romantic relationship, who should be an ideal dating partner and self-concept about themselves.

Methodology: The study was initially conceptualized as a qualitative study, along with detailed in-depth interview with people. Later after conducting a few interviews, the approach was changed into a mixed-method study based on self-report. This study was conducted online as a survey on dating behaviors in India. A self-report questionnaire was developed using available literature into an online form and sent to the contacts through social media. The study was conducted virtually on the internet using commonly used social media platforms such as WhatsApp, text message, and e-mail.

Participants: This study only included volunteers. The inclusion criteria were kept as broad as possible. Participants from the age-group of 18- 50 years were approached online. People who have access to smart phones, internet connection, and used social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, etc. were included in the study.

Variables: The variables under the study can be broadly classified into socio-demographic variables, attitude, and experience about online dating and reported self-concept and qualitative responses. They were asked about their expectation from a partner and why would someone like to date them.

Tools: A self-structured online questionnaire with 4 sections was developed in view to observe the research variables. Informed consent leads to the opening of the form which after collecting the socio-demographic details assesses on a multiple option scale the attitude of the respondent regarding online dating. After that section, the self-concept is reported on a 5 point Likert-scale. And the respondents have to answer the qualitative components in short answer type text entries. The quantitative variables were socio-demographic variables, attitude scale, and perceived self-concept.

The qualitative data has been thematically coded and analyzed. We used statistical methods such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency and percentage and thematic coding.

Results: We received 105 responses from Feb 20th to March 26th, 2020.

Socio-demography : The mean age of the participants was 25.33 ± 4.73 years and the age range of the respondents was from 19-39 years. The majority of responses in the study were received from, Uttar Pradesh, followed by West Bengal, followed by Delhi, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Karnakata, Mizoram, Bihar, and Uttarakhand (Fig:1). 65.1% of the respondents were male. The majority (86.8%) of the people followed Hinduism. 76.4% of the participants resided in the urban area followed by 13.2% in the semi-urban area and rest in the rural area (10.4%). The majority of the participants (69.8%) were educated above the graduate level (38.7% graduate and 31.1% postgraduate). 70.4% of the respondents never dated online before.

Attitude about online dating: Among the 51 people who had dated online before, 29% started dating in 2020, 31.3% had been dating before 2016. 78 people replied to the question regarding their reasons for dating online. 37.2% were looking out for stable long term relationships. 24% were checking people out and 15.4% were looking for open relationships, and 14.1% were looking for hooking up and 9% were looking for casual dating relationships. Among all the participants (N=105), 81% preferred dating offline, only 15.2% wanted to date online. 85 people responded to the question regarding their choices on the online dating among them. 90.5% preferred to chat with their potential partners, 27.4% wanted to video call, 17.9% wanted to share pictures, 13.1% wanted to 'sext' (sexual chatting) their

partners the respondents seemed least likely to send audio and video clips.

The response to the question regarding their interest in offline dating was given by all the 106 participants, 56% of the respondents were interested in meeting their potential partners in a café, almost 40% wanted to meet them at a restaurant, 24% wanted to meet them at a mall. Among 105 respondents 31.7% wanted to date online and 38% did not want to date online and 29% had already been dating online.

Self-concept rating : The self-concept of the people is summarized in Table 1. The major findings regarding the self-concept of the respondents are that more than half (55%) of the participants felt that they were satisfied with themselves, more than half of them (56.6%) thought they could respect themselves more. 94% of the respondents had a positive attitude about themselves.

Qualitative analysis: The study had two broad questions. The first question requires the respondents to outline the qualities that they want to highlight about themselves that can be criteria for likability for online dating. The second question was about characteristics that interest the responder. The broad opening questions had various types of responses these were thematically organized into a few characteristics.

