

## Online Dating, Deception, and Associated Risks: A Pilot Investigation

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### Abstract

Online dating has become quite common among youngsters in the past decade, as it is fast-paced and opens up online conversations. Individuals preferring virtual platforms for dating are motivated to gratify and fulfill their specific needs and desires, as evident in the theory of gratification. Hence, to explore and understand the experience of online dating, deception, and associated mental health risks, a pilot investigation was conducted on adults. An exploratory survey design was used to answer the research questions; the survey tool was developed using open-ended questions based on the gratification theory. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke); primarily, the open-ended responses were categorized and coded, and later, common trends and patterns were found to conclude the themes within the data. The five major domains emerged, under which multiple themes were generated, and the results indicate that online dating serves as a convenient leisure space for meeting people with ease. Also, creating a social circle can be challenging due to mental health risks and being deceived. The motives for dating online depend on personal intentions and purposes, like colloquial exchanges. The limitations and future directions are discussed to direct the research further.

*Keywords:* Online dating, deception, virtual world, interpersonal relationship, thematic analysis

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Dating has become diverse and a preferred option for those who search for partners first and later decide to commit to a relationship if they find a suitable match. The past few decades have seen a lot many changes in the dating world, where people are moving out of their spaces to meet and know people of similar interests. As technological advancement has given people the liberty to go beyond borders to seek suitable partners for dating, the conventional style of dating is becoming less preferable among today's generation. Online dating, i.e., dating on digital platforms via social networking sites, is widely becoming popular and accepted for meeting potential partners and forming new connections. It is continuing to evolve with time as online interaction becomes a safer option for interactions among strangers. It has become an overall dynamic way of finding love, companionship, and also casual dating, which offers a vast array of options for personal preferences.

Virtual dating becomes preferable when people are unable to meet or interact face-to-face; therefore, the demand to socialize increases on digital platforms. To say the least, there is an increased acceptance of virtual dating due to its widespread use among youngsters and the success rate for people who are unable to find partners in the real world, such as people from sexual minorities, people of specific religions, people seeking casual encounters, and such other cohorts. Especially during the COVID-19 outbreak, when people were confined inside their homes, access to socializing was possible via virtual mode as it became the primary source of interaction. In addition, niche dating platforms were helpful for marginalized groups and communities, which led to a preference for finding partners online rather than meeting face-to-face before getting to know the person. The online services and features of dating sites are continually enhanced for the user's convenience, which helps them find a better partner as the matching algorithm provides accuracy and relevant matches for every user. Virtual dating allows

for ease of interaction and romantically engaging with partners in long-distance relationships, giving them the opportunity to connect despite living far away.

Whenever one talks about digital platforms, the first thing that should be considered is convenience and safety. Hence, online interaction is considered a safe and secure platform for interacting with strangers and people from diverse backgrounds, as the threat of harm is lowest in terms of physical meetings. Authenticity and data privacy are two of the main concerns for people. The advanced technology provides enhanced protection and authentication for users dating online, keeping their privacy and security intact. Dating applications and sites offer various services, such as data authentication via verification, safety tips, reporting, and complaints for various issues experienced by users. However, the sharing of personal information on a digital platform can be risky as well; therefore, many sites offer encryption and security measures for the protection of user data.

The harms and risks involved are still pervasive, as people are given the freedom to interact among themselves without any third-party involvement. Although virtual platforms provide ease of interaction and access to a large audience, they are not risk-free in terms of deception and security threats. Mobile applications such as Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, Hinge, and many more have millions of active users across the globe. These applications break the boundaries and use geolocation and preferences to fit the profiles of potential matches nearby. As these applications give users the ease of creating their profiles and building connections, faking and deceiving might become easy on such platforms. People can easily misrepresent or create fake profiles on such sources to target people for their ill motives and intentions. People who fall prey are usually the ones who are desperately seeking partners for casual relationships or instant dating; some might also get trapped falsely due to blackmailing and threats on social

media. Especially vulnerable populations like females, adolescents, and sexual minorities become victims of catfishing and deception on the virtual platform.

