Decoding Love Relationships During Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Phase: Understanding Gen-Zs' Views on Romantic Relationship Management

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Romantic relationships have developmental significance during late adolescence and early adulthood. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these experiences, warranting an investigation into the changes and their impacts in India. This study aims to decode the intricacies of Gen-Z love relationships during and after the pandemic. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants (three females and one male) from diverse backgrounds, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The focus was on the challenges of managing romantic relationships during the pandemic, its aftermath, and the role of social media in relationship sustainability. Findings reveal that contemporary dating couples value respect, trust, and communication while challenging societal norms and stereotypes. This study is highly significant and offers a broader scope for further exploration into the evolving dynamics of modern romantic relationships.

Keywords: Gen Z, love relationships, pandemic and post-pandemic adaptations, social media, dating in India

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Subsequently, India announced a nationwide lockdown that restricted physical mobility, enforced social distancing norms, and limited a majority of public services but essential ones. These measures impacted almost all areas of daily life- work, academics, family, leisure, and romantic relationships. The uncertainty and fear accompanying COVID-19 introduced additional challenges, potentially causing partners to drift apart or adopt rigid and even hostile behaviors toward each other (Estlein et al., 2022).

While the pandemic proved to be a major life event impacting individuals of all generations, its effect on Generation Z, individuals born between 1995 and 2010, will persist over their lives. It is suggested that this is because they were at a life stage where their long-lasting values were still being shaped (Azimi et al., 2022). Gen-Zers approach love with more clarity, emotional maturity, and racial honesty by breaking down traditional stereotypical dating norms. Given this, they challenge the status quo and prioritize themselves while simultaneously expressing their authentic selves (Kamble et al., 2021).

Dating is not culturally accepted in Indian households. Social and cultural norms often place young females under greater care and protection until marriage than young males. Despite following a conservative culture, the sexual attitudes of young adults have significantly changed, and they choose to be

more open and independent from the traditional ties and cultural norms concerning sexual behaviors (Sivagurunathan et al., 2015).

The pandemic increased dependency on virtual connectedness due to unplanned long-distance relationships. These new normal culls to explore virtual dating, leading to increased global video and voice calls on the apps (Bhatia, 2021). Consequently, online dating has gained popularity in India, with a 300% surge in new user signups on dating apps (The New Indian Express, 2020).

Studies on relational transition due to the pandemic's effect on college students in romantic relationships revealed increased negative emotions and relational turbulence during the pandemic (Goodboy et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2021). A recent global survey on relationships during COVID-19 stated that concerns such as lack of physical intimacy, miscommunication, trust issues, unrealistic expectations, feelings, etc., were common among youngsters (Anand, 2021).

The present study focuses on understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of romantic relationships and their management through social media by Gen-Zers. The study also aims to assess young dating couples' post-pandemic patterns of romantic relationship management. The interview guide was prepared to delve deeper into the challenges faced by couples in online romantic relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic and their thoughts on sustainability, longevity, and comforts. The research questions revolved around the following themes:

1. Challenges faced by participants while maintaining a romantic relationship through social media.

2. Differences in emotional manifestation during online and offline relationship management.

3. The reliability and sustainability of social media for the longevity of romantic relationships.

4. Impact of prolonged lockdowns and physical distancing on romantic relationships by dating couples in post-pandemic conditions.

Despite facing psychological, emotional, and social challenges, a newly constructed social scenario would help romantic partners enable themselves to manage their relationships through social media (online mode). This study will elaborate on the challenges and management strategies of a romantic relationship on social media platforms.

Self-of-the-Researcher

As researchers, all three authors believe that people live in versions of stories narrated over time. Several experiences can influence these stories, relationships, and other systemic factors that change the nature of one's version of what they perceive as their truth. The first author was closely involved in the emotional management and counseling of youngsters during COVID-19, which led to conceptualizing the idea for the present study. The other two authors are of similar age as the participants and have the best understanding and reflections of the participants' versions. They were involved in data collection and helped with data analysis. The conceptualization is relevant to this study in a way that it aligns with the research questions and the utilization of pertinent methodology to answer the questions through the participant's descriptions of their experiences.

