‘Nowadays, Girls Have Exceeded Their Limits’: A Qualitative Analysis of Dating Violence in Young Adults from Bengaluru, India

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to understand how college-going young men and women in Bengaluru, India experience violence within dating relationships and their understanding of the role of gender in dating violence.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 undergraduate students aged between 18-21 years old. The data were analyzed using the framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Results: Five key themes emerged from participants' accounts: (1) defining abuse, (2) experiencing abuse (3) impact of abuse (4) abuse is gendered and (5) abuse is multifaceted. The first theme identifies how definitions of abuse are ambiguous and context-specific while the second theme discusses how young adults experience abuse as feeling controlled, losing control or self-protection. The third theme highlights how abuse causes distress but can also invoke coping while the fourth theme discusses the unique gender dynamics in abuse. Finally, the fifth theme identifies the perceived role of individual and community-level efforts in preventing abuse.

Conclusions: Violence is experienced as a complex and distressing part of dating relationships. The phenomenological insights gained from the study underscore the need for early identification and have implications for developing dating violence interventions in colleges and for future research in similar contexts.

Keywords: *dating violence; abuse; young adults; India; gender; culture*

Dating violence (DV) is a type of intimate partner violence (IPV) that occurs between two people in a close relationship and includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression or a combination of the different types (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017). DV acts as a precursor to violence later in life (Iratzoqui & Watts, 2019) and has several adverse consequences for the physical and mental health of survivors, including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Taquette & Monteiro, 2019; Yanez-Peñúñuri et al., 2023).

DV involves certain aspects which differentiate it from other types of IPV (e.g. marital violence), such as the lack of a legal bond and lesser economic and child-based attachment (Shorey et al., 2008). The relatively lower age of individuals involved in a dating relationship also means that there are unique developmental considerations contributing to their beliefs and behaviors (Couture et al., 2021; Giordano et al., 2021), which further necessitates studying DV separately.

The International Dating Violence Study by Straus (2004) found that the prevalence of DV was variable, but consistently high, in 16 countries across five different continents. Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses, based on studies from Europe, North America, South America and South-East Asia, have confirmed this, finding average prevalence rates of 20% for physical violence, 9% for sexual abuse (Wincentak

et al., 2017) and a range of 8.5-95.5% for emotional abuse victimization (Rubio-Garay et al., 2017; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). Young adults pursuing college education seem to be a particularly vulnerable group, with a recent study finding that 87% of female students from post-secondary institutes in Australia reported experiencing either intimate partner or familial violence (Zark et al., 2022). Despite the generally high variability found in prevalence rates (ranging from 1-61% for physical violence, for example), there tends to be a generally consistent finding of both men and women reporting significant perpetration and victimization. Two systematic reviews found evidence for higher rates of physical violence perpetration by women and sexual violence perpetration by men (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). However, such gender differences could also be due to differences in self-report patterns (Wincentak et al., 2017). Following from this, it is not surprising that bidirectional violence (i.e. when both partners in the relationship perpetuate as well as experience violence) has been found to be a more common pattern of violence in intimate relationships than unidirectional violence (Bates, 2016; Machado et al., 2024; Palmetto et al., 2013; Rubio-Garay et al., 2017). However, bidirectional violence is complex to measure, as one needs to consider not only the frequency of a violent act, but also other factors such as the sequence, intention, severity and consequence of the act (Palmetto et al., 2013).

Prevalence of DV in India has also largely been investigated in studies amongst college students. Straus (2004) reported prevalence rates amongst a sample of university students in Pune and found physical violence perpetration of 39%, with women reporting higher perpetration. This latter finding contrasts with the research conducted in the marital violence context but agrees with findings in global contexts (Wincentak et al., 2017). Other studies have found rates ranging between 30-31% for physical violence, 70-90% for psychological violence and 37-42% for sexual coercion (Som, 2006; Sundaraja, 2015). However, most studies reporting on rates of DV in India do not use samples that are representative of the general population.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Several theories have been used to understand and conceptualize IPV, with influential theories broadly including, but not limited to, feminist theories, family violence theories and integrated perspectives. The current paper uses feminist and integrated perspectives to conceptualize DV and to understand the role of gender in the phenomenon.

While a discussion of all the different versions of feminist theories is beyond the scope of this article, the preliminary foundation of feminist perspectives is based on the position that significant gender inequalities exist in society (Jordan, 2016). However, while structuralist theories of gender center on how a skewed

distribution of power in favor of men underlies violence (Anderson, 2005), post-structuralist feminist analyses of IPV also consider other forms of power such as race and class (Cannon et al., 2015), moving beyond binaries of situating men and women as oppressor and oppressed, towards intersectionality theory. The application of intersectionality theory in understanding IPV (Chavis & Hill, 2009; Cramer & Plummer, 2009) brings to light the different ways in which structural inequalities and the perpetrator/survivor's social position plays a key role in how violence is originated, maintained, and responded to. In particular, we consider the intersection of gender and culture i.e. the perspectives of transnational feminist scholars (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Mohanty, 2003) who critique "Western" feminist discourses, specifically, the assumptions that notions of gender and patriarchy can be applied cross-culturally, rather than demonstrating the "production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 31). Hence, the study of DV needs to involve a consideration of the local socio-cultural context within which DV is occurring and it is the intersection of various social identities (gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, disability) that underlies violence, not merely gender. Secondly, we also consider the intersection of gender and the unique developmental stage of adolescence and young adulthood, which may be characterized by features such as frequent involvement with peers as well as transitions and uncertainty around identity, employment and relationships (Couture et al., 2021; Giordano et al., 2021). Finally, a post-structuralist framework also acknowledges that women have their own histories, experiences and motivations for violence and the usual representation of women in the "Third World" as powerless victims of powerful men and systems must be challenged (Cannon et al., 2015; Mohanty, 2003).

Apart from feminist theories, there are two influential theories (out of others) that attempt to integrate differing perspectives on IPV and posit IPV as multifactorial. These are Johnson's typology (1995, 2008) and the ecological framework (Heise, 1998). Johnson's typology theory (1995, 2008) highlighted that IPV may not be a unitary phenomenon, but that there may be qualitatively different patterns of violence that may have implications for differing pathways to perpetration and prevention of violence. Johnson (2017) currently classifies five types of IPV: controlling coercive violence; situational couple violence; violent resistance; mutual violent control; and familial intimate terrorism. While controlling, coercive violence is theorized to be the type of violence more commonly found in data collected from police, courts, hospitals and shelters and rooted in patriarchal ideas of subjugating women, situational couple violence is found in community samples and is theorized to arise from unhealthy interpersonal dynamics of couple relationships, including poor conflict management and communication skills (Johnson, 2017).

Heise (1998; 2011) applied Bronfenbrenner's influential ecological framework (1979) to violence, arguing that patriarchy was a necessary, but not sufficient, explanation of IPV. Hence, the ecological framework conceptualizes IPV as a multi-factorial phenomenon arising out of an interplay between ontogenetic/individual factors (personal history and traits that individuals bring to their relationships), microsystemic factors (immediate context of the relationship, such as family), mesosystemic factors (formal and informal structures such as work, neighborhood, social groups, educational institutions) and macrosystemic factors (general views and attitudes that permeate the local culture). Both Johnson's typology and the ecological framework have been utilized in some studies to conceptualize marital violence in the South Asian context (Krishnan et al., 2012; Pinnewala, 2009; Ragavan et al., 2014; Zakar et al., 2013), with studies using the latter highlighting the role of contextual factors in understanding IPV. However, we could not find any studies applying either of these theories to DV in the South Asian context.

