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Types, Patterns of Romantic Relationships and Dating Delays among Urban Indian Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a subject of interest with changing socio-economic conditions in different sociocultural contexts. The peculiar familial arrangement and open markets in India are so intermingled that young adults' identities seem to be a confluence of collectivist Indian and liberal Western cultures. This confluence results in the emergence of adult-like tendencies among Indian youth in late adolescence and early adulthood.

This quantitative study examines the implications of emerging adulthood for the romantic relationships of urban Indian emerging adults. The participants were university students from several Indian states. The total sample size is N=510 (221 males and 289 females), unmarried individuals aged 18-25. The selection criteria include 'no romantic relationship experience' to have had 'one in the past two years of study participation.' The data are collected to study the association between socio-demographic profiles and types of romantic relationships having peculiar patterns. The typification of romantic connection by identifying underlying patterns is the most significant contribution. The study identified two categories of romantic relationship patterns: The First Romantic Relationship and the Last or Latest Romantic Relationship Pattern (whichever coincided with the time of data collection). Overall, the findings shed light on the lives of Indian emerging adults and their preoccupations beyond romantic relationships. The descriptive research design highlights areas for future research to examine the causes and effects of these relationships.

Keywords: Romantic Relationship; Emerging Adulthood; Late Adolescence; Relationship Pattern; Relationship Type; First Romantic Relationship; Last/Latest Romantic Relationship; Urban India

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Introduction

Adulthood plays a key role in an individual's life, family, and the state to which they belong. The onset of early adulthood is significant for overall productivity, efficiency, and reproductive potential. India, the most populous country in the world, has the largest population aged 18-35. This age group comprises two adult generations based on their exposure to technology, Millennials and Generation Z. Access to technology is a crucial factor in exposing individuals to alternative identities. Arnett (2000) stated that the generation entering late adolescence and adulthood in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries is faced with an unprecedented array of life choices, delaying their acceptance of adult roles. External factors, such as global socioeconomic influences, which shape local cultures and practices, are most readily influenced by younger generations. Indian young adults exhibit traits of emerging adulthood, such as identity exploration, self-reflection, and a sense of being somewhere between still growing and growing up, as they look for better career opportunities or romantic partners.

Pooja (2024) states that young Indian adults may exhibit delayed acceptance of romantic relationships due to sociocultural factors that align them more closely with their Western counterparts. This study examines patterns of romantic relationships among individuals aged 18-25 from July 2021 to September 2023.

This study aims to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of emerging adults in India and their statistical associations with pattern variables in romantic relationships. The results are crucial, as they highlight patterns in romantic relationships, indicate trends, and alert social scientists to potential social and psychological changes and risks. It consolidates patterns into types for academic and future research purposes and attempts to predict patterns of delayed relationships.

The study uses a quantitative, descriptive design to examine patterns of romantic relationships among urban Indian emerging adults. Data were collected through a structured digital questionnaire administered to university students. There are four major components of the study outline: (a) sampling and inclusion criteria defining urban emerging adults aged 18–25 years, (b) socio-demographic profiling of respondents, (c) examination of romantic relationship status and experiences, and (d) analysis of contextual variables such as family background, schooling, and urban exposure. The study maintains homogeneity by focusing exclusively on urban university students to explore relationship formation within rapidly modernising sociocultural contexts. The literature review is presented in the next section.

Literature Review

Adult development results from physiological, psychological, and social factors. The natural causes responsible for growth are beyond one's control; social factors are beyond conscious choices because individuals are subject to social constructs. Adulthood, though marked by age, is also a social construct, as it entails roles, positions, and expectations.

Individuals develop through narratives of expectations from adults, giving their attainment of age a social meaning (Hammack & Toolis, 2014). However, social meanings may be decided by the family, community, or society to which one belongs. In a larger, multicultural society, personal, familial, communal, and social ideas about oneself may become sharply divided. This may be why studies of emerging adult romantic relationships examine numerous psychological, demographic, cultural, educational, and social dimensions (Jensen & Arnett, 2012).

While Watkins and Beckmeyer (2023) have focused on individual-specific aspects in early adult love partnerships—intimacy, support, and personal growth, Freeman et al. (2023) studied dating duration and its influence on relationship satisfaction, dedication, commitment, and sexual activity.

In these contexts, various studies support the argument that relationship experiences, from casual to committed, during adolescence and early adulthood contribute to social and emotional development and to power imbalances (Meier & Allen, 2009; Cuccì et al., 2020). Konstam (2019) and Pooja (2023) have highlighted that navigating through romantic relationship dynamics may result in a sacrifice between romantic and professional aspirations.

Familial factors also influence romantic relationships during emerging adulthood. Jiao and Segrin (2022) state that parental involvement, particularly overparenting, can diminish the effectiveness and quality of interactions. Paternal intrusiveness has been linked to shorter relationship durations, highlighting the importance of individuation at this developmental stage (Glavač & Levpušček, 2024). In collectivist societies, familial involvement in whereas in Western countries, romantic relationships are prioritised (Seiffge-Krenke & Connolly, 2010). Familial attitudes toward romantic relationships are shaped by culture but can change in response to broader social changes. Relationships between young men and older women may be acceptable when individuals experience mutual respect, commitment, and satisfaction (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2008; Tembo & Mambwe, 2021; Niccolai & Swauger, 2021).

Transformation into traditional relationship-making approaches can also be discerned in technological changes such as social networking. Fermani et al. (2020) and Dougall et al. (2022) have found that individuals navigate challenges such as jealousy, despair, and toxic relationships with the support of social networks.

Emerging adults have shown an inclination towards values of justice and fairness in forming relationships. Women frequently evaluate fairness based on reciprocity, shared goals, equity, and self-awareness (Permana & Putri, 2024). Sells and Gangog (2017) examine the role of gender equality in romantic partnerships in which roles are shared equally, making such relationships gratifying, and indicate broader trends and awareness among emerging adults of the importance of values.

The existing studies cover many significant areas of emerging adulthood. However, Indian studies on this subject are limited. More so at this juncture of the 21st Century, where sociocultural changes have accelerated with individualising technology, the demands of market forces, where efficiency is highly valued, and young people find initiating and maintaining relationships challenging. An emerging concern is the type of romantic relationships that Indian emerging adults are forming in the backdrop.

Patterns of Romantic Relationships during Emerging Adulthood

Patterns refer to the warp and woof of determining factors underlying a type of relationship. They are defined by the nature of initiation, duration of the relationship, communication style, involvement of family and friends, frequency of interaction, closure or disclosure of the relationship, power dynamics between partners, the nature or maintenance of the relationship, and the nature of relationship termination.

Psychological qualities of partners, like attachment style, mindfulness, and self-expression capacity, contribute to pattern formation. In this context, Li and Tang (2024) have shown that psychological characteristics influence marital success, including fostering emotional intimacy and a strong sense of connection in partnerships. How emerging adults see their love journeys is also influenced by cultural narratives, with themes like love grows, firecrackers, and fairytales providing frameworks for comprehending relationship dynamics in different phases (Leverenz et al., 2023).