Method

A qualitative approach rooted in the phenomenological method was utilized to form a meaningful understanding of one's subjective experience and provide an in-

depth philosophical sense behind a phenomenon rather than its scientific truth and integrity (Englander, 2012). Through interviews, this study aimed to understand how COVID-19 impacted young dating couples' relationships, their challenges, and how they adapted to the same. The study highlighted relational themes under three broad categories- potential challenges, protective factors, and post-pandemic experiences. We aimed to derive meanings from the participants' experiences without focusing on correlation or causation. We used semi-structured interviewing to gather information about the romantic relationships of partners living separately during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

Participants were included in the study using a purposive sampling approach, predominantly sourced from social media applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Fifteen participants completed an interest form with demographic information, contact details, and informed consent. Researchers established communication via email to arrange telephonic interviews. Four participants consented to participate and scheduled interviews. Informed consent forms were obtained via email before the interview. Participants were 18-25 years old, had been in long-term romantic relationships for at least three years, and were fluent in English. Four participants consented to participate:

- Participant 1, MJ, was 23 years old and had been in a relationship for over five years.

- Participant 2, BB, was 19 years old and had been in a relationship for over four years.

- Participant 3, VK, was 21 years old and had been in a relationship for over four years.

- Participant 4, TD, was 20 years old and had been in a relationship for over three years.

Data Collection

During the interviews, the participants were seated in a quiet environment with minimal disturbance and a strong network connection. They were provided an overview of the study, including its purpose, objectives, and ethical considerations. With their verbal consent, the recording commenced. An interview guide outlined the process, with necessary follow-up questions at the researcher's discretion. After the interview, the interviewer expressed gratitude to the participants and offered the chance to provide feedback or seek additional information.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to evaluate the efficacy of eliciting participants' reflections. This approach balances a predefined guide and openness to explore emerging topics, which is advantageous in fostering interactive engagement between the participants and researchers and replicating the dynamics of conversations in real-world settings. Seven themes were identified by thoroughly reviewing existing literature and utilized for these semi-structured interviews- the role of social media, communication-related issues, social engagements, emotional compatibility and expectations, physical intimacy, trust-related matters, and physical/emotional abuse from a partner. Participants were asked questions such as:

1. How did you spend most of your time during the pandemic?

2. Did social media affect your relationship during and after the pandemic? If yes, how and what?

3. What were your preferred Modes of communication before and during the

pandemic? How did that change after the pandemic?

4. Do your partner's family/friends significantly impact your relationship? How?

5. Are you vocal about your mood and emotions with your partner? How do you express these emotions post-pandemic compared to before?

6. Was the pandemic period a boon, as you got a chance to spend more time (maybe online) during that period as compared to present times?

7. Do you think physical intimacy is essential to keep a romantic relationship going smoothly?

8. How did you manage physical intimacy during the pandemic? Have you struggled with maintaining intimacy post-pandemic?

9. Have you or your partner had trust-related issues in your relationship? Was it pre-, during, or post-pandemic?

10. Did you ever feel that you stretch yourself too much to maintain your relationship?

11. Has the pandemic been a boon or bane to your online dating experience?

Data Analysis

Data collected using semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). The following steps were followed in TA: (1) familiarize oneself with the data by reading and rereading it; (2) generate initial codes to identify potentially relevant data features; (3) search for themes that capture significant concerns revealed in the data; (4) review the potential themes to ensure accurate representation; (5) define and name themes to describe their uniqueness and specificity; and (6) produce the final report describing the best-derived story based on the analysis.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The research questions were aligned with the data collection method, and analytical steps and frameworks on relationship management ensured credibility. Detailed findings and excerpts were provided for confirmability and transferability. Adequate information for future researchers was included for dependability, and the study's context and influencers were clarified for reflexivity.

Findings

Findings are organized based on six steps in the previously mentioned thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clark, 2006). We found out that three distinct categories defined the experiences of Gen-Z and relationship management: Challenges Faced During the Pandemic, Protective Factors During the Pandemic, and Post-Pandemic Adaptations. The following sections discuss the analysis under the first category classified from the data related to the challenges faced in romantic relationship management during the pandemic (Figure 1).
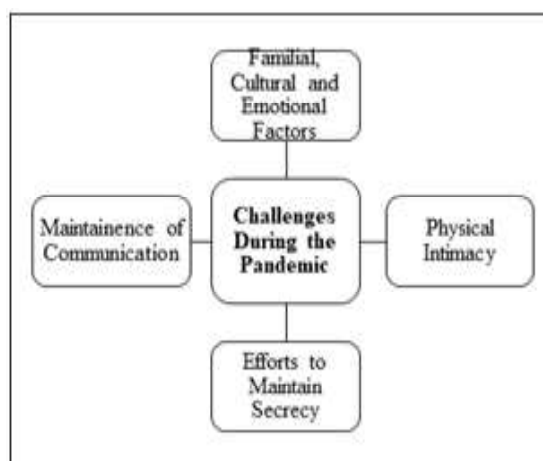

