**Online Romance in the Shadow of COVID-19: Dynamics of Committed and Non-Committed Romantic Relationships During Lockdown**

**Abstract**

Romantic relationships and physical intimacy have always been a desired and cherished interest across gender and age, majorly among youth. The COVID-19 led lockdown has put a brake on the in-person meetings and interactions among both committed and prospective couples looking for a relationship. In this context, the present study explores how useful online romance was in maintaining romantic relationships for youth during the lockdown period. It examines how online romance relates to relationship anxiety, loneliness, perceived internet essentiality, and relationship initiation. It further explores whether the nature of romantic relationships, i.e., committed or non-committed, influences these relations. A total of 624 youths, involved in online romance during the lockdown, have participated in an online survey (Mage= 20.948). Results show that online romance help in reducing relationship anxiety and loneliness only for participants who were in a committed relationship, but it increases the same for non-committed participants. As expected, online romance shows a positive association with perceived internet essentiality for both committed and non-committed participants. Furthermore, results show that online romance associates positively with relationship initiation for non-committed participants but show no association in the case of committed participants. Overall results show that online romance has had positive outcomes for youth when they were in a committed relationship, however, shows negative implications for non-committed participants.

*Keywords:* online romance, romantic relationship, committed relationship, internet essentiality, relationship apprehension, online relationship initiation.

**Online Romance in the Shadow of COVID-19: Dynamics of Committed and Non-Committed Romantic Relationships during Lockdown**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a lot of social, economic, and personal stressors into the lives of many individuals including couples, thus affecting their physical, mental, economic, and social well-being (Park et al., 2020). While the expansive use of technology has brought about significant changes in people’s daily lives, including psychological and social changes (Sayar & Senkal, 2014) and a shift of focus from in-person communication to online communications (Wiederhold, 2020; Morris, 2020), the pandemic has made it even more vital for people to depend on the internet and technology for everyday functioning and also for social interactions. Online practices for engaging in offline relationships on social media has long been used not only for seeking, developing, and maintaining social connections, and romantic relationships (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Drouin et al., 2014), but also finding romantic and sexual alternatives for them (Abbasi, 2019). The online dating industry was already enjoying a booming success (Smith & Duggan, 2013) as the world of the internet provided its users with various online platforms to satisfy their needs for romantic interaction.However, it became inevitable for people, especially couples to go completely online as a way to be with and support each other during the pandemic. A newspaper article has reported about the youth’s excessive use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic to connect and support each other during times of stress and isolation (Hindustan Times, 2020). Thus, the internet has become a way of escaping the lockdown blues. It is, therefore, logical to assume that individuals, especially the youth are actively using the internet and online romance to stay connected to their partners, or seeking a new romantic interaction in this bleak time of COVID-19. Online social interactions, initially, have been considered to bring about positive effects on subjective well-being, lessening loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression and boosting self-esteem and self-efficacy (Grieve & Kemp, 2015: Shaw & Gant, 2002; Steinfield et al., 2008), perceived social support, and enhanced feelings of belongingness and affiliations (Kang, 2007; Grieve et al., 2013). But lately, contrasting studies have reported negative consequences and have found online relationship behaviors had a positive association with thwarted psychological well-being, self-blame, loneliness, social anxiety, and readiness to involve in infidelity (Abasi, 2019; Clayton, 2014; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Lee & Stapinski, 2012; Prestage et al., 2015; Roderique, 2018). In this study, we argued that online relationships/romance can have positive as well as negative consequences depending on the nature of the relationship and context. Therefore, the present study explores the role of online romance for committed and non-committed individuals during the COVID-19 led lockdown.

**Online Romance**

Online relationships or romance, though a popular phrase nowadays, still has not been well recognized as a substitute for face-to-face romantic interaction despite being more than 25 years that the study of Parks and Floyd (1996) showed that a real or genuine relationship can be developed and maintained online, and can sustain in the offline world. At almost the same time, Walther (1996) showed that online romance is as intimate as normal communication. It is argued that within a few years of its conception, it became the new norm of relationship (Parks & Roberts, 1998). Doring (2002) asserted that technological advancements have also led to an increased prevalence in online romance with many individuals actively seeking out partners online through social media sites while the rest being indirectlyaffectedas people in their social circles such as friends, relatives, partners, or clients fall in love online or partake in cyber affairs. Online dating sites serve as a platform for singles who actively seek romantic partners over the internet to meet potential partners (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Against the prevalent notion of that time, Baker and Whitty (2008) contended that like a face-to-face relationship, an online romantic relationship also carries a bond, which is emotional and/or cognitive.