Subjective experiences in romantic relationships make some patterns exclusive. Despite subjectivity, data points out general findings to magnify trends, such as gendered trends. Shulman et al. (2018) observed that some pursue steady partnerships, while others transition from casual to committed

relationships or have occasional romantic encounters.

Gender also plays a role in pattern formation, as research shows women may tend towards stability, and men more frequently participate in inconsistent partnerships. Patterns impact psychosocial adjustment significantly. Compared with people who lead more active romantic lives, single people consistently report feeling lonelier and having lower life satisfaction (Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021). Initiating and maintaining romantic closeness also requires self-esteem and conformity to gender norms; better self-esteem is associated with greater relationship confidence and pleasure (Eryilmaz & Atak, 2011).

In a similar context, Eryilmaz and Atak (2011) examine how the social context surrounding an age group exerts an overarching influence on emerging adult romantic relationships. Extended exploration of identity and relationships is associated with socioeconomic changes and postponed life milestones, such as marriage and parenthood. At this point, on-off relationships are typical and may require intricate communication during attempts at reconciliation. The outcomes of these interactions are also impacted by social network influences and relationship ambiguity (Poole, 2014).

The immediate surroundings during early childhood can also shape patterned romantic relationships in adulthood. Early family and peer interactions lay the groundwork for romantic trajectories, making the transition to adulthood a crucial period for relationship formation. Higher relational happiness and stability later in life are associated with greater family cohesion and more favourable peer relationships (Boisvert & Poulin, 2016). On the other hand, early-life socioeconomic hardship can lead in various romantic outcomes, including relationship breakdowns and the dissolution of cohabitations (Bae & Wickrama, 2019). According to Shulman et al. (2018), gender differences persist in romantic routes, with women favouring stable relationships and men more inclined to pursue inconsistent ones.

According to longitudinal research, early love experiences frequently influence the dynamics of subsequent relationships. Compared with adolescents who date moderately, those who remain single consistently report feeling lonelier and having lower life satisfaction (Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021). In long-term relationships, attachment styles such as anxious attachment are associated with reduced commitment and satisfaction in adulthood (Freeman et al., 2023).

While poor interpersonal skills lead to instability, secure attachment, and the capacity to handle interpersonal conflict frequently promote the development of stable, close partnerships (Shulman et al., 2019). The breakdown of relationships further highlights the diversity of relationship patterns, underscoring the importance of addressing personal experiences and sociocultural contexts (Bae & Wickrama, 2019).

The relationship patterns we identified offer a comparative image of the first and last relationships, providing a unique perspective but with limitations due to recall bias.

Types of Romantic Relationships

Romantic connections play a significant role in the development of intimacy, autonomy, and identity during adolescence. Negotiation and dispute resolution are frequently necessary for these partnerships, and they are the cornerstones of strong, enduring ties (Seiffge-Krenke & Connolly, 2010; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

Some studies considering the 18–25 age group found that exploration during this phase is marked by change as individuals engage in various kinds of romantic relationships. The factors influencing them are socio-economic, cultural, and personal circumstances. Two types based on the duration of a relationship are Short-Term Relationships (STRs) (Freeman et al., 2023; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Claxton & Dulmen, 2013; Šutić et al., 2022) and Long-Term Relationships (LTRs), each with distinct characteristics and challenges (Shulman et al., 2023; Vennum et al. 2015; Stanley et al., 2010; Roberson et al., 2017).

Short-term relationships (STRs) are prevalent in emerging adulthood, often motivated by passion, excitement, and immediate gratification rather than enduring commitment (Mengzhen et al., 2024). They can give way to attachment insecurity, including avoidance or anxiety, which can adversely affect these relationships, resulting in a decline in satisfaction (Freeman et al., 2023).

Long-term relationships (LTRs), by contrast, emphasise love, loyalty, and trust, thereby promoting stronger emotional ties and mutual support (Mengzhen et al., 2024). Even if these connections offer substantial emotional benefits, they also have drawbacks. For example, although they typically provide high levels of support, challenges such as jealousy and control can arise and lead to discontent among partners (Lantagne & Furman, 2017). Although these problems usually go away as the connection deepens and stands the test of time, attachment styles like avoidance or anxiety can also compromise commitment and fulfilment (Hadden et al., 2014). Consequently, the growth of LTRs is associated with increased intimacy (Hurley & Reese-Weber, 2012).

The broad classification of STRs hints at casual, fleeting, and experimental relationships. However, the LTRs provide quality and content for assessing influences on life. We utilised these two types of insights and observed interaction and communication within and about the romantic relationships.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by multidimensional theoretical perspectives at the interdisciplinary interface of developmental psychology, psychoanalytic theory, cultural sociology, and the digital humanities. These foundations support understanding of the trends and forms of romantic relationships among emerging adults in urban India.

Macro-sociology and developmental psychology intersect with the life-course view (Elder, 1994), which provides a developmental and socio-historical perspective for interpreting how romantic relationship careers progress in specific contexts. The theory highlights four main principles: historical time and space, timing of life events, linked lives, and human agency (Elder et al., 2003).

Therefore, romantic relationships are not individual or isolated decisions as they are socially embedded processes. Relationships are defined by the more general structural, economic, and cultural conditions prevailing at a given time and space. For example, emerging adults may approach romantic relationships differently depending on developmental stage, which is characterised by identity exploration, instability, and self-focus (Arnett, 2000). This view addresses how personal development and life changes influence relationship patterns.

While the life-course view foregrounds temporal and developmental trajectories, the cultural sociology view emphasises the role of traditional cultural values and social meanings in shaping romantic relationships during periods of cultural transmission. Molnár & Lamont (2002) state that convergence of multiple cultures can contribute to distinctive relationship patterns and types because individuals negotiate their identities against societal norms. Cultural sociology underscores the significant role of cultural norms, values, and practices in romantic relationships. Urban contexts are characterised by emerging adults from diverse cultural backgrounds and social expectations (Cameron et al., 2017).

Beyond external societal expectations and cultural norms, intrapsychic processes rooted in early developmental experiences are also crucial in shaping romantic relationship patterns among emerging adults. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Bowlby's attachment theory, posits that the emotional bonds formed in childhood significantly shape adult romantic relationships. Emerging adults often replicate early attachment patterns, leading to either secure or insecure relational dynamics. Research indicates that secure attachment fosters healthier communication and conflict resolution in romantic partnerships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Suh and Fabricius (2020) state that emerging adults may unconsciously seek

partners who reflect their early familial relationships, leading to reenactments of past dynamics. Erikson (1959) emphasised that any conflicts in relationships are suggestive of unresolved childhood psychosocial dilemmas. It poses challenges to emotional growth and intimacy (Petersson & Plantin, 2024). Occasional or repetitive projection of childhood learning and unmet needs leads to relational conflicts in emerging adulthood, too (Scharff & Scharff, 1998). In the Indian context, these patterns are shaped by strong familial bonds and collectivist values.