### **Use of Deception in virtual dating**

Deception refers to an intentional act of misrepresenting or distorting facts or originality for the purpose of misleading others (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). In today's digital world, the use of deception, scams, online fraud, and cyber harassment is very common among people who are active users of the internet. With the dyadic nature of social interactions, self-presentation becomes a pressure due to the high level of competition for seeking suitable and good partners, which enables the users to date virtually (Schmitz, 2012). There are gender differences in how people show deceptive behavior in online dating, which also means that deception can be done in different ways depending on the intention of the deceiver. A study found that compared to females, males overexaggerate their profiles on positive characteristics and use over-presentation more while anticipating a potential partner, especially in interactions where they can play it safe like emails and chats (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012). Adding to this, men are also likely to misrepresent their assets and holdings, interests, and goals regarding personal relationships, and comparatively, women tend to exhibit such behavior about their body weight (Hall et al., 2010).

Online dating sites and applications do provide guidelines and user policies for creating profiles and utilizing them, but the match-making algorithm is not shared in the public domain. Moreover, the relationships built online have a shorter span as people use deception, casual interaction, and misrepresentation of the profile, which often leads to disappointment and untrustworthiness (AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). Consistent with the findings suggesting the use of deception only with the intention to deceive the person for personal motives, the profiles are

the primary element that captivates the users who get scammed and trapped. Dating profiles are misrepresented and faked to attract potential partners and also to entrap a victim, and lying about the demographics is also a key factor; however, the use of deception is limited to a certain level (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Besides this, the other factors associated with the use of risky online behavior are the characteristic features of the user, such as sensitivity to rejection, and a person with lower conscientiousness traits is more likely to use deception (Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014). Nevertheless, people have the need to socialize and strive for a partner with whom they can share intimacy and build family relationships, and they also find good connections and social circles to express themselves. In building such relationships, people develop a sense of their ideal selves, due to which users can misrepresent themselves, though people who are selective in representing themselves have a lower tendency to deceive through profiles (Wotipka & High, 2016).

### **Virtual platforms as convenient places to seek partners**

Online dating is a different experience than conventional dating, as the phases of the relationship are built based on the needs and marketing of such applications and websites. In addition to this, these websites offer the convenience of communicating openly, which was not possible in face-to-face meetings, i.e., allowing ways to refuse or accept people of interest (Tong & Walther, 2011). A study identifying the behavioral differences between males and females engaging in online dating found that females generally seek long-term romantic commitment, whereas males seek casual relationships (Alam, Yeow, & Loo, 2011). Seeking romantic relationships on the virtual platform can mean different things to every individual; however, the main aim of such sites and applications is to provide a place for people to socialize, interact, and build promising relationships with each other while also giving them the freedom to express

themselves, which can be challenging in the real world for many people. Compared to conventional methods of dating in the real world, online dating seems more advantageous due to the access to details about the person, the ease of finding partners, and the convenience of communicating privately (Finkel et al., 2012). Moreover, virtual dating has underestimated the positive side of long-term relationships and commitment with a single partner, and dating applications are becoming a medium for strategically engaging in intimate relations (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017).

The liberty provided to the users for creating attractive profiles and adding all the personal details like profession, interests, hobbies, preferences, etc. can be helpful for other users, as a study found that profile viewing helps in the amplification of the first interaction among dating individuals (Sharabi, 2020). In addition to this, a study suggests that, in comparison to people who met in person, those who met online are more likely to encounter romantic courtships and dating rather than marriage, and that commitment also depends on the quality and period of their association with each other (Paul, 2014). Social interaction is challenging for some people who experience issues of fear in expression, hesitation in socializing, and disclosing their interests in front of others. People who are sensitive to rejection and isolation can truly represent themselves and interact with people with ease on the online platform and therefore engage online more (Hance, Blackhart, & Dew, 2018). On the contrary, there are people who socialize only for the purpose of sexual relationships and not courtship. Terms like ‘sociosexuality’, which is a form of sexual behavior where the person shows uncommitted sexual interest, are common demeanors found among online dating individuals who prefer casual relationships rather than long-term commitments. A study found that people who are sociosexual tend to engage more in online dating, especially when seeking partners for

casual sex (Hallam et al., 2018). Such findings reflect the purpose of people seeking online dating—in other words, what gratifies them and also motivates them to prefer virtual communications. It was suggested in a study that there are various forms of gratification from virtual dating sites that people seek irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation; however, differences persist in what their purpose and desire are to seek online dating (Clemens, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2015).