The responses of the first question, found the most common traits among the desirability of the people to be loyalty and honesty followed by understanding and sense of humor (Fig 2). Physical beauty and family background were found to be some of the least reported preferences for dating among men and women both

14 responses from the men were regarding uncertainty about their qualities (why they should be liked). Three of those people who were uncertain about their qualities were also

Table 1: Self-concept of the respondents (N=105)

Sl.	Statement	Positive response
1	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	89.7%
2	At times I think I am no good at all.	59.4%
3	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	93.4%
4	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	88.7%
5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	59.6%
6	I certainly feel useless at times	55.7%
7	I feel that I'm a person of worth.	82%
8	I wish I could have more respect for myself	19.8%
9	All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.	84.9%
10	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	93.4%

uncertain about what they were looking for in their partners. Five responses of women were regarding their uncertainty about their likability but they did have reasons for their likability.

Some of the typical responses from the men received in the study are *"I am an honest, compassionate, dedicated person with simplicity and adjustability"*. This is a good way of perception and such qualities are usually expected by the women. The most typical response received from the women regarding expectation from a partner was *"honest loyal and respecting with a good sense of humour"*.
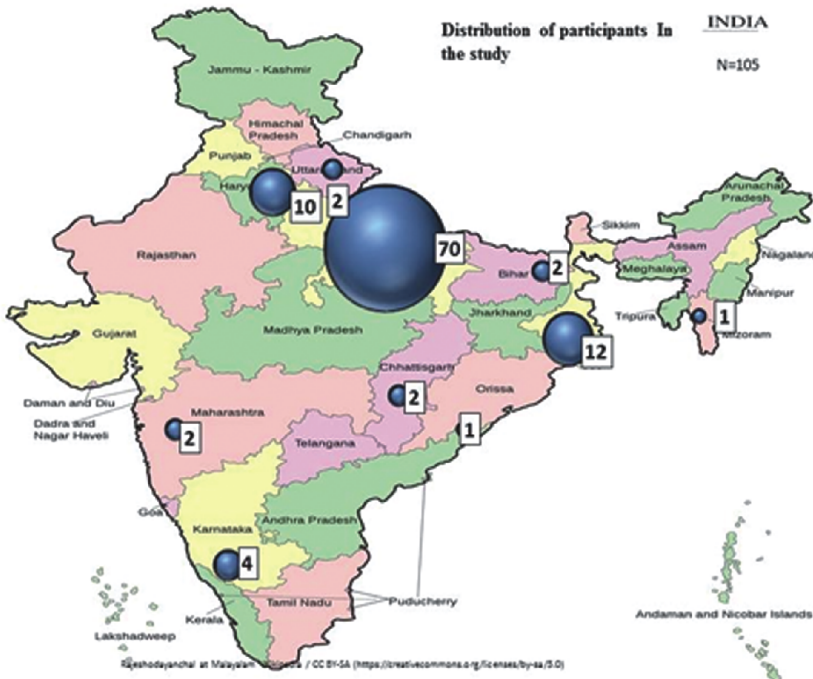

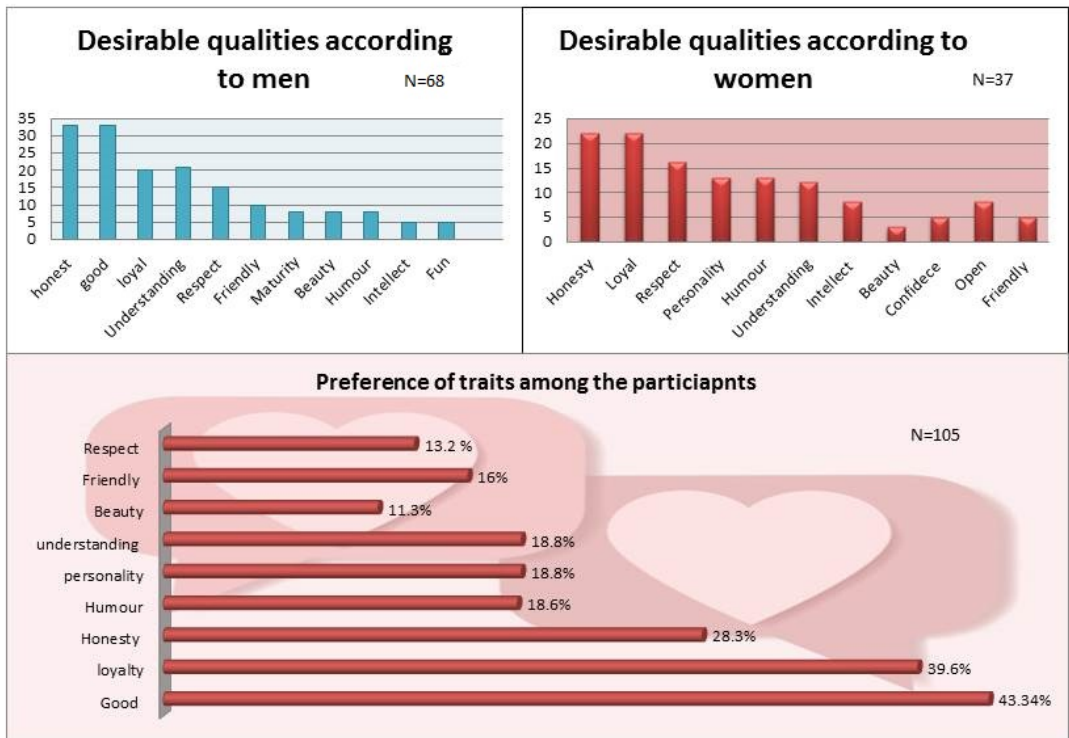**Figure 1: Distribution of participants in the study**

