

Physical Intimacy and Romance in Young Adulthood

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Intimate relationships are influential in the lives of those involved and can often define 'who' we are. The present study examines the role of physical intimacy in romantic relationships of young adults. For this purpose, two males and two females in the age group of 18-25 years, in a romantic relationship for a period of 6 months to 2 years, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis individually, following which the emerging broad themes were analysed. The results are discussed in the light of cultural background and family upbringing, the extent and importance of physical intimacy and the relative significance of physical versus emotional bonding. The study also aimed at addressing the role of physical intimacy in strengthening a relationship, and the associated issue of morality in the Indian context. Moreover, because of increasing Westernization and the contemporary changes influencing the life styles of young adults, the study has also tried to examine its effect on the ways in which young adults express their love towards their partner.

Keywords: physical intimacy, romance, young adults, attachment, emotional bonding

Introduction

Romantic relationships in young adulthood can play a crucial role in the development of an individual in both psychological as well as sociological sense. These relationships help in shaping up who we become. Romantic relationships can differ considerably from person to person and also within one relationship over the duration of the couple's time together. Broadly speaking, romantic relationships entail three component features- passion, intimacy, and commitment- that may be present in varying degrees in different relationships (Sternberg, 1986). Passionate attraction and sexual desire are the *sine qua non* of romantic relationships; without these elements, the relationship is just a friendship, not one of romantic status (Connolly et al., 1999). Equally important, romantic relationships are mutually acknowledged close connections between two people. There is good evidence that the elements of passion, intimacy, and commitment are present in all romantic relationships regardless of the age of the partners (Underwood, 2011).

Passion or physical intimacy is a key characteristic of romantic relationships in adolescence. Feelings of love, attraction, and longing for another person are the essence of romantic passion (Connolly et al., 1999; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2008), and it is the passionate component of romantic

relationships that distinguishes these bonds from close connections with friends and family at any age. Being in love with a specific person involves pleasurable physiological, cognitive and behavioural experiences; however, this increased arousal and preoccupation can also contribute to sleeplessness, distractibility, excessive reassurance seeking behaviour and concern about possible rejection or betrayal for both males and females (Brand et al., 2007; Larson et al., 1999).

Most teen's sexual activities occur with someone they are dating and, by the middle of adolescence, about half of established couples report having sex with one another (Cavanagh, 2007). As might be expected, sexual activities become more intense with age; younger teens most often engage in light sexual behaviours, such as hugging, holding hands, or kissing; whereas, older teens expand the sexual component of their relationship to include more intimate behaviours (Williams, Connolly & Cribbie, 2008). Also adolescent males and females differ in the extent to which sexuality is a key motivator of their romantic experiences (Cavanagh, 2007; Feiring, 1996). Males' ideal romantic relationship often includes significant sexual component, whereas females' ideal romantic relationships are more focused on emotional intimacy and companionship, with partners engaging in affectionate forms of sexuality such as hugging and cuddling (Underwood, 2011).

Many psychological theories guide our understanding of romantic relationships. Romantic Attachment Theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) suggests that the function of romantic relationships is to provide adolescents and adults with the safe haven and secure base that they first experienced as infants and young children with their parents. These functions begin to transfer from parents to romantic partners during the adolescent period, a movement that is motivated by adolescent's emerging desire to have these needs met by a person to whom they are sexually attracted. Romantic attachments may be secure or insecure expectations of relationships which are shaped by the attachments that teens had with their parents when they were children, as well as the more recent experiences that they have with friends and others whom they may have dated (Furman & Simon, 1999).

Romantic relationships have been researched by many to inspect the significance of physical intimacy within partnerships. Meggiolaro (2010) tested the suggestion made by Simpson (1987) that physical intimacy could intensify the relationship and hence, bring partners closer together by investigating physical intimacy and relationship satisfaction among young adults in Italy. This research confirmed that there is "a strong association between reaching an orgasm and relationship stability" (Turtenwald, 2012). Further, Turtenwald (2012) demonstrated what behaviours can sustain intimate relationships that are complex and multifaceted by utilizing findings of Pistole et al (2010) as framework. The study sought to gather qualitative data regarding seven maintenance behaviours, including: openness, positivity, conflict management, assurances, advice, shared tasks, and

shared social network. It also found that apart from these seven behaviours, physical intimacy and equal sacrifices are also significant in the maintenance of a romantic relationship. Thus, the study analyses the significance of physical intimacy and equal sacrifices in the maintenance of a romantic relationship among college students.

