

**VULNERABILITY, INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION PATTERNS
AND COMMITMENT IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS**

A THESIS

Submitted by

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I, **Akshita Bakshi**, declare that the work in this thesis titled “**Vulnerability, Integrated Communication Patterns and Commitment in Dating Relationships**” was carried out by me in the Department of Psychology, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University, India. The information used for any literature review was fully acknowledged in the text and references. The thesis has not been presented in any scientific gathering nor has it been presented for another degree in any University.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates that vulnerability and related aspects in dating relationships, which goes beyond the phenomenon of simple revelation or self-disclosure. This being a relative unexplored area of relationship, the aim of the study was to identify the underpinnings of vulnerability and highlight the presence of the phenomenon in varied dynamics of relationships. Other important goals included identifying the factors salient to vulnerability, intrapersonal communication, and commitment. Purposive snowball sampling was employed to appoint the participants from India. We used exploratory research and obtained the data through extensive mixed-method survey of 31 individuals which comprised of 21 females, and 10 males, who have an experience of dating relationships for 6 months and more.

Results highlighted the general contained idea of vulnerability, and degree of vulnerability which overall reflected the extent of vulnerability, ideal and actual vulnerability, and the experience of vulnerability in the relationship among the participants. Further we elaborated on the recurrent patterns and themes on overall authenticity of the participants in relationships. We also underlined the intrapersonal relationship dynamics found among participants in relation to emotional openness which gave an insight into the internal experience and influenced responses of the participants which either led to connection, or disconnection in their relationship. Further results showed the complexities of intrapersonal communication and vulnerability by using few case studies from the sample highlighting the interaction of the two variables suggesting contradictions in the way participants showed up in relationship i.e., who they are, and who they feel they need to be to feel accepted. The compiled illustration of the in-depth descriptions founded, based on the interaction of all three variables was also represented. The results further were validated using methodological triangulation process using the findings of the stage 1 study. The results concluded the phenomenon of relationship vulnerability was conditional among majority of the participants and occurred as common phenomenon, but different in terms of experiencing it based on foundation, patterns, and individual contributions such as, lack of internal acceptance, lack of self-awareness, distorted knowledge and unhealthy values around love/ relationships, maintaining dysfunctional relationships and protecting oneself through self-abandonment veiled as commitment in the relationship.

DEDICATION

TO MY PARENTS

COL. RAJAN BAKSHI

&

MRS. ANJALI BAKSHI

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PUBLICATIONS

- Bakshi, A., & Ansari, S. A. (2022). The key role of vulnerability in developing authentic connections in romantic relationships. *Cyprus Turkish Journal of Psychiatry & Psychology*, 4(1), 103-109.
- Bakshi, A., & Ansari, S. (2022). The role of response anticipation in hindering emotional intimacy by romantic relationships. *Vidyabharati International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 13(1), 973-983.
- Bakshi, A., & Ansari, S. (2023). Ideal and received affection discrepancy: Investigating the pathway to unfulfilled relationships. *Cyprus Turkish Journal of Psychiatry & Psychology*, 5(2), 146-162.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine the phenomenon of vulnerability in relation with integrated communication patterns and perceived commitment among dating relationships with an objective to dig deeper into the rising complexities of the relationships in today's world. Despite the broad ramifications of this phenomenon, the concept of being vulnerable in romantic partnerships has been elevated to an extraordinary level of recognition in recent years, largely as a result of the outstanding work done by Brené Brown (2012). However, with the glorification came new complications because of the personal relationship paradigms that each individual holds such as ideas, adapted roles, norms, values, trauma bond dynamics and so on. As discussed by Justin Schanfarber (2018), "I fully understand and appreciate the power of vulnerability; to finally shed that armour and really let someone IN... But the flipside of vulnerability is not necessarily emotional armouring; it can also be confidence in one's self, a sense of unshakeable truth and personal integrity", it throws light on the power of internal vulnerability, the embracing of self, and building strong sense of oneself as the major part of being vulnerable before showing up with vulnerability to build trust, or strengthen the bond with one's significant other. The study conducted by Murray (2018) found that there is a lack of extensive research on vulnerability in romantic relationships. Nevertheless, there is a widespread usage amongst common people, therapists, and increasing recognition of the phenomenon in popular psychology. Despite of which, there has not been enough research to fully understand and explore its impact on romantic relationships considering the evolving nature, and complexities of the system. This highlights the need for further investigation into the topic, in order to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon of vulnerability and its incorporation in romantic relationships by individuals.

As the sparse research and extant literature on this topic necessitated an inductive approach, this phenomenological study investigated the participants' perceptions on vulnerability in relation to intrapersonal communication dynamics through extensive subjective survey. The other two related aspects that of interpersonal communication and commitment, self-report measures were used due to the challenging nature of the data collection. For this study, I employed purposive sampling to recruit 31 adults in India from different states who defined their experience of dating relationship for 6 months and above. The research was conducted to learn more about this topic, add to the "dating" relationship

literature, and provide useful information for individuals, therapists, and educators. Beginning with a brief overview of the research that laid the groundwork for the study, this section is the first in the manuscript. My next section provides an overview of the problem statement, followed by the thesis, and finally the research questions. In this section, I also briefly describe the methodology I adopted, as well as the perspectives and assumptions. Definitions of crucial concepts and an explanation of why this study is important round out this chapter.

Background

Relationships in their simplest form are “to reach” and “to respond”. How ideal it would be if people can learn to reach and learn to respond instead of earning love at their cost? How enhancing the experience of relationships would be if people can learn to build the foundation of their relationships on authenticity? And how it would be if people can learn to show up with vulnerability with people who cares enough for them to receive what they really deserve. As Brene Brown quoted “*Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope empathy, accountability, and authenticity.*”

Unfortunately, in a world containing societal pressure, dysfunctional homes, and lack of educational influence pertaining to relationships, it is but easy to learn to live in survival mode. Number of researchers have concluded the conflicts caused by the difference among couples in the way men and women express (Floyd, 2019, 2006; Hesse & Tian, 2019). Irrespective of this differences, number of human beings are struggling with creating healthy relationships, let along maintaining it, due to absence of love, internalizations, failed relationships etc, in short, unhealed parts of self that impacts the way people show up in the relationships. Relationships are our foundation. When a child is born their relationship with the caregiver is the cornerstone of their identity, happiness, emotional development, and platform to experience feeling loved and how to love; and when any individual steps out of the family system to build personal relationships, it becomes a platform for exploration, growth, and transformation. However, reality is different than what ideally could have been because of the difficult childhood experiences, trauma, and other past concerns that taught people toxic narratives, through the lens of which they try to give, and receive love.

