

“How you met your partner? Understanding resilience during a pandemic”

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Abstract

Does Distance make the heart grow fonder? The global pandemic of 2020 has made everyone realize what really matters to a person, and romantic companionship is one such thing, which often helps us to rise above tough times. In these tiresome times, the additional distress of distance could possibly affect multiple spheres of a relationship; often reflective of the foundations of the relationship. With the different modalities of getting into a relationship, a few still remain taboo riddled, thus the present study is formulated to explore if there's any difference in resilience in heterosexual couples on the basis of the modality of their first contact i.e Online (Dating apps, social media) vs Offline (Friends or social gatherings). For in-depth analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of 26 questions including demographic details to interview three couples who met via online modalities and three couples who met via offline means, to determine the factors that contribute to the resilience in these relationships during a pandemic and if there are any differences due to the modality of the first contact. The interviews were then subjected to theme-based analysis. The themes emerged from the interviews are communication, conflict, and its management, intimacy, and resilience. It is further inferred that there is no difference in the level of resilience in couples who met either online or offline thus eroding the factors contributing to the taboo towards online dating platforms.

Keywords: *romantic companionship, pandemic, resilience, modality of first contact*

Introduction

The world we live in is unfortunately riddled by taboos, the eastern world so much more. One of the biggest challenges to overcome in a sub-continent country is to navigate the world while being in a non-ritualised relationship. Dating has always been looked down upon yet rampant in our personal worlds (Alexander et al., 2006). The pandemic of 2020 made dating even further difficult, it must be noted that personal romantic relations are often driven out of natural urges and difficult to be contained by the fear of a virus, the online platforms available for dating seemed to be a rescue in times like these (Meisenzahl, 2020).

The ongoing global pandemic has depleted people of their resources, patience and emotional capacities, often romantic relationships bear the brunt of troubles of personal life. It can be assumed that couples depending on each other for emotional support, security, and safety could be at a higher risk of relationship instability with increasing stress levels due to stressors of the pandemic (Leutke et al., 2020), The study is designed to understand the resilience in relationships during a pandemic, the factors affecting it and whether the mode of primary contact mode makes any difference.

According to Pietromonaco & Overall (2020), romantic relationships tend to vary in stability and quality based on their accesses to external resources such as financial stability/ instability, individual vulnerabilities such as attachment styles/ emotional health, didactic process they engage in such as problem solving and pre existing contextual situations such as social class/life stage. Implying that couples with less external resources, couples who have personal vulnerabilities, poor mental health conditions, and have poor executive functioning are at a higher risk of having poor quality of romantic relationships. On the other hand couples with better external resources, healthier personal vulnerabilities, better personal skills and an advantageous pre existing contextual situation are maybe at the end of a more stable and quality relationship. The pandemic has presented several challenges of couples in all stages of a relationship, the study has focussed on relatively younger unmarried couples to understand how the lack of physical intimacy and other

unprecedented factors can have an affect on theirsustenance of a relationship.

Relational resilience in couples is deemed to be greater than the sum of individual partner resilience combined (Skerrett, 2015). While keeping in mind the adverse and multiple changes in everyday life due to the global pandemic, the relationship of external resources, personal qualities, personal skills and pre existing contextual situation to the quality and stability of a romantic relationship, and the ‘we-ness’ in couples, the aim of our study is to understand resilience in heterosexual romantic relationships and to investigate if there is any difference in resilience on the basis of the modality of their first contact i.e Online (Dating apps, dating websites, social media) vs Offline (Friends, parties, social gatherings, etc).

Methodology

In view of the importance and need of the situation, as discussed above, the following are the objectives of the present study:

- To investigate if there is any significant difference in resilience in romantic couples onthe basis of the modality of their first contact.
- To understand the difficulties and hardships faced by couples in the lockdown period.
- To understand how couples sustained in romantic relationships during the Lockdown period of Covid-19.
- To unearh the factors contributing to resilience in couples.