According to Umemura et al. (2017), Indian familial ties are strong, and emerging adults exhibit attachment styles reflecting their upbringing in collectivist families. Seemingly, Kanth et al. (2024) suggest that emerging adults in India unconsciously seek partners who align with familial expectations and cultural norms surrounding marital sanctity. Cultural changes influence psychoanalytic functioning, and the abundance of choices and traditions, along with culturally rooted subconscious experiences, force the individual to choose between personal and expected options (Stitou, 2016; Lijtmaer, 2020).

The emerging adults' hyperconnected world of digital environments has become a crucial site where romantic desires, identities, and norms are negotiated and planned. Understanding current developments in the study of romantic relationships among emerging adults in India, which requires consideration of digital humanities theoretical perspectives, among others. The broader field of digital humanities addresses the microinteractions that occur on social media and other online platforms. Digital humanities play a pivotal role in shaping emerging adult romantic relationships in India by facilitating online interactions and cultural exchanges. Platforms such as social media enable young adults to explore diverse relationship norms, thereby breaking traditional barriers (Hamilton, 2016). Digital storytelling fosters emotional connections (Pera & Viglia, 2016), while data analytics provide insights into relationship dynamics (Kashy & Snyder, 1995;

Kammrath et al., 2018). Furthermore, digital platforms enhance accessibility to relationship resources (Lara-Millán, A., & Guzman-Garcia, 2025) and promote inclusivity (Udoudom, 2023).

These digital shifts coincide with broader socioeconomic changes, including increased youth populations, job precarity, and aspirational lifestyles, that are reshaping how relationships are timed, valued, and lived. An expanded youth population, greater access to digital media, and exposure to worldwide cultural scripts have ensured that Indian emerging adults today navigate relational transitions differently from past generations. Aspirational life-styling and job insecurity are increasingly unlinking romantic partnerships from conventional adult waypoints such as marriage, rendering them primary arenas for identity negotiation, exploration, and redefinition (Settersten & Gannon, 2005; Raley et al., 2007). At the level of development, the research utilises. Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett, 2000, 2023), a perspective for understanding the adult life cycle, frames the 18–25 age interval as a distinct phase of life characterised by exploration in love, work, and worldview. Apart from the existing views on adult development, the emerging adult view holds that one might attain an official age, the role performance is self-denied. In some cases, it implies choice, whereas often it is due to external or global youth culture pressures.

The convergence of the life-course view and emerging adulthood within developmental psychology, coupled with sociological and digital humanities perspectives, provides an interdisciplinary framework for a comprehensive understanding of romantic relationships among emerging adults. The ever-evolving world of romantic connections is therefore subject to multidimensional theoretical response.

Rationale

Studies consistently demonstrate how prolonged transitions to adulthood influence dating and romantic relationship patterns across sociocultural contexts. While emerging adulthood has been extensively studied in Western contexts, research from the Indian

subcontinent remains in its nascent stages — a critical gap given India's demographic dominance of youth populations (Author, 2024). Existing Indian studies have primarily examined romantic relationships through the lens of collectivist social structures (Dharanidharka, 2014) or specific aspects, such as parental influence (Author, 2023; Gala & Kapadia, 2014), leaving broader patterns underexplored.

The current study addresses this gap through a descriptive analysis of romantic relationships among emerging adults in urban India. By focusing on heterosexual relationships, we maintain methodological homogeneity to establish baseline patterns in a cultural context where traditional norms still predominantly shape relationship formation. Given the intensive nature of the research process, this focus mitigates the constraints on generalisability that arise when many variables are included in the analysis. Additionally, the homogeneity in sample size is maintained. This deliberate scope constraining to heterosexual relationships allows for clearer examination of how socio-demographic variables associate with

relationship types and patterns in mainstream Indian youth populations.

Our typological approach serves two key purposes: (1) providing a systematic framework for understanding majority heterosexual relationship patterns in urban India, and (2) establishing a comparative baseline for future studies of diverse sexual orientations. This dual focus advances the field while responsibly acknowledging the need for more inclusive subsequent research.

Research Objectives

- To study the association between socio-demographic variables and patterns of romantic relationships among university students.
- To consolidate the types of romantic relationships with their underlying patterns.
- To predict the patterns associated with relationship delays.

To achieve these objectives, we further divided them into smaller ones. Table 1 presents an overview.

Table 1: Objectives, Methods, and Indicators

Objectives	Methods	Indicators
To study the socio-demographic profile of the university students.	Quantitative Method: Semi-Structured Questionnaire	Demographic Profile: Age, gender, family type, educational status, etc.
Type of romantic relationships among the respondents.	Quantitative Method: Semi-Structured Questionnaire	Types of Relationships Friendly/platonic Romantic Intimate Non-intimate Casual Altruistic
Patterns of romantic relationships among the respondents.	Quantitative Method: Semi-Structured Questionnaire	Patterns of Relationships Linear Wavy Frequency of disagreements/fights, highs and lows/emotional dependence - detachment Attraction Physical closeness Open/Hidden Confession

		Commitment Physical intimacy Emotional intimacy Friendliness Sexual activity Familial involvement

Research Methodology

A quantitative methodology with a descriptive research design is used for the current study. A structured (SQ) digital questionnaire was sent to participants with the inclusion criteria in view. The digital SQ was disseminated to students through researchers' contacts in Central, State, and Private Universities and Colleges.

Students from 7 Central Universities, 2 State Universities, and 3 Private Universities were the primary recipients of the questionnaire. Direct recipients of the questionnaire also circulated it among their peer groups in other regions of the country.

Sampling

Data was collected using Stratified Random Sampling. The sample was restricted to urban university students to maintain homogeneity and control for confounding variables, such as educational exposure and sociocultural urban dynamics, which are central to the study's focus on emerging adulthood in rapidly modernising contexts. The respondents were selected based on their experience of urban living in the past 3-5 years, their participation in the study in the past 3-5 years, and their willingness to participate. The influence of urbanity is studied over a defined duration. The participants of the study comprised emerging adults in the age range of 18–25 years:

- Had a relationship experience within two years of participating in the study
- Currently in romantic relationships
- Those who have never been in a romantic relationship between late adolescence and 25 years of age.

It included both males and females. The sexual preference of the sample was set to include those having opposite-sex preferences.

Results

The socio-economic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 2. The total number of respondents, as per the inclusion criteria, is N=510. The average age of respondents is 20.43 years. More than 50% of all sample females lie in the age group of 17 to 18. 89% of respondents in the sample have at least one sibling. More than 90% of the respondents had their parents' marriage arranged by family or relatives. Nearly 70% of mothers are homemakers, while 24% work full-time. Almost 85% of the fathers work full-time or are self-employed. Schools are an essential point of socialisation; more than 65% of respondents attended a private school for at least two years. Therefore, a preference for private schools has been observed, with a predominance of coeducational schooling.