Figure 1. Category 1: Challenges During Pandemic in Romantic Relationship Management

Category 1: Challenges During Pandemic in Romantic Relationship Management

Within this category, four themes were identified: (a) familial, cultural, and emotional factors; (b) physical intimacy; (c) maintenance of communication; and (d) efforts to maintain secrecy.

(a) Familial, Cultural, and Emotional Factors: Each participant faced varying degrees of interference in their relationship to familial, cultural, and emotional factors. They faced disapproval from their family members and struggled to bridge gaps created by varied upbringings. In the Indian context, although in nuclear families, parents still maintain maximum control over children. Similarly, participants in this study reported that they feared disclosing their relationship to their family members, as being in a romantic relationship before marriage was not encouraged. Participant 1 shared:

"I was always very scared, like if anyone saw even a single chat at home if someone found out I was talking to someone. However, I was always very anxious." [P1]

Gen-Zers responded emotionally when asked about their perspectives on dating before marriage. They often feel guilty for their involvement in a romantic relationship, which is rooted in the constant feeling of their relationship burdening the family, fear of their relationship getting exposed, and the consequences of the same.

The prolonged lockdown and constant restrictions also led to frustration and anger due to various challenges. Participants who began their relationship in school were expected to explore it freely in college. However, pandemic-related restrictions prevented this, resulting in emotional instability that was difficult to manage. Participant 4 described their experience:

The pandemic was prolonged for a long time, and we have been looking forward to having a fun experience during college since we started dating… I think we both were frustrated, not with each other but with the situation that none of us had control over...

(b) Physical Intimacy: Physical intimacy significantly predicts relationship satisfaction. However, the COVID-19 pandemic precluded direct physical intimacy among dating partners who were confined to their respective homes and under the observation of family members. The lack of physical intimacy during this period led to prolonged yearning, resulting in anxiety, confusion, and significant emotional turmoil. Participant 2 observed

"And I was actually longing for it (physical intimacy) during the pandemic, as all we could do was just see each other on a square screen; I just felt anxious and stuck about when this would get over and when we would finally get to see each other, so in my opinion, definitely physical intimacy is important…" [P2]

P2 added that both gave up on the idea of proximity since they understood the turbulent nature of the situation. However, yearning for the same was still present; they also understood that such longing cannot be satisfied in virtual mode. Participant 3 stated that

"No, it was not a problem when we started, online to offline, but yeah, we did have a problem online that was impossible. How will you do all this stuff online?" [P3]

During the pandemic, excessive parental involvement and monitoring of online behavior compromised children's privacy. In Indian households, invading personal space without recognizing the children's autonomy is common. Participant 3 reported that their partner's mother frequently violated their boundaries, particularly regarding intimacy. Participant 2 recounted family disapproval of relationships as a young adult, noting that her household's restrictions made finding

quality intimacy with her partner difficult. Similarly, Participant 1 mentioned that pandemic restrictions led to an overcrowded home, complicating efforts to connect with partners via video calls or engage in virtual sexual activities as confirmed by previous literature that online dating, including video calls, Zoom parties, and sex tech, provided feasible options for connection during this period (Basu, 2020).

"He shared a room with his brother, so we had to delay things. You either need to delay it (engaging in sexual activities online) or cancel the plan because everything else can be continued, but not this..." [P1]

(c) Maintenance of Communication: Since online communication was the only option for couples, they faced many challenges, like misunderstandings, differences in opinions, different communication styles, likes and preferences, internet difficulties, conflict, and unmet needs. While social media can convey messages, it cannot fully capture or replace the emotions and satisfaction experienced in person.

"...If she meant to say I love you, I wouldn't feel it. Instead, I would feel like I said these specific words, but you didn't. Don't you feel the same? [laughs] And she would be like, I do feel the same, but I'm not too vocal about it..." [P3]

Participant 4 revealed that a lack of personal electronic devices meant using their parent's phones to use social media and periodically log in and log out, making it challenging to communicate with their partners, adding to the inconvenience.