### **Risk Assessment and Well-being in online dating**

Though there might be benefits to online dating due to its convenience, there is still a lack of control over the hazards and consequences of the relationships thus formed in the virtual world. Additionally, there are other risks involved in online dating, including lying behavior, sexual exploitation, getting trapped in financial scams, etc. (Vandeweerd et al., 2016). Being engaged in virtual interactions, people consider their significant others as the primary exploiters, i.e., ‘risky others’, and thus the risks identified involve lying, sexually risky behavior, risks involving emotional and physical harm, the risk of facing potential dangers, and being unable to trust people in person (Couch, Liamputtong, & Pitts, 2012). Catfishing, cyberharassment, discrimination, cyberbullying, and threatening and coercive behavior are commonly experienced in online interactions. The perpetrator of such malicious acts is aware of the fact that they will not be caught easily by anyone unless they have revealed original details on the internet, and the experience of such behavior can pose a risk to the mental health of the victims (Lauckner et al., 2019). Similarly, people who exhibit antisocial and psychopathic behavior, including abnormal impulsive characteristics, tend to engage in antisocial behaviors like trolling on online dating sites (March et al., 2017). Many such studies in the past have suggested that certain personality traits are linked with increased use of online dating; moreover, the fear of deception and

objectification are risks identified by many studies in online dating (Bonilla-Zorita, Griffiths, & Kuss, 2020).

People dating online also tend to engage in risky behaviors when meeting their partners offline; for example, sexual risk behaviors such as avoiding the use of contraceptives, having multiple sexual partners, engaging in casual sex, etc. A study suggested that people, especially females, belonging to sexual minorities and online dating individuals experience greater risks of sexually inappropriate behavior (Choi et al., 2016). Substance abuse and intoxication are linked with the overuse of mobile phones and other devices, indicating addiction to screen use, which is also related to increased use of dating apps (Flesia et al., 2021). People who are constantly engaged on the Internet tend to become addicted to certain aspects, as indulging in the screen involves sitting in one place and not socializing enough in the real world. In addition to this, excessive online engagement poses a risk of alcohol consumption and sexual involvement at an older age with a good income and smoking (Choi et al., 2017). According to *The Tribune (Men More Prone to Cybercrime, 2022)*, as compared to women, men are more likely to fall into the trap of temptation, especially on social media platforms where communication with strangers via messenger and video chat is just a click away.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theories that discuss social interaction and communication focus on the general motives and desires of people to intercommunicate and meet people for different reasons. One such idea is the theory of gratification given by Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch (1973), which says that seeking a specific form of social media or virtual platform is based on specific motives and desires. To put it another way, people are motivated to use certain interaction modes to gratify themselves and fulfill their needs, and they use such mediums on purpose. Earlier theorists have



discussed the use of gratification theory as people using media to satisfy their needs in general via communication or interaction. In addition to this, these needs and desires would reflect the form of communication people engage in, and the reasons for using these mediums can be to seek attention, develop self-confidence, or enjoy leisure time (Bryden, 2017). Therefore, it reflects that the individuals who gradually use the virtual medium to communicate for dating and casual interaction are motivated for different purposes and thus fulfill their specific needs. These purposes are linked with certain individualistic gratifications that directly impact the well-being of the person due to engagement in virtual dating (Azzahro et al., 2018). In the present study, gratification theory in context with virtual media use is utilized to support the objectives of exploring the online dating community and to develop an understanding of the factors associated with the use of the internet for the purpose of intimate interactions.