The study's key findings are patterns of romantic relationships, which are combined to form distinct types. More importantly, the relationship patterns have been analysed separately for the first and the last romantic relationship. Doing so helps learn about influential social factors like parental influence, trends in age groups, cultural determinants, and changing courtship practices. Other crucial factors include gendered experiences, economic status, and intersectionality.

Figure 1 depicts the participants' four types of romantic relationships: Romantic Friendliness, Intimate Commitment, Non-Intimate Commitment, and Non-Committed Intimate or Non-Stable (Uncommitted Connection).

The relationship types are crucial to drawing parallels and finding differences in Asian, Indian and Western Contexts. Although the identified relationship types exhibit considerable similarity across various sociocultural backgrounds, the

frequency of underlying patterns makes them context-specific and exclusive.

The first type—the Romantically Friendly Relationship—can be operationally defined as a romantic partnership or involvement in which commitment and emotional closeness are essential. In such a relationship, friendships with the partner and mutual friends have value. It encompasses elements of both a close friendship and a romantic relationship. The most preferred traits are mutual trust, respect, emotional support, and shared interests. The communication in such partnerships is limited to friends. Among the partners, communication involves little sexual connotation. We arrived at this definition based on responses to the structured questionnaire regarding the characteristic features of romantically friendly relationships.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants

| Variable	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	
17 -19	53.72
20-22	32.15
23-25	14.11
Family Income (Per Month)	
0-25k	23.92
25-50k	29.80
50k-1 lac	28.43
More than one lac	17.84
Family Set-up	
Joint	32.94
Nuclear	59.60
Single Parent	4.90
Single Parent with Joint Family	2.54
Religion	
Hindu	86.27
Muslim	6.27
Christian	3.92
Others	3.52
Educational Status of Mother	
Graduation or more	53.72
12th standard	18.43
10th standard	20.98
Educational Status of Father	
Graduation or more	60.98
12th standard	20.58
10th standard	14.70
Source: Primary Research	
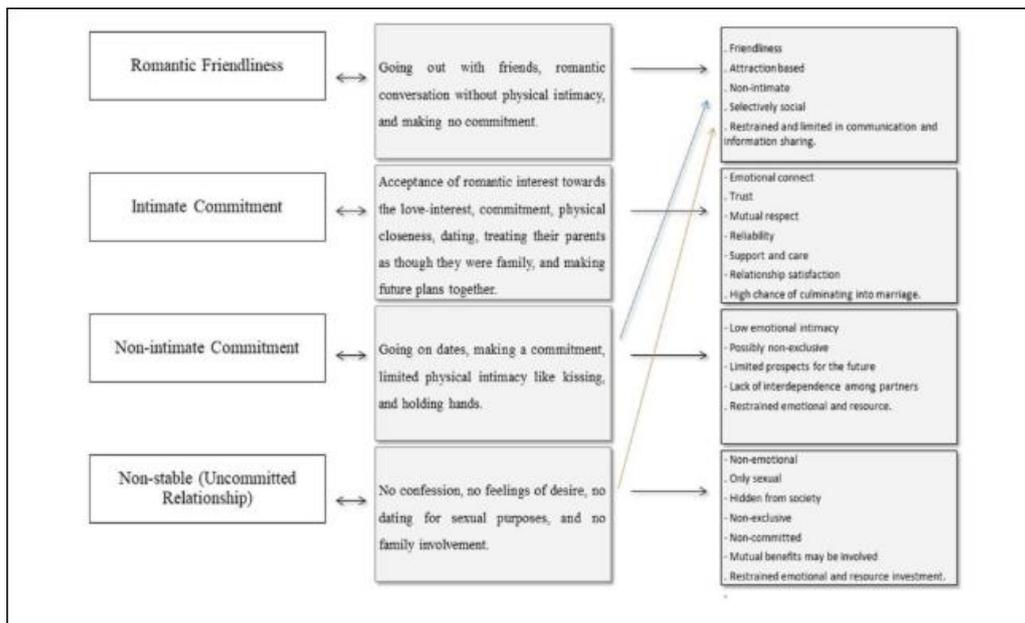
Figure 1: Types of Relationship Pattern
Source: Created Based on the Study

The second is that Intimately Committed Relationships arise from commitment and the acceptance of emotional intimacy. The interaction pattern is regular, and the relationship is socially accepted, at least in front of friends, if not within the family. The involvement has a higher degree of emotional and sexual intimacy. Some similarities are found with Collins and Feeney (2000), who define intimate, committed romantic relationships in terms of emotional closeness, trust, self-disclosure, and reciprocal caring. These relationships involve a sense of partnership, mutual support, and understanding of the other person's needs and desires. The people involved may not see their relationship as leading to marriage or having a clear plan for their future together.

Another type observed is Non-Intimately Committed relationships. In such a case, there is a confession, commitment, kissing and holding hands, and going out alone with the partner. It is hidden from friends and family. Most of the time, there is less emotional closeness. Owen et al. (2010) suggest that emotional connection and vulnerability may be lower, and partners may be less likely to share their deepest feelings and thoughts. It leaves space for more than one relationship at a time. Partners prioritise their independence and personal freedom. Therefore, they require less dependence on one another because they lack commitment, sufficient personal space, and a sense of purpose. As a result, the people involved may invest little time or money in maintaining the friendship or in planning its long-term growth.

Lastly, Non-Committed intimate or Nonstable relationships are often unstable. Among them, there is no confession and no open discussion. They are usually hidden from society. However, their communication remains confined to sexual aspects only. Non-stable romantic relationships are fleeting and casual. There is no emotional connection (Owen et al., 2013). They do not depend on mutual trust, honesty, confession, or commitment.

In a no-commitment relationship, limits and expectations are often flexible. Over time, the people involved can change the rules of their relationship as they suit them (Owen et al., 2010). Noncommittal, intimate romantic relationships constitute a distinct field of study within the broader field of personal relationships. Some forms of such relationships include Friends with Benefits (Hughes et al., 2005), hookups (Garcia et al., 2012), casual dating, and one-night stands (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009).

Pattern and Determinants of the First Romantic Relationship (FRRP)

Types of relationships are groups or classifications of relationships based on their shared traits, functions, or social norms. It involves grouping relationships in common characteristics, such as family ties, friendships, romantic relationships, work relationships, or casual acquaintances (Vangelisti & Perlman, 2018). Relationships may vary in levels of closeness, expectations, and social roles. Figure 2 summarises the nature, types, and patterns of romantic relationships among the study population.

We found that the two most prominent relationship patterns among respondents were romantic friendliness and non-intimacy in the first romantic relationship, with age a crucial variable.