These relationships might be initiated online, however, it is not necessary and in many cases, couples could have been acquaintances and then moved to online romance (Baker & Whitty, 2008). However, Griffiths (2015) has categorized online relationships into three types:. The first relationship is referred to as being purely virtual with no actual contact between individuals, the interaction is sexual and the relationship may be for a shorter term as they generally have partners in real life. The second relationship has been categorized as people who meet online but intend to carry it forward as a real/actual relationship after building an emotional connection. This type of relationship might include sharing photographs, offline meetings, and if located geographically close, their internet use would slowly reduce, since more time in real life would be spent instead of in the virtual world. Lastly, the third category of online relationships would be where individuals met offline but maintaining a major part of it online mostly due to geographical constraints.

Research shows online romance as a facilitation of positive interpersonal connections and in many ways equal to face-to-face relationships (Whitty & Carr, 2017). It suggests that online dating sites are the most popular way to initiate romantic relationships these days (Tong et al., 2016), some of which include Tinder, OkCupid, Bumble, etc. In a recent study, Goldberg et al. (2022) argued that relationships on social media are relatively easier to initiate as well as to avoid romantic communications. They further argued that because of the various affordances of social media, the search for information about the partner becomes convenient, easy, and anonymous. Online romance eases relationship satisfaction amongst couples with intimacy, trust, and communication (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Not only it is just a matter of convenience or satisfaction, but it is also more of a need for the changing times and relationship dynamics, especially in a crisis period like COVID-19.

**Committed/Non-Committed Relationships**

A committed relationship is one where the partners want to persist in the relationship for a long term, are emotionally and psychologically involved, and wherein they are dependent on each other (Rusbult et al., 1998, 2012). Interdependence theory of relationship holds that commitment is strengthened by the amount of satisfaction derived, whereas it weakens when the potential alternative partners are perceived better than the primary partners (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Rusbult and colleagues (1980, 2012) in their investment model emphasized the notion that commitment, along with satisfaction and availability of alternatives, is also affected by mutual investment that binds the couples together. The nature of the committed relationship is unambiguous and based on trust; research shows that, people who are in a committed relationship not only get positive relationship benefits but also show fewer depressive symptoms, and alcohol problems than singles (Whitton et al., 2013)

Non-committed relationships, on the other hand, are relationships without any long-term psychological attachment, less emotional involvement, and more sexual involvement (Machia et al., 2020; Olmstead et al., 2017). Friends with benefits (Fahs & Munger, 2015; Machia et al., 2020; Olmstead et al., 2017), casual partners (Shulman et al., 2019), etc., are some terms used to describe non-committed relationships. Generally, a relationship moves from a non-committed stage to a committed stage, however, not every non-committed relationship necessarily turns to a committed one.

The basic difference between committed and non-committed relationships thus lies in the perceived clarity about the relationship between its nature and future. Clarity, intimacy, and commitment are positive markers of change in relationship quality where romantic relationships have been defined and are not ambiguous (Knopp et al., 2020). Studies have also shown differences between committed romantic relationships and casual dating relationships about finding sexual alternatives and addiction to social networking sites (Abbasi, 2019). Studies suggest more communication, satisfaction, and increased commitment in committed relationships than in friends with benefits/ non-committed relations (Collins & Horn, 2019). Therefore, it can be inferred that not only does the nature of the relationship varies in a committed or non-committed relationship, but the individual and relationship wellbeing also differs.

**Gender Differences in Online Romance**

While online dating offers a connection that can be easily formed and dissolved without costing much to both sides, it also allows maintaining initial anonymity (Žakelj, 2014) which explains the extensive use of the internet for online dating by its users. For example, 23% of U.S adults agreed to have met their spouse online (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Due to its utility component, both men and women readily embrace the world of online dating to find a new date, short flirt, or even a long-term companion (Abramova et al., 2016). The statistics can vary for different age groups but the ready use of various dating sites (Tinder, OkCupid, eHarmony) by both genders suggests a strong interest of both the parties in initiating and forming romantic interactions (Sautter et al., 2010). However, gender differences are prevalent in relationship behaviors with men as compared to women, who are more likely to have tried forming new relationships online (Harris & Aboujaoude, 2016). A systematic review by Abramova et al. (2016) on the gender difference in online dating concluded that men are more active on online dating platforms than women and are mostly motivated by short-term romantic pleasures. While men are more attracted by physical appearances online, females prefer men’s breadwinning capabilities and socio-economic status over attractiveness. Men are also more likely to initiate contacts, and, lie about their relationship status and goals online (Abramova et. al., 2016).