Participants

For the purpose of our study, 6 heterosexual couples were chosen which further consisted of 3 couples who met on various online dating platforms like tinder, hinge, bumble, etc. and the other 3 couples who met in person for the first time such as through social gatherings, mutual friends, etc. The dating duration ranged from 12-17 months and the age range of the sample was 21-26 yrs. Purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling were used to collect the data.

Tools used

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed consisting of 24 items including demographic details. The questions were developed to determine the factors that contribute to the sustenance of an interpersonal romantic relationship during a pandemic. Interview questions contained open-ended responses. Couples were interviewed through video calls on Google meet in lieu of the Pandemic.

Research design

A cross-sectional study was conducted on six heterosexual couples to understand the resilience during a pandemic in romantic relationships based on the modality of their first contact i.e., couples who met through Online dating apps or social media and those who met in person.

Procedure

The current qualitative research study was conducted to understand the resilience of the couples during the lockdown period of 2020. Moreover, modalities of how the partners first interacted were divided into two categories i.e., online dating apps and traditional methods of face-to-face interaction. After taking consent from the participants, a semi-structured interview was conducted of each couple via video/audio calls. The data were coded and then analysed using thematic analysis and various themes and subthemes emerged.

Results

Table 1 : *Themes emerged from the interviews*

Themes	Sub-themes	Verbatim Evidence
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	Engagement style	<p>P1: "We mostly used WhatsApp and Instagram to talk." P3: "We had gaming nights, movie nights, and sometimes we also shared our workout regime and tried to follow it together." P4: "We were constantly connected on WhatsApp and at night we made sure to talk over video calls on a daily basis." P10: "We used facetime and WhatsApp."</p>
Communication	Expression	<p>P1: "Well honestly yes because most of our fights are about not meeting and so we are able to share both of things equally whether it is positive or negative." P2: "No, meeting in person is quite different when compared to chatting on WhatsApp or some other platform. I feel meeting each other makes a lot more difference." P7: "There were no expectations as such but yes we express ourselves to each other."</p>
Conflicts their and management	Reason for conflict	<p>P2: "We mostly fought about not being able to meet during these 7 or 8 months, due to the lockdown period." P4: "After a period of time it did feel irritating and to accept the sad reality that you cannot meet." P5: "I get irritated very easily, I mean even if it's for little things, for say, not picking up my phone, I will get irritated, so that often adds on to the arguments we have." P8: "We both used to get irritated easily, and that is only because of the fact that we were not able to physically see each other or meet each other, although there was nothing that we could do about it but yes, this did lead to some of our fights." P9: "We mostly fought about him not coming to Delhi to meet me. And sometimes I used to be really busy with my work, so that led to most of our fights."</p>
	Resolution strategy	<p>P1: "We talked about the conflicts or arguments we had; I mean even if it was hard." P4: "Majority of the time the issues we had between us were discussed and cleared. But at times issues which we felt were not worth it or very petty issues we didn't feel like discussing them." P9: "Well most of them were resolved after apologizing later because she was the one losing temper or shouting unnecessarily."</p>
	Concerns	<p>P2: "Despite being connected virtually almost all the time; it was the physical distance that leads me to the feeling of lack of emotional intimacy." P3: "I did feel a little possessive since we weren't able to meet and this bothered and made me upset a few times, the distance was the biggest concern" P5: "Lack of trust at some point in time, did feel like a major concern to me in our relationship, and also lead to a lack of emotional intimacy between us." P8: "Lack of communication was the one thing which I felt did lead to a lack of emotional intimacy."</p>

