

Original Research Article

Meaning Making of Intimacy, Passion and Commitment: Lived Experiences of Unmarried Adults in Online Romantic Relationships

ABSTRACT

Background: Technological advancements and the prevalence of online dating apps in India are shaping the landscape of romantic relationships. The pressures of living in a work-centric and fragmented offline world have forced individuals to seek romance through online dating apps. Much of urban India struggles to make sense of this new phenomenon and its impact. The current **qualitative study** attempted to understand the lived experiences of unmarried couples who initiated contact through online dating platforms.

Methods: The study used a qualitative design and employed Thematic Analysis to capture relevant themes. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit **ten (10)** participants for semi-structured interviews. **The interviews were conducted through online mode.** The participants were Indians residing in Bengaluru whose ages ranged between 25 to 49 years (**mean = 33.2 years**) and who were currently in a heterosexual relationship that had been initiated through online dating platforms at least six months before their recruitment.

Findings: The results of the **Thematic Analysis** revealed that online dating comes with a plethora of challenges. Furthermore, intimacy, passion and commitment were found to be vital in online romantic relationships, fostering essential elements for successful and meaningful partnerships. A conceptual framework mapping the process involved in building meaningful online romantic relationships was also developed.

Conclusion: The study provided useful insights about modern relationships in India by identifying themes and interpretations of intimacy, passion and commitment discussed in conversations regarding the development of romantic relationships.

Keywords: Lived experiences, Online romantic relationship, Intimacy, Passion, Commitment

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements and the rise of online dating apps are significantly transforming romantic relationships in India. Online dating apps have become a primary method for meeting romantic partners, with many users relying on algorithms to filter potential matches based on preferences and compatibility [1,2]. The process of selecting partners has shifted towards a more rational approach, where users often prioritize specific traits and social status, reflecting a "rational love" model. Digital platforms enable remote communication, allowing individuals to interact before meeting in person, enhancing comfort and safety in initial interactions [2]. However, this shift has led to a dehumanization of relationships, as

users may engage with virtual personas rather than authentic individuals [3]. The gamification of dating apps introduces a new dynamic where validation and rejection are experienced in a digital context, altering users' emotional responses to relationships. This environment fosters a post-romantic love culture, where traditional emotional complexities are minimized in favour of efficiency and ease [4]. While these advancements offer new opportunities for connection, they also raise concerns about the depth and authenticity of relationships, as technology increasingly mediates human interactions.

The dynamics of intimacy, passion, and commitment significantly influence online romantic relationships in India, particularly among younger adults. These three components, as outlined by Sternberg's Triangular theory of love (1986), interact uniquely in digital contexts, shaping relationship quality and success. Increased self-disclosure enhances social intimacy, which is crucial for online dating success with trust acting as a mediator, linking social intimacy to the success of online relationships [5]. Passion in online relationships often stems from shared interests and emotional exchanges, although physical attraction may be less emphasized compared to traditional relationships. Online platforms can hinder the development of passion due to the lack of physical presence, which may affect emotional bonding. Commitment can vary between online and offline relationships, with online interactions requiring more effort to establish long-term commitment [6]. While online romantic relationships can foster intimacy and connection, they may also present unique challenges that can complicate the development of passion and commitment.

1.1 Online dating and romantic relationships

Online dating can be described as the process in which various relationship initiation activities such as identifying and selecting prospective partners occur through online interactions before the relationship transitions offline [7]. It is estimated that more than 300 million people worldwide use online dating platforms to meet others for different types of relationships and that most young people increasingly prefer online dating to other methods [6]. The emergence of this transformation can be attributed to the influence of COVID-19, during which a significant portion of the global population had to turn to technology-based methods of connecting intimately, including dating apps. Just a few years ago, using the Internet to seek out possible romantic partners was subject to social stigma, but today, it has become the standard for a growing number of individuals worldwide, particularly young adults in major urban cities [9].