**Present Study**

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the implementation of social/physical distancing and stay-at-home orders restricting meetings between friends, family, and co-workers. Undeniably, this worldwide pandemic serves as a prospect to have a better understanding of how youths are managing their engagement in relationships in the face of lockdown and COVID-19. This period of uncertainty unlike any other, might harm romantic relationships for some people since studies show dependable associations between social disconnection and lower relationship satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Haggerty et al., 2022; Seidman et al., 2019). On the other hand, some others might, for security and support turn to their partners during threatening and stressful times as a coping strategy as in the case of the pandemic (Afifi et al., 2016). Recent research exploring the effect of COVID-19 on romantic relationships has reported that 34 percent of those who were in a relationship have faced conflicts due to COVID-19 associated with changes in their intimate and sexual lives (Luetke et al., 2020). Several other studies have also reported the adverse effects of lockdown and the spread of COVID-19, which includes higher levels of anxiety, depression, disruption of social and romantic relationships, etc., (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Previous studies during non-pandemic conditions have indicated that married individuals or partners, who are cohabiting together, remain protective towards adverse mental health conditions (Shiovitz-Ezra & Leitsch, 2010; Whitton et al., 2013) such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

It is evident that COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed have created chaos in the lives of romantic couples affecting them mentally, emotionally, and making them rely heavily on the internet, social media, and online romance as a means to stay connected to their loved ones. Since the dynamics of committed and non-committed relationships are different, therefore, the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown might also be different for these individuals. However, no such research could be found that is addressing specifically how committed and non-committed individuals are using online romance in varying ways to deal with this situation. The present study thus examines the management and functioning of romantic relationships by committed and non-committed youth in the current scenario of COVID-19 lockdown.

Further, the study attempts to understand how online romance works differently for committed and non-committed relationships in dealing with problems, such as relationship anxiety and loneliness. It is hypothesized that online romance would help youth to deal with their loneliness and relationship anxiety in the case of a committed relationship but not for a non-committed relationship. The rationale for moderating hypotheses is based on previous studies, which show that people in committed relationships have more clarity and intimacy (Knopp et al., 2020), and therefore, online romance will help them to maintain that intimacy and will create less doubt among the partners. On the other hand, non-committed relationships are full of doubts, uncertainty, and challenges in maintaining the relationship (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016; Machia et al., 2020), and online romance may not help here in mitigating loneliness, anxiety, etc. as in the case of a committed relationship. Recent research has shown that social networking helps in indirect exposure of alternative partners, which leads to exploration and persuasion of these alternatives and hence decreases the relationship commitment (de Lenne et al., 2019). It is also hypothesized that online romance will show a positive association with online relationship initiation.But since in a committed relationship, partners are more dedicated and loyal to each other, we expect that the relationship between online romance and relationship initiation will be moderated by the nature of the relationship.

**Method**

**Participants**

The study comprised 624 undergraduate and postgraduate students who were actively engaged in online romance during the COVID-19 lockdown. Originally, a total of 1325 valid responses were received for the online survey on “the impact of lockdown on youth”. However, in this study, we included only those participants who mentioned their involvement in online romance during the lockdown period either in a committed or in a non-committed relationship. Out of 624 participants, 266 were in a committed relationship and 358 participants were in a non-committed relationship. Out of the total participants, 404 were females and 220 were males. The mean age of 624 participants was 20.984 (SDage = 2.512). The participants were from various Indian universities and colleges and represented almost all the regions and religions practised in India.

**Measures**

The nature of the romantic relationships in the present study has two groups- first, those who were in a committed relationship and second, those who were in a non-committed relationship. To know about the present relationship status, they were simply asked whether they were in any committed romantic relationship or not. Based on the answer, participants were categorized either in the committed group or in the non-committed group. The non-committed group included participants who were probably involved in a variety of non-serious romantic relationships, such as casual relationships, friends with benefits, unsure of commitment, involvement in multiple relationships, or even in the beginning of their relationship where they have not yet reached the point to call their relationship as a committed one.