Overall, feminist theories and integrated perspectives influenced our broad research questions and interpretation of the themes in discussion, as further described in the Methods section.

Empirical Literature

As seen from the theories above, it is important to contextualize the study of DV. Hence, empirical literature from the South Asian context in general as well as the Indian context in particular is discussed. To avoid an interpretation of 'India' as one homogenous context, the local context of the research conducted is highlighted where possible. It is compared with empirical literature from the global context where relevant. The focus is on qualitative studies. Most research below refers to heterosexual romantic relationships.

Cultural Context of Dating Relationships in South Asia and India

Some South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan have traditionally favoured marriages arranged by family (Dharnidharaka, 2014; Twamley, 2013). However, in recent decades, against the backdrop of globalization, exposure to Western media, earlier onset of puberty and increasing age of marriage, pre-marital romantic relationships are growing more common in India (Darak et al., 2022; Dharnidharaka, 2014; Stephens et al., 2016; Yadav et al., 2017). Despite this, the socio-cultural context is still discouraging of premarital relationships (Abraham, 2002; Chakraborty, 2010), especially for women (Stephens et al., 2016).

Further, rather than a linear transformation towards self-chosen romantic relationships, it has been argued that there is a tension between collectivistic cultural norms of preserving family honor and gaining parental approval and more individualistic norms of choosing one's own partner for love (Donner, 2016; Singh, 2023). While on one hand, discourses around choice and consent may be more prevalent, especially in the urban

Indian middle-class, young people are still expected to subordinate their desires to become responsible members of the family (Donner, 2016). Hence, it would be relevant to explore the perspectives of Indian youth residing *within* India, on the violence within their dating relationships, to understand how living within this unique and changing socio-cultural context, impacts dating violence.

Marital Violence Research in South Asia and India

There has been extensive scholarship on marital and domestic violence in India and other South Asian countries, which has largely focused on situating violence within patriarchal societal structures and beliefs. Qualitative studies conducted in Lahore, Pakistan and Udaipur, India have found highly gendered constructions of marital relationships, such as notions of an 'ideal' wife or a 'responsible' woman, which are used to exert control and justify violence (Ragavan et al., 2014; Zakar et al., 2013). Both men and women justify violence by a man against his wife as 'discipline' or 'rightful punishment' in certain circumstances, such as when she engages in infidelity (Sabri & Young, 2022; Sardinha & Catalan, 2018). While some aspects of marital violence in India are similar to findings in other global contexts, studies have identified unique context-driven aspects of marital violence in India, for example, the use of particular tools to perpetrate violence and features of dowry harassment and control over reproductive choices contributing to violence (Kalokhe et al., 2017; Sabri & Young, 2022). Hence, themes from the marital violence literature indicate that exploring violence in intimate relationships in the Indian context should include an exploration of gender dynamics and contextual factors.

Dating Violence Research in South Asia and India

As described above, while a spate of recent studies has explored the changing patterns and perspectives of individuals on *dating relationships* in India, very few studies have explored how dating *violence* is understood and perceived in this context. Recent qualitative studies conducted with South Asian youth in Canada and USA have highlighted how specific aspects of the South Asian cultural context, such as stigma around dating, the significance of family honor and the primacy of women's sexual purity and other cultural values may reduce the disclosure of DV to friends and families, help-seeking for DV as well as the tendency to end abusive dating relationships (Couture-Carron, 2017, 2020; Karunaratne, 2023; Ragavan et al., 2018). Globally as well, quantitative studies have found cross-cultural differences in attitudes towards DV, with more permissive attitudes towards DV found amongst students in Uganda and China, for example, as compared to USA (Lyons et al., 2022; Zark & Satyen, 2022). The intersection of gender and culture is reflected in the findings of a recent qualitative meta-synthesis based on studies with immigrant Asian and Latino communities (Cala & Soriano-Ayala, 2021): young people differentiate between "Asian" patriarchal systems and "Western"

patriarchal systems, with Asian patriarchal systems perceived as being highly invested in family honor and women's sexual purity, which leads to different strategies of male control in dating relationships.

In India, most research on DV has been quantitative, examining rates of DV and associated risk factors, such as family-of-origin violence, attitudes justifying violence and substance use (Kamimura et al., 2017; Saini & Singh, 2008; Som, 2006; Straus, 2004; Sundaraja, 2015). In addition to the high rates of DV perpetration and victimization reported by both men and women, this body of research has also consistently found DV to be positively associated with childhood familial violence. However, apart from prevalence rates and risk/protective factors, it is also important to understand the perspectives of young adults on the violence in their dating relationships. This would require qualitative methodologies that can provide a rich account of experiences of violence in dating relationships, which have been so far limited in the Indian context. A recent study with 344 young adults in Bengaluru did aim to measure the perceived nature of DV (Jhala et al., 2021), but used survey methodologies to do so, limiting access to the lived experience of participants. Additionally, the use of standardized questionnaires to study DV suggests an assumption that young adults in India adhere to particular definitions of DV, for example, adhering to the classification of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The dearth of qualitative studies prevents a commentary on how DV is understood and defined by young adults in India. Sundaraja (2015), in an unpublished dissertation, conducted a mixed-methods study on DV with young adults from Bengaluru. While this study explored some aspects of the phenomenological experience of violence, it was also focused on factors that influence men and women to remain in violent relationships and did not specifically explore participants' perceptions of gender in DV.

Relationship between Gender and Dating Violence

Qualitative studies conducted in various countries such as USA, Canada, Chile, China and Vietnam, when attempting to understand how adolescents and young adults understand DV, have found that gendered constructions are present (e.g., Lewis et al., 2021; Sanhueza & Lessard, 2018; Sears, 2006; Storer et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021; Wang & Petula, 2007). Taylor et al. (2021), using interview data from Midwest USA, found that adolescents used action as well as emotion-oriented phrases to define DV; girls tended to discuss DV in terms of the survivor's emotions and boys in terms of the perpetration and physical consequences. Interestingly, some studies ~~also~~ indicated that violent behavior by women was less likely to be seen as abusive, whereas acts by men were considered more serious (Sears, 2006; Storer et al., 2020). In a sample from Beijing, Wang and Petula (2007) found that acts of violence by women were perceived as due to willfulness and a childish personality. Using interview data from Vietnam, Lewis et al. (2021) found prevailing gender norms such as

expectations of men to be determined and independent and expectations of women to be obedient and agreeable, which in turn influenced behaviors in dating relationships, including dismissal of women's sexual cues. Hence, since research findings from diverse countries find gendered perceptions of DV and the Indian marital violence literature has emphasized the role of a deeply patriarchal society in marital violence, it would be relevant to examine perceptions of young people in dating relationships in the Indian context about the role of gender within DV. Unique gender dynamics might be at play in a changing socio-cultural landscape, as quantitative research in India has often found DV to be bidirectional, with both men and women reporting perpetrating high rates of violence (Straus, 2004; Sundaraja, 2015), which is different from the perpetration patterns of marital violence.