### **The present study**

With the advent of technology, online dating has become widespread in Asian countries like India, where traditional values are still focused on long-term commitments and marriage rather than casual dating. However, with the drastic change due to modernization, people are opening up in personal relationships and moving out of their private spheres to search for suitable partners. Since there is limited empirical evidence supporting the experience of virtual dating among Asians, the present study calls for piloting, investigating, and exploring digital dating among adults living in India. The aim of the paper is to explore the general dating experience and its effects on mental health by using the gratification theory. As there are no appropriate standardized scales or tools available to capture this essence, the data collection tool was created by using the major trends found during the review of the literature and focusing on the theory of gratification. The purpose was to understand the participant's experience based on

the following exploratory research questions: (1) What are the reasons for preferring online dating? (2) Why is deception used in online dating? (3) Is online dating a convenient platform for interactions, expressions, and engagement? (4) Does online dating affect your overall health and social life? (5) What are the primary motives and desires for preferring online dating?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The aim was to recruit a homogeneous sample of an adult population, i.e., 18 years and older, wherein the participant selection was based on their experience of online dating in the past or present, residing in India. The participants were recruited through the convenience sampling method, a form of non-probabilistic sampling technique. Firstly, a digital form was created using the Google Forms application, and the questionnaire was formulated based on the theoretical framework of the study. The form consisted of a consent letter for the convenience of the participants, which also provided them with important information regarding the study to obtain their consent for participation. The data collection part of the form consisted of questions on demographic information and open-ended questions on experience in online dating. Since there was a lack of a suitable tool available to utilize for answering the research questions in the present study, the questionnaire was developed based on the study's theoretical framework and literature review. The virtual link to the data collection was provided and circulated to the groups on social media platforms like WhatsApp, Messenger, and Telegram. The data was collected from a sample of 15 participants who were eligible and consented to participate in the study and were residents of Haryana (N = 3), the NCT of Delhi (N = 6), Rajasthan (N = 1), Madhya Pradesh (N = 1), and Uttar Pradesh (N = 2). The age ranged between 21 and 31 years old, where N = 8 were males and females were N = 5. Two data sets were not included because of missing

information. See Table 1 for a detailed summary of participant characteristics and demographic information.

### **Assessments and Procedures**

A questionnaire was developed consisting of multiple-choice questions for collecting data on demographic details and open-ended questions based on the theoretical framework of the study and the literature review of the study. The demographic details section asked about their age, educational qualifications, gender, sexual orientation, living area, socioeconomic status, annual family income, family setting, residence state, religion, employment status, relationship status, and social networking services preferred for dating. The open-ended questions focused on collecting information regarding the experience of online dating and mental health constraints and risks. These questions were formulated around the participant's personal experience in online dating, which was focused on five major domains: (a) Virtual preferences (e.g., Why do you prefer online dating?); (b) Deception (e.g., Do you think people use deception in online dating? and why?); (c) Convenience in Online dating (e.g., Do you think online dating is capable of developing successful relationships?; Do you find online dating a safe place to interact and engage yourself?); (d) Associated risks (e.g., Has online dating affected your mental health in any way?; Has online dating affected your physical health in any way?; Has online dating affected your social life in any way?; Do you think the online dating experience has changed your interaction style?; What qualities do you look for while dating someone online?); (e) Motivations and desires (e.g., What do you think motivates you to date online?). Since the study is a pilot investigation, the questions were kept simple and direct in order to develop a basic understanding of the current trends in online dating. This study will shed light on the modern

dating style in a virtual setting and also give future directions for precisely developing a research strategy for understanding the concerns of intimate relationships in the virtual world.

### **Data Analysis**

The responses to the demographic information were questioned in the form of Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) which are presented in Table 1. The responses to open-ended questions were in the form of sentences, these were treated as verbatims of the respondents. The verbatims were coded for the open-ended questions, which were guided by the thematic analysis framework given by Braun and Clarke (2006) (as cited in Cooper et al., 2012). The data was first carefully read for analysis, categorized to form the specific codes, and then coded for drawing the theme, and later common trends and patterns were formed. The five major domains were used to categorize the themes under each based on the questions asked in the data collection tool. The emerging common themes are discussed in the results section.

### **Results**

The findings of the study are presented with the research questions (RQ) in accordance with the five domains, namely virtual preferences, deception, convenience in online dating, associated risks, and motivations and desires. See Table 2 for the list of domains, themes, subthemes, and case frequencies.