Dating apps provide many profiles that users can either approve or dismiss. When two users mutually approve each other's profiles, a match is made. The chance to exchange social validation through matches makes the process of perusing profiles alluring for dating app users. Hence, the primary engagement in dating app usage revolves around the assessment and exploration of other users' profiles [10]. Online dating apps are becoming the principal gateway to enter the realm of romance and intimacy. The matches culminate into a romantic relationship for the users. According to sociologists who study love, romantic love has led to greater personal autonomy by shifting the focus from defining romantic partnerships based on practical considerations to defining them based on the emotions of the individuals involved in the relationship [11]. A view held by certain scholars suggests that dating apps primarily serve to capitalize on users' desires, redirecting their focus towards the app and the act of accumulating matches, rather than predominantly facilitating in-person meetings. In addition, instant social gratification and self-worth validation are among the most common motives for dating app use [10].

1.2 Online dating and romantic relationships in India

Online dating in India has evolved significantly, particularly among urban youth, influenced by technological advancements and changing social norms. The rise of mobile dating applications and social media platforms has facilitated new avenues for romantic relationships, allowing individuals to connect beyond traditional boundaries. This transformation is particularly evident in urban areas, where young women are increasingly engaging in online mate-seeking as a means to expand their social networks while navigating cultural constraints [12]. India has a patriarchal structure about marriage choices, and in most communities, marital relationships and marriages occur within the family institution. Conventionally, dating before marriage is frowned upon, although this perspective has changed significantly in urban spaces despite the prevailing dominance of arranged marriages. Within this framework, online dating is emerging as an individual choice, as computer or mobile applications aim to streamline the selection and opportunities for initiating relationships.

The online dating space in India is currently dominated by apps such as Tinder, Truly Madly, Ok Cupid, and Bumble. The uptake of dating sites in the Indian context, despite the stigma and odds attached to them, clearly shows the growing acceptance of finding partners through this method. Despite the continued emphasis on traditional values that prioritize long-term commitments and marriage over casual dating, there has been a significant shift as a result of modernization. Users can curate their profiles, enhancing self-presentation and control over their dating experiences [13]. However, online dating is not without its pitfalls, including the potential for scams and harmful behaviours [14]. Hence, forming stable, supportive romantic relationships is an important determinant of well-being for adults [15].

Online romantic relationships in India come with challenges, influenced by cultural, emotional, and technological factors. These challenges can significantly impact the dynamics and sustainability of such relationships. Individuals often encounter issues related to privacy and data protection, which can lead to mistrust in online interactions. Emotional distress such as feelings of loneliness and frustration is prevalent among individuals in online relationships [16]. The desire for connection can lead to online infidelity, as individuals seek validation and companionship outside of their primary relationship. Emerging adults in urban India navigate shifting social norms, where traditional expectations often clash with individual desires for autonomy in romantic relationships [17]. Conversely, some may find that online relationships provide a unique platform for exploring their identities and desires, fostering connections that might not be possible in traditional settings. This duality highlights the complex nature of online romantic interactions in contemporary India.

1.3 Definition of meaning-making

This study sought to explore how individuals in urban India create meaning in the context of online romantic relationships, with a specific focus on intimacy, passion and commitment. The process of meaning-making at the initial stages of romantic connections has been associated with life purpose, satisfaction, and the pursuit of life objectives [18]. It is presumed that the core belief held by most people is that their lives have a sense of purpose [19]. This belief shapes how people perceive their past and present circumstances, as well as what they consider significant in life [20]. This contributes to their psychosocial well-being and life satisfaction [21]. The concept of meaning has been subjectively described and comprises three elements: 1) a feeling of understanding (comprehension and clarity regarding one's life and experiences), 2) a sense of purpose (guidance and motivation stemming from objectives and life aspirations), and, 3) significance. Numerous scholars have suggested that meaning is constructed through meaning frameworks, which are mental structures akin to schemas encompassing goals and beliefs [13].

1.4 The current study

The present study looked at online romantic relationships of unmarried individuals and the meaning-making of intimacy, passion, and commitment in their current relationships. I chose to use these three constructs as they have often been studied quantitatively in the context of Robert Sternberg's (1986) Triangular theory of love [22]. This theory identifies three core components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. This framework can be applied to various romantic relationships, revealing how different combinations of these elements shape the nature of love experienced by individuals. While the Triangular Theory provides a robust framework for understanding love, it is essential to recognise that cultural and individual differences can significantly influence how these components are experienced and prioritised in relationships [23].