Need for the Current Study

From the literature, it emerges that although dating violence is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the Indian and South Asian context, there is little research that focuses specifically on dating violence. Even more limited is research that qualitatively explores the lived experience and perspectives of young adults themselves on their relationships and the violence within. Further, gender dynamics may be different in DV as compared to marital violence, hence perspectives on how gender links to violence also need to be explored. Such research also needs to be contextualized to both the broader socio-cultural as well as the more local context.

Hence, the current study aimed to explore the perspectives of young, college-going adults in Bengaluru, India on the violence in their heterosexual romantic relationships. The two primary research questions were:

1. How is violence in a heterosexual dating relationship described, experienced and made sense of by young, college-going adults in Bengaluru, India?
2. How is the relationship between gender and dating violence perceived and understood by young, college-going adults in Bengaluru, India?

Methods

The current study was guided by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009, 2021). IPA is based on the philosophical approach of phenomenology and focuses on lived experience. It is hermeneutic i.e. it attempts to explore how people make sense of and interpret these lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021). We used IPA because the current study aimed to explore participants' perspectives on, and experiences of, violence in their romantic relationships.

Setting

Bengaluru is the third-largest city in India, with the maximum number of colleges in any district in India (All India Survey of Higher Education, 2021). Hence, it has a high college-going population, including students from out-of-state. The current study was conducted in English-language colleges, hence it accessed young adults who were literate, part of formal educational systems and largely coming from high-income backgrounds.

Recruitment

The current study used interview data from a larger mixed-methods study conducted between 2019-2020. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Departmental Ethics Committee of the institute to which the first author was affiliated to.

In the quantitative arm of the parent study, undergraduate students attending selected colleges in Bengaluru, India (n=155) filled out self-report questionnaires as part of their usual college day, to examine rates of self-reported physical, emotional and sexual dating violence as well as its association to mental health, self-efficacy and gender-role attitudes. The current sample was a subset of participants from this quantitative arm, recruited using a purposive sampling approach. From the parent study, participants who self-reported being in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least a month, either currently or in the past *and* reported experiencing or perpetrating DV, as measured on a standardized questionnaire (The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory [CADRI]; Wolfe et al., 2001), were approached through phone to seek consent for interviews. The CADRI is a 35-item self-report questionnaire that contains five sub-scales: physical abuse, sexual abuse, threatening behavior, relational aggression and emotional/verbal abuse and measures both perpetrating and surviving violence. After initial recruitment of ten participants through this method, four further participants were recruited through snowball sampling, as recruitment through the first method was exhausted. We targeted an *a priori* sample size of 13-15 interviews, balancing between study deadline constraints and aiming for enough interviews to provide rich data for IPA.

Participants reporting higher severity of experiencing and/or perpetrating violence were prioritized for interviews, as this was felt to provide richer material on violence as well as an opportunity to refer them to other services, as required. Since dating violence is often bidirectional (Rubio-Garay et al., 2017) and this was found in the sample from the parent study as well, we decided not to isolate only survivors or only perpetrators, in order to avoid imposing ecologically invalid categorical distinctions on the sample. An approximately equal

number of men and women were contacted, with the purpose of understanding violence and gender dynamics in violence (no participant in the larger study identified as gender non-binary).

Participants

The final data consisted of six women and eight men (n=14) aged 18-21. They were from nine different colleges across Bengaluru, each pursuing an undergraduate degree in varied subjects such as engineering, computer science, basic sciences, psychology and so on. Most of them had been in multiple romantic relationships. Table 1 provides details about participants and the relationships in which they reported violence [Table 1 here]. Eight participants spoke about relationships in the past, ~~while~~ five participants spoke about present relationships and one participant mentioned both past and present relationships. The duration of the relationships ranged from 2 months to 4.5 years. Nearly all participants mentioned emotional abuse, while ten participants spoke about physical violence. With regards to directionality of violence, all but one participant had endorsed at least one item indicating bidirectional (emotional, physical or sexual) violence on the questionnaires. This was not the case for interviews, where some participants only mentioned unidirectional acts of violence. Since the primary goal of the study was to understand the lived experience of participants, we focus on highlighting the positionality of the participant i.e. how the participant presented themselves in the interview (survivor, perpetrator or bidirectional) in Table 1 as well as in the rest of the article below, where relevant.

Researchers

The first author is a clinical psychologist and researcher with an interest in feminist perspectives on violence and trauma. The second author is a doctoral scholar of clinical psychology and her research focuses on the mental health correlates of IPV. The last and senior author is an additional professor of clinical psychology with more than 15 years of experience in research on gender-based violence. Our motivation to conduct this study was the lack of research on this topic, especially in the Indian context. Our positionality while conducting this study was to be guided by feminist and integrative theories of IPV, however we took care to remain open to new meanings shared by participants. Interview questions were focused on phenomenological experience. Mutual processes of discussion during data analysis further helped in ensuring that preconceived notions were identified and evaluated.

Procedure

An interview schedule was co-developed by R.C. in consultation with V.S. An initial draft of the interview schedule was shared with three pilot participants (separate from the participants in this study) and their feedback on the same solicited. The final interview schedule included open-ended questions about

participants' perceptions and experiences of romantic relationships, their experiences of surviving and perpetrating DV (which they had reported on the standardized questionnaire), felt impacts of being in a violent relationship and participants' perceptions of gender roles in relationships. As per Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations, both the participants and researcher were equal participants in the research process; while the interview guide was used by the researcher to set a broad structure, it was not rigidly adhered to and participants' priorities that emerged while talking were followed, subject to relevance to the research topic.

All interviews were conducted in English by R.C. on a one-to-one basis at a safe space of mutual convenience, including the college premises of the participants and the [name of institute] campus. Written informed consent was obtained and the interview was audio-recorded. Interviews ranged approximately between 35 minutes to 87 minutes. Time was taken to build rapport and while the researcher did not offer any interpretations or reflections on the participants' words, they used non-verbal acknowledgements, follow-up questions (both those present in the interview guide and additional questions) and paraphrases to encourage the participant to speak and to feel comfortable. After the interview, the participant was linked to an appropriate resource in case of distress and provided with the option of contacting the researcher in case further help was needed.

Analysis

All interviews were manually transcribed and Smith et al.'s (2009) thematic approach to IPA was used as a guide for data coding. First, one transcript was chosen at random and read and reread by R.C. to immerse herself in the participant's world. A detailed set of notes and comments were produced, including descriptive, linguistic as well as conceptual comments, keeping the research questions in mind. Emergent themes and connections across themes were developed and represented using a visual map for the first transcript. The same three steps were repeated for the other 13 transcripts individually. We then looked for connections, convergences and divergences between all the visual maps from all the transcripts to produce a list of initial codes and themes. To ensure trustworthiness of the study, analyst triangulation (Patton, 2015) was used, wherein 3 transcripts were randomly chosen to be independently analyzed by A.D. R.C and A.D. then discussed and revised the themes, resulting in a final master table of superordinate themes and sub-themes. V. S. was consulted when there were disagreements as well as to discuss the final themes and their interpretation. This process of discussion also enabled the examination of the researcher's positionality towards the data, including preconceived biases. For example, during this stage, it emerged that R.C's initial coding into 'physical abuse' and 'emotional abuse' was imposing on the data pre-conceived notions of the categories of abuse usually used in

survey questionnaires and that had, in fact, been used in the larger parent study. Hence, we decided to revise primary themes that separated out physical and emotional abuse into themes that just mentioned experiences of abuse, staying close to participants' descriptions. Finally, we also discussed the themes in context of the theoretical frameworks outlined in the introduction, including how findings converged and diverged from the theories.