**Table 1.** Demographic information and participant characteristics

Participants	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Educational Qualification	Religion	Socioeconomic Status	Living Area	Family setting	Employment status	Relationship Status	Social Networking Sites preferred for dating
1	25	Female	Intersex	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Upper Middle-Class	Urban	Nuclear family	Full time Employed	In a relationship	Dating Applications/sites
2	23	Male	Straight	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Lower Middle-Class	Rural	Nuclear family	Full time Employed	Casual Dating	WhatsApp Messenger
3	24	Male	Straight	M.Phil/Ph.D. pursuing or completed	Hindu	Lower Middle-Class	Urban	Living alone	Student	Single	WhatsApp Messenger
4	24	Female	Straight	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Upper Middle-Class	Urban	Nuclear family	Full time Employed	Single	Meeting in person is preferred.
5	.	Male	Straight	UG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Lower Middle Class	Urban	Nuclear family	Student	Single	Instagram
6	22	Male	Bisexual	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Upper Middle Class	Urban	Living alone	Student	Casual Dating	Dating Applications/sites
7	25	Female	Straight	PG pursuing or completed	Buddhist	Upper Middle Class	Urban	Nuclear family	Unemployed	Single	Dating Applications/sites
8	31	Male	Bisexual	M.Phil/ Ph.D. pursuing or completed	Atheist	Lower Middle Class	Urban	Living alone	Full time Employed	Casual Dating	Dating Applications/sites
9	23	Female	Straight	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Upper Middle Class	Rural	Joint family	Student	Single	Face to face
10	21	Female	Intersex	PG pursuing or completed	Hindu	Lower Middle Class	Rural	Joint family	Unemployed	Single	Dating Applications/sites
11	22	Male	Intersex	Graduation pursuing or completed	Hindu	Lower Middle Class	Urban	Joint family	Student	In a relationship	Instagram
12	21	Male	Straight	UG pursuing or completed	Atheist	Upper Class	Urban	Living alone	Full time Employed	In a relationship	Threads
13	26	Male	Straight	UG pursuing or completed	Atheist	Upper Middle Class	Urban	Nuclear family	Self employed/ Freelance	Single	I did not use any platform for intentional dating

Note. Note: UG- Undergraduate; PG- Post Graduation

**Table 2**

*Table 2. Summary of domains, themes, subthemes, and cases*

Domain	Themes	Subthemes	Cases	
Virtual Dating Preferences	Dating is not the primary purpose; rather seeks fun and enjoyment	Provides many options and can find a suitable partner	3	
		Not preferred much	7	
	Ease and convenience	It is convenient	6	
		People are more confident online	2	
		Easier to approach	4	
		Physical attractiveness is preferred more	4	
	Deception in online dating	People use deception for different reasons Deception is a common behavior as one can hide behind the screen	Physical attractiveness and good looks	4
			Caring, understanding, loyal	3
Only offline meeting preferred			3	
Convenience in Online Dating	Virtual dating may be helpful in developing good relationships	Yes it is used for catfishing, scamming, revenge, etc.	4	
		Misrepresenting and hiding	3	
	Online dating is not always a reliable space to engage	Not experienced	2	
		Yes it can be in later stages	6	
		No there are rare chances	5	
		Not a safe place to express and engage oneself	9	
		Can be helpful for those who have rejection sensitivity	4	

Domain	Themes	Subthemes	Cases
Associated Risks	Mental health and social interaction are more affected than physical health	Affects mental health and self-esteem	6
		Not much impact on mental health	7
		No affect on physical health	11
	Social interactions is affected	Connections with good people	5
		Social engagement and communication are affected	6
Motivations and Desires	Casual interactions and finding suitable partner	Meeting new people and suitable partner	4
		Casual interaction	3
	No ideal intentions	Not really preferred	7

*Note. Subcategories are arranged according to the common responses and cases reflect the number of respondents out of our sample of 13 participants*

*RQ 1: What are the reasons for preferring online dating?*

### ***Virtual Dating Preferences***

The preferences for online dating are based on reasons why virtual platforms are primarily preferred by respondents. Most of the responses show that online dating is a casual interaction space where people have various motives to act in certain ways, and it is preferred as a suitable environment for spending leisure time. A few responses also show that participants do not prefer online sites only for dating but rather meet people casually for chatting.