This study includes five main variables- online romance, relationship apprehension, internet essentiality, loneliness, and relationship initiation. Online romance in the present study is considered as an engagement in romantic activities such as sharing songs, virtual dates, video calls, etc., with the romantic partner through the virtual mode. To measure online romance, we developed a 10 items scale, which included the items related to their attitude as well as behavior about involvement in online romantic activities specifically during the lockdown period. Examples of the items are - “I enjoyed our virtual dates”, “I send pictures (of myself, family members, food, etc.) to my partner now and then”. The responses were taken on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A higher score means higher involvement in online romance and a lower score means less involvement in online romance. To check the content validity of the scales, the opinions of three subject area experts were taken. Based on their ratings for each item, whether the item was essential or not to measure online romance, the content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated. The average CVR for the scale came to 0.90, which showed a good content validity of the scale. The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was found to be .917. The list of complete items, along with the instructions, is given in the Appendix.

To measure relationship apprehension during the lockdown, we developed items specific to the context of lockdown. Three questions were asked regarding the apprehension about their romantic relationship in the lockdown period. For example, “I was worried that my romantic partner might lose interest in me”. The responses were taken on a five-point scale where a higher score meant higher relationship apprehension. For the three items scale, the CVR came to 0.899, and Cronbach’s alpha was found to be .722.

Through internet essentiality, we tried to understand the felt importance and indispensability of the internet in participants' lives during the lockdown period. To measure internet essentiality, five items were developed, for example, “Internet was the lifeline for me during the lockdown”. The responses were taken on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A high score on this scale means high perceived internet essentiality. Cronbach’s alpha internet essentiality was calculated as .928 and the CVR came to 0.933. The complete list of items related to relationship apprehension and internet essentiality is given in the appendix.

For measuring relationship initiation, we used the Online Relationship Initiation Scale by Harris and Aboujaoude (2016). The scale has nine items related to the online initiation of friendship, romantic relationships, and sexual relationships. Example items were “Did you make any new friends online?”, “Were you looking/hoping to make new romantic relationships online?”. For the present sample, Cronbach’s alpha was found to be .873. The responses were collected on a five-point scale, according to the instructions of the scale.

For loneliness, 10 items were taken from the UCLA loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980). Example items were “I lack companionship”, “There is no one I can turn to”. The responses were taken on a four-point scale ranging from never (1) to often (4). Cronbach's alpha for the sample was .811.

**Design and Procedure**

An online survey was used for data collection. The survey was made through Google Forms; the link of the survey was circulated amongst the students of various higher academic institutions/universities/collegesvia email, WhatsApp, and other social media sites. The survey had an introduction to the study and an informed consent form along with items of various study variables. The electronic informed consent was taken from each participant. This survey is a part of the project “the impact of lockdown on youth” conducted in June 2020. Participation in the survey was voluntary without any financial compensation. The online survey did not have any compulsory question, except the informed consent, to protect the rights of the participants to refuse to answer any question which they are not comfortable with or don’t want to answer.

**Data Analysis**

From the total of 1325 filled data, only 624 data of the participants who mentioned engagement in online romance during lockdown were taken for this study. We performed three different analyses on the data. First, to see the relationship between study variables, we used Pearson correlation. The correlations were calculated at three levels— for all 624 participants, for committed 266 participants, and for non-committed 358 participants. To see the role of gender, relationship nature, and their interaction on each study variable, two ways ANOVA was conducted. Finally, to see the moderation effect of relationship nature on the relationship between online romance and study variables, we performed the moderation analysis given by Hayes (2017).

**Results**

The relationship between the study variables is given in Table 1. Relationship analysis for all the participants showed a significant positive correlation between online romance and internet essentiality. The relationship magnitude and direction were found similar for the committed as well as non-committed participants. Since both groups, committed or non-committed, require the internet to involve in online romance, both showed a positive relationship between online romance and internet essentiality. Loneliness showed no relationship with online romance for the complete data set, however, it showed a significant negative relationship for committed individuals and a positive relationship for non–committed individuals. Similar results were found for the relationship between online romance and relationship anxiety. Though overall, there was no relationship between online romance and relationship apprehension, a significant negative relationship was found for committed participants. For non-committed participants, it was a positive relationship. The relationship between online romance and relationship initiationshowed a different pattern. For all participants, it showed a significant but weak positive relationship. However, no relationship was found in the case of committed participants, and a relatively lower positive relationship was revealed in the case of non-committed participants.