Role of Self in Relationship:

Exploring our inner world comes across as challenging because it requires introspection which invites change and it is often perceived as threat by the human brain. Relational Schema

theory (Baldwin, 1992) explains that our thoughts and emotions around perceived images of self and others in addition with a psychological script of “how an interaction should be” is activated during any conflictual situation. This and other theories on relationships deduce down to feeling of safety in relationships. Human brain responds to perceived threats based on our memories and experiences (Bourne, 2011, p.93; Cannon, 1915) which explains one of many reasons for people being accustomed to certain patterns of being. If couples individually practise awareness and ownership of their personal thoughts as well as actions, it becomes easier collectively to accept each other with openness, support and understanding. As Dr Nicole LePera mentions that understanding, and being aware about your partners trauma is a love language [LePera, 2021] as it provides space for mutual evolution by dedicatedly participating in each other's life with enthusiasm and presence (Reilly, 1979; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). To understand whether conscious love is practised today in relationships a thought experiment was conducted considering a theory that people continue to stay in unfulfilling relationships involving self-sabotaging behavior and high functioning external locus of control. It was observed that a number of people in relationships are operating on survival mode which makes the individuals relationship functional on destructive characteristics like false hopes, unrealistic expectations, self-abandoning and ambiguous communication patterns. Therefore, to experience oneness built on strong connections in relationships, it is important to have a firm understanding of one's identity, or else it manifests trauma bonding (Erikson, 1968; Prager et al., 2013). The components of self, such as self-worth and self-esteem are strengthened through personal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 2000; Weiser & Weigel, 2005) yet it is necessary to be aware of how much of these components an individual carries into a relationship with them. Number of research has focused upon people acting on their best behavior during the honeymoon phase of a relationship (Quek et al., 2015), whereas a limited amount of research has talked about negative forms of vulnerability that emerge in relationships like emotional vomit or oversharing and incongruence among couples. Also, few researchers have talked about issues like adjustment or over giving nature pertaining to women which has bounded our understanding of men's functioning and approach in relationships (Prager et al., 2013). Overall, it is detected that there is a limited in-depth knowledge and research concerning this topic (Quek et al., 2015; Giordna et al, 2006, Brown et al, 1999; Carver & Udry, 2013).

Individual and Societal Changes effecting relational aspects of self and others

Upcoming generation do not possess the same biological, psychological, social and cognitive functioning (Tillman et al., 2019; Silva, 2016), owing to much changes in the culture,

environment, upbringing and technological advancements. People are “taught” to take the path of inflicting virtues (Grant, 2020) that have only added stress and uncertainty in their lives (Shulman and Connolly, 2013). To survive in such complex surroundings, the one thing an individual can be certain of is their identity and to strive for being their best version which is greatly achieved by forming deeper connections and that is exactly where people are feeling turbulent. (Levinson, 1978; Shulman and Connolly, 2013). This elicits two interpretations, *one*, people are experiencing relationships on extremes representing lack of balance which produces inner/external conflicts and *two*, where flexibility and transparency are required for maintaining relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2013), the opposed is being practised due to external influence leading to estranged relationships which is usually taken as a personal failure. Research conducted on adolescents’ relational script (Soller, 2015) gathered that, if the script deviated from the peers' order of events in relationship it led to distressed feelings, inauthenticity and dissatisfaction. Relationship dynamics are altering adversely, affecting the relationships at individual, relational and collective aspects (e.g., Brown, 1991, Carver & Udry, 2003; Harding, 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 1991). With the growing romantic involvement of youth in today's time, the challenges are increasing simultaneously. Despite which, it was observed that studies stay limited to investigating the role of family influences, attachment styles and peer pressure in uncoupling. It is crucial to study behavioral struggles in-depth, after understanding the existing patterns owing to childhood and upbringing but, people are much aware in today's generation to make conscious choices of controlling learnt behavior, practice autonomy, create own standards and learn-unlearn-redefine their ideas around relationships. This can help them achieve “earned security” in relationships (Roisman et al., 2002). The lack of deeper understanding and interventions are damaging the perceptions of individuals which are holding them back in creating contented bonds.

Key Terminologies

Vulnerability: In the Book “Daring Greatly” (Brown, 2012, p. 36), vulnerability is defined as-

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path. I know this is hard to believe, especially when we’ve spent our lives thinking that vulnerability and

weakness are synonymous, but it's true. I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure."

In relationships, vulnerability is when an individual lets another person see their inner world. They allow themselves to be seen for their authentic self and consciously chooses to connect in raw, and open manner by expressing their true emotions with their partner, and not holding back, or supressing. It can be their strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, experiences, memories, dreams or asking for affection, needs, and even displaying boundaries without the fear of being judged (Duck, 1988; Derlega, 1984; Lazowski & Andersen, 1990). *Brene Brown*, PhD, a research professor explains, by being vulnerable we step into the uncertainty, we show up in relationships, take initiatives, freely share thoughts, emotions and feelings without worrying about the consequences with an intention to connect and hope for it to be received.

Interpersonal Communication: Communication is not just about words but also the affect with which it is said. This generates an understanding between partners and creates a space of trust where partners can respond without feeling the need to show aggression or rudeness of any form (Fincham, 2003). Therefore, the way a behavior (especially the ones not appreciated in the other) is explained and perceived by a partner either promotes problem solving or increases conflict and contempt (Finchman, 2001,2003). John Gottman (2000), in his research has found "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" that predicts the high conflicts, and eventual separation among the majority of the couples, namely, Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling. It can be simply said that communication between couples to handle conflict does require a vulnerability at the core to connect, evolve, and empathize in a relationship from a place of understanding (Denton & Baumeister, 2017). It does fall in alignment with the John Gottman's antidotes of the four horsemen i.e., Gentle start up, taking responsibility, describing feelings/ needs, and physiological self-soothing (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Practicing this in relationships are much harder because it invites vulnerability which can leave one emotionally exposed, and triggered. Therefore, to understand relational interaction processes, it is important to understand verbal intimacy, extant of vulnerability, and overall nature of conflict, (Horan et al., 2015). Much of the research is presently limited to married couples and conflict handling using quantitative studies irrespective of the phenomenon that lies in the core of the relationship maintenance.

Intrapersonal Relationships: *"Your relationship with yourself sets the tone for every other relationship you have" – Robert Holden*

When an individual doesn't feel good enough at the core, and carries shame, and unworthiness as an identity they will not feel good enough, lovable enough, or deserving of prioritizing self. Hence, it can lead to people chasing others in order to feel loved, the default switches to "If they love me, I'll feel loved,"(Bullard, 2020). Unfortunately trying to find love on the outside leads to persuasion, chasing, and demanding of love that one desires at the cost of self-abandonment, leading to maladaptive coping strategies (Peel, & Caltabiano, 2021; Pharaon, 2021a). Hence, loving oneself is the foundation to connect with authenticity, and from a place of vulnerability. This can be explained by the Brene Browns concept of scarcity, which she describes as a "never enough problem" (Brown, 2012, p. 29). Living in a culture where at every step there is a reminder of what is lacking, it reinforces the attachment wounds, adds on shame, and enables holding back. This leads to disconnection, misalignment, and difficulty embracing and showing up with vulnerability. Therefore, engaging in a relationship from a place of shame/ unworthiness, or from a place of authenticity/ worthiness makes all the difference in the way relationship is built, and dynamics are formed. One of the articles found that (Bakshi, 2022) most of the participants in toxic relationships avoided any negative, or discomforting feeling that emerged within, and partners actions that were not much appreciated because of fear-based love, and confusion, i.e., over-analysis, and questioning due to fear, lack of self-worth, and whether they will be loved for who they are, or if they need to shapeshift themselves (Pharaon, 2021b).