There is a strong association between respondents' age and Age at First Relationship (AFR). The Chi-square, asymptotic significance value is $p \leq .001$, and Cramer's V, $p \leq .001$. The frequency of initiating their first romantic relationship between 17-21 years is highest, 48.4%. AFR and Family Type are associated with $\chi 2$, $p \leq .01$ and Likelihood Ratio (G2), $p \geq .10$. Also, the frequency of initiating their first relationship between 17-21 years of age is more than 60% among nuclear family participants.
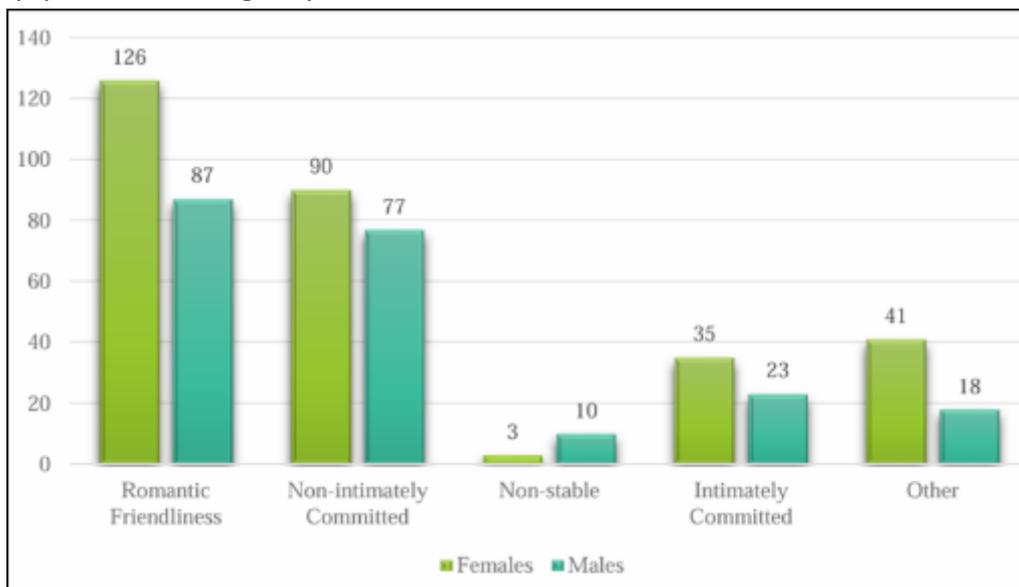

Figure 2: Types of Relationship Patterns in the First Romantic Relationship
Source: Primary Research

A strong association is also observed between AFR and the Type of School, as indicated by $\chi 2$ (p $\leq .005$) and G2 (p = .005). Individuals who attended only private schools had the highest proportion (62.8%) of initiating their first romantic relationship between ages 17 and 21. The frequency of adolescent relationships was also high among students attending a private, coeducational school. Within the private school type and the first romantic relationship between ages 12 and 16, the frequency exceeds 70%. Another strongly associated variable with AFR is School Set-up with $\chi 2$, $p \leq .05$ and Cramer's V, $p \leq .05$. 85% of those who attended a co-educational school and experienced their first relationship between 17-21 years.

The School Type and School Set-up are also strongly associated with $\chi 2$ ($p \leq .001$) and G2 ($p \leq .001$). The proportion of individuals who attended co-educational private schools exceeds 91%. Nearly 84% of respondents enrolled in an undergraduate program between 17-19 years, and the most common age range of first romantic relationships is 17-21 years. The

statistical treatment of these variables suggests a strong association between AFR and Age during the First Year of Graduation $\chi2$, $p≤.005$ and G2, $p=.025$.

These trends are suggestive that those who attended a co-educational private school show a high frequency of initiating a romantic relationship between 17-21 years of age upon entering college. Therefore, a private, a coeducational school setting, which provides conducive conditions for romantic relationship formation during adolescence and may be highly influential in its continuation into graduation.

Respondents from a nuclear family who attended a co-educational private school and got to study at college have great chances of experiencing their first romantic relationship between 17-21 years of age. It can be inferred that among urban Indian emerging adults, the first romantic relationship typically occurs during college, typically at the onset of adulthood. The age variable is again essential.

Figure 3 showcases the determinants of the First Romantic Relationship. The First Romantic Relationship Pattern variable is highly associated with AFR ($\chi2$, $p≤.001$ and Cramer's V, $p=.001$). The two patterns of relationships have high frequencies among the respondents, Friendly and Non-intimately Committed. Strong associations of FRRP are with family type, financial support, single-partner relationship, duration of the latest romantic relationship, and no change in career path due to romantic involvement.

A strong association exists between FRRP and the Family Type $\chi2$, $p≤.001$ and the Cramer's V, $p≤.005$. The highest frequency in FRRP is that of Friendly and Non-Intimately Committed Romantic Partners. Nearly 67% of respondents from nuclear family settings engaged in a Non-Intimately Committed Relationship (NICRP).

Further, there is a strong association between FRRP and Single-Partner Relationships. For example, more than 90% of respondents only had a single-partner relationship at a given time between 18-25 years of age. Contrary to the claims that a NICRP has non-exclusive romantic partaking, the respondents differ.

A strong association exists between FRRP and the Duration of the Latest Romantic Relationship. The $\chi2$, $p≤.001$ and the G2, $p≤.001$. The Non-Intimate Commitment type showed the highest frequency among the individuals whose latest relationship continued for at least two years. Interestingly, FRRP is strongly associated with the dependent variable, "romantic relationships, not with influencing career paths." The $\chi2$, $p≤.001$ and the Cramer's V, $p≤.001$. Most respondents deny experiencing regret regarding romantic relationships that influenced their career choices. The first romantic relationship usually lasts for two years. At this stage, respondents do not agree that it influences their career path or causes any disturbance. Instead, they provide psychological and social support. It is not affected by career-driven female partners. With these variables, the FRRP of the target respondents can be easily categorised within the urban Indian context.

FRRP is strongly associated with the LRRP (Last Romantic Relationship Pattern) $\chi2$, $p≤.001$. A higher percentage of respondents with a Friendly-committed first relationship had a Friendly Committed last relationship. However, the proportion of respondents reporting different subjective experiences of their most recent romantic relationship is the highest, at more than 70%. Their responses indicate sexual intimacy and bitter relationship experiences as recurring themes.

Furthermore, a strong association exists between FRRP and Psychological Support in Romantic Relationships ($\chi2$, $p ≤ .001$; Cramer's V, $p ≤ .001$). Almost 70% of respondents who agreed that "Psychological Support with their First Romantic Relationship" had a Non-Intimately Committed Romantic Relationship. Then, a strong association exists between FRRP and Social Support in Romantic Relationships $\chi2$, $p≤.001$ and Cramer's V, $p≤.001$. Those who reported the Non-Intimately Committed type of first romantic relationship had higher experiences of social support because of a

romantic relationship. The frequency of this response is 57%.