A qualitative study does not allow statistical generalizability but it can allow for analytic generalizability and transferability (Polit & Beck, 2010). By being transparent about methodology and providing descriptions of participants and contexts, we have attempted to give the reader enough information to judge whether findings may transfer to the settings they are thinking of (Guba, 1981).

Findings

An overview of the key themes and sub-themes emerging from the participants' accounts is presented in Table 2 [Table 2 here]. Theme 1, 'Defining abuse[1]' encompassed two subthemes: 'Abuse includes emotional and physical harm' and 'Abuse is ambiguous'. Theme 2, 'Experiencing abuse' had sub-themes: 'Abuse feels like being controlled, 'Abuse feels like losing control', and 'Abuse as self-protection'. Theme 3, 'Impact of abuse' included subthemes: 'Abuse harms health' and 'Coping in the face of abuse'. Theme 4, 'Abuse is gendered' encompassed subthemes: 'Role expectations contribute to abuse' and 'Double standards in abuse'. Finally, Theme 5, 'Abuse is multifaceted' included subthemes: 'Individual factors' and 'Social factors'. All names used below are pseudonyms.

Defining Abuse

This theme encompassed the manner in which participants defined abuse, focusing on the aspects which constituted abuse in their relationship.

Abuse Includes Emotional and Physical Harm.

All participants included emotional and physical abuse when asked an open-ended question about what they perceived as abuse. The emotional component of abuse referred to their partners' words, behaviors and attitudes that were perceived as psychologically distressing. The physical component of abuse identified was actions that physically harmed them or their partner. Physical abuse was frequent (> two incidents) in three

[1] We have used the term 'abuse' in the Findings section, as participants mostly used the word 'abuse' or 'aggression' in interviews. We have used the term 'violence' in the Discussion section, in keeping with the broader phenomenon of dating violence being discussed.

relationships. More often, it occurred occasionally. Some participants also mentioned experiences of sexual coercion; they are not discussed in this article due to limited space.

Participants often spoke about physical violence and emotional abuse together and emphasized that the experience of abuse stemmed from the combination of the two. When asked if she would call her relationship abusive (one in which she positioned herself as a survivor of physical and emotional abuse), Mehak replied:

> *Yeah. I would say that. You know, there has been emotional abuse, there has been physical abuse because somebody's not understanding you and trying to only understand, that's a type of emotional abuse they're doing to you because they're not letting you to be yourself. (Mehak)*

For Mehak, along with the physical violence, her partner not permitting her the agency to be herself was what made the relationship abusive. Similarly, for Siddharth, being taken advantage of and feeling helpless was at the core of the abuse in his relationship. Physical abuse was encompassed within this element of control that his partner exerted over him:

> *Because clearly, she took advantage of what was happening, no, she knew I won't do anything to her, first thing, okay and she was trying to show that, you know, I have you under my control, I'll hit you also, you can't do anything and all. (Siddharth)*

Abuse is Ambiguous.

Several participant narratives displayed a tension between what was considered abusive and what was not, highlighting that abuse could not be defined in a uniform manner. One aspect which brought ambiguity in definitions of abuse was the tendency to view physical violence and emotional abuse as being a common part of a dating relationship and not of very large significance. John spoke about his relationship in which there was bidirectional violence. Towards the end of the interview, he subtly normalized the abuse, as an aspect of being in a relationship with a woman ('girls and all'). The implication was that women may be prone to such acts of violence:

> *But yeah, there are problems, problems are there in every relationship, and this is common, hitting, means, scratching and all, girls and all, it happens. (John)*

What participants labelled as 'abuse' was fluid and changing as per the context. For example, John defined abuse with a qualifier; he would only call something abusive if the abusive actions are being performed beyond the time at which they are justified and relevant. Hence, according to him, his partner's actions were not abusive in the past when she was triggered by his lying, however, they were abusive at the time of the interview because her actions continued despite the trigger no longer existing.

I would call it abuse right now. I would not call it abuse at that time that this thing was happening because that's the way she's showing her anger to me. But that phase has passed, okay, if you continue showing that anger to me in that same, what do we say, as if it's just happened to you, like a talk which has happened a year ago, you still have the same kind of anger or aggression and you're still pinching me, or scratching me or beating me for that thing, that is something I would call it as abuse. (John)

Another aspect which created variability in defining abuse was justifying certain acts by claiming that circumstances were exceptional. Some participants felt that physical violence was permissible and not wrong in select circumstances, thereby suggesting that physical violence was not always a sufficient condition to define abuse. For example, Mehak expressed how she would not necessarily consider violence abusive if she 'deserved it' on account of doing something wrong:

Even all this beatings and all is also fine if you give a valid reason, if I did some mistake, see you can, I know when people beat like…if I'm going out, if I'm having some other sexual relationship with other guy and you caught me, you can beat me, because the thing which I did is a mistake. (Mehak)

Experiencing Abuse

This theme captured participants' lived experiences of abuse and their associated thoughts and feelings.

Abuse Feels Like Being Controlled.

One common aspect of abuse emerged to be controlling behaviors. Controlling behaviors often occurred in the context of jealousy and possessiveness. Several participants mentioned behaviors such as asking partners to restrict the time spent with the opposite sex. While both men and women restricted opposite-sex interactions, this was gendered in that it was men who used protectiveness as justification for restricting interactions, citing that they personally knew the 'bad intentions' of some men and wanted to protect their partners from the same. Aisha, who positioned herself as a survivor, explained:

Yeah, he restricts from meeting boys. He says, not every guy has the same intention to talk. He may be very nice at you on your face, but their intentions are not good. So better stay away. (Aisha).

Control was also exerted using verbal aggression. This included suppressing the partner's opinions by constantly arguing or interrupting them or dominating over them with a louder voice. Siddharth explained how his partner became extremely antagonistic towards him and put him down every time he expressed his opinions:

After, one point came, where she was all about attitude. Anyone she sees, she'll be like, who the fuck is she? Who the fuck is she? How can he talk to me like that and all that…Like I couldn't tell one opinion about what I feel and all. She'll be like, shut the fuck up, you don't make sense and all. (Siddharth)

While Siddharth's interview involved the mention of bidirectional acts of violence, he positioned himself as the survivor overall, framing himself as a victim of the control exerted by his partner.

Repeated badgering as means to control the response of the partner was also seen. Below is an illustration of this from Kunal, who described perpetrating several acts of violence in his interview, but saw them as justified. He described how he kept pursuing a woman despite her saying she was uncomfortable and justified his actions by characterizing the woman as someone who is interested but is communicating ambiguously. The agency of the partner was disrespected, as Kunal assumed that if she did like him, her desire to not be in a relationship was irrelevant:

So I called her and I proposed her. She did not accept, so I have been just like, 2-3 days, I have been calling her, texting her, repeatedly, she never said to me that I don't like you, she used to say that I'm not interested, so I used to ask her, say me directly. If you say that I don't like you, I don't want to text you and I don't want to call you, I will not disturb you, I used to say that. But she never said that I don't like you. So then I felt that she likes me. Then I felt like, she's that type of person who never gives direct answers. So, I felt, okay, but she used to say that I'm feeling uncomfortable if you're asking like this, again and again, I'm feeling uncomfortable, she used to say. (Kunal).

Abuse Feels Like Losing Control.