Differences in upbringing and modern exposure influenced their preferences. Participant 1 noted that her partner was unfamiliar with many trending Instagram pages, likely due to a lack of relatability, and preferred sharing regional language poetry.

Consequently, she had to understand his perspective better.

Throughout the pandemic, with online education, participants expressed that their priorities related to their relationships and careers became more demanding as time passed.

"...I realized that, however, whatever time is possible, spend it together. Spending time together is just not about talking to each other; it's doing anything together..." [P3]

Balancing relationships and careers was key in the current phase of the participants' lives. One of the participants said-

"We are like-minded, and we have the same preferences that we want to first establish our careers and then think about our relationship...we'll do what is best for each one of us." [P2]

(d) Efforts to Maintain Secrecy: This is the fourth theme of Category 1. All the participants emphasized that they had to take cautious steps to maintain the secrecy of their relationship. Most participants revealed that since they did not have their phones and were either not allowed to have a social media account or their social media accounts were monitored by their parents, they created a private account, including only close friends or cousins, to post things related to their relationship.

"I also have a private account where I sometimes like to post about each other ... we prefer to stay private about a relationship and not post it so much on Instagram." [P2]

Category 2: Protective Factors

Figure 2 depicts the second category. Within this category, three themes were identified: (a) social media as a mode of communication, (b) a supportive friend circle, and (c) loyalty and regard for a partner.
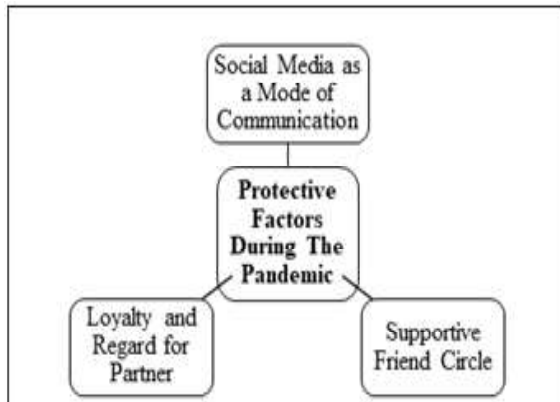
Figure 2. Category 2: Protective Factors During the Pandemic

(a) Social media as a Mode of Communication: The role of social media, especially in romantic relationships since the COVID-19 pandemic, has changed the landscape of interpersonal communications (Christensen, 2018). In times of restrictions, social media emerged as an essential communication tool for couples. Despite the challenges, romantic partners devised new ways to spend quality time with each other and remain connected via social media.

The shift to virtual communication resulted in an increased use of video calls due to ease of connecting and accessibility. Participant 2 affirmed these findings. Further, talking every day before sleep has become a habit for many, including Participant 3. These efforts to remain connected led to an apparent increase in the use of social media during the pandemic as opposed to post-pandemic. Implying the same, Participant 4 said:

"So, during pandemic we were 24x7 online only. Moreover, we had nothing to do either. So, the usage of social media was less after pandemic." [P4]

Romantic partners need to be constantly updated about their significant others to feel connected to each other. Participant 2, for example, reported that they stayed in touch through exchanging Instagram reels. Sharing reels, memes, and posts that resonate with both partners has become a means of expressing that they are in each other's thoughts. Participant 4 said:

"If I'm sitting here and I want to tell that I'm busy, I'm sitting here, I'm doing this, so I snap it and send so it's not like I'm making an excuse or ignoring someone. I share snaps on that and our daily routine. Moreover, he also used to do the same thing." [P4]

In the Indian context, exposure to social media at a very young age is not encouraged due to its potential risks. Participant 2 said they had never used social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook before meeting their partner since they were teens and joined because of the pressure from their partner for better communication and connectedness.

(b) Supportive Friend Circle: In the Indian scenario where acceptance of early dating by family is uncommon, criteria such as mutual friends and getting along with each other's friends play defining roles in relationships for some individuals. Most of the participants in this study reported that they transitioned from friends to romantic partners and met each other in school or via mutual friends.