Figure 2: Characteristics of the participants

Looking at the expectations from the men in the study we typically find a pattern (Fig 2). The most typical response received from men regarding their expectations of qualities from their partners includes the following, *"Loyal, great sense of humor, intelligent".* The response of women to about their likability typically consisted of responses such as *"I think I'm witty, smart, caring, and fun to be with".*

The study found that a very less number of people 8.5% gave importance to physical beauty as a quality to be expected in their potential partners which is quite contrary to the common belief.

Discussion

The internet has become an undeniable part of the modern world. The majority of the work has already moved online through the internet, along with socialization. The romance has also gone online; people look for their potential partners online. Dating, which has separate platforms online now affects relationship formation and progression majorly. According to studies, millions of people look for partners online and dating sites try to provide suggestions using algorithms (Su & Hu, 2019; Xia et al., 2016). So, our study was aimed at what people perceive about online dating and how it affects them. Men and women both use the internet and various applications to engage in romantic relationships online. Our study was aimed at identifying people's preferences about dating and preferable traits in their potential partners. We took adults from the age of 18-50 years. Studies have reported that the age of dating although it is much less than that of the conventional age, can range from 15- 70 years many dating apps have age, gender, and sexual orientation-specific sites and applications (Su & Hu, 2019). A review of literature from 2012 reported that there were high chances and good scope for people to date online, the landscape of dating has been changing and online dating gives

increased access to potential partners and helps them match with each other (Finkel et al., 2012). This does not always guarantee a better outcome of the relationships. In contemporary times, it has become a common platform for seeking more than just romantic relationships. There are specific reasons why people turn into certain online applications. Usually, all types of people come on dating applications and social sites to look for potential partners. So, it is not only the online dating apps but the matrimonial sites and social networking sites also are platforms for searching potential partners and engaging in sexual and romantic relationships. The present-day dating scenario is much more than romance, it has hookups, and open relationships, various people come online for various reasons. Our study found that the majority of people would come for chatting with other people (89%). Online dating platforms usually use that feature to provide matching and use that to get to know about the people from there (Frazzetto, 2010). The studies on online dating had similar socio-demographic features to this study, young people, residing in urban areas with access to the internet and educated up to high school were among the participants of their study (Lykens et al., 2019). We considered people above the age of 18 years but studies say that much younger population also accesses online to involve themselves in romantic relationships (Hamilton, 2016). In rural areas of the developed countries people were less into online dating (Lykens et al., 2019). In our study, respondents were belonged to urban areas majorly.