Another notable and robust association exists between FRRP and Failed Relationships due to Career Driven Female Partners $\chi2$, $p\leq$.001 and Cramer's V, $p\leq$.001 $p \leq$ .025. Only 44% of the sample disagreed that romantic relationships fail due to career-oriented female partners.

Notably, the Friendly-Commitment type has a higher percentage agreeing that a failed relationship is due to a career-oriented female partner.

Overall, the sample in the pattern of friendly commitment holds the view that relationships may fail due to a career-oriented female partner. However, conditional on the pattern, the respondents might not yet have considered the nuances of the relationship and its prospects. Contrary to this, respondents engaged in an intimately committed relationship might envision that composure between psychological support and career ambition is vital to prosper and maintain a healthy relationship. Suppose the female career orientation gets sound social support. In that case, it can enable her to increase her self-assurance and contribute to building a steady footing for a romantic relationship.
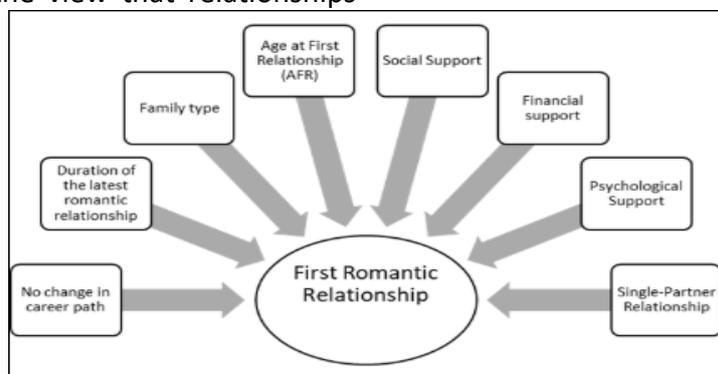

Figure 3: Determinants of First Romantic Relationship
Source: Primary Research

Pattern and Determinants of the Last/Latest Romantic Relationship Pattern (LRRP)

It is possible that an individual initiated one or more relationships between the first and the latest. The inclusion criteria consider the latest relationship if it happened in the past two years of participation in the study. As interpersonal, intimate, or romantic relationships are dynamic, learning about their trajectory in 2 to 3 years may give a microscopic view.

The SQ covered the most recent romantic relationship pattern, using items similar to FRRP's, and included a section on subjective responses. Most responses received were different from the FRRP. These are analysed to understand the difference between FRRP and LRRP.

The factors that influence the last romantic relationship are shown in Figure 5. The Last/Latest Romantic Relationship Pattern (LRRP) and its association with background characteristics are also analysed. There are strong associations between LRRP and Parental non-acceptance, Romantic relationships influencing Career Choice, Number of Relationships after the Age of Eighteen, Multiple Relationships, Current Relationship Status, and Duration of the Latest relationship. Other strong associations with LRRP include Parental Preference for Marriage over Employment, Failed Relationships due to Career-Driven Female Partners, Difficulty Maintaining a Romantic Relationship during Career Building, and Psychological and Social Support in relationships.

LRRP and Parental Non-acceptance show a strong association as $\chi2$, $p\leq$.001 and the Cramer's V, $p\leq$. 001. Categories emerging from subjective responses help us define a new pattern of the last relationship until the Age of Twenty-Five. Another essential variable related

to parents is the preference for marriage for adult children over employment by the Age of Twenty-Five. A strong association exists between LRRP and this variable ($\chi 2$, $p \le .01$ and Cramer's V, $p \le .01$. Trends suggest that such influences are highly accepted by those with a new pattern of last romantic relationship. The influence of romantic relationships remains positive, as responses to this question indicate that most participants did not regret their romantic relationships. Instead, a positive relationship was associated with their educational and career pursuits. Thus, LRRP is strongly associated with no regret due to a romantic relationship. The $\chi 2$, $p \le .001$ and the Cramer's V, $p \le .001$.

The LRRP is strongly associated with a single-partner relationship before age 18. Although many participants had only one relationship before age 18, their LRRP differed from FRRP. It is a reiteration that a new pattern in the last relationship emerged, distinct from the existing

ones. However, Non-intimate Commitment remained the second most preferred. The statistical values are $\chi 2$, $p \le .001$ and G2, $p \le .001$.

Next, an association exists between the single-partner relationship and LRRP $\chi 2$, $p \le .005$ and Cramer's V, $p \le .005$. Since single-partner relationships (at a given time) are prevalent among 91% of respondents, there might have been a gradual experimentation with patterns from one relationship to another. The reasons for having a new pattern might be age, physical conditions, and experimentation. Current Relationship Status is another crucial variable associated with LRRP $\chi 2$, $p \le .001$ and Cramer's V, $p \le .001$. With a new relationship pattern, most of the respondents have ended their latest romantic relationship. The highest frequency of the latest romantic relationship duration of two or more years was nearly 34% among those 407 respondents who had a relationship experience per the inclusion criteria.
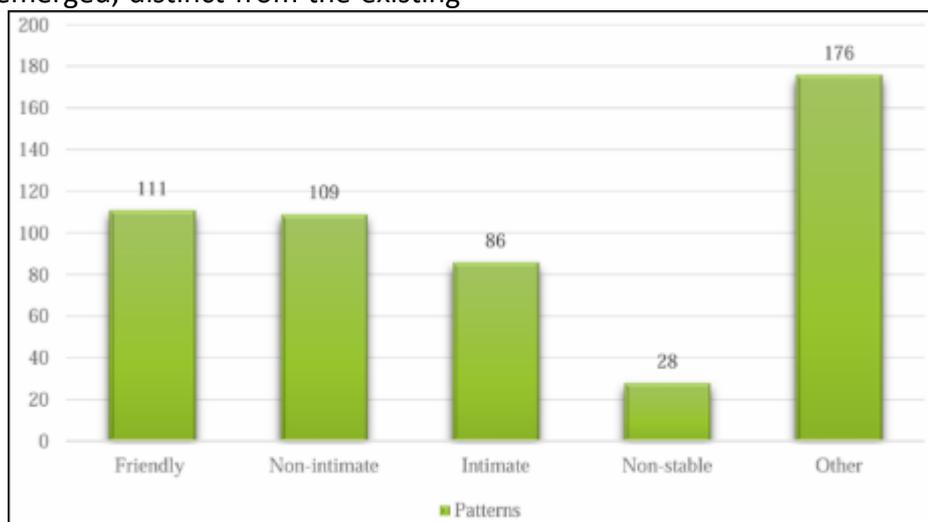

Figure 4: Types of Relationship Patterns in Last Romantic Relationship
Source: Primary Research

The duration of the latest relationship is also strongly associated with LRRP $\chi 2$ ($p \le .001$) and Cramer's V ($p \le .001$). Those who spent two or more years in their latest relationship usually had Non-Intimate Commitment (46%). An association exists between LRRP and "Difficulty Maintaining a Romantic Relationship During Career Building" $\chi 2$, $p \le .001$ and Cramer's V, $p \le .001$. Over one-third of respondents did not

find maintaining a romantic relationship complicated during career building.