The purpose of the present research therefore, is to understand the role, nature and extent of physical intimacy in the romantic relationship of young adults, and whether emotional bonding or physical intimacy is more important in a relationship. It also studies the effect of cultural background and family upbringing on the extent to which young adults get physically intimate in their respective romantic relationships. The study also tries to address the morality aspect of physical intimacy in the Indian context. This research aims to capture the influence of westernisation, if any, in the ways in which young adults express their love to each other, such as a public display of affection.

The present study, hence, seeks to understand the role of physical intimacy in romantic relationships during young adulthood for individuals in the age range of 18-25 years, who have been in a romantic relationship for a duration of 6 months to 2 years.

Method

Participants

Two males and two females, all Indian, having a relationship (not necessarily with each other) for a period of six months to two years, in the age group of 18-25 years (unmarried) were interviewed with informed consent. Details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

	Age (in years)	Gender	Educational Qualification
A	21	Male	Completed B.Com (H)
B	18	Female	Pursuing B.A. (H) Economics
C	19	Female	Pursuing B.A. (H) English
D	19	Male	Pursuing B. Tech

Procedure

After the review of literature related to the topic was carried out, a probe list was prepared that

consisted of areas that could be touched upon during the course of the interview. Questions were framed and re-framed keeping the probes in mind and clarity and unambiguity of the questions was ensured. It was

made sure that the language of the questions was such that it avoided 'Yes/No' responses but instead elicited as much detailed information as possible in order to gain rich data. The participants sampled using purposive convenience sampling. The participants were then informed about the nature of the research and an informed consent was sought. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule after ascertaining their willingness and their schedule. The interview was conducted in a suitable, uninterrupted, quiet place. The interview was recorded using an audio recorder to avoid loss of data.

The data obtained was then transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The important and recurrent themes that emerged in the light of the current research study have been discussed below.

Results and Discussion

The data was subjected to thematic analysis. The themes that emerged have been discussed below.

Family, morals and cultural values

Participant A: Family opinion and disclosure: 'Not So Open'. The participant in his family is closest to his elder brother, and who is the only member in his family who knows about his relationship. When asked if he would ever be comfortable disclosing his relationship with his family, he replied "*Never, I won't be comfortable ever*" and elaborated by saying "*getting physical before marriage in our society is a crime, so my family being a conservative Punjabi family is also not comfortable with it.*" It can be thus said that the family appears to be conservative and there is a general lack of openness within the family that the participant refrains the participant from sharing his relationship status with them.

Further, the participant himself doesn't want to 'cross' his boundaries and attaches morals to physical intimacy. He repeatedly stated, "*there should be some boundaries that I guess you should not cross*" and "*I have some limits that I prefer not to cross*". Further, he also believes that "*females are more delicate about these things so you should not go to that level (sex)*". Hence it can be said that Participant A values virginity and wishes to retain it till marriage.

Participant B: "Practical freedom" yet rules and regulations. Participant B believes that her parents are strict and not very open about certain issues. However, they have given her and her sister all the "practical freedom" and trust them both. To support this claim, she stated that she lives away from her parents with her elder sister in Gurgaon, while her

parents are settled in Myanmar. When it comes to the proximity with the opposite sex, she said that they are "*not very open about having relationships and boyfriends and stuff*" and their reaction wasn't very accepting when they found out about her sister's relationship. Hence, B hasn't told them about her relationship and is scared that they might get annoyed. She respects them and all the freedom they have given to her, and hence she wants to be honest with them about it, but is unable to do so because she fears being reprimanded.

When it comes to being physically intimate, she feels that it changes one as a person and makes one feel vulnerable and awkward. She feels guilty about it up push her "*boundaries*" and feels that she is "*wronging her parents*" by not being honest about her relationship with them while they have trusted her and given her the freedom.

Participant C: Not so open parents, follower of certain principles. It can be inferred from the participant's responses that she is not comfortable telling her parents, especially her mother, about her relationship, especially to her mother. She feels that she might lose her freedom as her mother will start keeping a check on her. She said, "*relationship is one thing that I can't tell my parents about.*" It seems that her family is not very open when it comes to romantic relationships, and they might not respond in a positive manner if she tells them.

