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Dating Apps, Moral Disengagement, and Break-Up Distress Among Indian Emerging Adults: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Background: The rapid proliferation of dating applications has transformed romantic relationship initiation among Indian young adults, yet the psychological implications of this shift remain understudied. **Objective:** This study compared dating app users and non-users seeking romantic relationships on three psychological constructs: moral disengagement, self-concept clarity, and break-up distress. **Method:** Using a quantitative, non-experimental comparative design, 250 Indian young adults aged 18–26 years completed standardized measures of moral disengagement (Moore et al., 2012), self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996), and break-up distress (Field et al., 2010). Independent samples t-tests were conducted using Jamovi. **Results:** Dating app users reported significantly higher moral disengagement than non-users, $t(249) = -2.98$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.38$. No significant differences were found in self-concept clarity ($p = .513$, $d = 0.08$) or break-up distress ($p = .115$, $d = 0.20$). **Conclusion:** Digital dating environments may heighten cognitive moral disengagement without fundamentally destabilizing identity or amplifying emotional distress after relationship dissolution. These findings have implications for clinical practice, digital literacy education, and platform design within the Indian sociocultural context.

Keywords: *Dating Apps, Moral Disengagement, Self-Concept Clarity, Break-Up Distress, Emerging Adults, India*

1. Introduction

The landscape of romantic relationships in India has undergone a profound

transformation over the past decade. Historically, Indian courtship was embedded in collective social structures mediated by family and community networks (Anand et al., 2023). The rapid penetration of high-speed internet and smartphone technology has catalyzed a shift toward individualized, autonomous dating, with platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge becoming primary conduits for relationship-seeking among Indian young adults (Venkatesh & Ganapathy, 2020). India now ranks among the largest markets for dating applications globally, with emerging adults aged 18–26 constituting the majority of active users.

This shift raises important psychological questions. Dating applications introduce a "gamified" relational environment characterized by abundant partner alternatives, reduced social accountability, and interface-mediated interaction. These features have been theoretically linked to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), wherein individuals cognitively justify ethically ambiguous behaviors such as ghosting or deceptive self-presentation without experiencing guilt or self-censure. The digital medium also raises concerns about identity stability, given that users must engage in continuous curated self-presentation and are persistently exposed to idealized portrayals of others, processes that may influence self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Furthermore, questions remain about whether the emotional intensity of romantic dissolution differs between digitally formed and traditionally formed relationships, with attachment theorists arguing that the pain of loss is anchored in internal bonds rather than relational context (Bowlby, 1980).

Despite the growth of digital dating in India, empirical research integrating these three constructs, specifically moral disengagement, self-concept clarity, and break-up distress, within a comparative framework is scarce. Most existing studies are conducted in Western contexts and focus predominantly on usage motivations rather than psychological outcomes (Chakraborty, 2019; Menon, 2024). The present study addresses this gap by comparing Indian young adult dating app users and non-users seeking relationships across all three constructs.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory posits that moral agency is not fixed but regulated through self-evaluative mechanisms that can be selectively activated or deactivated. In digital environments, mechanisms such as dehumanization, displacement of responsibility, and

euphemistic labeling may be amplified by the perceived anonymity and reduced empathic feedback characteristic of app-based interaction (Suler, 2004). Second, Campbell et al.'s (1996) Self-Concept Clarity Theory defines identity coherence as the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable. Emerging adulthood is a critical period for identity development, and curated digital self-presentation may either challenge or reinforce identity coherence. Third, Bowlby's (1980) Attachment Theory proposes that affectional bonds and the distress that follows their severance are biologically based, implying that the emotional aftermath of romantic dissolution may be largely independent of relational medium.

2.1 Research Hypotheses

Three null hypotheses guided the inquiry: (H01) There is no significant difference in moral disengagement between dating app users and non-users; (H02) There is no significant difference in self-concept clarity between dating app users and non-users; and (H03) There is no significant difference in break-up distress between dating app users and non-users.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, comparative research design was employed. The study did not manipulate variables but compared naturally occurring groups defined by self-reported dating app usage. Independent samples t-tests were conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.7) to evaluate group differences on each dependent variable.

3.2 Participants

The sample comprised 250 Indian young adults aged 18–26 years (emerging adulthood; Arnett, 2000). Participants were recruited through university campuses in Bangalore and via social media and university mailing lists, using a mixed offline and online strategy. Of the 250 participants, 103 (41.04%) reported actively using at least one dating application within the past year (dating app users), and 148 (58.96%) reported not using dating applications but currently seeking romantic relationships (non-users). The sample was predominantly male (61.75%; female, 33.86%; prefer not to say, 4.38%). The majority were students pursuing undergraduate (27.89%) or postgraduate (25.90%) degrees, with 19.52% employed full-time.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18–26, reside in India, report interest in

romantic relationship formation, and have experienced at least one romantic relationship and break-up. Users were required to have actively used a dating app within the past year; non-users had not used any dating app during this period. Participants currently in therapy for break-up-related distress were excluded.