		Whatever major or even minor you will be forever comfortable sharing with them.”
	Attention	<p>P1- “My attention towards my partner has definitely increased.”</p> <p>P5- “By the end of the day to be honest, we both need some attention from each other. If anyone was busy the other one kept on texting.”</p> <p>P8- “No, we talk the whole day and even if the other person is busy we talk at night.”</p> <p>P9- “Yeah, the attention towards my partner increased in my case, I was cognizant of the fact that I need to reply to his messages faster.”</p> <p>P10- “She needed attention. She would randomly text and when I asked what happened she would say no I just wanted your attention.”</p> <p>P11- “Yes, I felt the need for attention.”</p>
Resilience	Partner expectation	<p>P1- “The good point was our communication, we were able to express our emotions to each other.”</p> <p>P2- “Emotionally I would say we were able to fulfill each other’s needs.”</p> <p>P3- “Emotionally, yes, he was there for me whenever I needed him. He played his part well on handling me altogether.”</p> <p>P5- “He reassured me whenever I was worried about the Covid situation, it was a huge support for me.”</p> <p>P8- “We were able to take time out for each other and make that time special for us.”</p> <p>P10- “At times she met my needs, at times not. It was very subjective to the situation we were in.”</p>
	Working together	<p>P1- “we managed to navigate through fights by giving each other personal space and time to absorb certain things, mainly to gain perspective on what’s happening with us and the world around.”</p> <p>P6- “ We try to connect, we try to keep that string always together connected from both the sides.”</p> <p>P10- "He was very sure that the lockdown wouldn't affect our relationship and that reassured me that nothing will change except now we can meet daily on video calls."</p> <p>P12- “One major fight that we had during the lockdown definitely brought in that fear of losing the relationship, and we talked through it and resolved it.”</p>

Discussion

Is offline dating better than online dating? Do couples who meet offline stay strong in difficult times when compared to the ones who met online? In the present study, we understood the resilience of the couples who met through different modalities. The theme-based analysis uncovered several themes and sub-themes.

The themes that emerged by analysing the interviews were communication, conflicts and their management, intimacy, and resilience. The sub-themes that emerged from Communication were- Engagement style and Expression, Conflict and its management - Reasons for Conflict, Resolution strategies, Concerns, Intimacy - What couples missed the most, Attention and Resilience -Partner

Expectations, Working Together.

Communication

One of the most significant factors in a relationship is communication. It determines the relationship established with the partner. Communication provides a base to grow in trust and respect. Sub-themes emerged from this theme were – Engagement style and Expression.

Engagement style

Communicating face to face with the partner, looking into the eyes and holding hands, makes the conversation more interesting and comfortable when talking about anything. The sudden change of COVID-19 lockdown left couples not only to meet but to communicate virtually which initially seemed difficult but later became comfortable with the situation. Researchers noticed that couples who met offline felt more connected to each other during lockdown than the couples who met online. As reported by P4, “I guess we connected more during lockdown, the only thing we were sad about was that we were not able to meet. Everything was normal like we tried to connect well, we had no problem with that.” Despite being connected virtually all the time, through virtual movie dates and game nights, both the groups managed to spend some quality time with each other.

Expression

Setting unrealistic expectations in a relationship can often lead to conflicts among partners. But not expressing it to your partner is also not a healthy habit. It was observed from the interviews that during the pandemic even though the entire relationship was maintained virtually, most of the partners did manage to express their expectations to each other. Being honest with your feelings is not always easy, but it can be worth the effort. However, partners from both groups were not only able to communicate their feelings (positive or negative) but also understand the emotions of their partner. As per the conducted interviews, P2 reported “we grew more emotionally close to each other during this time and although the situation didn’t allow us to meet for a very long period of time, we did somehow manage to express our emotions as well as understand the other’s emotions.”

Conflict and its management

Conflict in any relationship is unavoidable. The sub-themes that emerged under this area are as follows-

Reason for conflict

The main reason due to which couples had conflicts was the lack of physical proximity, as reported by P4, “After a period of time it did feel irritating and to accept the sad reality that you cannot meet.” The lack of movement due to Covid-19 restrictions posed a burden on couples. Both the online and offline groups fought about the same reason for not being able to meet each other. Even though the modality of the meeting was online for one group the need for physical

Intimacy

Intimacy is not only limited to your partner's physical touch, but it is also a feeling of being close, connected, and supported emotionally. It means being able to express as individuals a whole variety of thoughts, emotions, and experiences that we have. Sub-themes that emerged under this theme were- what couples missed the most and attention.