C seems to be a person who lives her life according to certain principles and rules that she has set for herself. At one place, she said,

"there are some ground rules that I follow. For instance, in a public place there is a certain decorum that you ought to maintain. If a boy and a girl are travelling in the metro, they obviously can't hug and kiss there. Those are certain rules which I follow."

Participant D: Parents usually don't understand everything; rules define an individual. The participant is not at all comfortable talking to his family about his relationship. In fact, he dreads the day when he will have to tell them about it. This can be inferred from several comments that he made, "*It is going to be horrible if I talk about relationships with them*", "*They will never be cool with it*", "*If they ask me to break up, I will have no other option but to break up with her.*" All these statements indicate that D is very afraid of disclosing it to his family; he does not plan share this anytime soon.

He lives his life in accordance with certain principles and thinks that rules are something that defines an individual. He accepts that he does have certain personal rules for himself when it comes to dealing with the opposite sex. He elaborated on this by giving an example. He said, *“For instance, if I have a female friend who I have known for the past 2-3 years, I might hug her and when it comes to my girlfriend, I might kiss her on the cheek, not anything more than that.”*

To conclude the first theme, it can be said that the families of the participants are not open to the idea of romantic relationships for their children. Therefore, the participants are hesitant and uncomfortable, perhaps scared of talking to their parents about their romantic partners. Also, probably because since time immemorial, people in India have considered physical intimacy as immoral and something that brings a “bad name” and disgrace to the family. The participants have been socialised in this fashion, consequently, the guilt. Thus, they have set certain limits for themselves and do not intend to cross those self-imposed boundaries.

Importance and extent of physical intimacy

Participant A: Physical intimacy not so important. Although the participant believes that physical intimacy strengthens the relationship, *“we are getting more comfortable with each other and the bond is getting stronger and it also connects us emotionally.”* He says,

“I don’t think it is very important getting physical in your relationship because getting physical is not the only thing, there are so many other things as well so I don’t think it plays any main role in my relationship.” He also mentions later, *“I don’t give this so much importance that you have to get physical again and again, matlab keep it to a limit.”*

This can be further justified by viewing facts such as the participant first kissed his girlfriend after one year (on their first anniversary) and the frequency is rare i.e. once or twice in a month. He is comfortable only with kissing and has defined certain limits that he intends not to cross even though some part of him wants to take the relationship to the next level. He believes that physical intimacy in a relationship is first a choice that perhaps becomes a necessity later in a relationship.

Participant B: ‘Part of the package’ but ‘I am not going to have sex’. B believes that what is counted as physical intimacy depends from person to

person. For her, physical intimacy depends on the setting she is in like, *“if you are outside on the road holding hands is physical intimacy, but like if you are in a room and holding hands then I won’t call it physical intimacy.”* She believes that physical intimacy is the complementary part of the package of relationship, but has set certain rules that define her relationship. She claims that she sometimes ends up pushing her boundaries in the heat of the moment, but has made it clear to her boyfriend that she will not have sex with him. Also she doesn’t feel that physical intimacy in general contributes to the security of the relationship as she has seen so many instances with her friends wherein the other person has been found cheating.

Participant C: You don’t need to sleep together to be a couple. When asked about her ideas on physical intimacy, she said, *“If I put it bluntly, you don’t need to sleep together to be a couple.”* In her own relationship, they have held hands and hugged. When asked if she would like to take it to the next level, she said, *“there are strong feelings and urges but there is no way that can happen because we mostly meet at public places.”* When probed further about how intimate they plan to get in future, she very clearly stated that they would definitely not end up having sex. She seems to be fine with everything apart from sex, as far as physical intimacy is concerned.

Participant D: Physical intimacy should have a boundary. D feels that physical intimacy should always have a boundary within which both the persons involved feel comfortable. In his own relationship, they have hugged and kissed once or twice. When asked about taking it to the next level, he said that they couldn’t, because they mostly meet at public places. When probed further, he seemed a bit confused. He does want to take it to the next level, but at the same time feels comfortable with where he is right now. He is a little apprehensive about going ahead because of the ramifications that might follow. He mentioned at one point that he would try his best to control himself.