#### ***Dating is not the primary purpose; rather, it seeks fun and enjoyment***

Few participants indicate that there was no primary intention to date online; rather, they opted for casual interaction to seek fun and enjoyment by talking with new people. For example, Respondent 10 says, “Some just for time passing,” and Respondent 4 says, “Easy to approach and can be in many relationships at same time without the other partner knowing.”

#### ***Ease and convenience***

Most of the participant responses indicate that they found online dating a convenient space due to the virtual convenience and ease of approaching and finding suitable partners. It makes the interaction easier due to the preliminary steps of profile viewing on the sites, which is helpful for people with rejection sensitivity and loneliness. For example, Respondent 3 says “Virtual convenience,” and Respondent 10 says “Some people don't find good people, so they use online dating to find better ones.”

#### ***Physical attractiveness is preferred more***

Physical attractiveness and good looks are the primary characteristics that are more appealing and preferred when finding partners online. Some of the respondents also indicated



that they preferred a supportive and understanding person with good communication skills, including trustworthiness, honesty, a caring personality, etc. For example, Respondent 2 says “*Good looks, communication skills, and a good career*”, and Respondent 5 says “*I would prefer to meet people in real*”.

*RQ 2: Why is deception used in online dating?*

### ***Deception in Online dating***

#### ***People use deception for different reasons***

Most of the respondents indicated that they believe people use deception while interacting online with potential partners. The reasons provided are intentional trapping, lack of self-confidence, misrepresentation, personal purposes, and benefits. For example, Respondent 3 says “*Yes. It's part of the game*”.

#### ***Deception is a common behaviour, as one can hide behind the screen***

Virtual platforms have the convenience of allowing people to reveal their real selves. This is one of the reasons why deceiving becomes an easy and common practice, as indicated by the participant responses that people can hide behind the screen and easily fool others. For example, Respondent 11 says, “*Yes sometimes hide their details in online dating*”

*RQ 3: Is online dating a convenient platform for interactions, expressions, and engagement?*

### ***Convenience in Online Dating***

Since the virtual world has given us the ease of interacting with a large community at any point in time and place, the convenience it offers is beyond expectations. Besides, it also gives the opportunity for people from varied backgrounds and places to interact and build a social circle, which was previously not possible for many.

***Virtual dating may be helpful in developing good relationships***

Few responses indicate that online dating can be helpful in providing suitable partners and developing long-term relationships, provided the partners get to know each other well. For example, Respondent 1 says, “*Yea, if people take it slow then yes, you can find worthwhile people*”

***Online dating is not always a reliable space to engage***

According to most of the responses, online dating is not a reliable space to interact with strangers, but caution is important. For example, Respondent 1 says “*You just need to be cautious*”.

*RQ 4: Does online dating affect overall health and social life?*

***Associated risks***

There are many potential harms and hazards to interacting personally with strangers on a virtual platform, as one is unaware of the person behind the screen. Most of the responses indicate a harmful effect on mental health and social life.

***Mental health and social interaction are more affected than physical health***

Some responses show that mental well-being can be impacted by posing risks due to deception, scams, revengeful intentions, etc. However, there is no particular harm to physical well-being except for people getting hooked on screens for a longer time. For example, Respondent 1 says “*It keeps you hooked to your phone*”

***Social interaction is affected***

According to the responses, social interaction on the virtual platform may change as people get connected with large audiences in a short span of time. For some people, it can be

helpful to know people more openly and be more straightforward in their approach. For example, Respondent 6 says “*Made me more open to people's choices I feel*”.

*RQ 5: What are the primary motives and desires for preferring online dating?*

### ***Motivations and Desires***

There are many personal desires and motives for opting for online dating rather than conventional methods, which depend on individual choices. People have a desire to find a suitable partner or meet new people for casual relationships.

