

Impact of Online Dating on the Adolescent Population: A Brief Review of the Literature with Special Reference to the Indian Scenario

Влияние онлайн-знакомств на подростков: краткий обзор литературы с учетом текущей ситуации в Индии

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Review

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Online dating is becoming more and more popular not only among the adult population, but also among adolescents, which comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Adolescents are more vulnerable to a number of issues connected with online dating, including online grooming, bullying, emotional abuse, revenge porn, harassment, and lack of social interaction.

AIM: We aimed to briefly review the available literature exploring the impact of online dating on adolescents, with special reference to the current Indian Scenario.

METHODS: A brief literature search was conducted in PubMed and Google Scholar in September 2022 with no date limits. Keywords included various combinations of terms such as “online dating”, “dating applications”, “social media”, “mental illness”, “psychiatric disorders”, “adolescents”, and “mental health”. Original studies and review articles exploring the impact of online dating on adolescents and published in English were reviewed in our work. A descriptive strategy was used to summarise the findings.

RESULTS: The impact of online dating on adolescents is discussed in the light of (1) issues associated with online dating among adolescents, (2) the international context, and (3) Indian context.

CONCLUSION: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online dating has grown in popularity among adolescents, which has led to a number of worrying situations, including increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, dating violence, and mental health issues. All of these issues are described in the literature in the context of unsupervised use of technology, peer pressure, and desire to fit into the society. Data from India remain scarce on this topic, highlighting the need for research exploring the influence of online dating on adolescents.

АННОТАЦИЯ

ВВЕДЕНИЕ: Онлайн-знакомства становятся все более популярными не только среди взрослых, но и среди подростков. Такая тенденция имеет как положительные, так и отрицательные стороны. Подростки чаще

становятся жертвами онлайн-груминга (формирование доверительных отношений с несовершеннолетними для их дальнейшей сексуальной эксплуатации), травли, эмоционального насилия, порнографии, домогательств и недостатка социального взаимодействия.

ЦЕЛЬ: Провести краткий обзор имеющейся литературы, посвященной влиянию онлайн-знакомств на подростков, с учетом текущей ситуации в Индии.

МЕТОДЫ: В сентябре 2022 г. в базах данных PubMed и Google Scholar был выполнен краткий поиск литературы без ограничения по дате публикации. Ключевые слова включали различные сочетания терминов, такие как «онлайн-свидания», «приложения для знакомств», «социальные сети», «психическое расстройство», «психические расстройства», «подростки» и «психическое здоровье». В обзор включались оригинальные исследования и обзорные статьи на английском языке, освещающие влияние онлайн-знакомств на подростков. Для обобщения результатов применялся описательный подход.

РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ: Влияние онлайн-знакомств на подростков обсуждается в свете (1) проблем, возникающих при знакомствах в интернете среди подростков; (2) международного контекста и (3) индийского контекста.

ЗАКЛЮЧЕНИЕ: С начала пандемии COVID-19 популярность онлайн-знакомств среди подростков возросла, что привело к ряду проблем, таких как увеличение риска заражения инфекциями, передающимися половым путем, насилие на свиданиях и психические расстройства. Все эти аспекты описаны в литературе с учетом их связи с бесконтрольным использованием технологий, давлением сверстников и желанием быть принятым в обществе. Данные по этой теме из Индии остаются немногочисленными, что подчеркивает необходимость проведения исследований, изучающих влияние онлайн-свиданий на подростков.

Keywords: *online; dating; adolescents; apps; India*

Ключевые слова: *онлайн; знакомства; подростки; приложения; Индия*

INTRODUCTION

The first use of the word “dating” in the American language appeared in the 1920s. As defined by various authors “dating” is a stage in a romantic relationship when two individuals engage in activities together, most often with the intention of weighing each other’s suitability as a partner for a future intimate relationship.¹ Historically, courtship used to be a matter of family and community interest.² However, around the time of the Civil War, it became a private matter for couples.³ The protocols and practices of dating vastly differ

across cultures, societies, and time periods. In India, dating is heavily influenced by the custom of arranged marriages [1]. “Arranged marriage” refers to a marriage negotiated by matchmakers or matrimony sites and agreed to by parents and relatives. Currently, there are strong indications that the marriage institution is undergoing a drastic transformation in India. Love marriages are becoming more common and accepted, especially among the urban populations, which is probably driven by the fact that India is becoming more and more integrated with the rest of the world.⁴

1 Wikipedia [Internet]. Dating; c 2007-2023 [cited 2023 Apr 2023]. Available from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dating&oldid=1109272329>

2 Hirsch E. The History of Dating and Communication. Communication Studies [Internet]. 2011 [cited 1 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.communicationstudies.com/the-history-of-dating-and-communication> (accessed 12 September 2022).

3 India’s Arranged Marriage Traditions Live on in U.S. [Internet]. 2003 [cited 1 November 2022]. Available from: https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/uri/uri_APLJ050720039401343.html?ei=5034&en=be1a8b75099fc08d&ex=1130212800 (accessed 12 September 2022).