Prior to this research, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there have been no efforts to investigate the real-life experiences of adults engaged in online romantic relationships through a qualitative methodology in the Indian context. Hence, through a **qualitative study** of the meaning-making of online romantic relationship, I aimed to get a holistic picture of the lived experiences of such individuals engaged in online dating.

Current statistics in India indicate that there has been an increase in user registration for online dating sites or apps. The user registration in the Indian online dating market was 2.7 percent in 2018 and increased to 3.2 percent in 2023 [24]. The considerable amount of time that people invest in using dating sites raises issue of subjective well-being. Therefore, the results of this study will empower mental health practitioners to bolster strategies aimed at improving the quality of romantic partnerships. The research question of this study is as follows: How do Indian unmarried adults in online relationships make meaning of intimacy, passion and commitment associated with the online medium? To answer the research question, we need to understand the lived experiences of adults in online romantic relationships and the meaning they attribute to intimacy, passion and commitment.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study participants

The procedures of the proposed qualitative study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee at the concerned university. Participation in the study was limited to adults living in urban Bengaluru, India. The study participants were enlisted through a targeted advertisement **through social media** within the Bengaluru online community, and purposive and snowball sampling methods (non probability sampling) were utilized. Ten unmarried heterosexual adults, five men and five women, aged 25 to 49 years (Mean age = 33.2 years) and working in different fields in **Bengaluru** were enrolled in the study. The participants were interviewed **owing to COVID-19 guidelines, using video conferencing tools (Zoom calls)** during the period from April 2020 to May 2021. At the time of the study, the participants had been in heterosexual relationships that had been initiated online through online dating platforms for six months.

2.2 Data collection procedures

The participants gave their informed consent by signing a consent form before completing a demographic questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the study participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw at any given time without any penalties. The collected data were also only accessible to the researchers. Each participant

was assigned a letter and a number based on the order of interview to ensure anonymity. After completion of the study, all notes, audio recordings, and transcripts were deleted.

The author adapted semi-structured interview questions using extant literature reviews. The choice of using semi-structured interviews as the data collection method was suitable for the research topic, as it combines structured questions with open-ended conversations, allowing participants to provide in-depth explanations in response to the queries. In-depth and semi-structured interviews “do not offer researchers a route to ‘the truth’, but they do offer a route to partial insights into what people do and think” [25]. The investigator conducted interviews with the participants in English, with each interview lasting for one hour. The participants' consent was obtained prior to the recording of their interviews, which were subsequently manually transcribed for analysis. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online using Zoom video and audio communication.

This study was explorative with the main objective being to understand the meaning-making of intimacy, passion and commitment. The interview questions that were posed to the study participants were on a) differences in the meaning of intimacy, passion and commitment between their current online romantic relationships and previous relationships that started offline, b) their beliefs of intimacy, passion and commitment and how they were formed, and c) the meanings they attached to intimacy, passion and commitment based on their current online romantic relationship.

2.3 Data analysis

For this study, thematic analysis, which focuses on the process of examining, exploring, and documenting patterns of significance within the data was employed as the qualitative data analysis technique [26]. As outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analysis involves the analysis of data post-collection, during which categories are formulated to structure and make sense of the gathered information [27]. These categories are rooted in overarching themes and emerging sub-themes. The data analysis process typically consists of six steps: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, scrutinizing the content, defining and labelling the themes, and ultimately composing the study's report. I transcribed each interview, read the answers to the specific questions, identified keywords based on the research questions which amounted to initial codes, went through the codes to form phrases and sentences that emerge to form themes. This process was repeated multiple times until the overarching final themes were identified. The data were recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and then relevant texts were extracted and documented. In order to provide coherent information for presenting the findings and their implications, emerging themes were delineated and compared with the existing literature.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Demographic information of the participants

The socio-demographic information of the participants is summarised in Table 1. All the study participants were employed in private and public organizations. Furthermore, out of the 10 participants, one had a PhD, seven had post-graduate level qualifications, and two had graduate-level qualifications. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned an alphabet and number in the interview order.