In several interviews, abuse was described as sudden, impulsive, unexpected or involving some form of loss of control. This was sometimes followed by remorsefulness on the perpetrator's part. This was clearly illustrated throughout Kanishka's account, wherein she described a relationship that was otherwise non-abusive, in which her partner perpetrated sudden physical violence on one occasion. What was most shocking and unexpected for her was that this came from a person who was usually 'very docile and doesn't talk much'. Her explanatory framework for the incident is that he lost control over his emotions:

I went to the door, I opened it and he held my hand and [swallows] he twisted it. And like, I was actually physically feeling hurt because he twisted my hand behind my back. He was like, you're not going anywhere. I don't know what got into him because he's not that person…So I was very surprised that he would go to such an extreme but at this point, he also in his head is just like, what the hell? He's out of

control and he's having an emotional outburst too. And I'm like, you're hurting me, please leave me. And then he's like, oh I'm sorry, I don't know what happened there. (Kanishka)

Her partner immediately apologized for the first act of violence, indicating his possible loss of control in perpetrating this first act. In fact, he then went on to strangle her neck and then apologized again.

Similarly, Neha, throughout her interview, clearly positioned herself as the perpetrator of violence in her relationship, not out of an intention to exert power, but out of being unable to control her overwhelming emotions of sadness and anger:

So he said, I need to build my career well because that's only for you, baby. He always tell like that so I feel like oh, he's good but still I don't know why I feel so angry, sad. Yesterday I don't know what I was feeling so I will, he won't slap me, okay, but I'll slap him, that's the problem. (Neha)

Abuse As Self-Protection.

Violence was also described as being used in self-protection**,** either as self-defense to the partner's physical aggression or to protect oneself from perceived humiliation. In the extract below, John described an instance when he hit his girlfriend, triggered by her scratching him in a public place. His humiliation at being physically abused in a public place, and that, too, to the extent it leads to injury, is what ultimately prompts him to slap her back:

We are at a place where people are around, people weren't looking as in, it's a dark area, I just turned around and I gave her a slap. You can't behave in an environment like this, okay, if you're giving me, if you're scratching me, and I was bleeding okay and I was bleeding at that point of time. (John)

Siddharth, too, presents himself as hitting his partner in self-defense to stop her from hitting him, although his description also depicts his loss of control ('I got raged'):

Like she slapped me once, I got raged. Like I slapped her. Then she starts crying. How can you hit me, how can you hit me? I'm like [laughs], you were hitting me till now, I just hit you to stop you. (Siddharth)

Impact of Abuse

In this theme, participant narratives about the different ways in which abuse affected them and how they found their means to cope are presented.

Abuse Harms Health.

The adverse health impacts of dating violence were brought forth in many narratives. Many participants highlighted the emotional toll as the largest impact of being in an abusive relationship, using words such as 'dark phase', 'I was broken', 'emotional breakdown' and 'depression'. These were usually participants

who perceived themselves as survivors of violence or as being engaged in relationships with bidirectional violence. Below, Mayank described how his relationship impacted his daily activities, his friendships and led to a sense of overall purposelessness:

> *It was a pretty dark phase, actually. And I lost purpose for pretty much everything. As I said, I was interested in sports, I lost interest in that. It was just for a few months, though, this phase, uh, I used to sit at home all the time, I never used to hang out with my friends. (Mayank)*

Impact on physical health was brought forth by Vikram. The stress from the relationship exacerbated a chronic illness he already had, with intense episodes occurring once in three weeks whereas he had been attack-free for a year before the onset of the relationship.

Violence also impacted self-esteem and self-confidence, with participants doubting their roles in contributing to the abuse they had experienced and being worried about repeating patterns in other future relationships they would have. Mehak, who was a survivor of violence in her relationship, reflects:

> *The problem, I guess, it's not with me, I wouldn't know, but people say the problem is always with me only. Even in my first relationship, the same similar scenarios I've heard from people…one thing is there, sometimes I would feel low about myself, like is this gonna happen the whole time in my life? (Mehak)*

Coping in the Face of Abuse.

While speaking about the harmful effects of being in a violent relationship, some participants also highlighted their own coping skills and how they had emerged from the experience with new learning or personal growth in some way. Kanishka wanted to regain control over the physical environment in which the abusive act had occurred. She decided to re-establish control by throwing eggs all over that room which gave her a cathartic release:

> *That moment, I take charge of how I want to be treated. How I want to be free, like how I should feel and that time, it was him taking a charge and that, in that room of his, taking a charge over my life…I feel like the eggs released a lot of emotions of aggression and anger. I didn't want to hurt him, that was not my intention. It was something, somewhere…it was some vent I needed. And honestly, I got it, from that incident. (Kanishka)*

Abuse is Gendered

Gender was seen to play a role in the participants' experiences of abuse through stereotypical notions and expectations.

Role Expectations Contribute to Abuse.

Abuse was perceived to be linked to unfair gender role expectations, which were described by several women as operating in their romantic relationships. For Mehak, her partner had moved into her house with a male friend and expected her to continuously cook and clean for both of them, while they played video games. Further, he was interested in showing off a particular version of her to his friends and was concurrently critical that she would never measure up to his standards:

> *And he's like, how many ever times I try to show you good before my friends, you never reach that point….it seems like, I have to be little different, it seems. Like being very, like, good housewife something, like which we have to get up early in the morning, make all the things before these people get up. As soon as these people wake up, we go and give them coffee, tea or something like that. (Mehak)*

Another way in which there was an implicit gendered expectation of women was that the woman was expected to be quiet in conflicts, while the man was allowed to be aggressive. Shreedhar, who described himself as the perpetrator of violence in his relationship, used the word 'back-answering' to describe his partner as fighting back in a conflict, suggesting that he expected his partner to be silent during fights and perceived that she 'provoked' him into escalating the fight by back-answering. The partner's agency to answer back in a fight was disregarded:

> *In the beginning like, whenever I say something, she never used to say anything. She used to keep her mouth shut…in the end, she started back-answering. For everything. She was like, she knows that I'm angry and she wanted to counter it, and it used to provoke me a lot and then the fight even turned up… I knew I don't like back-answering. So I made sure I told her, if you back-answer, it's gonna become a big issue. (Shreedhar)*

Several of the women interviewed framed themselves as problematic because they were aggressive, demanding or non-conforming to traditional gender norms in some way. Women's personalities were often seen as needing change to fit within the dimensions of the relationship. Throughout her interview, Likita presented herself as having a 'bold personality' which was opposite to what was expected of a woman. Even a partner who initially dated her for her personality ultimately found her too 'harsh', desiring a bold woman in theory, but unable to accept one in practice:

> *[when breaking up, he said] you're too, you know, you don't have the right kind of mannerism. Again, I told you I'm a very tomboyish kind of girl. I come through like, you know, harsh….what's very ironic is,*

he said, while he started dating me, the reason why he's dating me, he likes my behavior, it's different from the others. And then he wanted me to change that same thing. (Likita)

Some men saw women as 'exceeding their limits' in terms of women empowerment. Such beliefs were linked to actions aimed at exerting more control over women. Shreedhar expressed his dissatisfaction with women engaging in conventionally non-feminine activities, so much so that he took it upon himself to report to a friend's boyfriend when she went to a hookah bar:

Nowadays girls, it's like, they want to be equal to boys and they've already reached that equality and they're exceeding it. They're going beyond their limits…It was like, in the beginning, none of my friends used to smoke, in school, even my boy friends didn't use to smoke, none of the girls used to. But now, few of my college mates, they do weed and all…one of my friends took a boy, her own classmate to a hookah bar and taught him how to smoke hookah. And she was proud of it. And she sent me a snap saying, see what I did. And I had to text - she's really close to me - so I had to text her boyfriend that this is happening so you make sure she doesn't do it. (Shreedhar)

There was also a feeling of threat linked to the increased power women were gaining in society. For example, Kunal felt unsure about the present power dynamics in society slowly tilting in the favor of women.