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Table 1 about here

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Moreover, a weak but positive relationship was found between internet essentiality and loneliness. The relationship direction was consistent across all three conditions, however, the magnitude varies to a significant level. While in the case of non-committed participants the relationship was much stronger, for committed it showed a weaker relationship. Furthermore, the results also showed a positive association between loneliness and relationship apprehension across all conditions. Although the relationship magnitude was found to be strong in the case of committed participants, it was weak for non-committed participants. Similarly, loneliness and relationship apprehension showed positive associations with online relationship initiation.

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Table 2 about here

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Mean and SD of various study variables across gender and relationship nature are given in Table 2. The results of ANOVA showed no significant gender differences in internet essentiality [F(1,620)= 1.311, p= .235, ƞp2= .011], loneliness [F(1,620)= .165, p= .680, ƞp2= .000], and relationship apprehension [F(1,620)= .412, p= .521, ƞp2= .001]. However, a significant gender difference was found in online romance [F(1,620)= 9.049, p= .008, ƞp2= .011] and relationship initiation [F(1,620)= 42.976, p<.001, ƞp2= .065]. Results showed that the involvement of males in online romance as well as in relationship initiation is significantly higher than their female counterparts.

Table 2 further showed the differences in the study variables due to relationship nature. The committed participants reported significantly higher online romance [F(1,620)= 62.290, p<.001, ƞp2= .091] and internet essentiality [F(1,620)= 7.983, p= .005, ƞp2= .013] than non-committed participants. It showed that youth in a committed relationship were more involved in online romance and found the internet more indispensable during the lockdown period than non-committed youths. Moreover, relationship apprehension was found significantly higher in the case of non-committed participants than committed [F(1,620)= 13.051, p<.001, ƞp2= .021]. However, no effect of relationship nature was found in loneliness [F(1,620)= .968, p= .326, ƞp2= .002], which showed equal loneliness among committed and non-committed participants. Interestingly, relationship initiation showed no difference between committed and non-committed participants [F(1,620)= 1.485, p= .222, ƞp2= .002].

Interaction analysis showed no significant interaction except for online relationship initiation [F(1,620)= 5.073, p= .025, ƞp2= .008]. The results showed that the mean of committed males (M= 15.128, SD= 8.066) was lower than non-committed males (M= 16.844, SD= 6.574) on online relationship initiation, however, in the case of females, the mean of committed participants (M= 12.999, SD= 5.078) was found slightly higher than non-committed participants (M= 12.489, SD= 4.712). This showed that while male non-committed participants were more involved in online initiation than committed males, female committed participants were slightly higher in relationship initiation than female non-committed participants.

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Table 3 and Figure 1 about here

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The moderation results and the graphs are given in Table 3 and Figure 1, respectively. It can be seen from the table and the graph that relationship nature significantly moderated the relationship between online romance and relationship apprehension. That is, for individuals in a committed relationship, online romance reduced relationship anxiety, while for those in non-committed relationships, it led to an increase in relationship anxiety. Similarly, significant moderation of relationship nature was found in the relationship between loneliness and online romance. That shows loneliness decreases for committed individuals engaging in an online romance, while it increases for non-committed individuals. Relationship nature did not moderate the relationship between online romance and internet essentiality. It indicated that for both the groups, the magnitude as well as the direction of the relationship between online romance and perceived internet essentiality, were similar. Analysis, however, showed significant moderation in the relationship between online romance and relationship initiation, which indicated that non-committed individuals’ high involvement in online romance shows higher online relationship initiation, while it does not affect individuals in a committed relationship.