Table 1: Demographic details of the research participants

Participants	Age (years)	Gender	Education	Duration of relationship
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				(months)
P-1	42	Male	Post-Graduate level	12
P-2	31	Female	Post-Graduate level	12
P-3	26	Female	Post-Graduate level	6
P-4	49	Male	Engineering Degree	6
P-5	34	Female	Post-Graduate level	12
P-6	34	Female	Post-Graduate level	12
P-7	25	Male	Post-Graduate level	7
P-8	24	Female	PhD	6
P-9	28	Male	Graduate level	6
P-10	39	Male	Post-Graduate level	7

3.2 Meaning-making of intimacy

Meaning-making of intimacy plays a crucial role in enhancing both individual and collective well-being. It serves as a foundation for emotional connections, fostering resilience and promoting mental health. The interplay between intimacy and meaning-making can be observed through various dimensions. Intimacy provides emotional support, which is essential for coping with stress and adversity, leading to improved mental health outcomes [28]. Individuals with strong intimate relationships report better physical health, including lower rates of anxiety and depression. It fosters social connections, which are vital for community resilience and collective health. Socially connected individuals experience enhanced life satisfaction and longevity [29]. While the positive impacts of intimacy on well-being are well-documented, it is important to consider that not all intimate relationships are beneficial. Unhealthy intimacy can lead to negative outcomes, highlighting the complexity of intimacy's role in well-being [30].

3.3 Theme 1: Emotional connection, vulnerability, and loyalty beyond physicality

This theme highlights how intimacy transcends physical interactions, emphasizing emotional bonds, trust, and the significance of in-person connections in fostering vulnerability and loyalty. The three sub-themes that emerged from this theme were 1) "meeting in-person leads to intimacy," 2) "intimacy is an emotional and physical connection, and is not only about sex," and 3) "intimacy is about being vulnerable and loyal."

3.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Meeting in-person leads to intimacy

The findings of this study revealed that intimacy is essential to relationships, and due to the nature of meeting their partners through dating applications, it was necessary for the study participants to first meet in person rather than continue an online discourse. Most of the participants stated that the online dating platform is a "means to an end": it facilitates a relationship through algorithmic matching, and once a match is made based on an individual's criteria, an offline meeting occurs. Below are some of the statements made by the participants:

"See, online eventually becomes face-to-face interaction, and it depends on the proximity you are situated at, the distance between you and the person you have met online, intimacy begins when you have met regularly...." (P-4)

“How can you have virtual intimacy? You can keep sending emojis of hugs and kisses and the horny devil ones and all that, but your actual intimacy is known only when you meet face to face.” (P-1)

“When you are face to face with somebody, the intimacy and expressions would be far more than what you have when you are online. It is very difficult. The moment you are with each other, you do not even have to say things. It makes a huge difference.” (P-6)

3.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Emotional and physical connection

The study also revealed that intimacy needs not only be about having sexual relations. Engaging in physical intimacy implies being transparent and open with another person, and fostering a heart-to-heart connection through verbal and non-verbal cues. The study found that intimacy involves spending time together and getting to know each other, components that contribute to strengthening a relationship. Two participants made the following statements:

“I survived without intimacy for eight to nine years in my previous marriage. Intimacy is important but I am not talking about physical intimacy, I am not talking about sex. I am referring to other levels of intimacy like non-verbal or just spending time with each other.” (P-4)

“So more than a physical thing, it is an emotional and mental thing. You need to have an emotional connect with a person to get intimate with them.” (P-1)

3.3.3 Sub-theme 3: Being vulnerable and loyal

The study revealed that, for the study participants, loyalty is a crucial foundation in their relationships that stems from their connections. It plays a key role in cultivating trust, fortifying emotional bonds, and nurturing intimacy between partners. When a person opens up and embraces vulnerability, the person is assured that he/she will be respected and not abandoned. The presence of loyalty and vulnerability gives a certain assurance towards a healthy relationship. One participant said:

“There are two things about intimacy: one is being vulnerable with the person and express whatever you want to and whether the other person accepts it or not is okay. And the other is being authentic and loyal to share my body.” (P-5)