A noticeable shift in relationships is seen, where people are becoming more wounded over time followed by the loss of human connection and individuality. Factors like, loneliness, fear of unfamiliar bondings, self-detachment, low socio-emotional intelligence, trauma induced behaviour impacts the sustainment of relationships. It can be understood that shame developed over the period of time in people can make them believe they are unworthy of love (Brown, 2013). Our ego is made up of interactions we come across with the world, people and ourselves throughout our lives (Bowlby, 1969; West & Keller, 1994; Shi, 1999; Baldwin 1992). As the need to connect is universal, people will repeatedly come across partners who, depending on the circumstances such as conflicts, may reveal each other's dysfunctional patterns. This uncovering can surface ego stories i.e., an individual's inner voice, internalized as children or adults which tell stories and assigns meanings around who we are, who others are and how the world operates based on past experiences (LePera, 2022). it has been proposed that these internalized patterns specially come into play at the time of adversity (Shi, 1999). This can be

applied in relational context where if couples experience conflicts, it can trigger their deep-seated issues.

Conceptualizing Vulnerability in Relationships

Vulnerability is often considered a weakness (Brown, 2012; Counselling Centre: Vulnerability (n.d.). However, vulnerability is quite the opposite, it is a pathway towards joy, belonging, freedom, love, empathy and authenticity. Above all, pathway towards growth, and achieving deep intimacy in relationships as it co-creates safety, and brings forward the willingness to explore the relationship, the self, and each other in the process. Numerous people spend their lives avoiding and guarding themselves from feeling vulnerable, and being perceived as overly-emotional, or needy in order to avoid appearing “weak”. One of the research papers conducted for this thesis (Bakshi, 2022) concluded that, participants when asked about how important it is for them that their partner shows affection towards them on the scale of 1-5, there were some contradictory ratings as compared to their shared idea of ideal affection. Most of the participants rated low, to moderately important. They justified their ratings with several reasons such as, it’s too cliché to ask someone to meet their needs, can’t be perceived as needy, okay adjusting with whatever is given etc. Whereas, in reality the difficulty expressing needs, setting boundaries, receiving love, and earning love with over-giving were stemming from low self-worth, based on their past experiences (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Therefore, fear, and discomfort turns into self-critical analysis, and self-judgment. This leads to putting energy into protecting themselves by putting efforts into avoiding shame, swallowing real feelings, embarrassments, sadness etc, rather than letting themselves be seen. One of the poets MW Hardwick (2012), expresses how vulnerability is connected with self-worth, who are constantly pretending/ performing to earn love, and prove their worth in one of his poems named “vulnerability”-

*Rooted in “I am not good enough”
Shame and guilt are just part of life
dis-connected, numbed and unfeeling
People with strong sense of self and belonging –feel they are worthy of
Connection, Love, Openness, Caring, and Joy...
Others wonder –Am I good enough
Worthiness is at centre of being awake
whole hearted people have sense of*

*Courage, Authenticity, and Okayness...
Numb vulnerability at your own risk, at your risk —
to addictions, being fearful, alone and wanting
No real feelings just numb self...*

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan states that “it is only in recognizing that we are lacking, that we are capable of love”, which literally transfers into the meaning that we find in others what we lack in ourselves and that the other person completes that missing gap by renewing hope through love. On the contrary, this can stand baseless for people who struggle with the feelings of deserving or being worthy of love/ relationships. They could be drawn to people who lack something that an individual believes they can offer to teach them, or fill that gap with their presence in hope of making themselves feel worthy enough in the eyes of their partner (Pharaon, 2022). Therefore, boundary-less, fear-based, and misaligned relationships become the outcome for people in quest of love.

In a relationship, being vulnerable means taking a risk. There is a possibility of being harmed, but there is also a possibility of connection and growth. Not always is expressing oneself to another person simple. We may fear that if others discover our deepest insecurities, fears, and secrets, they will judge us differently or even reject us. Being vulnerable means risking getting hurt. If we've been hurt in the past when we've given someone our heart, it can be especially difficult to do so with a new person. However, if we never allow ourselves to be vulnerable in our relationships, how can others truly get to know us? How can these connections be strengthened? Vulnerability in a relationship can take a variety of forms because it has different meanings for different people. To be open to sharing all facets of oneself with one's spouse and not be frightened of being judged and condemned, is what it means to be in a healthy relationship. It entails being able to communicate with your partner about your ideas, principles, and values (Linter, 2022). Likewise, it can mean feeling safe enough to share your past and experiences with them. It may also entail the capacity to express difficult emotions, such as sadness, anger, or frustration, without resorting to confrontation. Sarah Epstein (2021), a licensed marriage and family therapist explains, "responding vulnerably means speaking in terms of how their actions affected you, as opposed to attacking the other person. Being vulnerable entails accepting that you cannot control what will transpire, while still acting and speaking in an authentic manner. "When we speak from our feelings and share our fears and aspirations with others, we give them the ability to either hear us or hurt us" (See, Linter, 2022;

Brosnan & Horvath, 2012). In the study conducted for this thesis, it was found that people's level of vulnerability was highly dependent upon the intensity of affection they received from their partner, such as, in the beginning they were able to share their past, desires, needs until they were being met, the moment their self-worth was triggered based on their partners reaction, they activated self-abandonment to avoid rejection, and put themselves in the back seat leading to exhaustion, and irrational hope.

However, Vulnerability isn't just limited to sharing your deepest emotions, expressing love, and sharing real feelings with your partner, but also extends to showing courage to accept one own parts of self, ability to self-regulate, make peace with past events, and treat oneself with compassion. As Brene Brown (2012) founded in her study that experience high sense of belongingness who had high sense of worthiness and vice versa. Schutz (1958) behaviourally describes the need for affection as developing and maintaining satisfying relationships with others that is characterized at the level of one's own self-concept as the perception of one's own lovability (p. 20). Similarly, Floyd, (2006) argues in one of his studies that the advantages of giving affection outweigh those of receiving it. One potential advantage of wives showing, and communicating affection irrespective of the imbalance, are more likely to perceive themselves as receiving sufficient affection to be happy and healthy. However, I oppose this argument based on how over-giving leads to higher feelings of affection until the end of honeymoon period, where disillusionment and deterioration begins (Bakshi, 2022). This study also concluded lack of self-worth leading to self-sabotaging, and lack of open honest communication leading to burn out, and imbalanced labour. Even though Floyd (2006), has argued that giving affection has much more benefits than receiving affection, it is not relevant for a healthy relationship. At the end of the day, the basic human needs are to feel seen, heard, understood, valued, or belonged which is impossible to gain from affection deprivation irrespective of the amount of affection given to the other person. One study supports my argument by establishing that giving affection with imbalance can create alter in the perception of meeting one's own minimal threshold of needs of affection such as I am loved if I love people harder (Hesse, 2019). However, the theory's proposition is relevant in its bits and pieces that giving affection has more benefits than receiving affection if we know the intention, place and context from which the affection is given. This brings me to another understudied phenomenon of vulnerability intention, context, and hangover that people use to show up in relationships in order to feel validated, and accepted at the cost of their own self (Bakshi, 2022). Hence, the thesis is focused on understanding the phenomenon of self-dialogues, and its impact on extent

of vulnerability to feel loved, and fulfils the desires in a way that either promote healthy, or unhealthy communication patterns which in turn effect the perceived commitment, and ways of showing up in a relationship.