Perry et al. (2018) emphasized that social interactions in and around online multiplayer video games effectively build social capital. Similarly, for Participant 3, playing video games with friends and partners became a bonding opportunity for quality time. Sharing mutual friends allowed for relaxed interactions with partners' social circles. In this regard, Participant 1 said:

"…most of my friends have met and are best friends with him. I have met many of his colleagues. He has met most of my friends." [P1]

On sharing vulnerabilities, Participant 1 mentioned that their partner felt conscious about their background in social settings. However, their best friend encourages a safe space to be vulnerable and work through insecurities.

In the conservative context of the Indian family system, extended family members, such as cousins, offer the support typically expected from parents regarding early dating by providing positive responses from cousins, strengthening the bond, and fostering hope for the future among romantic partners. In this regard, Participant 4 said:

"…if I talk about cousins because they only know about our relationship… they value me so much, and they have always said that if we want someone to be with our brother, that is you only like we want you to be his wife..." [P4]

Overall, having a supportive friend circle and spending quality time with them, especially with significant others, helps build substantial social capital and establish healthy boundaries.

(c) Loyalty and Regard for Partner: Childhood friendship eased the transition to lovers for Participant 2, though they needed time to understand the relationship dynamics. Similarly, Participant 4, despite a positive response to their feelings, required time to be certain before labeling it "love." This underscores the seriousness with which love is regarded in Indian culture, where people ensure mutual understanding before defining their relationships. In romantic relationships, expressing love typically signifies a desire for commitment (Campbell & Ellis, 2005). Loyalty and trust further contributed to forming a secure bond. Participant 2 added:

"I believe I am with the right person… I believe that he gets me, understands what is going on, and doesn't force a particular emotion on me." [P2]

Participant 2 stressed the significance of grasping each other's daily habits and routines to gauge respect in a relationship. Additionally, viewing romantic relationships as part of life, not life entirely, and establishing boundaries for social media reflected mutual respect, trust, and understanding, Participant 3 said.

A prominent subtheme under theme 3 was Love Languages (LLs). Influenced by social media and pop culture, young adults value integrating these languages into their relationships (Bunt et al., 2017). Participant 3 noted sharing multiple LLs with their partner, while Participant 4 prioritized words of affirmation. Chapman (1992) suggests that LLs are always strategic because people must learn a partner's LL and make conscious efforts to speak that LL.

Category 3: Post-Pandemic Adaptations

The third category describes the themes of post-pandemic adaptations (Figure 3). Within this category, five themes were identified: (a) Comfortable in getting physically intimate; (b) maturity in relationships; (c) making choices together; (d) technological advancements; and (e) struggle with college and relationships.
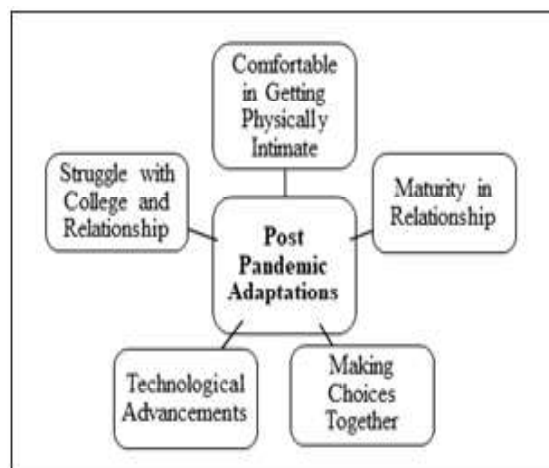

Figure 3. Category 3: Post-Pandemic Adaptations

(a) Comfortable in Getting Physically Intimate: As the pandemic waned and restrictions eased, people reconnected offline with friends, family, and partners. This reconnection led to the revival of physical intimacy among couples, which is vital in romantic relationships. Participant 1 mentioned with excitement the prospect of being able to connect with her partner in person:

"I love hugging him and like, you know, sleeping on his arm and then just narrating the whole day, and it didn't exist while we were dating as long distance during the pandemic". [P1]

During the pandemic, intimacy-related concerns arose, as physical affection is crucial for connecting with a partner and forming meaningful relationships. Participant 2 managed well despite routine changes. Emotional connection during the pandemic led to increased physical intimacy afterward.