Another participant added:

“The first thing that matters to me is that my partner and I are honest and loyal to each other. If that factor is missing, there is no intimacy for me.” (P-6)

3.4 Meaning-making of passion

The meaning-making of passion significantly influences individual well-being in online romantic relationships through the dualistic model of passion, which distinguishes between Harmonious Passion (HP) and Obsessive Passion (OP). HP fosters positive emotions and enhances relationship strength, while OP tends to generate negative emotions, adversely

affecting well-being and relationship dynamics. Harmonious passion positively correlates with the experience of positive emotions during shared activities, leading to stronger relationships. Obsessive passion is linked to negative emotions and detrimental relationship outcomes [31]. Individuals with HP are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviours, reflecting higher eudaimonic well-being [32]. While passion can enhance well-being, excessive focus on online romantic relationships may lead to obsessive behaviours, potentially undermining emotional health and relationship satisfaction. This duality highlights the need for balance in passion expression within digital contexts.

3.5 Theme 2: Partnership involving strength, attraction, and acceptance in building a future

This theme emphasizes mutual growth, a strong emotional and physical bond, and unconditional acceptance while collaboratively shaping a future together. The three sub-themes that emerged from this theme were: 1) “passion is growing stronger together” 2) “passion is building a future together” 3) “it is a strong physical attraction and acceptance.”

3.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Growing stronger together

Passion in romantic relationships can enhance the bond between partners, particularly when it is characterized as harmonious rather than obsessive. Research indicates that shared passionate activities foster positive emotions, which in turn strengthen the relationship. Passion is characterized as a strong motivational drive towards sexual and emotional engagement, often manifesting as a desire for physical intimacy and connection [33]. Two participants said:

“One thing for sure if I talk about passion is that we grow stronger together. We think of each other informing each other and updating each other about the smallest things.” (P-5)

“Passion is what leads to intimacy. You are passionate about each other and the life that you are going to spend together.” (P-6)

3.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Building a future together

Passion plays a crucial role in building a future together in romantic relationships, influencing relationship quality, personal growth, and commitment. Engaging in shared passionate activities enhances positive emotions, which strengthens the relationship. Harmonious passion in both the activity and partner correlates with positive experiences, while obsessive passion leads to negative emotions [31]. Most participants said:

“We foresee a future together, the way we want to build a future with each other.” (P-5)

3.5.3 Sub-theme 3: Physical attraction and acceptance

Passion in romantic relationships encompasses both strong physical attraction and emotional acceptance, serving as a crucial element for relationship dynamics. This dual nature of passion can significantly shape the overall functioning of the relationship. Strong physical attraction is often a precursor to deeper emotional connections, driving the initial stages of romantic relationships [33]. Emotional acceptance, characterized by mutual respect and understanding, is essential for sustaining passion over time [34]. Some participants said:

"It is a strong attraction for sure because when we are together, we cannot keep our hands off each other." (P-1)

"A lot of relationships I have been in were not accepting from my side or the women's side, about who we are. That acceptance I have finally found here." (P- 4)

3.6 Meaning-making of commitment

The meaning-making of commitment significantly influences both individual well-being through self-binding choices. This can enhance health and satisfaction in personal and romantic contexts. Commitment can lead to self-restriction of options, fostering a sense of control and reducing anxiety, which positively impacts well-being [35]. Engaging in meaning-making processes can improve health outcomes by providing individuals with a framework to navigate challenges, such as illness [36]. Conversely, while commitment can enhance well-being, excessive or misaligned commitments may lead to stress and dissatisfaction, highlighting the need for balance in personal commitments. Relationship commitment refers to an individual's emotional connection to their partner and their willingness to sustain the relationship [37]. Committed individuals employ a range of strategies to nurture their relationship, especially in the face of the frequent temptations for extradyadic relationships that people encounter in daily life [38].

3.7. Theme 3: Navigating life together with presence, loyalty, and shared experiences

This theme emphasises the holistic connection in a relationship, including emotional, mental, and physical presence, alongside a commitment to exclusivity and shared journeys. The two sub-themes that emerged from this theme were 1) "being with each other at all levels" and 2) "exclusivity and going through things together."