Literature Review: Highlights and Theoretical Underpinnings

Some of the highlights and theoretical underpinnings from the literature that served as the basis for this study are described in this section. The details of its contents are laid out in Chapter 2.

Scant research and literature: Limited research is conducted on vulnerability in practise among couples from different cultures. Only few key studies have been conducted on this phenomenon, (e.g., Brown, 2010; Gottman, & Gottman, 2010). Even though many studies have been conducted on shame, self-worth, self-disclosure, relational conflicts etc, (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Orbuch & Markman, 1992), they being relevant in a specific context, doesn't come together as a phenomenon showing its combined effect on modern love, and relationship dynamics with direct experiences, and in-depth studies. Gottman, (2017) have talked about "emotion-embracing", or attunement of emotions as one of the crucial components of the relationship. Similarly, Brown (2012). has talked about "embracing the suck" which means that those who are truly committed can detect when they are emotionally entangled and become genuinely curious about their thoughts and feelings.

The Stone Centre's Strategies of Disconnection, which state that people react to being injured by moving away from, toward, or against that which feels unpleasant, are references made by both Gottman and Brown. When hurt, Gottman advises turning to your partner. Brown emphasizes the need of embracing our difficult emotions and becoming intrigued about them. Both are brave views that value mutuality over individualism and embrace emotions (Gottman, 2017; Brown, 2012).

Unfortunately, the majority of us are not trained to accept unpleasant emotions while we are young. It's illogical and goes against the way our brains are wired. To a greater extent still if our past has been difficult. Additionally, our civilization as a whole is an emotion-deadening one. However, as Brown (2010) warns, there is a cost when we choose to suppress certain feelings. We numb our pleasant emotions when we dull our painful ones. The distinction existing between people who embrace vulnerability, and those who aren't able to is that of whether an individual believes if they deserve the love and acceptance, according to Brown's, (2012) findings. She also added that, to a great extent, social connections benefit

those who believe they are deserving of them. When individuals feel good about themselves, their likelihood of reaching out to others increases. In such situations, they are more willing to be emotionally open to another, or their significant other. However, expressing one's true feelings does not guarantee that they will get what they desire which can make individuals more prone to rejection, or unresponsiveness. However, individuals more willing to be vulnerable are open to take these emotional risks for the relationships such as, if the expression of love goes unreciprocated, or their truth is laughed upon etc, as they are less likely to hold themselves, and their worthiness responsible for lack of reciprocation in any way. Such individuals build healthy relationships based on authentic love, honesty, and interdependence. They embrace uncertainty, making it easier for others to do the same. As Brene Brown quoted, "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen." Therefore, being vulnerable does require emotional safety before emotional connection through authenticity. However, the most difficult aspect of being seen in our most authentic form is being stripped of all of our barriers and defense and become entirely vulnerable. Being vulnerable is daunting, and it takes a lot of fortitude, bravery, and self-acceptance to let others see you for who you truly are (Raue, 2021).

Similarly, John Gottman (2017), has talked about the role of vulnerability in conflicts. Many of us have learnt to speak in a manner that prevents our partners from genuinely understanding us and addressing our needs. When partners feel alienated and misunderstood, it is not uncommon for them to express contempt or criticism. Ultimately, a lack of attunement generates conflict. This is because one of our most fundamental needs is to be understood by others. This urge to be "seen" begins in childhood. As adults, we like to be viewed in our natural state. To allow another inside our inner emotional world with confidence. This is why Brene Brown associate's vulnerability with living with wholeheartedness: it helps us to be fully understood by others. Additionally, she describes vulnerability as the adhesive that ties partnerships together. However, being vulnerable is not simple. It is far simpler to blame or attack our spouses for relationship troubles than it is to articulate how we feel.

Considering the increasing complexities in building as well as maintaining the relationships, and rise in the toxic/ unhealthy relationships, or forcibly making a choice to stay single, or casual dating, inspired by the work of Brene Brown, and John Gottman, I conducted a study on Indian population to understand the roots of the concerns that romantic relationships are facing in terms of building a relationship, giving and receiving love and embracing each other as they truly are. Moreover, to understand what at first place is even leading towards such

unfulfilling relationships and complex dynamics of relationships where individuals are heartbroken, hopeless, and insecure. We found the “why”, and the “how” of the phenomenon. With the exploration of interviewees responses, as well as the survey responses, we observed that most of the people came forward with implicit patterns where they have been suppressing their real needs and feelings in order to be loved and chosen by their partners. Through analysis, it came out that the idea of love and survival among individuals was folded in conditioned responses whenever they felt threatened. A deep desire to abandon oneself in order to maintain the presence of their partner and avoid feeling threatened/ rejected in any way is a trauma response i.e., any perceived threat will cause stuckness in the sympathetic state leading to present itself in various ways (Vincent, 2022) to feel in control again. It is worth noticing that the role of vulnerability in securing affection, using vulnerability with intention to gain acceptance, and validation, or to feel vulnerability as a weakness because of not getting desired response leads people to broken, unfulfilled, and misaligned relationships. Adjusting to bare minimum has become the goal for the people rather than thriving in their relationships where they feel they are getting the love they deserve. Therefore, it is important to study how it is brought into a relationship as it acts as a core strength of romantic relationships which helps in building an interdependent relationship. According to Sternberg's theory of love (1986) a healthy and happy relationship cannot alone survive on one component, it requires progression to consummate love which involves intimacy, love, and commitment in everyday interactions. All the three components are achieved through the quality of communication individuals indulge in either with self or with their partners in a relationship. The synthesis, evaluation, and analysis of extensive review articles have shed light on the existing gaps, numerous different perspectives, and scope of future potential research. It is essential to conduct gender-neutral studies to understand the contribution of couples at various levels in relationships. Highlighting the disclosure style and patterns of women than men has led to puzzling conclusions due to contradictions and observations in real scenarios. Surveys were proved vague, as every individual define love, sex, intimacy, or passion within his or her own created understanding; knowing how one interact with such terms can be a major predictor of a healthy relationship. In-depth studies will help in providing conclusive statements which would be in alignment with the necessities and demands of changing environment and increased self-governed culture. Studies have focused a lot on couples who are married, even though much of the younger generation is romantically involved (Carver & Udry, 2003) who are facing difficulties and challenges in understanding relationships, suffering from breakups and maintaining connections based on many unhealthy factors like seeking instant gratification,