3.3 Measures

Moral Disengagement was assessed using the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (Moore et al., 2012), an 8-item unidimensional measure reflecting the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement (e.g., moral justification, diffusion of responsibility). Items are rated on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater moral disengagement. The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties across adult samples.

Self-Concept Clarity was measured with the 12-item Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS; Campbell et al., 1996). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale; higher total scores indicate greater clarity and coherence. The SCCS has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$) across diverse samples.

Break-Up Distress was assessed using the 16-item Break-Up Distress Scale (BDS; Field et al., 2010), adapted from the Inventory of Complicated Grief. Items are rated on a 4-point scale; higher scores indicate greater distress. The BDS has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx .91$).

3.4 Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Questionnaires were administered via paper-based surveys (campus settings) and via Google Forms (online). The Moral Disengagement Scale, Self-Concept Clarity Scale, and Break-Up Distress Scale were completed following a demographic questionnaire. Data from both modalities were merged, screened for missing values, and analyzed.

3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to characterize sample demographics and variable distributions. Prior to hypothesis testing, normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test and homogeneity are robust to normality violations. Where Levene's test was significant (moral disengagement), Welch's correction was applied. Effect sizes were calculated as Cohen's d . Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents sociodemographic characteristics. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics by group. Dating app users showed higher mean moral disengagement compared to non-users. Differences in self-concept clarity and break-up distress appeared minimal at the descriptive level.

Table 1: *Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 250)*

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	155	61.75
Female	85	33.86
Prefer not to say	11	4.38
Dating App Usage		
Users	103	41.04
Non-Users	148	58.96
Current Status		
Pursuing Undergraduate	70	27.89
Pursuing Postgraduate	65	25.90
Full-Time Employed	49	19.52
Other	66	26.39

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables by Dating App Usage (N = 250)*

Variable	Group	n	M	SD
Moral Disengagement	Non-Users	148	-12.49	6.36
	Users	103	-9.70	8.47
Self-Concept Clarity	Non-Users	148	36.03	8.09
	Users	103	35.30	9.37
Break-Up Distress	Non-Users	148	29.87	11.51
	Users	103	27.68	9.69

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Inferential Statistics

Table 3 presents independent samples *t*-test results for all three hypotheses.

Table 3: *Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Dating App Users and Non-Users (N = 250)*

Variable	t	df	p	95% CI	Cohen's d
Moral Disengagement	-2.98	249	.003*	[-4.63, -0.94]	0.38
Self-Concept Clarity	0.66	249	.513	[-1.46, 2.91]	0.08
Break-Up Distress	1.58	249	.115	[-0.54, 4.92]	0.20

Note. CI = confidence interval. Welch's correction applied for moral disengagement due to significant Levene's test. * $p < .05$.

3.7 Hypothesis Testing

H01 (moral disengagement) was rejected. Dating app users demonstrated significantly higher moral disengagement than non-users, $t(249) = -2.98$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-4.63, -0.94], Cohen's $d = 0.38$. The small-to-moderate effect size indicates a meaningful though not large practical difference.

H02 (self-concept clarity) was retained. No significant difference emerged, $t(249) = 0.66$, $p = .513$, 95% CI [-1.46, 2.91], Cohen's $d = 0.08$. The negligible effect size indicates that dating app usage does not meaningfully influence identity coherence.

H03 (break-up distress) was retained. No significant difference was observed, $t(249) = 1.58$, $p = .115$, 95% CI [-0.54, 4.92], Cohen's $d = 0.20$. Non-users reported slightly higher distress, though the difference was statistically non-significant, with a small effect size.

5. Discussion

The findings offer a nuanced portrait of how digital dating environments intersect with moral cognition, identity, and emotional functioning among Indian emerging adults. The results support what we term a "Digital-Moral Dissonance" framework: dating app use appears to selectively influence moral cognition while leaving identity coherence and the emotional depth of break-up distress relatively intact.

5.1 Moral Disengagement

The significant group difference in moral disengagement aligns with the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004), which posits that perceived anonymity and reduced empathic feedback in digital spaces lower the psychological threshold for ethically questionable conduct. Dating apps present structural affordances, including gamified interfaces, abundant partner alternatives, and attenuated social accountability, that may normalize behaviors such as ghosting,

deceptive self-presentation, or parallel relational engagement (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Consistent with Bandura's (1999) framework, these features may activate mechanisms such as dehumanization and euphemistic labeling, allowing users to rationalize such behaviors without experiencing self-censure.

The moderate effect size ($d = 0.38$) suggests that app use amplifies pre-existing cognitive tendencies rather than fundamentally transforming moral orientation. This is consistent with findings in organizational contexts where technological affordances, including diffusion of responsibility and reduced achievement visibility, predict moral disengagement and social loafing (Song et al., 2026). In romantic contexts, Aignesberger and Greitemeyer (2024) similarly found that higher moral disengagement predicted greater infidelity and reduced relationship satisfaction. The present findings extend this work to the specifically Indian digital dating landscape.