3.7.1 Sub-theme 1: Being with each other at all levels

Commitment was a key concern for the participants of the study. It took them a lot of effort to be there for their partners physically, emotionally, and intellectually. After matching with a partner, commitment, for the study participants, came with the expectation that a long-term relationship would result in marriage. Two participants said that:

"Commitment means you are committed not just to remain loyal or faithful to that person, but you are with that person at all levels, physical emotional intellectual for a lifetime Infidelity is non-negotiable." (P-1)

"Commitment is seeing it through, being there, doing your best.... I am committed to protect myself and then the next person, right?" (P-4)

3.7.2 Sub-theme 2: Exclusivity and shared experiences

Exclusivity within a relationship revolves around fulfilling the human need for trust and emotional security, which can shed light on why infidelity may be perceived as a breach of trust. Therefore, it is reasonable for partners to jointly decide on exclusivity in romantic relationships [39]. This heightened level of commitment is likely to foster feelings of contentment and an enhanced sense of security, deepening a relationship. Two study participants made the following statements:

"I think commitment is being in an exclusive relationship, getting excited when you speak to that person. Just being able to sit in the same room and not even talk and watch a film. The little things that are important, but I would say the biggest thing is exclusivity." (P-10)

"See either you are committed or not committed. It is like being pregnant, either you are or you are not. If you are in a relationship, if you want to make things work it is important for both the persons to stay committed to each other. There are going to be rough times together but what matters the most is how you accept each other and build things together because it is easy to fall out of love these days." (P-6)

4. DISCUSSION

The current study explored the process of meaning-making within relationships between individuals who met each other through online dating apps. The process of creating meaning has been associated with life purpose, satisfaction, and the pursuit of positive life objectives [18]. There is a fundamental assumption that the majority of people believe that their lives have meaning [19]. This belief shapes how they perceive their past and present, influencing their priorities in life [20] and, consequently, plays a role in their psychological well-being and life satisfaction [21]. Meaning-making is a "mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships that connects things" [40]. Intimacy is an individual's responsibility and is the medium for emotional survival in friendship, couples, family and community. Passion plays a crucial role in the meaning-making process of romantic relationships, influencing emotional experiences, personal growth, and relationship quality. Research indicates that the alignment of partners' passions can influence relationship dynamics, although matching does not always predict quality [41].

When considering relationship commitment, it represents an individual's emotional connection to their partner and their determination to sustain the relationship [37]. Committed individuals possess a repertoire of relationship maintenance strategies intended to sustain their interest in the current relationship, given the everyday temptations that people encounter [34]. As commitment typically signifies a long-term dedication to the relationship, those committed tend to engage in a variety of behaviours that promote and preserve the relationship. This includes actions such as forgiving their partner's transgressions [42], making sacrifices [43], and accommodating their partner's needs [44].

The findings of this research provide insight into the lived experiences of unmarried adults in relationships with their partners who they have met through online dating platforms. They have attached meanings to their relationship through their experiences of finding the right partner. Through them, one understands the challenges and negotiations that they navigate to enter into discourse with their current partners. The analysis of the results focuses on how the concept of intimacy, passion and commitment has been associated with their present partners, and how these associations have been employed to advance their relationships into long-term commitments.

4.1 The attachment of meaning to intimacy in the relationship

The findings of the study revealed that intimacy is essential. Furthermore, due to the nature in which the relationship is initiated, it is necessary to meet in person rather than continue an online discourse. Intimacy is an emotional and physical connection that you have when you meet the person that you have matched with. The sub-themes that support this idea include: 1) "Meeting in-person leads to intimacy" 2) "Emotional and physical connection" and 3)

“Being vulnerable and loyal”. To have physical intimacy would mean being honest and opening up to that person through verbal and non-verbal cues. It also means spending time and getting to know each other. Loyalty is an essential pillar of such relationships that helps build trust to strengthen emotional bonds. If loyalty and vulnerability are present in a relationship, the couple are given a certain assurance that their relationship is healthy.