unhealed trauma or repeated unhelpful patterns. It would be beneficial at societal level to conduct research on personal relationships on a population which is not much represented. For example: India, has focused extensively upon physical, sexual intimacy, dating violence, separation anxiety and fear of loneliness (Janardhana & Manjula, 2018). It is an urgency that we focus beyond the familial influences and childhood patterns as much as we cannot deny the fact that it plays a major role, we also need to accept that today's youth is much aware about their operational unhealthy patterns. Many studies have focused upon people acting on their best behavior during the honeymoon phase of a relationship (Quek et al., 2015), whereas a limited amount of research has talked about destructive forms of vulnerability that exists initially between couples to seek love and avoid shame and rejection. Therefore, the role of vulnerability in young adults remain unclear in changing landscape of relationships and the lopsided focus on certain aspects affect non-productively on digging deeper in to more psychologically and cognitively entwined aspects of behavior. The overall quality of relationship management could benefit a lot if the focus of research finds the right balance

Problem Statement

Romantic love is seen as an important part of marriage (Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991), or any other form of healthy relationship, but the lack of loving feelings was the most common problem in couple's therapy. Whisman et al. (1997) found that "lack of loving feeling" was one of the hardest problems to fix in couple's therapy (p. 364). Dating process has become more emotionally daunting, and becoming complex over time (e.g., Shulman, & Connolly, 2013), with prolonged suffering, loneliness, and emotional despair. In the counselling literature, it has been found that many people get tired of minimizing the detachment single-handedly in the relationship through chasing, and self-betrayal (Peel et al., 2019) to get the affection they need that they finally give up, and turn negative towards their partner. The enduring dynamics model (Caughlin et al., 2000) suggests that initial differences between couples persist over time and augur later satisfaction and stability. One of the studies based on 6,712 samples of participants (Jerbaek & Muoio, 2018), concluded that 70% of the people do not believe they are good enough for anyone; 42% have an intense desire to be liked by anyone; 60% of the sample have a strong need to be approved by others, and 66% people believe they are worthless, and useless. The statistics are alarming, as it justifies the increase in the toxic, destructive, and imbalanced relationships. This study can give us insight into the reasons, reactions, consequences, (Civilotti, 2021), and overall experience of the phenomenon that builds and perpetually occurs in the relationship.

It is unfortunate to observe people feeling incapable of love, or being loved, and resisting it in today's world. Self-silencing over self-expression is seen to be much easier among people to secure affection. Vulnerability, and healthy communication patterns are often cited in mental health practises as a way to have healthy relationships. However, we know very little about this phenomenon among Indian population in practise over knowledge, given its impact on individual, and relational well-being, this study was needed. Moreover, it was important to capture the participants' perceptions and experiences of this phenomenon as it has been understudied in the empirical literature, and in Indian population, and appears to be not well understood among relationship scholars and practitioners.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The goal of this study was to learn more about the relationship dynamics among dating couples in romantic relationship through mixed method survey within India. It was believed that by gaining a better understanding of the practise and presence of significant components of relationships that helps in building foundation of a relationship, it would be possible to expand the research knowledge that would benefit the individuals, society, and relationships as a whole. Historically, relationships were not looked at the way it is looked at in modern society and India is no exception to it. The relationship is talked about and looked upon differently than before which has brought forward the rapidly changing dynamics of relationships as well as the dating culture. As the Indian culture is warming up to the idea of dating before marriage or having partners as a natural occurrence in life, we have parallely seen a shift in the openness of relationships, and the frequency of increase in dating relationships among youth, young adults, and even other age groups. Yet, there are people who can't bring themselves to feel happy, contented, or satisfied in a relationship after a certain point in time. As the making of relationships is increasing, so is the breaking of relationships. With the rising complexity in relationships, as well as the increasing loneliness, and other emotional concerns regarding people's emotional health, forming connections is making people more wounded over time. This research can be used to understand not just the symptoms but also the root of the problem of rising relationship failures. The findings can be used to address the needs of the concern, incorporate the results in professional settings such as therapy sessions for forming interventions, and can also be used to build much-needed relationship education for schools and families to facilitate individuals toward fulfilling relationships with self as well as others. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How is vulnerability viewed as a need for attachment or a means of establishing a connection in relationships?
2. What are the factors of vulnerability effecting emotional intimacy?
3. How does vulnerability (or lack of it) effects the foundation of the relationships.
4. How does the integrated communication patterns lead towards emotional connection/disconnection?
5. Does the meaning of commitment impact the way an individual shows up in the relationship?
6. What are the differences between those who showed up with vulnerability, and those who struggled with being vulnerable?

Research Approach

Due to the nature of the research topic, I adopted a mixed-method approach for the final investigation. On receiving approval from Galgotias University's Institutional Review Board, I conducted in-depth interviews for the stage 1 of the study, and mixed-method survey analysis for the stage 2, to study the experiences and perceptions of a number of participants who had willingly contributed to this research and reported challenges with their dating partners.

Assumptions

The experience as a Counselling Psychologist and also working with 15 individuals in extensive interview, lent itself to six primary assumptions. First, romantic relationships are of great importance to most people, and lack of loving feeling can cause greater distress. Affection deprivation has been linked to a variety of indicators of mental health. Floyd (2014) discovered a link between affection deprivation (defined as a perceived lack of touch) and the number of individual personalities, mood, and anxiety disorders. There were also links between deprivation and loneliness, depression, stress, and psychological traits like insecure attachment and alexithymia (Floyd, 2014). Second, many relationships consist of imbalance and unhealthy communication dynamics in relationships in terms of giving, and receiving love, self-narratives, gaslighting, cultural influence, and fear-based love, which is the cause of prolonged suffering caused in at least one of the couple members (Hendrick, 1988). This assumption is guided by my work with clients, research on fading of affection, and personal experiences/observations. The one suffering in such dynamics are the ones who over function in the relationships by keeping oneself in the backseat. This assumption also corroborates with my

previous research findings based on interviews. Third, vulnerability isn't practised in its purest form, but it is a medium through which people seek reassurance, and approval to feel accepted, or approved of. This assumption is supported by my research findings, and the concept of self-disclosure. Some of the studies state that individuals disclose whatever they feel will not be a threat or cause of conflict in the relationship (Gilbert, 1976). Fourth, commitment is often seen higher among individuals who are in an unfulfilling relationship until the point of no return, accepting disillusionment (deterioration), or waiting on the partner to break-up. This assumption is guided by my previous research, work with clients, and few researches which indicates the higher commitment among individuals who feel unsafe/ unsatisfied in their relationships (Hemesath, 2016). Fifth assumption was that many dating relationships, and increasing complexities in today's world is due to the lack of authenticity, and self-rejection. People are becoming broken over time trying to fulfil the romanticized version of love to fill the void through others in the form of "passionate love" or "attachment love". Sixth, relationships are often kept on a pedestal at the cost of self (self-abandonment), is becoming the sole source of getting ones needs met, and overlooking the work required to build an intentional growing relationship are the missing bricks to build a solid foundation of the relationship. Finally, adults, and mental health providers often struggle to understand, define, or address vulnerability as a relational skill and the prime reasons of connect or disconnect in the relationship. This assumption is also based on my personal and professional experiences, the results of interviews, and reviews of the literature. All of these things support the idea that there isn't a lot of research, education, or theory on this topic, and what there is often uses confusing and contradictory language.