4 ibidem.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online dating has increased in popularity due to the heightened feeling of loneliness that came along with the lockdowns. Online dating has been defined as a way of starting a romantic relationship on the internet using online dating platforms [1]. Online dating platforms, in turn, can be defined as social media platforms where people can find romantic partners and friends [2]. These platforms encompass dating websites, apps, and social media texting sites where people can interact with each other virtually. These applications can be easily accessed through devices like mobile phones, laptops, tablets, and computers. According to a survey conducted by Outlook India in 2022⁵, around 83% of users professed interest in online dating during the pandemic. Overall, 63% of the users of online dating platforms reported being anxious regarding their future and around 70% claimed to have changed their attitude towards online dating as compared to the period preceding the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, 81% of users claimed to be open to getting to know their matches at a deeper level, while 66% of users said that they were open to just chatting with their matches even if there was no prospect of a long-term relationship.

The adolescent population in India has free access to online dating platforms, since their use is not limited to adults. Within the past two years, almost all adolescents in India have used a smart device for educational purposes, something that contributed to a sudden explosion in unsupervised usage of social media and online dating applications. Although definitions vary considerably across the literature, an individual aged between 10–19 years can be described as an adolescent [2]. It is important to note that adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood when changes occur in the emotional, physical, social, and behavioural realms of an individual [3]. During this transitional stage, these individuals are more exposed to a number of issues having to do with online dating, including online grooming, bullying, emotional abuse, revenge porn, harassment, and lack of social interaction. In this regard, we aimed to briefly review the available literature exploring the impact of online dating on

adolescents, with special reference to the current Indian Scenario.

METHODS

A brief literature search was conducted in PubMed and Google Scholar in September 2022 with no date limits. Keywords included various combinations of terms such as “online dating”, “dating applications”, “social media”, “mental illness”, “psychiatric disorders”, “adolescents”, and “mental health”.

Original studies and review articles exploring the impact of online dating on adolescents published in English were included in the review. A descriptive analysis technique was applied to summarise the findings.

RESULTS

Overall, 58 articles related to the topic of interest were found, out of which 19 were included in the review. The obtained results will be presented as follows: (1) issues associated with online dating among adolescents, (2) the international context, and (3) Indian context.

(1) Issues associated with online dating among adolescents

Development of a new technology comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Online dating apps were intended to ease communication. Yet problems, such as absence of supervision, exposure to online grooming, harassment, and increased peer pressure have appeared along the way. Due to the increased desire to experiment in different aspects of life during adolescence, individuals in that age tranche may suddenly have to confront a spectrum of unique issues as a result of their use of online dating apps [4]. These issues are discussed below.

- a. **Risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).** Due to unsupervised access to online dating apps, the lack of sex education, and easy access to pornography, a large number of adolescents are being drawn into unprotected sexual intercourses [5], increasing their risk of contracting STDs. The UNAIDS 2022 report (2000–2021 data) estimates that

5 Virtually: Is Digital Dating The New Normal? Outlook [Internet]. 2022 Sept 20 [cited 2023 Apr 17]. Available from: <https://www.outlookindia.com/culture-society/love-virtually-is-digital-dating-the-new-normal-news-43423>.

160,000 individuals aged 10 to 19 are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).^{6,7} Out of those, 56% are girls and 85% reside in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ Intercourses among male homosexuals is found to be one of the leading causes of the increased number of HIV cases among adolescents, alongside other factors such as being sexually exploited in adolescence and youth engagement in sex work. Substance abusers and transgender adolescents are found to be at higher risk of contracting HIV.⁶

- b. Teen dating violence (TDV).** TDV refers to the physical, sexual, or emotional violence that occurs between adolescent dating partners interacting via online platforms [6, 7]. It includes psychological abuse [8, 9], stalking [10], harassment, and physical and sexual abuse [9, 11]. Online dating violence is linked to higher rates of suicide compared to offline dating, whereas higher levels of peer attachment and parental support were found to mitigate the risk of suicidal behavior [12]. Existing research shows that adolescents with authoritarian mothers are at higher risk of falling victim to online dating violence and that adolescent girls with authoritarian fathers are more susceptible to verbal-emotional violence [13]. A cross-sectional study from England and Wales which looked at dating and relationship violence among 16– to 19 year-old students found no significant gender differences but showed a high prevalence of dating and relationship victimization among adolescents in both males (two to eight times) and females (two to four times) [14]. The Oxford dictionary defines sexting as a process of “sending sexually explicit photographs, video-clips, or text messages to someone, typically via a mobile phone” [15]. A study conducted in Italy in 2016 found a relationship between dating violence and moderate-to-high use of sexting, highlighting the fact that male adolescents and non-heterosexuals were more often involved in sexting [16]. The study also reported that dating violence victimization and perpetration was predicted by sexting and by the duration of the relationship [16].