What couples missed the most

During the lockdown, couples couldn’t meet in person and therefore felt the lack of physical intimacy as mentioned by P4 in table 1 “Yes, due to the distance both of us felt the lack of physical intimacy.” Couples in both online and offline groups felt a lack of physical intimacy during this time. Even though couples were constantly connected through virtual means it was observed that the lack of emotional intimacy was felt in couples who met through offline modality more than those who met through online modality. This indicated that the couples who met through offline modality felt more lack of closeness than the couples who met through online modality.

Attention

In these tiresome times, one usually needs and wants attention from their loved ones to comfort themselves. In the interviews conducted it was observed that couples did feel the need for increased attention from their partners as said by P5 “By the end of the day, to be honest, we both need some attention from each other. If anyone was busy the other one kept on texting.” Another observation made was that the female partners reported an increased need for attention in comparison to their male partners. It was not just the need but partners did end up giving more attention than usual to each other during this lockdown period and were clearly evident in a statement made by P9 “Yeah, the attention towards my partner increased”. Couples of both groups (online and offline modality) felt the increased need for attention from each other.

Resilience

This 2020 pandemic has acted as a test for every individual around the globe. Romantic relationships too have been compromised as the pandemic has acted as a test for couples too, but it was only the companionship and support of each other that people rose above these difficult times. Sub-themes that emerged under this theme were- partner expectation and working together.

Partner Expectations

Couples this year had a tough time as the relationship was forced to maintain virtually. They faced hardships while fulfilling each other's needs physically, and not being able to meet further led to frustration. However, couples (online and offline modality) did manage to meet each other's emotional needs, as mentioned by P4 in table 1 “we were able to express our emotional needs to each other and somehow also managed to fulfill it while being connected virtually, this time has surely proven to be a rollercoaster ride for us.” This shows that although the times for many couples were stressful, they felt somewhat satisfied when they expressed their positive and negative emotions via online platforms (video calls, chat, etc).

Working together

Working through a relationship takes immense and equal efforts from both sides to keep things alive in any relationship. As mentioned by P1 in table 1 “we managed to navigate through our fights by giving each other personal space and time to absorb certain things, mainly to gain perspective on what's happening with us and the world around.” Most importantly couples did survive this spell by talking to their partners, and P2 also stated, “As a couple, this time made us resilient and the period overall has been a test for us.” Couples in both online and offline groups reported working together on making their relationship work. Couples also felt that the lockdown made them resilient and has been a test on their patience and love for each other.

The research shows that there was no evident difference found in expressing the emotions in partners from both the modalities. Whereas, the difference was visible in emotional intimacy. Couple's from both groups managed to resolve conflicts by communicating and spending time together on virtual modality. There was no evident difference found in resilience based on the modality of their first contact. The research helped us explore the factors contributing to a healthy resilient relationship such as expression, engagement style, reasons for conflicts, resolution strategies, concerns, what couples missed the most, attention, partner expectations and working together to resolve the hardships they faced.

A psychological researcher aims to contribute to help understand human behaviour, interpersonal romantic relationships being one of the important aspects of life which deems to be researched to improve the overall quality of wellness in life. The factors contributing to this relationship can be identified as Communication (Engagement style and Expression), Conflict and its management (Reasons for Conflict, Resolution strategies, Concerns), Intimacy (What couples missed the most, Attention) and Resilience (Partner Expectations, Working Together). A research is only as good as its results and its applicability, it can be seen that these factors are present in both modalities of first

contact. The limitations of the present study can be seen in its smaller size of sample pool and the lack of physical interaction with the sample. We urge future researchers to use our study as a pilot in humanising the modern virtual world and reducing its anathema. This research team hopes to undo the taboo against online dating and results deem that the resilience of romance is evolving as the times are changing.

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