For all the participants, physical intimacy claims to strengthen the relationship but it is only considered as a complementary part of the relationship. It seems that the idea of having sex in a relationship (before marriage) evokes feelings of discomfort and anxiety in the participants. Williams, Connolly & Cribbie (2008) observed that sexual activities become more intense with age; younger teens most often engage in light sexual behaviours, such as hugging, holding hands, or kissing; whereas, older teens expand the sexual component of their

relationship to include more intimate behaviours. Participants in the present study are comfortable exploring physical intimacy up to a certain limit, and clearly mentioned that they would not end up having sex. This can also be explained by the fact that premarital sex is still considered to be a taboo in the Indian society and in spite of westernization, couples in the present study have held on to their cultural values.

Emotional bonding versus physical intimacy

Participant A: Emotional bonding is relatively more important. It is evident from the data that participant *A* considers physical intimacy to be not as important as emotional bonding. When asked specifically he replied that, “*emotional bonding is more important for me than getting physical, so yes, emotional bonding has an upper hand in my relationship as compared to physical intimacy.*” Moreover, according to him, it is immoral to get physical without knowing the person and developing an emotional bond.

Participant B: Physical intimacy is complementary to emotional bonding. According to the participant, emotional bonding is important in the relationship to a great extent but she doesn't think it's a bad thing to be emotionally closer with someone other than your boyfriend such as in her case, her irreplaceable best friend with whom she is more open and shares a stronger emotional bond than that with her boyfriend. She further remarked that physical intimacy is not as important as emotional bonding but is something that is complementary. “*It just comes; it's like the part of a package. It is automatic, even if you kiss once and say you won't do it again it happens again sooner or later because it's something you have already experienced and you enjoy it.*” This is in line with Meggiolaro's (2010) and Simpson's (1987) findings that physical intimacy could intensify the relationship.

Participant C: Emotional bonding is more important but one cannot do without physical intimacy. Going through the interview, it could be inferred that she places emotional bonding on a higher plane as compared to physical intimacy. At the same time, she acknowledges the fact that one can't do without it. According to her, physical intimacy can be seen as the happiness and joy derived out of holding hands or standing together.

Participant D: Emotional bonding is everything in a relationship. *D* strongly feels that emotional bonding is everything in a relationship. He said, “*if you do not understand a person emotionally,*

how can you even think about having a relationship”. He substantiates this by talking about his own relationship. He believes that it is emotional bonding that has strengthened his relationship. He said, “*in my case, I know every little thing about her-how she thinks, how she will react to a particular situation, how she is going to reply.*” He feels that physical intimacy is a by-product of one's emotions. According to him, “*it is something that cannot be planned, and happens spontaneously in the moment.*”

It is evident from the data that all participants highly value emotional bonding and think that it is more important than physical intimacy. According to them, physical intimacy is just the part of the package of a relationship. This is because emotional bonding probably provides them with the sense of security, which is similar to what infants experience in their early childhood through their attachment figure such as parents. This is in accordance with the romantic attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), in which this sense of security later gets transferred towards a romantic partner in the adolescent period.

Public display of affection

Participant A: Public display of affection – “Not acceptable to me at all”. *A* doesn't believe in public display of affection. “*I am not at all comfortable because I don't think expressing your love in public areas is... I don't feel right about it... I feel very 'yuck'!*” nor is he comfortable with others expressing their love in public and says, “*it is not even legal in India.*” According to him, the acceptable ways in public areas are holding hands, walking together but nothing else, but for himself he doesn't even feel comfortable as for him holding hands in public and hence does it rarely.

Participant B: ‘Once in a blue moon’. When it comes to expressing love publicly, both *B* and her boyfriend don't believe in public display of affection. They may hold hands under the bench sometimes but that happens “*once in a blue moon*”. For her, hugging is still an acceptable way of expressing love in public but nothing more. When asked if she would be comfortable with someone else portraying public display of affection, she says yes, and in fact, she would probably point and laugh and make fun of him or her.

Participant C: Public Display of affection? NO!!! *C* is strongly against public display of affection. She feels that certain decorum ought to be maintained in public places, and there are boundaries that one should not cross while in public. She said, “*I am shy expressing my love in public places and I have my own*

constraints”, “I keep looking in all directions, who is watching and who is not.” Also, she said that she gets extremely uncomfortable when it comes to public display of affection.

Participant D: Public display of affection within certain limits is fine. He seems to be quite okay with public display of affection, as long as it is within certain limits. He does not care much about what people around might think. He mentioned, “I believe I am more comfortable than she is. I can be demanding. What is the big deal if we hold hands! Till hugging I am fine with it.”