Present situation, I think so, it is going to girls' hands. But till now it is in boys' hands. But surely, it'll go to girls' hands, surely. That is sure. (Kunal)

Double Standards in Abuse.

On the one hand, while abuse was gendered in terms of traditional patriarchal gender-based expectations playing out in violent relationships, on the other hand, several participants perceived double standards in abuse, particularly that women's perpetration of abuse was not taken that seriously. For example, John, when talking about how his partner scratched him hard enough to leave injuries, sardonically made a reference to the popular #MeToo movement to show the double standards he perceived around physical violence:

I've got many marks from her hand over here and also, see. So, at one point of time I have to retaliate, she keeps hitting me back, if I do the same thing with her, then won't it be a #metoo moment for me? (John)

Kanishka, too, observed that women's physical aggression may be downplayed in the relational context:

In anger, this one woman would have shoved this guy, but he is big so it didn't really affect him so much, but she equally like, in that anger and it would be okay but if that guy did the same, he shoved the girl and the girl is maybe physically less this thing and if she moved a little, that would be an issue. (Kanishka)

Abuse is Multifaceted

This theme consisted of participants' views on how the roots of dating violence could be understood as well as how abusive relationships could be intervened with. A wealth of suggestions emerged that held individuals and the wider society including family, peers and educational institutes accountable.

Individual Factors.

Some participants saw honest and open communication with the partner as the key to managing the aggression and conflicts in a relationship. This was often linked to the idea of aggression emerging when feelings were bottled up and anger festered for a long time, exploding when it could no longer be stifled. Amara, who described a relationship in which there was 'equal' amounts of aggression from both partners, spoke about the importance of communication:

Communicate, that's the main thing. Communicate…Without your feelings being told, without being expressed or understood, nothing can be done. It's going to eat you up from inside. (Amara)

Some participants mentioned that people should leave an abusive relationship. However, it was interesting that while this was the advice given to others, many of the participants themselves did not wish to easily give up on their relationships and took pride in the fact that they took efforts to make their relationship work despite problems. Almost all participants established a distinction between serious and casual relationships; casual relationships meant relationships that were purely for physical benefits and less sincere in the depth of their emotional connection. Participants situated their own relationship as a serious relationship, in contrast to the casual relationships around them of their peers. Below, Neha constructed her relationship as one where she and her partner did not differentiate between a dating partner and a spouse, and gave each other the same level of commitment as a marriage:

Because in my college, they're not ready to sacrifice anything. In my relationship, he will sacrifice anything. Anything. If I say, don't go there. Okay I won't go there…if he said don't wear that dress, if he don't like because if any male commented on me, okay. Okay fine, I'll sacrifice for him…but in our college they're not. Why should I need to sacrifice for you? It's my relationship, you're not my husband? There are things like that. Where I'm thinking... he's my husband only. (Neha)

This could play an important role in tolerance of abuse and could be a barrier to leaving abusive relationships. Mehak below described how she tried to work matters out instead of leaving the relationship, despite it being abusive:

> *Because I like commitments, I'm not a person who's going to leave anybody…even though it's little tough, I would try to maintain it instead of just breaking off it in a few months or something. I would like to, I would like try different things so that we can work out…(Mehak)*

Social Factors.

Several participants brought up the continued taboo around romantic relationships in society, particularly by adults, and how that restricted the support young people could get around their relationships. They pointed out that the family, educational institutes and peers could play a role in bringing the required change. Below, Mayank explained how the restrictions put in place around romantic relationships negatively impacted the mental health of people in the relationship:

> *From what I've noticed in our society in general, most of them are completely against the idea of even having a relationship. Like you know, a sexual relationship. As soon as they know you're dating someone, confiscate the phone, take away internet, don't go out, you're grounded. I mean, like that kind of puts a negative impact on someone's, I don't know, mental health, if I may. (Mayank)*

Neha gave an account of the social shaming still prevalent around relationships which made individuals afraid to disclose details of their relationship.

> *You know, in [place], if they find any relationship they were like, oh my god you are in relationship and they slap her and make nonsense and make all, what will they say, really very very bad thing about her. Like they cook up their own stories like, oh she had relationship, she went everywhere with him, like that only. That's why most of the girls fear to tell everything, okay. (Neha)*

The role of parents was frequently brought up in this context. Participants perceived that parents should be more open and accepting of romantic relationships, so that participants could get the necessary support and advice from them, instead of having to hide their relationships. Further expanding on the crucial role of family, many participants cited an inadequate family environment as a possible explanation for abusive behavior. Mehak brought this up spontaneously early on in her interview; almost as soon as she mentioned her boyfriend's aggression problems, she immediately linked it to his upbringing:

> *My right now current boyfriend, he has aggression problems also. The problem I guess, it's from his home only. Nobody has ever said him 'no you should not do this'. That should be something in their*

upbringing or something in their home, they would have seen it very common, like what's there in drinking at home, or something like that. Or like saying something to someone, what's wrong in this? (Mehak)

Another consequence of romantic relationships being perceived as taboo brought up by participants was that individuals lack adequate knowledge about relationships and sex. Siddharth felt that this was likely to be a relevant topic for college-based workshops for young people that they would pay attention to:

Like, you know, somewhere we had some person coming and speaking about relationships and all. Like, if you speak about positivity of relationships and all that, no, it affects - because see, what is interesting nowadays? Every student is interested in love, and someone comes to your college and talks about love, everyone's going to listen to that and everyone's going to connect to that. (Siddharth)

Peers were seen as the most major influencers in the lives of young people, with the power to support abuse or stop abuse. As Mehak illustrated, young people were reluctant to listen to parents or even their partner; it was their friends who could have an impact:

I guess, who can help them is their friends. In this age, most of the people won't listen to their father, mother or even the girl also…There should be like their friends or somebody, or there should be something, dear, this is what you're doing wrong…(Mehak)

In fact, friends were seen to actively encourage romantic relationships, sometimes leading to detrimental consequences. Below, Likita links the initiation of a relationship that eventually turned 'ugly' to being pressured by her best friend to date him:

So it was a pressure from my other friend, best friend, that he's a really nice guy, you're best friends, I think you should date and all that…[later in the interview] And everybody around me was, you know, into physical stuff, like 'Likita, you're missing out on a lot, you've to try stuff' and stuff like that. So even I was kind of vulnerable and even he was vulnerable so we both gave in at a point. (Likita)

Discussion

This study presented young adults' perspectives on dating violence in their heterosexual relationships. The first theme 'Defining abuse' suggested that participants did not conceptualize DV in terms of specific actions, but rather in terms of dimensions of power ('somebody's not letting you be yourself', 'she took advantage of the situation'). This is in convergence with other studies globally that have found that while, for some young people, DV may constitute physical violence, most young people cite broader and more complex definitions of DV (Sears et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2021). However, while Taylor et al. (2021) found that men

tended to define DV in terms of perpetration and physical consequences, in our study, both men and women who positioned themselves as survivors of violence in their relationships described the emotional and power-based aspects that constituted DV.