Proposed working model for the study

Below is the proposed model for the study that indicates the phenomenon of vulnerability being affected by various related aspects which either leads to connection or disconnection among couples (See figure 1).

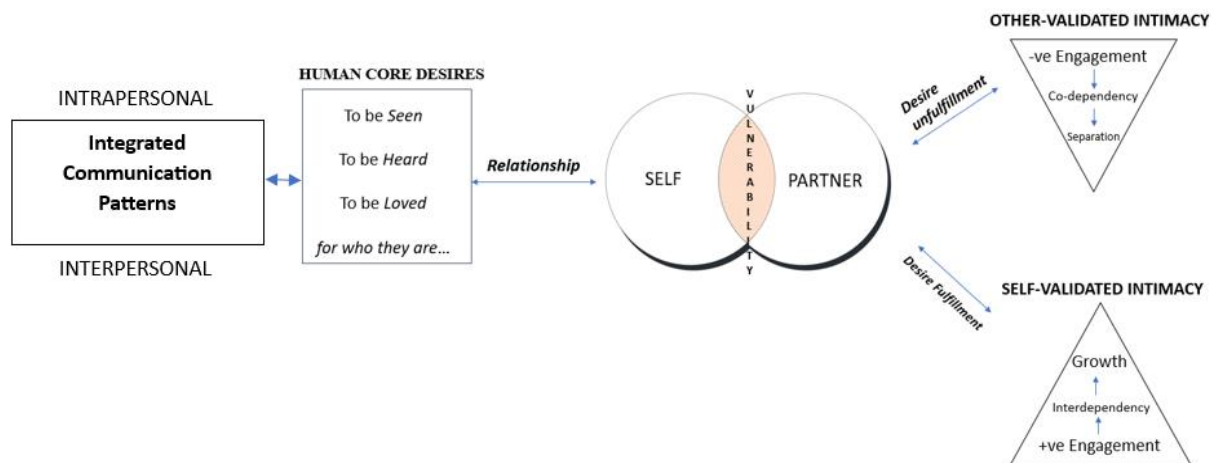


Figure 1- Proposed working model

The proposed model of the study gives the framework to the survey designed, concept being studied, and also reflects the fundamentals of relationship dynamics that can lead to healthy vs unhealthy dynamics i.e., either connection, or disconnection. To understand vulnerability, it is beneficial to understand the underlying functions of the same. It is in those moments when we feel most connected with oneself, and the others are which makes us feel emotionally exposed, and if reciprocated- strengthens the bond i.e., individual feel seen, heard, valued, and loved for who they are which are the human core desires (LePera, 2020). The models explain the underlying functions of internal experience that impacts the values, beliefs, and influenced responses which either leads to self-validated intimacy, or other-validated intimacy. Intimacy that is based on external validation from one's partner, such as acceptance, empathy, and reciprocal disclosure, is known as other-validated intimacy. This is sometimes confused with intimacy itself. On the other hand, self-validated intimacy is built on a person's ability to maintain their own sense of self and self-worth while sharing, without expecting acceptance or reciprocity from their partner. This type of intimacy is closely linked to one's level of differentiation, or their ability to maintain a clear sense of self despite pressure from loved ones to conform. It is essentially a reflection of one's relationship with themselves. This is adapted from the work of David Schnarch (1997). Therefore, this model focuses on not just the aspect where vulnerability is also explored from the flipside i.e., as vulnerability is often seen as a necessary aspect of building meaningful and intimate relationships, as it involves opening up and exposing one's emotions, thoughts, and feelings to another person, however, the flipside of vulnerability can also be a strong sense of self-confidence, a deep understanding of one's personal values and beliefs, and a firm sense of personal integrity. People who have a strong sense of self-confidence, personal truth, and integrity are less likely to feel threatened by the risks associated with vulnerability, as they have a solid foundation of self-awareness and

self-respect (Schanfarber, 2018). As a result, they are more likely to approach relationships from a place of strength, knowing that they can handle rejection, criticism, and disappointment, and that they will not lose their sense of self in the process. Hence, a sense of self-confidence, a deep understanding of one's personal values and beliefs, and a firm sense of personal integrity, which allows people to approach relationships from a place of strength and resilience. Hence, exploring the dynamics of intimacy through the lens of vulnerability (internal and within) is the representation showed in figure 1, as well as is the focus point if the research.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale for this study originated from my professional role as a mental health practitioner treating individuals and couples with relationship challenges, and concerns. Relationship conflicts are the most prevalent and recurring problem of people in psychotherapy (Pinsker et al., 1985). In such cases, long-standing, chronic relationship concerns are frequently addressed rather than separate, acute problems (Doss et al., 2004). In addition, absence of love is the most challenging issue to treat in couple's/ individuals' treatment (Whisman et al., 1997). Most of the ways what and how we associate love with, starts in our childhood based on our relationship with the caregivers, as also mentioned in adult attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973). It has been highlighted that the attachment figure and attachment relationship is based on three functions that must be accomplished by an attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1991). First, the person should feel the “proximity” at the time of need, second, they should be perceived as a “safe haven” and third the attachment figure should be viewed as “a secure base” (Obegi & Berant, 2009, p. 19). As described by Obegi & Berant (2009), secure base is where a relationship partner can provide a platform to obtain non-attachment related goals which leads to self-expansion which is also one of the most desired results of a healthy relationship and forming of strong foundation (Aron et al., 2004). This is exactly where the problem exists in relationships today.

As a society we have focused heavily upon the increasing number of divorces, changing relationships dynamics to situationship, or online dating, and the self-reliant/ independence factor in people that is causing trouble to sustain relationships., whereas, the focal point of other researchers have majorly been gender differences in relationships (majorly women centric), how childhood impacts conflict resolution strategies or other relational aspects, premarital sexual involvement, role of peer pressure in adolescent relationships, dating violence, loneliness and other important relationship aspects like love, trust, autonomy and

understanding. Living in a pre-existing uncertain and complex environment, forming connections are becoming more and more complicated. It is important to observe the shift in today's relationships - how broken and dependent people become after suffering the loss of self and connection. Trauma bonding is confused with love, self-abandonment is considered as a token of affection, self-awareness is ignored. Gradually, ingratiation is becoming the foundation of relationships. The goal of growing together and individually with support of partners is sadly replaced by an urge of fulfilling the 'romanticised' idea of love. The new way of feeling valued toxically revolves around getting one's own needs met without the consideration of having to give back into the relationship. The solution to this problem lies in creating interventions that can facilitate people in giving and receiving the love which is healthy and conscious driven, rather than driven by unconscious unhealthy patterns.