"During the pandemic, we got to know each other as a couple, and as lovers, and after the pandemic, like I said, our physical intimacy increased..." (P2)

Physical intimacy symbolizes confidence and closeness in a relationship, as reflected in Participant 4's ideology. She revealed:

"...when we are physically intimate, then we feel that now you are the one and I am the one for you... after that particular thing, you get closer to him... After that, you care more for your partner. This is the person I don't want to hurt." (P4)

(b) Maturity in Relationship: Managing relationships in one's late teens and early twenties can be a rather tumultuous and transitionary period in an individual's life. Participants reported mutual respect for their partner's lives outside the relationship. They believed a relationship requires mutual respect and support.

"We respect each other and understand that this relationship is a part of our life, but it's not our complete life." (P2)

Participants also highlighted under this subtheme how their relationship had evolved during the pandemic, and they feel like they can communicate their emotions effectively even post-pandemic, which reflects maturity and understanding.

"We have evolved a lot personally, and our relationship has also evolved a lot.... It was a good experience to talk about my emotions and feelings after the pandemic because I believe he understands what is happening." (P3)

Maintaining a relationship over a long period requires honesty and understanding between partners, especially regarding actions and behaviors that concern the relationship, as mentioned by Participant 4. Additionally, Participant 3 added that relationships require adjustments. The conflict of opinion can be resolved through mutual communication, but they are determined to stay together.

Participant 1, whose relationship spanned five years, identified consistency in communication before, during, and after the pandemic as an important channel to be together, regardless of familial or social interference. Participant 1 and Participant 2 mentioned that they could resolve third-party issues and feel comfortable with their partner's friends, reflecting communication and maturity.

(c) Making Choices Together: For a sustained relationship, both partners must address their respective life tasks and subsequently integrate them with the partner. Our participant stated that at their current age, they tend to make career-oriented decisions and commit to long-distance travel to ensure their education or careers are not compromised. Participant 2

revealed that establishing a career was a priority for both of them and that they were ready to maintain a long-distance relationship. As Kornblum et al. (2020) highlighted, romantic relationships can facilitate their partner's career goal. By prioritizing career growth over relationships, partners displayed support and promises of spending their future together.

"We had a lot of good times. Whether you do a job first or go for post-graduation, we will manage a long-distance relationship. Later, we will spend maximum time together." (P3)

(d) Technological Advancements: Technology became an integral part of communication and assisted in maintaining a perception of social support during the lockdown (Gabbiadini et al., 2020). However, more is needed to integrate these changes in romantic relationships post-pandemic. Initiating intimacy on social media requires a certain level of trust and understanding between the partners. Participant 3 mentioned how they were cautious when sharing explicit pictures on social media, such as Snapchat, which was used to create a sense of closeness.

"Snapchat helped us to get closer to each other in some way, like when we show… helped us to get closer to each other in some way" (P4)

(e) Struggle with College and Relationship: As academic institutions and workplaces started offline activities after the pandemic, romantic partners had to adjust to the new landscape they were presented with. Participants reflected on the emergence of insecurity, which led to conflict and strains in the relationship due to the reopening of the college. Coping with these situations often involved extensive convincing and building trust, as highlighted by Participant 3.

"After the pandemic, I started attending my college offline… she used to be insecure. I had to struggle to make her believe that I am not like others who will run after other girls; please trust me, at least." (P3)

However, Participant 3 later shared that they could resolve those issues mutually and restore trust by making collective decisions. Furthermore, there was a struggle to balance other commitments, primarily academic and work-related, with being in a relationship, especially in the year following the pandemic. Participant 4 shared that considering the nature of the lockdown and the changes it brought about, they understand that such conditions are inevitable, normal, and universal. It was something given.