Secondly, many participants in the current study either normalized DV or justified the use of violence in certain contexts and circumstances, such as a response to infidelity. The idea that context matters in considering a behavior as abusive or not has been well-recognized in the literature on perceptions of DV (Sears et al., 2006; Storer et al., 2020). Cross-cultural studies comparing attitudes towards DV have found greater justification of DV in young people from Asia, South America and eastern Europe as compared to USA and western Europe (Lyons, 2022; Ozaki & Otis, 2017; Zark and Satyen, 2022), with infidelity and jealousy cited as common justifications for violence (Sabri & Young, 2022; Sanhueza & Lessard, 2018). Overall, this finding also indicates that young people are uncertain about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in romantic relationships and may need education about the same, a finding echoed by Taylor et al. (2021).

Further, some studies in the South Asian context have found that there could be specific contextual factors that influence how DV is defined, for example, the threat of exposure to parents and community was considered emotionally abusive by South Asian immigrant Muslim youth (Couture-Carron, 2017). In the current study, while we did not find specific contextual definitions of DV, it was interesting that many participants situated their *relationship itself* as a 'serious' relationship akin to a marital relationship, often contrasted against the casual relationships of their peers. This aligns with Sundaraja's (2015) findings in the same context (Bengaluru), but with a different sample, that participants clearly differentiate between casual dating and serious relationships. We further discuss the possible implications of this below.

The second theme 'Experiencing abuse' loosely maps onto Johnson's typology theory (1995, 2008, 2017). Participants' descriptions of 'abuse feels like being controlled' could map onto a coercive, controlling pattern of violence, whereas participants' descriptions of 'abuse feels like losing control' could map onto situational couple violence. Similar to Johnson's (2008; 2017) description of coercive, controlling violence, in this study, too, participants who described the controlling nature of violence spoke of it as a pattern that was established over a long period of time, usually reported as unidirectional (though not always) and involved establishing power over the partner. While it seemed to be perpetrated by men in most cases, one participant (Siddharth) described his girlfriend perpetrating this type of violence. On the other hand, participants who described 'abuse feels like losing control' spoke about the perpetrator losing control over their emotions and perpetrating an act of violence about which they were then remorseful. This can be likened to situational couple

violence, which as per Johnson's theory, arises out of dysfunctional communication patterns. In the current study, this was perpetrated by both men and women and was both bidirectional and unidirectional. Further, participants' descriptions of using violence in self-defense could be understood as 'violent resistance' (Johnson, 2008, 2017) which is enacted in response to controlling, coercive violence. However, while Johnson (2017) typically describes violent resistance as being used by a woman, in our study, men described this, too, concurrent to recent studies testing Johnson's theories that have found that men also do use violent resistance (Hines & Douglas, 2018).

While we could not find any study that attempts to apply Johnson's typology to dating violence in the South Asian context, Ragavan et al. (2014) identified three types of physical IPV, loosely corresponding to Johnson's categories, operating for married women in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Overall, studies in India and South Asia have generally linked IPV perpetration to patriarchal norms (Brown, 2014; Mondal & Paul, 2021; Zakar et al., 2013), which fits with the coercive, controlling type of violence identified in the current study. While the idea of differing patterns of violence may not be new to a western audience, the current study suggests that situational couple violence and violent resistance, too, may be operating in dating relationships of young adults in India, which may have significant implications for prevention and intervention, as it shows that DV may not be a homogeneous phenomenon and further, that typologies of IPV may be worth exploring in dating relationships of young people as well, as has been explored in the US (Conroy & Crowley, 2022; Zweig et al., 2014). Of note, we could not classify relationships in this study into only having one type of violence; further research may wish to apply a quantitative approach to the typology as well.

With reference to the third theme 'Impact of abuse', the current study found that participants described DV as impacting their mental health deeply, particularly when they perceived they had survived violence. Quantitative studies conducted on the relationship between mental health and DV in India have reported significant as well as nonsignificant relationships between the two variables (Saini & Singh, 2008; Sundaraja, 2015). It is difficult to find research conducted in South Asia and/or India describing the lived experiences of violence for a) young people in dating relationships and b) both men and women, with most research significantly focusing on the lived experiences of women in marital relationships (Bhandari, 2020; Kallivayalil, 2010; Khan & Hussain, 2008; Pinnewala, 2009). Local understandings of suffering and distress in South Asian communities have often found that members somaticize psychological distress (Kallivayalil, 2010; Midlarksy et al., 2006); interestingly, participants in our study were quite comfortable describing the impact on their mental health. This may be because we accessed a younger, urban population of English-speaking college students who

are presumably exposed to narratives of mental distress and health. Secondly, we also found that survivors did not merely position themselves as victims, but also described how they actively made sense of their experiences and attempted to overcome their difficulties, particularly demonstrated through the account of the participant who egged the home of her perpetrator. This is consistent with a post-structuralist feminist framework (Cannon et al., 2015), wherein survivors are not merely 'victims' but rather actively responding to violence. Hence, it may be important for future research and praxis to not only highlight the distress caused by abusive relationships, but also journeys of how young people actively navigate and cope with distress from abusive relationships.

For the fourth theme 'Abuse is gendered', the data clearly suggested that perpetration and victimization was not restricted to one gender, with both men and women describing surviving as well as perpetrating violence. In fact, six out of the eight men interviewed reported experiencing violence, a majority of them including physical violence. This is concurrent with quantitative literature from India on dating relationships, which also reports high levels of violence experienced by men (Straus, 2004; Sundaraja, 2015). The complexities in the gendered nature of violence become further apparent when we consider the following findings: while there were traditional gender role expectations operating in the relationships, with women being expected to be submissive or being penalised for being non-conforming to traditional feminine norms, there were also a) a backlash against the feminist movement and b) identification of the "double standards" existent in judging men's versus women's use of violence. Since the time Faludi (1991) identified the phenomenon of anti-feminist backlash, it has been well-recognized, albeit the conceptualizations and meanings of backlash are contested (Jordan, 2016). At its simplest, backlash refers to the phenomenon when the increased possibility of women's equality leads to feelings of threat and resentment for the group declining in power, which leads to actions aimed at undermining the progress women have made, either through claiming that women have already attained equality or through claiming that equality is detrimental to women (Faludi, 1991; Jordan, 2016; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Such anti-feminist backlash can be identified in the current study in comments such as 'women have reached their equality and are exceeding it' or 'the present situation is going to girls' hands'. Transnational feminist scholars have identified the phenomenon of backlash against feminism in the "South" (Mohanty, 2003) and also specifically, in India (Dehingia et al., 2021; Lodhia, 2014; Mayaram, 2002). Lodhia (2014) analyses the discourses prevalent in men's rights groups in India and discovers narratives of 'men as the real victims' and the 'hazards of importing Western feminism' to India. In the current study, too, many men positioned themselves as the survivors of violence in their relationships, some of them while describing perpetrating acts of violence in self-defense, which arguably, could be seen as perpetrating violence in its own right. Further, the identification

of double standards by participants, namely that a woman's use of violence is taken less seriously as compared to men's, could reflect a manifestation of feminist backlash, particularly as one of the participants made a reference to the popular #MeToo movement to imply how men have been strongly called out. However, the identification of double standards could also reflect the idea that women, too, may use acts of violence to exert power. This is in line with a post-structuralist feminist framework that recognizes that women are not merely victims, but also agents in their relationships and that women's use of violence is not only in self-defense, but also out of anger and myriad motivating factors (Cannon et al., 2015). Further, the same act of violence, depending on the gender identity of the person it is perpetrated by, may be understood and responded to differently by the people around (Anderson, 2005; Cannon et al., 2015). Hence, a woman's act of physical violence may be minimized because it is understood within the discourse of the reduced physical power of the person perpetrating it or the discourse of women as emotionally dysregulated and commonly prone to acts of minor violence; similar discourses have been identified in studies conducted in UK, China and US (Sears et al., 2006; Storer et al., 2020; Wang & Petula, 2007). This latter discourse of women being conflictual may also influence what is labelled DV; in the first theme in the current study, a participant downplayed minor acts of aggression by invoking implicit gendered beliefs such as the idea that such things are a usual part of dating relationships when women are involved.