Ultimately, this investigation's findings could have far-reaching implications for people of all ages. As emphasised by Berscheid & Regan (2005), "the factors associated with the maintenance and stability of marital relationships have been of special concern to relationship scholars because of the importance of the marital relationship to the partners, to their children, and to society" (p. 192). Discord in adult relationships is harmful to people's emotional and physical wellbeing (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Therefore, adults may benefit from resolving this condition, which could lead to fewer cases of mental and physical illness (Goldberg, 2010). Many of life's greatest and worst moments are tied to the people we love, and feelings of sadness or anxiety frequently stem from strained friendships or the absence of a romantic partner (Mearns, 1991). The association between relationships (couple distress), and individual emotional/ mental wellbeing are being increasingly reported (Lebow et al., 2012). When a couple breaks up, it's common for each member to feel a deep, abiding ache for the other for a long time (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Unfortunately, collectively responsible as a society, trauma bonds/ toxic relationships are rising, people are settling for the bare minimum, and the excitement of falling in love surpasses the maintenance of being in love (Bakshi, 2022). Various social Psychologists are intrigued by the phenomenon of falling in love and other characteristics of romantic love, concluding that love and its stages have cognitive, behavioral and affective components (Principles of Social Psychology, 2015, p.349). Falling in love is often used synonymously with passionate love, which as the name suggests you fall head over heels for someone, also referred to as a transitional phase between not being in love and being in love" (Sloan, 2021). The characterization of this stage is same as of passionate stage i.e., lust, infatuation, excitement, craving each-others presence, simple listening to say to say lives

being great joy (Arangua, 2022) and often intoxicating or passionate. Therefore, the commencement of a strong desire to be with someone and build a close relationship with that specific person is called falling in love (Aron et al., 1995). It is only wise for any individual falling in love to not confuse this phase with the expectation of necessary accomplishment of further stages in love (Fromm, 1956; Grant, 1998). Whereas, being in love is a stage that follows the phase of falling in love as a result of its experience (Ackerman, 1994). Ackerman, 1994 has described the feeling of being in love as steadier than falling in love and can result in more addictive rewards that a human being craves such as familiarity, warmth, intimacy, happiness and mental comfort (p. 166). This kind of intense passion is not necessarily in just the initial stages of the relationship until the couples make an effort to rekindle the intimacy through actions like vulnerability, creating shared meaning or making rituals that fire the everyday closeness (Sloan, 2021). Even though there are studies and observed among common people that passionate love or falling in love is sometimes used interchangeably with romantic love, it is important to note that it is very different than what passionate love looks like. Loving someone is very different than obsessive love tainted with one's fantasies, and hopes. As psychologist Paulette Sherman (2008), PsyD, and author of the *dating from the inside out*, puts it "To love someone is to know them deeply, experience their challenging sides, and fully embrace them". Loving someone comes from a place of security, vulnerability, balance and aligned values. It takes a lot of work to cross the dips of such stages to reach a place where you feel loved and loving someone feels liberating, joyful and meaningful specially when the initial racing excited hormones or brain chemicals wears off. This study can help form recommendations to help individuals become aware, and build a level of self-love before seeking it outside.

However, as researchers, we are largely ignorant of how to cultivate romantic love, preserve it, or endure the apparent anguish of its absence. As Regan (2017) concluded, "Understanding the types of love that exist, the changes that commonly occur over time in romantic relationships, the signs and symptoms of interpersonal problems, and the coping mechanisms that are available can enable us to effectively alleviate the difficulties that may develop in our love relationships" (p. 216). Even though on one end of the spectrum people are longing to be seen, loved, and desired like they do, and on the other end of the spectrum people are consciously choosing to be single, hold back true feelings, fight the reality, and feel angry towards the difficulty of maintain relationships. The experience of relationships on such extremes of the continuum raises the question on the lack of education, and knowledge around portrayal of love, sex, or relationships. As Esther Perel quoted in one of her interviews, "We

have gone up the Maslow ladder of needs, and now we are bringing our need for self-actualization to the marriage. We keep wanting more. We are asking from one person what once an entire village used to provide”. The goal of growing together and individually with the support of partners is sadly replaced by an urge of fulfilling the ‘romanticized’ idea of love. The new way of feeling valued toxically revolves around getting one’s own needs met without the consideration of having to give back into the relationship. Many people have also attached a negative connotation to the word “needy” (Venable, 2021). In the research conducted on fading affection (Bakshi, 2022), when asked about how important it is for them that their partner shows affection towards them, there were some contradictory ratings as compared to their ideal affection standards. Most of the participants rated low, to moderately important. They justified their ratings with reasons such as, setting high standards are futile, reinforce possessiveness, having affection standards are bound to bring disappointment, too cliché to ask for meeting their needs, and can’t be perceived as needy. It leads some people to perform in a relationship from a place of inauthenticity, and deceptive affection (Horan et al., 2011; Floyd, 2014).

Relationships are highly studied in ways of relationships breakdown or the reasons for break-up and heartbreaks (e.g., Hill et al., 1976; Baxter, 1984) but the changes in the relationships and their emotional aspects are the most understudied phenomenon in literature (Hemesath, 2016). Karen Kayser (1990), has conducted in-depth interviews she did with married people who are disaffected but still together and discovered three stages of disaffection: a) Disappointment (disillusionment and increased anger, hurt, negativity, thoughts of leaving, and emotional/ physical withdrawal), b) Between Disappointment and Disaffection (continued anger, hurt, negativity, assessing rewards and costs, trying to change the marriage, thoughts of leaving, and withdrawal emotionally and physically), and c) Reaching Disaffection (apathy, indifference and ending marriage). One of the studies (Hemesath, 2016) talked about falling out of romantic love (FORL), in which she studies the path toward marital disaffection and divorce. She indicated factors such as attachment style, past relationship history, self-esteem, mate selection criteria, and level of intimacy with the spouse during the phase of FORL. Karen (1993), also stated that the participants made efforts to change the relationship, hoping the marriage would survive, and improve by making attempts and such attempts were labelled as pleasing, over-accommodating, asserting their needs/ wants, etc. Similarly, the patterns are also found in dating couples despite them wanting a more conscious relationship. Most of the clients that reach out for therapy complains about staying in an out of love relationship, feeling guilty of being in one, blaming oneself as a failure for not being able

to maintain a peaceful relationship, or desiring of a partner to meet their every need, irrespective of the present red flags, their own actions functioning as a contributing factor, or over-giving to feel worthy of their own existence.