Figure 4 depicts a complete thematic map showing the interaction effect of themes derived from the data. Despite the differences among the categories, we observed that the themes were interrelated. This entails the behavioral impact of COVID-19 continued to carry in the post-pandemic phase. Maintaining physical intimacy was one of the major concerns faced by partners due to cultural stereotypes and a lack of privacy during the pandemic. Video calls and social media were the only mechanisms to cope with this distance, feel connected, and maintain relationships. Couples observed increased proximity after the pandemic and were excited to spend time in person post-pandemic. While a change in social media patterns was observed post-pandemic, social media was used to reassure their partner by sending updates and photos 24x7. Couples were concerned about their future together during the pandemic due to family and societal restrictions. Post the pandemic, they focused on balancing career, education, and their romantic relationships and chose to make career-oriented decisions so that they could grow individually and partners. Communication was observed to be consistent in all three phases.
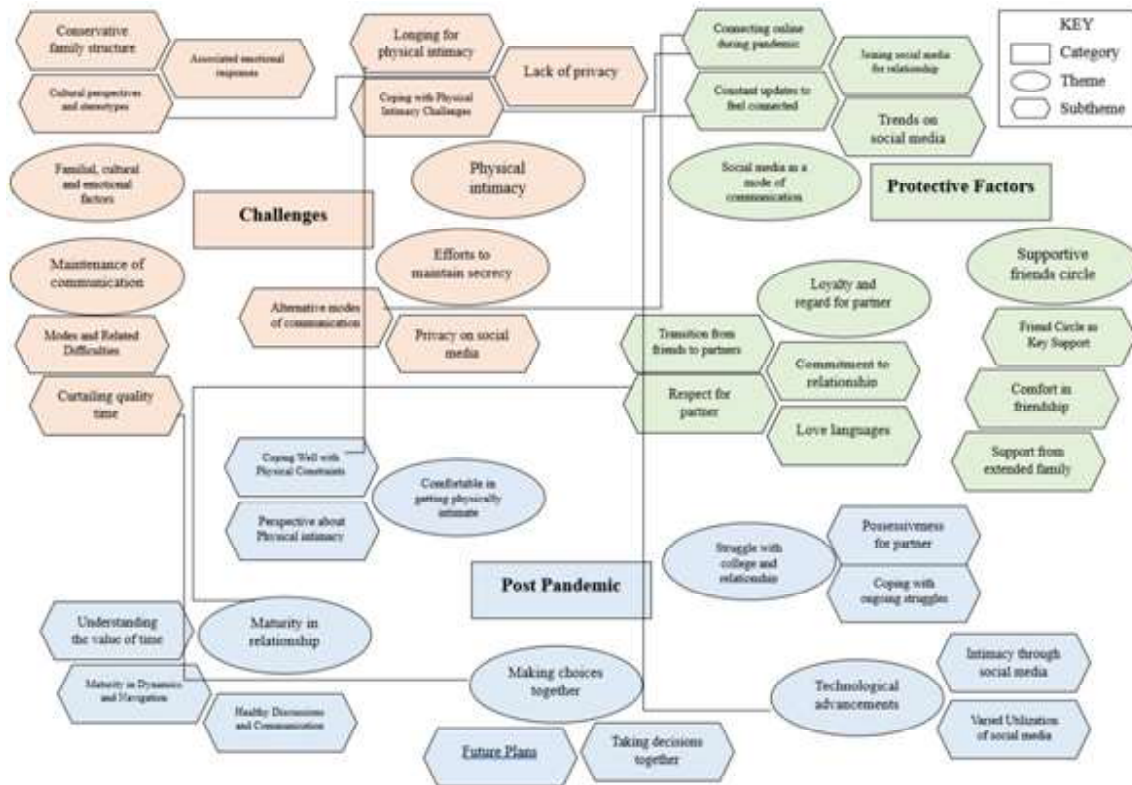
Figure 4. Complete Thematic Map

Discussion

The novel COVID-19 not only surprised us with its varied symptoms, presentation, and lethality but also challenged people to engage with it in myriad ways. Youngsters, too, had to navigate how to maintain their thresholds to stress of diverse types and remain engaged in self-focused behavior while exploring various ways. The present study explored how Gen-Z dating couples managed their romantic relationship during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings were categorized into three segments viz., (i) challenges during the pandemic, (ii) protective factors, and (iii) post-pandemic adaptations with the help of a semi-structured interview that intended to dig deeper into the challenges faced by couples in online romantic relationship management during the COVID-19 pandemic and their thoughts on sustainability, longevity, and comforts.

Being in a romantic relationship has developmental significance during late adolescence and early adulthood; it provides them the opportunities to have healthy communication and develop conflict resolution skills, trust, intimacy, and commitment in social relationships. During a pandemic, strict lockdown measures were implemented, giving fewer opportunities to engage with romantic partners. Ellis et al. (2020) suggested that during a pandemic if parental support is strained, it leads to an additional burden on relationship management. In such a situation, Gen Zers look for support and find their friends and cousins supportive. The support from the partner and mutual trust between them not only plays a significant role in coping but also strengthens the relationship bond (Karp et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, participants reported missing the physicality of real contact while using online dating. This was the biggest drawback of online dating, leading to frustrations and other negative emotions, but the commitment to each other remained unaffected as Gen-Z quickly found alternatives (Portolan et al., 2021). These findings align with our participant's narratives (e.g., Le et al., 2011). The geographic separation of romantic partners is linked to missing the partner. They maintain commitment towards each other by engaging in fond musings, revisiting old memories, and reminiscent thinking that depicts "reflective of heightened romanticism". It allows couples to build a better nonphysical connection (Goldstein & Flicker, 2020).