The final theme on 'abuse is multifaceted' can be explained using the ecological framework on IPV (Heise, 1998; Heise, 2011) and the perspectives of transnational feminist scholars. The ecological framework posits that IPV is not a single-factor phenomenon, but rather that violence occurs because of a complex interplay between individual, relational, community and societal factors. In our study, too, participants identified both individual and dyadic-level factors (e.g. communication skills) as well as broader social factors (educational institutions, the stigma around dating relationships) as having a role in DV. The interplay between social and individual level factors is suggested by the finding that participants constructed their own relationships as 'serious' relationships, akin to marital relationships. The reason for doing so could be to gain legitimacy in a context that stigmatizes dating relationships otherwise. This in turn may influence whether young people choose to stay in or leave abusive relationships, as they may take pride in their ability to stay committed to their dating relationships. Previous literature on commitment found how women from Pune, India may tend to endorse more commitment values to premarital relationships than men (Darak et al., 2022); while this may be true, we posit whether there is also a link between a social factor (stigma) and an individual factor (commitment to the relationship). Interestingly, this finding was echoed by Couture-Carron (2020), whose South Asian Muslim

participants residing in Canada spoke about the strong relationship attachments that tend to persist in dating relationships due to the cultural norms discouraging dating.

Further, aligned with the intersectional perspectives of transnational feminist scholars (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Mohanty, 2003), the findings bring to light the influence of various intersecting social identities (in particular, gender, culture, developmental stage, socioeconomic status) on how DV is experienced. For this group of young adults who come from high-income, mostly upper-caste backgrounds and are attending premier educational institutions in a metropolitan city, their struggle is between navigating modern dating relationships premised on choice, encouraged by highly influential peer networks on one hand and dealing with subtle undercurrents of anti-feminist backlash, persistent gender role expectations and stigma around engaging in premarital relationships on the other hand. This appears to create an environment where relationships thrive within peer networks in educational institutions, but are hidden from formal systems and the adult community, with little opportunities for formal or informal engagement about dating relationships between these young adults and other members of society. This then reflects in their recommendations for preventing violence such as focusing on raising awareness about DV through peers in colleges. This finding broadly converges with those of recent studies involving South Asian youth in Canada and US highlighting the negative impact of a cultural context that forbids dating, on disclosure and help-seeking behaviours (Couture-Carron, 2017, 2020**;** Ragavan et al., 2018). The need for culturally tailored interventions was also highlighted by participants in Ragavan et al.'s (2018) study, who suggested that interventions should focus on engaging parents in conversations around DV. This aspect of including family members in interventions for IPV, rather than restricting interventions only to the dyad, has also been proposed with married couples in Bengaluru, India (Krishnan et al., 2012) and may reflect an important insight about designing DV interventions in socio-cultural contexts that have stigma around dating.

The biggest limitation of the current study is limited generalizability, due to a small sample size and an English-speaking, college-going sample from a single urban city in India. These findings may not be transferable to young people from different socio-cultural, economic, geographical and educational contexts (e.g. young people living in rural areas or urban slums or young people who are not in formal education and/or are working to support their families), wherein dating relationships and dating violence may operate differently. However, a strength of the study is that students from nine different colleges were interviewed, while previous studies have often been able to access students from a single college only. Another limitation of the current study is that we had access to only one partner of the dyad, who spoke about both their and their partner's actions from their

perspective, which led to interpretations about the partner's actions, without having access to the partner's perspective. However, this is one of the few in-depth qualitative studies on DV experiences of young people residing in South Asia, as against South Asian immigrants, and as such, has relevance for literature.

The current study has the following implications for research and practice. Firstly, it identifies a need for DV interventions with young adults in India and suggests that such interventions may need to involve a careful discussion with young people about their conceptualizations and meaning making of a romantic relationship itself. In the current study, young people situated their relationships as 'serious' relationships and likened them to marital relationships, perhaps in order to gain legitimacy for their relationships. Without understanding this, DV interventions that encourage people to view abusive relationships as negative and end them, may not be successful. Secondly, components on how to navigate help-seeking and disclosure of romantic relationship problems in a society that often discourages and shames such relationships would be important. Both these findings are not only relevant for researchers in similar contexts, but researchers on DV in general who want to understand how community and societal factors may influence how DV is experienced. Thirdly, DV intervention design must carefully consider how to position themselves to a possible subsection of young men who may feel disempowered by feminist takes on dating violence and hence, may not engage with programs that are based on typical ideas of targeting patriarchal belief systems.

Further, with respect to directions for future research, this study suggests that differing patterns of violence may be operating in the dating relationships of young people and DV may not be a homogeneous phenomenon. If further verified and generalized, this may have significant implications for prevention and intervention and hence, future research can consider applying Johnson's typology in greater depth and breadth to DV in this and similar contexts, where traditionally, research has focused on understanding IPV within a patriarchal framework only. Even in North America, where there is arguably the most amount of scholarship on DV, the application of Johnson's typology has been limited. It would also be important for future research to tease out the complexities of gender dynamics in dating relationships, particularly if there is a simultaneous operation of both traditional gender dynamics where women are expected to be submissive, as well as anti-feminist backlash, where women are seen as 'having exceeded their limits', and to more directly explore whether these can be linked to violence perpetration. Methodologically, it would be important to include the perspectives of both members of a dyad, to understand how men and women position themselves (as a survivor or perpetrator or both) and how this impacts what they report and disclose. Finally, although policy on DV in India is nascent, this study suggests that in the first instance, educational institutions may need to consider policies on

safeguarding young people in these situations and more broadly, socio-political institutions may need to consider the incorporation of DV into legal frameworks and policies that are generally restricted to married couples only.

Overall, this study highlights the unique meaning-making of violence within heterosexual dating relationships for college-going young people in Bengaluru, India, lending support for differentiating between conceptualizations of marital violence and DV and the need for further scholarship on DV in South Asian contexts where dating is becoming more and more popular. It also adds to the limited literature on the complex gendered nature of DV in India, highlighting not only traditional gender role expectations, but also double standards identified and anti-feminist backlash that emerges in narratives of participants when making sense of DV. Finally, it brings to attention that while some aspects of DV described by college-going young adults in Bengaluru, India are similar to findings in other global contexts, there are also contextually specific aspects of DV, an idea that must be carefully considered by researchers and practitioners intending to better understand and contextualize DV.

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