Studies have reported that men and women look for different qualities among their potential partners (Xia et al., 2016). In our study, we found that there was similarity in some characteristics and differences in many of them. The most common desirable quality among men and women were loyalty and honesty; the findings show that there is a chance of trust issues when people date online, many studies have reported that people usually fake their profiles to make themselves attractive, the virtual world makes it possible to create illusions about oneself. This could be the most important reason behind honesty being the most desirable trait while looking for a potential romantic partner (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). In our study, we found that majority of the people were looking for stable relationships mostly for the long term and some for uncertain periods but only 14% of the respondents were looking for 'hook-ups' on line. This finding is a little different from the findings and claims of online dating agencies and applications (Frazzetto, 2010; Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016). The majority of the participants in the study were willing to date online or were dating online, which indicates that online dating has taken a big place in the lives of the generations. The current scenario of pandemic and social distancing has become beneficial for people to look for dates online. Although there is reduced contact people are more engaged in romantic activities online for their loved ones as reported by news (Friedman, 2020). The other qualities both noted by men and women are 'good, loyalty, honesty respect, understanding, humor, friendliness, and beauty'. Although a majority of the profiles did not mention the physical beauty they emphasized more on the qualities, like, respect, understanding, humor, maturity, etc. this also shows that people are shifting their views from the apparent notion of physical beauty. Few participants responded very differently from the others its worth to note a few, a male participant responded to the question about his likability like this, *"because I'm decent, educated, have a class and a good background"* another male participant responded, to the same question that, *"because*

I deserve it". There was another important pattern that could be noted which is put into the section of desperation. We found that some people think that they need to date someone just for being in a relationship as they say. *"I am interested in dating", "Because I am single"* and *"people should date me as everyone needs to date someone and so I think someone should date me".* This type of statement also depicts that dating among young adults is the norm and if people remain single they feel desperate to be in relationships. This type of person gets vulnerable online and can become potential targets for abuse and usually end up in difficult situations (Collibee et al., 2018; Collibee & Furman, 2014; Lykens et al., 2019). When we look at expectations of people from their potential partners online, we observe the pattern where, honesty, loyalty, understanding, humor, respect, and responsibility were the most sought after qualities. Participants valued those traits over physical beauty in the majority of the responses. A few of the unusual responses received in the expectation of partners were, *"she should be beautiful with remarkable features of a great asset which I can bank on at times to take a decision".* another uncommon response received was, *"Good Looks, Good Looks, Good Looks".* Another deep-rooted colonial mind-set was also depicted, where people focused on traits of good personality, understanding, and intelligence one response was notably just, 'Fair skin'. These types of behaviors were also noted in studies throughout the world (Collibee et al., 2018; Lykens et al., 2019; Su & Hu, 2019). The preference still people chose offline dating instead of online dating. The reasons are obvious dating and romance seek to fulfill the basic need for companionship and mating and a majority of it is unachievable by online means.

Conclusion

Online dating has become a common trend, people making profiles online and dating people has become a general commonplace. This has led to the development of separate platforms, specially dedicated to romantic and sexual match making and relationships. They have impacted social life since the early second decade of the millennia. Online dating and match making have become a rampant and easy solution to people for connecting and being together. The cheap access to the internet and enormity of social media makes one inevitable to engage in such type of behaviors. Our study found that people in India currently prefer offline dating more than online dating, although majority of them try online dating. Usually, people look for stable and long term relationships for dating but there are also a good number of people who wish to have open relationships and hook-ups. There is only limited opportunity to get to know the person and usually, the romance can become fast-paced. Online dating is an effective way to search for partners as it becomes easy to find people near and far to start a relationship with but people with poor self-concept and desperation can bring about issues regarding exploitation abuse. The data published online is virtually indestructible so there are high chances of fraud and technology-facilitated sexual abuse which can be detrimental to both the physical and mental health of the associated person. Generally online was found to be an acceptable method to look for partners, and make friends with people whom you may not meet otherwise. The online dating exposes the younger age group to vulnerabity of being abused and fraud. Many People who have ill intentions may pose as a friend can harm a vulnerable person. This study is limited to small sample size and larger sample with more detailed studies will be needed to generalize the findings. Mental health is usually vulnerable to relationships in life; online relationships can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on the lives of people who pursue so.

People should try to keep themselves informed and proceed to the world of online dating with a little caution. This will make the experience a smooth and expected one.

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