**Discussion**

The current COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the lives of individuals throughout the world, with the advent of multiple stressors (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020; Luetke, et. al. 2020) and has contributed to elevated health-related anxiety, loneliness, and perceived social support (Tull et al., 2020). Therefore, staying in and isolating has become the new normal, with everyone turning to the internet for being connected and maintaining relationships. With no to very less physical proximity, which is an important component of a relationship, COVID-19 might be increasing the chances for misunderstanding, and dissatisfaction between couples. Therefore, it is the virtual/online romance that is giving them the platform to stay in contact and express themselves romantically as research also shows that romantic gestures can significantly increase satisfaction in the relationship (e.g., Jacobs & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Algoe et al., 2010). Online platforms have not only allowed the partners to be romantic but also help them to communicate and provide support to each other, especially during the time of COVID-19. Keeping this in mind, in the present study, we have examined, how online romance has been helping youth— both in committed and non-committed relationships to stay connected at a time when physical meetings were not possible. Results indicate a positive relationship between perceived internet essentiality and online romance, for both committed as well as non-committed participants. For committed individuals, romancing with their partners through the internet would serve as a means of staying connected and maintaining the relationship, while for non-committed individuals, the internet could serve as a platform for seeking online partners, sexual interactions, or making meaningful emotional connections. Interestingly, for both variables— online romance and perceived internet essentiality, scores of participants in the committed relationship are higher than non-committed participants. This reflects that not only committed participants were more involved in online romance but at the same time, they felt more necessity and importance of the internet in their lives, perhaps to be connected with their romantic partners.

Stress steaming due to the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to unfortunate relational outcomes, including increased intention to terminate relationships (Li & Samp, 2020), and divorce (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). Since, close relationships are a vital source of support to deal with stress (Afifi et al., 2020), couples who engage in constructing coping behavior and problem-solving communication can enjoy stability in their relationship (e.g., Woszidlo & Segrin. 2013). Results show that online romance has served to decrease loneliness for committed individuals, probably through enabling intimacy, trust, and communication satisfaction (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). However, loneliness was found to show a positive relationship with online romance in the case of non-committed participants, one of the probable reasons being non-committed relationships do not serve to have much psychological and emotional involvement. Therefore, these individuals, strive to fill the void of their loneliness through seeking romance online especially, at a time when physical and social distancing is being maintained. According to the social penetration theory, (Altman & Taylor, 1973) as the relationship moves forward, communication grows from shallow, non-intimate levels to deeper ones. However, when non-committed partners engage in online romance with little to no chance to meet physically in the time of the pandemic, the scope for the relationship to move from a shallow level to deeper ones is unlikely. Also, an abundant amount of information is initially disclosed through an online profile which violates the norm of an appropriate amount of self-disclosure at the early stages of a relationship (Fox et al., 2013), and, there is no proper clarity, boundary, and guarantee with the information they share. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, clarity, intimacy, and commitment are positive markers of change in relationship quality where romantic relationships have been defined and are not ambiguous (Knopp et al., 2020), suggesting that online romance for non-committed partners lack intimacy and deep attachments which committed partners share. Further, moderation analysis supports the assumption that it is the commitment that works as a moderator between online romance and loneliness.

Our findings also show that when face-to-face social interactions are minimal, individuals may feel lonely and apprehensive about their relationships. Studies on long-distance dating relationships also support our findings as romantic partners have limited face-to-face interactions, encountering huge challenges like loneliness (Waterman et al., 2017), and uncertainty (Maguire, 2007). Online romance serves to facilitate relationship satisfaction for committed individuals, enabling them to trust their partner (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006), thus reducing relationship-related anxiety which may arise due to physical and geographical constraints. However, despite engaging in online romance and spending time on the internet, non-committed individuals lack deeper and meaningful connections, and the lack of real sexual involvement as a result of physical restraints due to COVID-19 may lead them into anxietyabout their current relationships or their partner's standpoint on it. Despite how engaging online romance could be for non-committed partners, there is no guarantee whether the stranger you are interacting with is real or just a scam. Research shows that online dating scams can have a significant psychological impact, with people experiencing trauma due to relationship and financial loss, with people quoting relationship loss as more painful (e.g., Whitty & Buchanan, 2016). In addition to this, the ruthless practice of ghosting which refers to one-sided cutting off communication and denying all attempts to reconnect with a partner, is a new break-up strategy that has received academic attention recently. It is more conveniently practiced through one or more mediums of technological means like dating apps (Timmermand et al., 2020) and have shown negative consequences like higher anxiety and avoidance of romantic relationships (Powell et al., 2021).