Two crucial variables that hint at the positive effects of relationships while career building are psychological and social support, which are also strongly associated. The statistical treatment suggests LRRP is related to the experience of Psychological Support in Romantic Relationships ($\chi 2$, $p \le .001$; Cramer's V, $p \le .001$). Almost 56% of

respondents agree that relationships provide psychological support during career building.

Likewise, the variable Relationships, acting as Social Support while 'Career Building' is associated with LRRP χ2 (p ≤ .001) and Cramer's V (p ≤ .001). The highest frequency of respondents agreeing to it is almost 45%. Some respondents (44%) disagree that a career-

oriented orientation among women leads to failed relationships. It can be underlined that even in FRRP, the failed relationships were not accepted to happen because of career-oriented female partners. Only a specific type of commitment pattern led more respondents to agree that women's career orientation causes failed relationships.
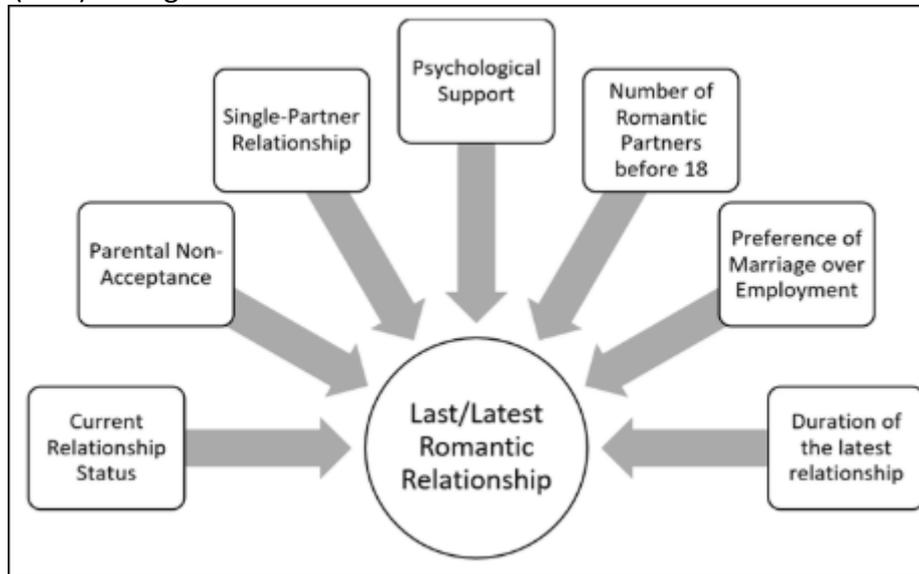

Figure 5: Determinants of Last Romantic Relationship
Source: Primary Research

Factor Analysis

A factor analysis was conducted to identify the essential dimensions of the research objective concerning the nature, types, and patterns of romantic relationships. Table 3 shows the eigenvalues of the components, indicating the proportion in the data's variance they explain. Each component group contains variables related to a similar theme. As a result, 13 factors were identified, corresponding to 5 components with eigenvalues greater than 1, which explain a cumulative variance of 53.5%.

Table 4 shows the rotated component matrix from a principal component analysis (PCA) using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation. It shows the factor loadings of various variables. A high loading suggests that the variable strongly contributes to that factor. An important component concerns the current romantic experience, romantic history, and an individual's status. The loadings of the variables captured in this component are Age at first Relationship

(.597); More than one relationship at a given time (-0.581); and Duration of Latest Relationship (.752).

Another important component reflects the career-focused relationship decision-making, which includes variables such as maintaining a romantic relationship is difficult while career building (.740), feeling of 'regret' due to a romantic relationship affecting education or career (0.589), and 'romantic relationships' without financial security bring a chaotic experience (.563). Some of the other variables which explain a significant part of the variance are current relationship status (-.746), number of relationships after 18 years of age (0.604), romantic relationships provide social support while career building (-0.556), type of college (-.719), age at graduation (0.662) and financial source (0.781).

The analysis shows that the duration of the latest relationship, the current relationship status, and the decision to postpone a

relationship for career reasons are strong contributors to romantic relationship patterns. These results have also been supplemented with chi-square findings in the study.

Table 3: Principal Component Analysis

Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	Cumulative %
1	2.235	17.192	17.192	2.235	17.192	17.192	1.709	13.146
2	1.438	11.062	28.254	1.438	11.062	28.254	1.527	24.890
3	1.129	8.688	36.942	1.129	8.688	36.942	1.410	35.733
4	1.096	8.427	45.369	1.096	8.427	45.369	1.164	44.690
5	1.063	8.180	53.549	1.063	8.180	53.549	1.152	53.549
6	.995	7.653	61.202					
7	.962	7.403	68.605					
8	.882	6.787	75.393					
9	.814	6.258	81.651					
10	.722	5.557	87.207					
11	.652	5.013	92.221					
12	.527	4.052	96.273					
13	.484	3.724	100.000					

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Source: Primary Research

Table 4: Rotated Component Matrix
Rotated Component Matrix[a]

Variables	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4	Component 5
Duration of the latest relationship	.752				
Age at first relationship	.597	.394			
More than one relationship at a given time	-.581				
Current relationship status				-.746	
Number of relationships after 18 years of age	.482	.604			
Romantic relationships provide social support while career building	-.556		.410		.334
Maintaining a romantic relationship is difficult while career building			.740		
Feeling of regret due to a romantic relationship affected education or career	-.311		.589		-.318
Romantic relationships without financial security brings chaotic experience			.563		
Type of college				-.719	
Age at graduation				.662	.441
Present course of study or career				.381	
Financial source					.781

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
[a] Rotation converged in 8 iterations.
Source: Primary Research Data

Delayed Dating

As in existing studies on emerging adulthood, in which the transition to adult roles is delayed, some significant associations suggest why this might be occurring among Asian Indian emerging adults. The tendency to postpone romantic relationships may be among the most important causes of the non-intimate commitment pattern. However, we lack supportive evidence to establish the claim. Nevertheless, the available variables and their factor analysis may adequately guide further investigation.

We conclude from the data that many respondents are uncertain about their propensity to postpone romantic relationships. The issue of financial independence appears to be linked to the stability of one's profession. Responses confirming the 'delaying relationship for educational or career building pursuits are associated with parents' preference for marriage over employment if the adult child is 25 years old or older. The Chi-square asymptotic significance, $p \le .05$, and Cramer's V, $p \le .05$.

The other two closely associated variables are 'postponing romantic relationships' and 'chaotic experiences in romantic relationships without financial stability.' The Chi-square asymptotic significance and Cramer's V are $p \le .05$. Thirdly, 'postponing romantic relationships' is associated with 'difficult maintenance of romantic relationships during career building' at $p \le .05$. Lastly, there is also a significant association between 'postponing romantic relationships' and 'career aspirations among females as a cause of failed romantic relationships, $\chi 2$, $p \le .05$. These associations open us to further questions where delayed relationship acceptance and disclosure need to be addressed scientifically and in detail.