In today’s world, although Westernization is influencing the lifestyle of young adults, it can be observed that the participants disapprove of public display of affection. This can be linked to the fact that the social learning and cultural influence have shaped the beliefs of the participants that once formed cannot easily unlearned. Moreover, India being a collectivistic culture emphasizes a lot on community-based society. Hence, it matters what others think or say. Furthermore, under section 294 of the Indian Penal Code, Public Display of Affection (PDA) is a criminal offence with a punishment of imprisonment up to 3 months or a fine, or both. Public Display of Affection is considered as a taboo and offence in India with newspapers publishing articles such a “Keep THESE in mind before indulging in a PDA” (Times of India, 2015), warnings regarding what one can and can’t do in public.

The idea of an “Ideal Relationship”

Participant A: Understanding is the key. The participant says that the foundation of an ideal relationship is understanding and trust. He also mentions that in his relationship, patience plays an important role since he has to deal with the “short-tempered nature of his girlfriend”. Sharing is also one important aspect in an ideal relationship. According to him, since “when you are sharing everything so it’s easy for you to attach.” therefore implying that emotional bonding is an important ingredient for an ideal relationship.

Participant B: “I pull his hair and he pulls mine”. The participant believes that what an ideal relationship is differs from person to person. In her opinion, ideal is something that is not sustainable, rather, comes and goes. It is an ideal relationship “when both people understand each other, are happy with each other and have fun with each other.” She says that because both she and her boyfriend are not very romantic people but instead are friendly and frank, she pulls his hair while he pulls hers. Thus, she

says for her relationship, the secret maybe lies in, “the fact that that I pull his hair and I am allowed to slap him.” For her, happiness is a mood and not a destination and it comes and goes in a relationship. She believes that there are always ups and downs, “sometimes you feel happy and contented, while sometimes you feel upset and frustrated.”

Participant C: No candy-floss romance. C mentioned at several places that she is not a very romantic person. For instance, she said, “I don’t believe in candy floss romance, I don’t like coochie-poochie relationships.” She feels that an ideal relationship is one that has its foundations in mutual love, understanding and honesty. Maturity is another factor that is very important to her.

Participant D: Comfort and compatibility. When asked about his idea of an ideal relationship, D said, “There is no ideal relationship. I mean what is important is, the two persons involved should be comfortable and compatible with each other. They should fit into each other like gears.” Besides, he feels that communication is very important, and that it is essential to be good with words, and at the same time a good listener. For him, compatibility is the ultimate factor and it can ensure a close-to-perfect relationship.

For the young adults interviewed, though some believe that there is no ideal relationship or that ideal is not sustainable; the key ingredients that make up an ideal relationship are understanding, comfort, trust, compatibility, patience and maturity. This is in accordance with various models of intimacy, which suggest that intimacy in a relationship is made up of several components such as conflict resolution, affection, cohesion, sexuality, identity, compatibility, autonomy, expressiveness (Waring & Reddon, 1983). Some have focused on a particular aspect of intimacy such as self-disclosure (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998); a few researchers have focused on commitment in relationships (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 2012). Others have used two or three different intimacy scales in combination to capture the multidimensional nature of intimacy (Hook, Gerstein, Deterich & Gridley, 2003; Merves-Okin, Amidon & Bernt, 1991).

Implications, limitations and suggestions

It was seen that the participants were not comfortable disclosing their relationships to their parents. Hence they resort to lying, hiding etc. which in turn makes them feel guilty. Thus, programs to address parental inhibitions about discussing sexual matters with their children are needed in order to encourage greater openness and interaction between

parents and children. Sometimes due to lack of communication between the parents and children, young adults have no one to guide them. Therefore, there should be programs to ensure that young men and women are fully informed and equipped to make safe choices and negotiate wanted outcomes. Sex education must be made compulsory from an early age in schools and other settings in which young people congregate. Young adults may also be counselled to overcome their moral dilemmas.

Due to paucity of time, only a limited number of participants could be interviewed. Other tools of research could also have been employed (such as psychometric tests etc.) in order to get generalised and comprehensive results. All the participants were from an urban background. Further research on this topic can be done on participants varying in different aspects such as ethnicity, age, culture, and geographical and socio-economic background.

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