- c. Mental health issues.** A number of studies have been conducted to look for a relationship between body image issues and weight control behavior among adolescent Tinder users [17, 18]. It was found that Tinder users had higher levels of body image issues and unhealthy weight control behavior in comparison to non-users [17]. Although there are a few studies linking dating apps usage with disordered eating habits among adolescents, no study has reported any significant link between psychological distress and online dating [18]. It is possible to speculate that there might be a link between online dating and the level of stress among adolescents. But, to our knowledge, no published data is available to authenticate this.

(2) International context

Although the amount of data exploring the impact of online dating on adolescents remains limited, a survey conducted in the US in 2014 and 2015 by the National Pew Research Centre showed that around 35% of adolescents aged between 13 and 17 years had been romantically involved with or dated someone [19]. Although the majority of these relationships started offline (76%), online platforms was the most common method to engage romantically with others [19]. The survey also found that girls were more likely to be the recipients of uncomfortable flirtatious messages than boys [19]. In particular, around 35% of girls had blocked or unfriended someone for that reason compared to 16% of boys [19]. Although it was suggested that online platforms help adolescents feel closer to their partners and display affection, the platforms were also the reason for jealousy and uncertainty in relationships among 27% of users [19]. The most common ways of communicating and spending time with each other were texting, followed by calling, and meeting in person [19]. Overall, 88% of the adolescents expected to hear from their partners at least once a day and 15% expected their partner to check on them hourly [19]. Around 4–10% of adolescents involved in a relationship displayed potentially harmful or controlling behavior

6 Dating apps prove factor in HIV rise among adolescents. BBC News [Internet]. 2015 Dec 6 [cited 2023 Apr 17]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-34995811>.

7 Adolescent HIV prevention. UNICEF DATA [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Apr 17]. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/hiv/aids/adolescents-young-people/>.

towards their current or an ex-partner [19]. This included having access to the partner's accounts, modifying their social media, impersonating their significant other, posting embarrassing photographs of their partner, and using a tracking program without the partner's knowledge [19]. Around 22% of adolescents experienced inappropriate behavior at the hand of their former partners, such as public shaming or posting derogatory comments against them once the relationship ended via social media platforms [19]. About 15% of adolescents reported that their former partners spread rumours about them using digital platforms [19]. Winstone et al. (2021) suggest that usage of online platforms has the potential to improve peer and family relations or exacerbate them [16, 17].

(3) The Indian context

The concept of adolescent romantic relationship has begun to attract increased attention from researchers in India. It is believed that dating allows adolescents to explore their budding romantic feelings and bolster their social skills [20]. Furthermore, it helps to develop emotional feelings, form personal and social identities, and mitigate the feelings of loneliness and isolation [21]. Although dating has its obvious advantages, risky behaviors among adolescents involved in romantic relationships have been reported in various leading Indian newspapers on a regular basis in the context of getting married, engaging in unsafe sexual practices, and becoming pregnant. The affected adolescents contact child protection services such as government children homes of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). They are offered psychosocial care and other child protection services, according to the guidelines of the Juvenile Justice (care and protection) Act of 2015. These services include institutional and non-institutional care, such as child line, foster care, sponsorship, shelter homes, promotion of family-based care, aftercare programs, adoption, education, vocational training, development programs, legal assistance, rehabilitation, etc. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act (POSCO 2012) makes sexual contact in any form with anyone below 18 years of age illegal and punishable under the law. This poses a threat to the sexual freedom of adolescents and imposes legal obligations on adolescents [18, 19].

Dating as a concept may not have been known to Indian adolescents two or three decades ago, but now, it is rather common [23]. Here are some of the reasons which have led to the rise of an adolescent dating culture in India:

- a. **Westernization.** The increasing penetration of Western Culture has nudged urban Indians closer to the concept of open dating among adolescents. The older population may still not approve of adolescent romantic relationships, but they do accept and recognize its growing reality. Hence, the western influence has led to an increased popularity of dating among adolescents in India [23].
- b. **Early Puberty.** In the last few decades, it has been the case that boys and girls experience puberty at a younger age than was the case in previous generations. In general, girls enter puberty between the ages of eight and 13 and reach menarche (first menstruation) several years later, while boys enter puberty between the ages of nine and 14. Early puberty increases interest in sex, which makes adolescents seek out romantic partners more often [24]. This happens in the context of conflicting emotions and the social pressure brought about by the transition from childhood dependency to independent adulthood.
- c. **Peer Pressure.** The Majority of adolescents try dating due to peer pressure. Not having a partner may increase the risk of being ridiculed by one's peers and can be a reason for non-acceptance into social circles [3].
- d. **Media Influence.** Electronic and social media portray love/romantic relationships as an alluring experience, leading to the popularisation of dating among adolescents. Nowadays, demonstrating a new partner on social media, updating one's relationship status, and posting romantic pictures have become an integral part of adolescents' lives [25].

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online dating has grown in popularity among adolescents, which has led to the emergence of a number of challenges, including increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, dating violence, and mental health issues. All of these

issues are described in the literature in the context of unsupervised use of technology, peer pressure, and desire to fit into society. However, data from India remain scarce on this topic, highlighting the need for research that explores the impact of online dating on adolescents.

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