#### ***Casual interactions and finding a suitable partner***

Many responses indicate that they are motivated to explore and meet new people for casual engagement to avoid feeling lonely and to choose a suitable partner out of multiple options. For example, Respondent 6 says, “*Just meeting new people*”

#### ***No ideal intentions***

Some responses indicate that they did not initially have the intention to date online, which shows that it could be a situational factor for dating. For example, Respondent 10 says, “*Basically I don't prefer but the reason can be to find better one*”

### **Discussion**

The present study findings have reflected online dating as a platform where people can engage in casual interactions and leisure time as it provides convenience to meet many people virtually with ease. People look for casual involvement more than actual romantic relationships because virtual dating does not serve as a reliable source of commitment and courtship for many. On the other hand, some engage in online dating due to its convenience and safety, as they first get to know the person virtually and then may decide to meet. Additionally, such dating styles can be very harmful to mental health and well-being if they are entrapped by

fraud, unreliability, infidelity, and harassment, except that they do not impact physical health as evident in the previous findings (AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015; Bonilla-Zorita, Griffiths, & Kuss, 2021; Vandeweerd et al., 2016). Results also suggest that social interaction on the virtual platform may be helpful in developing confidence and self-esteem as many people are unable to interact or socialize easily in the real world (Finkel et al., 2012). Talking about motives and desires, the gratification theory may prove the research findings that individuals have different intentions and purposes for engaging in social media communication, especially for intimate interactions, as suggested in previous literature (Azzahro et al., 2018; Bryden, 2017). A contrary finding suggests that people may find suitable partners easily on virtual platforms; however, they might not primarily have the intention to date the person.

There is a need to explore the online dating community on a large scale so as to describe and understand the risks and concerns involved with virtual dating. Secondly, the data on gender differences and use of online dating, such as duration of time spent on the dating site, purpose and motivations, type of audience interaction, helpfulness of the site services, etc., is scarcely analyzed, which needs immediate attention so that internet use and misuse can be properly defined amongst the people seeking virtual dating rather than conventional ways. Thirdly, as the results suggest, people may be involved in passing time or engaging in casual interactions, which can impact intimate relationships and commitment in the long term, thereby risking trustworthiness and satisfaction with the partner in the long run. This also indicates that the growing demand for casual involvement and risky behavior on the internet has had a negative impact on the well-being of people in romantic relationships and in general.

### **Limitations and future directions**

The present study was a pilot investigation to understand the perspective of online dating, and the results could conclude the concerns regarding the virtual world of intimate relations. There are certain limitations to the study that need to be focused on for future research: first, the sample size was smaller, and there was a lack of homogeneity in the sample. Second, there is a lack of appropriate studies focusing on describing the issues and concerns related to online dating in the present time, and there is a need to empirically investigate the recent trends among people preferring online dating over conventional methods. Third, there is also a lack of standardized tools for assessing online dating attitudes and perspectives; therefore, these areas need to be explored in depth to develop appropriate tools. Finally, the results reported can be biased as the responses gathered and interpreted on the open-ended questionnaire were not extensively answered, therefore, the research result may not be bias-free.

Future research can focus primarily on exploring virtual dating attitudes and behaviours among the online dating community. Through preliminary analysis and exploration of online dating trends, the empirical investigation would develop an understanding of the major concerns of the virtual era. Moreover, extensive qualitative research can be helpful in tracing the concerns related to people who prefer online dating and also analyzing the differences between online and offline dating individuals. Dating websites and apps can also be studied to analyze the services being provided and the type of community most attracted to such sites.

### **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of people who date online in general and develop an understanding of the concerns associated with virtual dating.

The extensive literature and gratification theory helped in the formulation of research questions and data collection tools. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that online dating is a flourishing and growing space for people who find convenience and comfort in interacting for casual relationships and for leisure time to meet new people. There are a few risks involved, such as being deceived or scammed, revengefulness, etc., and social interaction with other people can become easier virtually than in the real world. The motivation to date online depends on the purpose they seek, such as casual dating or finding the right one from many options, and the primary motivation is not always for dating.

There are many existing limitations to the study, which would help in developing a better understanding of the research in this area. The pilot study served the purpose of generating a general picture of dating and relationships in the virtual space and will therefore guide future investigations.

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