Discussion

The age-old question of the nature of a phenomenon applies to romantic relationships. Are all romantic relationships alike, or do they change patterns in different contexts and circumstances? With a well-defined methodological approach, this study partially addresses these questions while presenting other findings relevant to our understanding of romantic relationships. 'Romantic friendliness' and 'non-intimate committed relationship patterns are two fundamental romantic relationship patterns (RRPs) found in both the first and latest romantic relationships. Moreover, these trends are associated with other criteria, including age, family structure, financial assistance, and interactions with unmarried individuals.

Typically, the duration of the initial romantic relationship spans approximately two years. The respondents currently do not concur with the influence of romantic relationships on their career trajectory or the extent to which they create any disturbances. Instead, relationships provide support in psychological and social domains. Career-driven female partners do not influence the pattern of the first romantic relationship (FRRP). These parameters facilitate the categorisation of the FRRP of the target respondents within the urban Indian context.

It can be inferred that romantic involvement in the first relationship is restrained and experimental. One may initiate a romantic relationship merely to experience how it feels. Individuals with this pattern have no decided goal for a romantic relationship; the relationship is not the centre of attention.

The 'non-intimate commitment' type showed the highest frequency among the individuals whose latest relationship continued for at least two years. The analysis indicates that a friendly first relationship will likely transform into a friendly last relationship with no physical intimacy or social disclosure.

The 'last romantic relationship pattern' introduces the potential for a novel pattern that diverges from the findings of previous studies. The findings related to LRRP, or the tendency to delay or postpone relationships, are characterised by an unpleasant relationship pattern. LRRP manifests differently among males and females and is influenced by familial influences and the pursuit of educational and career goals. Females engage in academic endeavours. Males endeavour to secure employment. Based on the LRRP findings,

certain relationship tendencies are evident. These include engaging in casual dating, maintaining long-distance relationships, exhibiting a reluctance to form emotional connections following experiences of betrayal, and prioritising spiritual growth in the aftermath of relationship termination. In addition, the sexual bond is present more in LRRP and less in FRRP.

While the sample is regionally and socioeconomically specific, it offers a foundational understanding of romantic relationship patterns among urban Indian emerging adults—a demographic pivotal to societal transformation. The detailed typologies and patterns identified here can inform targeted interventions for urban youth and serve as a benchmark for future comparative studies. To enhance solidarity in romantic relationships, engagement activities such as premarital counselling, family enrichment groups, support groups, peer networks, and reproductive health counselling could be implemented. Through teams of practice-based professions such as Social Work, Public Health, and Community Mental Health, these interventions can be implemented, monitored, and modified. The inclusion of social agents will enhance mutual support amongst family members and propagate cohesive community building.

Conclusions

With shifting socioeconomic circumstances in many sociocultural contexts, emerging maturity is a topic of study. Young adults in India appear to be a synthesis of liberal Western and collectivist Indian cultures. The most important contribution is the taxonomy of romantic relationships, which identifies underlying patterns. Two types of romantic relationship patterns were found in the study: the First Romantic Relationship and the Last or Latest Romantic Relationship Pattern. The results also provided insight into the aspects of Indian emerging adults' lives and interests outside of romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study concluded with several limitations, with sampling being one of these. The sample was restricted to the North and South Regions, as those were the areas where the digital data collection instrument was implemented. Findings focus on urban emerging adults from North and South India, primarily university students from private educational backgrounds. While this provides valuable insights into this demographic, the findings may not generalise to rural populations, lower-income groups, or non-collegiate youth. It shows the accessibility of digital tools among university students primarily from urban areas. Although limited in its scope to the sample population, the trends hint at a rural-urban techno-communication and educational divide.

We acknowledge this focus necessarily excludes the important experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals, whose relationship trajectories face distinct challenges, including stigma, legal complexities, and different disclosure patterns. These differences would introduce confounding variables beyond our current theoretical framework, examining conventional relationship patterns. Future research can test the same framework with people of different sexual orientations, which may aid in a better understanding of emerging adulthood in a more significant number of young adults. Such data can be comparatively analysed to find similarities and differences. Such a study can inform research on youth identity challenges in South Asian countries such as India.

Another significant limitation is the predominance of participation from private, coeducational schools. This allowed for a controlled examination of emerging adulthood in urban areas. At the same time, they are causing a one-sided understanding of romantic relationships. A holistic understanding can be developed through dedicated research across different groups using a similar methodology and, where appropriate, integrating qualitative approaches to draw causal inferences. Future research should prioritise stratified sampling across India's diverse regions and socioeconomic

strata to validate and expand upon these findings. Additionally, comparative studies between urban and rural cohorts could uncover how infrastructural and cultural disparities shape relationship trajectories.

This study is based on cross-sectional data. Although principal component analysis was included to reduce data complexity, the restrictions on drawing causal inferences could not be eliminated. The future research aim is to conduct experimental and longitudinal studies to undertake predictive modelling and draw robust conclusions about causality. This will also enable researchers to observe changes in relationship patterns over the period.

The present study concluded by offering various unprecedented insights into romantic relationship patterns of urban Indian emerging adults. It established foundational typologies in a rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape regarding personal relationships. While findings are pertinent on how education, urbanisation, and digital access shape relationship dynamics for university-educated youth in North and South India, there are numerous limitations, too. These limitations can be addressed through rigorous scientific approaches, including sample selection techniques, checks of the tool's reliability and validity, expanded representation, temporal depth, and comparative frameworks.

Nonetheless, despite the constraints, the study's contributions are crucial, as it documents distinct forms of relationships among educated urban Indian emerging adults and provides evidence of delayed romantic commitment, reflecting global emerging adult experience and India's assimilation. It hints at the mediating roles of technological access and educational and career advancement in relationships. These specific findings may equip policymakers, academicians, and professionals in youth services, mental health, and educational settings to focus on personal or intimate relationships.

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Ethical Approval

This research study does not include participants or respondents from vulnerable sections. It is a quantitative study in which no personal information of individuals is disclosed. Professor Archana Kaushik and Professor Neena Pandey from the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi, were members of the Research Advisory Committee when data were collected as part of the doctoral programme. Necessary ethical clearances were sought. The present work is a reinterpretation and extension of the same.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest in this research article. This piece is original research and has not been published in any other journal.

Author Contribution Statement

P: Conceptual framework, research design, methodology, data analysis and documentation.

SB: Paraphrasing, formatting, editing, and schematic adaptation.

Informed Consent

Research participants were informed of the study's objective and participated willingly. The structured questionnaire was to be completed only at the individual's discretion.

Funding

Data Availability Statement

The data were collected solely from primary sources and are confidential. It will require participants' permission before sharing.

Acknowledgements