5.2 Self-Concept Clarity

The absence of a significant group difference in self-concept clarity was consistent with the Trait-Like Stability hypothesis (Campbell, 1990), which positions identity coherence as a relatively enduring structural feature of personality shaped primarily through early socialization. Although dating apps require continuous curated self-presentation and exposure to idealized others, these surface-level interactions may not penetrate the more deeply anchored cultural and familial self that characterizes Indian young adults (Chadda & Deb, 2013). This suggests that collective cultural values may serve as a protective anchor against identity fragmentation, even within rapidly digitizing relational contexts.

The negligible effect size ($d = 0.08$) further underscores the robustness of self-concept clarity to relational medium. These results challenge deterministic narratives suggesting that digital dating environments inherently erode identity coherence and align with the view that individual-level developmental and attachment processes are more salient predictors of identity stability than platform engagement per se (Slotter et al., 2010).

5.3 Break-Up Distress

The non-significant difference in break-up distress supports Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980) and Sbarra's (2006) model of coping with romantic dissolution, both of which posit that post-breakup distress is driven by the depth of emotional investment and attachment security rather than by the mode of relational formation. The pain of romantic loss appears to be a

platform-independent experience, consistent with the view that the brain's attachment system undergoes a similar grief response regardless of whether a partner was met via an algorithm or a social circle (Field, 2011).

Interestingly traditional, higher-accountability channels may involve deeper emotional investment. It also resonates with evidence that digital endings may paradoxically extend distress through lack of closure (Koessler et al., 2019) and ongoing digital exposure to former partners (McDaniel et al., 2021), effects that may partially offset any reduced emotional investment associated with app-based relationships.

5.4 *Integrated Interpretation*

Taken together, the findings suggest a domain-specific influence model in which digital relational environments exert a selective effect on moral cognition while leaving identity architecture and core affective systems comparatively unchanged. This distinction carries significant clinical weight. The "symptoms" of modern digital dating, including ghosting, perceived disposability, and ambiguous commitment, reflect shifts in moral cognition rather than deeper disruptions to self-understanding or emotional capacity for loss. For clinicians working with emerging adults, this suggests that therapy may most productively focus on cognitive patterns of moral justification and interpersonal accountability, rather than if app use has globally undermined psychological functioning.

6. Implications

6.1 *Clinical and Counseling Practice*

Mental health professionals should attend to moral reasoning patterns in clients engaged in digital dating. Interventions addressing cognitive justifications for ghosting, ambiguous commitment, or deceptive self-presentation may be particularly warranted. The absence of identity disruption or elevated break-up distress among users offers a counter to alarmist clinical narratives about digital dating, while still flagging morally disengaged behavior as a therapeutic target.

6.2 *Education and Digital Literacy*

Relationship education programs at universities and community organizations may benefit from incorporating digital relational literacy modules addressing ethical communication, accountability in online romantic contexts, and the normalization of ghosting. Given that moral

disengagement was elevated among users, psychoeducational content that renders these cognitive mechanisms explicit may help mitigate their normalization.

6.3 Platform Design

Platform developers may consider features that promote accountability and transparency, such as prompts that discourage abrupt disengagement or that provide structured closure options. Design choices that humanize the interaction experience may reduce the structural facilitation of moral disengagement.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal. Longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to establish directionality. Second, all constructs were assessed via self-report, introducing potential for social desirability bias, particularly for the sensitive construct of moral disengagement. Third, dating app usage was operationalized as a binary variable, without capturing frequency, duration, or intensity of use; dose-response relationships may emerge in future work. Fourth, the sample skewed male and was drawn primarily from an urban Indian context, limiting generalizability. Fifth, potential confounders including attachment style, personality traits, and relationship history were not controlled.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs, include measures of attachment style, and examine specific app behaviors (e.g., frequency of ghosting, number of concurrent matches) as continuous predictors. Cross-cultural comparisons between Indian and Western samples would further test the cultural specificity of the present findings. Qualitative methods may also illuminate the mechanisms through which moral disengagement is activated within dating app contexts.

8. Conclusion

The present study is among the first to integrate moral disengagement, self-concept clarity, and break-up distress within a comparative framework targeting Indian young adult dating app users and non-users. The findings demonstrate that while digital dating environments are associated with heightened moral disengagement, they do not significantly disrupt identity coherence or amplify the emotional pain of romantic dissolution. This pattern, conceptualized as

Digital-Moral Dissonance, highlights a critical distinction: technology may shape how individuals cognitively justify their relational behaviors, but it does not appear to fundamentally alter who they are or how deeply they grieve relational loss. These findings offer culturally situated, empirically grounded insight that can inform clinical practice, relationship education, and platform design in the rapidly evolving landscape of Indian digital romance.

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