In the Indian context, studies have revealed that Gen Zers approach love with clarity, emotional maturity, and radical honesty. They are vocal regarding romantic relationships and question obsolete social. Their romantic goals are often conscious and deliberate (Sivagurunathan et al., 2015). Findings from our study revealed that Indian Gen Z do not believe in typical relationship phases. The data revealed that they address the issues related to toxicity in relationships and prioritize establishing emotional and physical boundaries, indicating rejecting societal indoctrination. Gen Z is very particular about balancing their career and love life and smartly managing both with mutual consent (Kamble et al., 2021).

With the advent of technological accessibility and changing societal norms, they embrace digital platforms for dating purposes. They experienced and understood the challenges of miscommunication in social media; therefore, they prioritize open communication, consent, and personal growth in relationships. All the participants believed in practicing kindness towards each other and embracing the values of respect, empathy, and compassion. Gen-Zers believe love comes in all shapes and sizes and beyond community norms (Isaf, 2020).

The data analysis suggests that during the lockdown, Gen-Zers were inspired to take up innovative ways of staying connected (Banerjee & Rao, 2021), but this, too, was not without any limitations. During the pandemic, restrictions, isolation, and separation contributed to long-term grief and shame for not being closer to their loved ones at a time of uncertainty and need (Lebow, 2020). The mutual trust and maturity in romantic relationships over time also served as a protective factor concerning their mental health and gave them strength to deal with personal distress. Although the prolonged lockdown took a heavy toll on youngsters in managing their romantic relationships, they also adapted and found novel ways to continue dating during lockdown that created more meaningful and lasting connections. Our participants were active on social media during the lockdown and maintained secrecy when family members were unaware of their relationship status. Gen Z turned to dating apps and websites to creatively utilize them to maintain their connections (Hansom, 2022).

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings revealed from the study will facilitate counseling practitioners working with couples to prepare intervention modules. It also showcased that adaptations and overcoming the challenges due to COVID-19 restrictions are possible through a couple's future and career planning together, reminiscing old memories, and showing mutual support. These depict successful adaptation to challenging times. This valuable observation can be incorporated into intervention planning for such couples. Interventions may be designed to enhance couples' relationship satisfaction, especially during social distancing, whether

geographically apart or in forced proximity. The study will undoubtedly contribute in addition to a knowledge base on the impact of adversity on romantic relationship management among youngsters in the Indian context.

There are several limitations of the study, which provide areas of improvement for future research. First, the sample comprises a homogeneous group, viz. young females and an English-speaking male belonging to a metropolitan set-up in India. Secondly, out of four, only one was a male participant, leading to an inadequate perspective of male Gen-Zers. Thirdly, no follow-up interview was scheduled for the participants. Another limitation of the study was that interviews with the participants were conducted after the pandemic ended. This time-lapse may introduce confounding effects in the descriptions. Furthermore, using a single method in a study suffers from various limitations associated with the semi-structured interview method. The study also needed the perspective of the dating couple. We only interviewed a participant dating the same person before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future research can include heterogeneity and diverse cultural context rituals and beliefs to better understand the phenomenological context. Future studies can arrange interviews for the couple to understand the impact on their relationship. The shared experience of the couple through a single lens will better explain phenomenological underpinnings. Therefore, in light of the above observations in the study, future research can be carefully planned to overcome the mentioned limitations.

Conclusions

The present study is one of its kind in the Indian context. It explores how Gen-Z managed their romantic relationship and developed adaptiveness to several challenges during and after the pandemic, thus underscoring the importance of cultural factors that define the norms for relationships, particularly concerning dating before marriage and breaking the stereotypes to readjust to the new normal. The study demonstrates how a couple can manage mutual commitment in a relationship despite non-supportive family, meeting adverse challenges, and being unable to be together in person by being supportive, committed, and understanding to each other, acting as a buffering agent during stressful situations.

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