4.2 The attachment of meaning to passion to the relationship

The findings of the study highlight the essence of mutual growth and development within a relationship, where both emotional and physical bonds are strengthened. It underscores the importance of unconditional acceptance and the shared effort to build a meaningful and united future together. The sub-themes that support this idea include: 1) “Drive to grow stronger together,” which focuses on the continuous evolution and resilience of the partnership; 2) “Building a shared future,” emphasizing collaborative planning and commitment toward long-term goals; and 3) “Physical attraction and acceptance,” which reflects the balance of intimacy and appreciation for each other’s individuality. Together, these sub-themes weave a narrative of a thriving, passionate relationship grounded in strength, unity, and acceptance.

4.3 The attachment of meaning to commitment to the relationship

The study revealed that commitment is a constant concern for the participants of the study, and requires considerable effort to maintain, as individuals who are committed to a relationship employ a range of strategies to maintain the interest and vitality of their current partnership. The theme highlights the nature of connection within a relationship, encompassing the emotional, mental, and physical presence of each partner. It stresses the importance of a deep bond between partners, paired with a commitment to exclusivity and mutual experiences. Relationships thrive when partners are fully present with one another on all levels, creating a strong foundation of understanding and support. The two key sub-themes that emerge from this concept are: 1) “being with each other at all levels,” which focuses on engaging wholly in the relationship and fostering a profound connection, and 2) “exclusivity and going through things together,” emphasizing the value of loyalty and facing life’s challenges as a united team. Together, these ideas illustrate how holistic connection and shared experiences are essential for cultivating a meaningful and lasting partnership.

5. LIMITATIONS

This study collected data in an urban environment in India. It might be advantageous to conduct a separate study in other urban and semi-urban areas to ascertain whether the results would agree. Further research can be carried out in other such settings to yield comparable outcomes and offer a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of unmarried adults in online romantic relationships in both urban and semi-urban areas. Since the participant age group was varied, extraneous factors such as cultural and individual differences that could influence relationships were not considered in this study. This study also gathered information from the views of only one partner in a dyadic romantic relationship. It could also be beneficial to interview both partners to get a different perspective of what their views and experiences of their relationship are. Furthermore, the study’s sample size was small, which limits the generalizability of its findings.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study’s findings provide insights into significant themes and interpretations of intimacy, passion and commitment, which are commonly discussed in conversations regarding the

development of romantic relationships. While there is research focused on the experiences of couples in romantic relationships or married couples, less attention is paid to how people experience the search for long-term partners through an online dating medium. The findings of the study highlight how the participants go through a process to find their partner and thereby attach meanings to intimacy and commitment. As evident from the findings of the study, intimacy, passion and commitment are essential components of any romantic relationship, whether initiated online or in person. In online romantic relationships are perhaps even more challenging to establish and maintain due to the absence of physical proximity. Intimacy fosters a deep emotional connection between partners. In online relationships where physical presence is lacking, emotional intimacy becomes even more critical for building a strong bond. Passion plays an important role in the meaning-making process of romantic relationships, influencing emotional experiences, personal growth, and relationship quality. Commitment is closely tied to trust. In online relationships, partners must trust each other despite not being able to observe each other's daily lives. Being committed to the relationship demonstrates a willingness to invest time, effort, and emotions, which can help build and maintain trust. Many online romantic relationships are long-distance, making intimacy and commitment even more critical. The commitment to making the relationship work despite physical distance can strengthen the bond and create a sense of shared purpose. Intimacy, passion and commitment are vital in online romantic relationships because they foster emotional connection, trust, communication, and support, which are essential for building and maintaining a healthy and fulfilling partnership, regardless of the medium. Therefore, cultivating these elements can lead to successful and meaningful online romantic relationships. The author recommends that a conceptual framework mapping the process involved in building lasting romantic relationships be made for future studies so that people who use online dating platforms are counselled and made aware of the challenges and process involved in choosing their long term partners.

CONSENT

The author declares that written informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the interviews. Consent was also obtained to publish their anonymized excerpts from interviews.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The procedures of this study were approved by the Research and Ethics Committee at the concerned University. The research has been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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