Results have also demonstrated that individuals experiencing loneliness and relationship apprehension show more engagement on the internet looking for possible connections and companionship (e.g., Pittman, 2015), and thus initiating relationships. However, when it comes to romancing online, it is the non-committed individuals that show more interest in initiating relationships. This is mostly because they seek to make new connections either emotional or sexual which is not the case for committed individuals as supported by the moderation analysis. With the current scenario of COVID-19, it can be understood that individuals are on the lookout for all possible means of social support (e.g., Afifi et al., 2020) with the internet serving as the medium to do so. Men can be seen taking the first step more often than women, which is also supported by previous studies (Harris & Aboujaoude, 2016; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). Studies also report that even those youth, who had left online dating apps, have resumed with them as the statistics released by some dating apps have shown thatthere has been a 10-15% upsurge in the use of many dating apps like Tinder during this period of COVID-19(Sullivan, 2020). Interestingly, much before this pandemic, McGinnis (2004) coined the term FOBO, meaning fear of better options after which he came up with the term FOMO, referring to the fear of missing out. Both these fears have surfaced at their peak during this pandemic. Youth today are frantically immersed in their smartphones as they fear missing out on important updates. Even in the case of non-committed relationships, the youth are looking for initiating relationships yet not wanting to be committed to one due to the fear of losing/ restricting better options as in the case of FOBO. As McGinnis (2004) rightly remarked, “practicing aggressive FOBO will only serve to alienate your friends”. This supports the results that showed loneliness and relationship anxiety to be associated with relationship initiation in youth.

The very basic components of the relationship are different for committed and non-committed individuals. This explains that even though both committed and non-committed youths were using the internet and online romance as a means to stay connected to their partner, it is the committed youths who are benefiting the most out of it. As non-committed relationships are mostly built on sexual interaction (Machia et.al. 2020; Olmstead et al., 2017), physical distancing due to geographical, and especially, COVID constraints have made it difficult to engage in any sort of real-life sexual activity, leaving them with the only option of virtual sexual romance, if possible. Moreover, the non-committed relationship lacks a deep level of emotional intimacy, hence, the conversation in a non-committed relationship is more superficial and less satisfying. On the other hand, a committed relationship is one where the partners are co-dependent, partners look out for each other and there is a presence of genuine care for each other's well-being (Rusbult et al., 1998, 2012), which is not in the case of non-committed relationships. Most importantly, committed people know that they can rely on their partner, which is further helping them in dealing with their loneliness, and relationship anxiety at this time of adversity when there is physical separation. However, this is not the case for non-committed youth, since the component of commitment itself is missing from the relationship. So, at a time like this when the uncertainty is high, the certainty of a non-committed relationship in the absence of physical romance is very low and thus, we see that instead of a decline in loneliness and relationship anxiety, it is increasing for the non-committed participants. Thus, even though, both the committed and non-committed youth indulge in an online romance, it is the nature of their relationship which affects the outcomes of online romance.

**Limitations**

Despite the interesting finding of the present study, it has a few limitations. The sample for the study included only college/university students, hence, the results of the study cannot be generalized to other age groups who are also going through stress and isolation due to COVID-19. The study was designed specifically for the lockdown period, which gives an insight into differences in online romance for committed and non-committed individuals, although its generalization for normal times will be limited. Another limitation of this research is the measurement of the nature of the romantic relationship. In the present study, the relationship status is taken in the binary order, i.e., committed or non-committed. In future studies, the commitment could be measured using a relationship commitment scale to get a better understanding of relationship commitment and its impact on online romance.

**Conclusion**

COVID-19 and its induced lockdown forced people to rethink their priorities and find ways to engage themselves and also keep in touch with their loved ones. Individuals during this time heavily relied on the use of information technology. Whether it is the internet itself, social media, meeting apps, health apps, or shopping apps, all of these were the only lifelines for many of us when we were lawfully asked by our government not to head out and stay in our respective premises. Yet another area where the internet and its application played an important role is the romantic relationship between people. The pandemic highlighted the importance of online romance as a way of connecting with partners and how it has helped to manage relationships. Both committed and non-committed youth showed inflated use of the internet during this time. Despite that, online romance helped in reducing loneliness and relationship anxiety only for committed youths; it seemed to increase the same in the case of non-committed youth, explaining that it is the nature of the relationship (committed vs. non-committed) that works as a moderating factor between online romance and increasing/decreasing of relationship anxiety and loneliness. Moreover, the study shows that online romance is positively related to online relationship initiation and internet essentiality.