Based on how majority of the research is focused on married relationships, this study would help the unmarried couples, or individuals irrespective of age in dating relationships. the falling out of romantic love, the line between bending and breaking to keep a relationship, learning when to let go, and most importantly how to form relationships based on authenticity since the start of the relationship will be advantageous for the youth, young adult, or anyone who is dating but unmarried. Most importantly, it can also impact positively the adults, or married people to form healthier bonds which in-turn be advantageous to upcoming generation. Therefore, the new understandings of this phenomenon and its occurrence can help people in India preserve the relationship in a healthy manner, build the relationship they wish for, and find self-confidence in dealing with the challenges that come along the relationships i.e., relational threats, or triggers (Menanno, 2022). It is important for a couple to work together on the relationship triggers as two people of different attachment styles cannot co-exist without the efforts to understand each other's needs and functioning in a relationship and catering to these needs to build secure balanced relationship. Any kind of emotional expression does carry a relational meaning as well as a literal meaning (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Floyd, 1997) that sends an underlying message to the person the expression is directed towards. This cycle also corresponds with the risk regulation models self-protective goals, as people with lower self-esteem tries to minimize the perceived relational threat i.e., the risk of rejection (Luerssen et al., 2017), and that can lead to the confusion between emotional reactivity and emotional vulnerability. Pineo (1961) called this process the difficulty adjusting to the reality of the marriage from romanticism. He also concluded in one of his studies that the individual's disenchantment involved some primary factors such as less touch, lack of trust, holding back true feelings, and attempts to resolve disagreements. Similarly, Kayser (1990, 1993) has highlighted a few factors in her study that she named "turning points" (behaviors that accelerated disaffection and marital doubts). Some of the factors were lack of emotional support, controlling behavior, lack of ownership, unequal distribution of responsibility, and substance abuse.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap by using the obtained in-depth data through the lens of those who have experienced dating relationships and are either struggling or flourishing in their relationships, to build a pathway that transforms knowledge into action when it comes to building maintaining, or growing interdependence in a relationship by

building on the cause of the concern by focusing on the rudimentary elements of the romantic relationships including the self, partner, and the relationship.

Summary

Although romantic relationships have been studied, our understanding of the importance of self-awareness, relationship skills, ideas around love influenced by past experiences, and how people actually show up with preconceived notions, and build relationship on fantasies from raw point of view, is in its infancy. There are very few studies that focus on the interplay of various factors in a relationship that actually leads to the making, or breaking of the relationship (eg, Hemesath, 2016). Studying the relationship not just from conflict management, or attachment theory perspective, but studying the foundational aspects of the relationship in-depth, such as vulnerability, presence or lack of responsiveness, communication influenced by the self-dialogues, etc must be taken into consideration. Even though vulnerability has been studied by Brene Brown (2012) the context, nature, presence, and forms of it, is limited in association with Indian population with respect to various scenarios and types of relationship.

Unfortunately, the shift in today's generation is opposite of what is defined as romantic love (Brandon, 1980, p. 3). For instance, individuals are preferring to stay in mutual resentful relationships, over-function, or stay at the cost of self to avoid loneliness. Hence, this research focuses on the why, and how of the what aspect by solely focusing on the basic elements of relationships where individuals are finding difficulties to thrive with their romantic partners. Therefore, we are taking the concept of vulnerability one step ahead in terms of understanding how the extent of it is influenced by the individual's ego stories, scripts, values, alternatives to connect, and other self-belief patterns which reflects in the way they communicate in the relationship whether during conflict, or regular expression of their needs, disappointments etc i.e., understanding the internal experience of an individual and its overt expression in varied forms that either leads to disconnection, or connection. This research would also help us understand where do people stand on understanding the concept of vulnerability, intent of using it in their relationships, and what actions do they perform against their intuitions to hide their vulnerability. Also, it will reflect the level of self-love one carries in the relationship that impacts the way they show up with their partners. Therefore, studying vulnerability in association with integrated communication patterns can help us look at the relational concerns prevailing in India from a collective vantage point. This will enrich the understanding of this phenomenon. New understandings of this phenomenon could have implications for the many

Indians who at one point or another find themselves in love, and wish to make it work, or preserve the relationship.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes the review of the existing empirical literature pertaining to vulnerability, and communication patterns in romantic relationships. This chapter unfolds the theoretical framework, and underpinnings for this study. The focus of this review was to gain a better understanding of what is known as vulnerability, and its impact on relationships, keeping the related aspects in consideration such as intrapersonal communications, interpersonal communication, intimacy, the dynamics of the relationships etc. Throughout the review of literature, we have added the gaps that justifies the study for its sparse information, and important role in any human's life. The literature related to vulnerability, and related concepts were thoroughly reviewed throughout the research process (from stage 1 study to the stage 2, the present study) to ensure the relevance of information, and to form a base of the study. In this chapter the first, the current patterns and themes will be reviewed by focusing on the prominent theories of relationships that are used to explain the system of it. Second, the concept of vulnerability will be reviewed extensively which will also describe some of the terminologies we are considering for the study. Third, understanding the communication as a pivotal aspect of relationship will be reviewed descriptively keeping in mind the relationship it plays with the process of vulnerability. Fourth, we have highlighted the concept of intimacy and commitment in romantic relationships which will conceptualize the existing knowledge on the way emotional intimacy is described in the literature. Fifth, we will describe the methodologies that are most commonly used among researchers to study some of the very complex phenomenon in relationships. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the literature on the phenomenon of vulnerability, related communication patterns and the discovered limitation.

Building meaningful connections are indispensable to human lives as human beings desire social bonds. This fundamental drive brings meaning, purpose, and growth into existence (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Cag & Yildirim, 2018). The "Hierarchy of Needs" is a classic theory through which Abraham Maslow (1943) expounded the psychological needs as love and belongingness for any individual to be self-actualized. For fulfilling relationships, the love element is not merely responsible. In today's world, considering core beliefs formed around self and others due to past experiences is vital in comprehending the noticeable shift and confusions in relationships because trauma bonding is bewildered as love, self-

abandonment is considered as a token of affection, self-awareness is ignored and gradually, ingratiation is becoming the foundation of relationships. Living in a pre-existing uncertain and complex environment, forming connections are becoming incrementally complicated. The dominant cause for increasing ambiguity in relationships are because of the perpetual dynamics of society creating uncertainty, where individualism, self-sufficiency and economic changes are being practised (Shulman et al., 2005; Wallace & Kovatcheva, 1998) and other cause lies in the Family system theory (Bowen, 1978), which suggests that people with low differentiation levels face difficulty (Gubbins et al.,2010) at interpersonal level (emotionally dysregulated and not self-aware) and at intrapersonal level (difficulty maintaining balance between self and other; individuality and maintaining the relationship) which creates imbalance within self and in intimate relationships. The approach towards the idea of relationship is changing considerably as relational goals are being replaced by an urge of fulfilling the romanticised idea of love which in turn is consuming people with loneliness and deprived sense of self. Obtaining one's intrinsic worth toxically revolves around getting one's own needs met without the consideration of having to give back into the relationship which is cultivating mental health challenges (Tillman et al., 2019). Mental health and relationships are extensively studied in the field of research where research has proven that toxic relationships have an adverse effect on psychological wellbeing like, anxiety, depression, distorted self-image (eg: Soller, 2014; Cag & Yildirim et al., 2018). Even though a huge amount of research has focused on people's behavior in relationship, it is limited to childhood patterns, peer influence relationships, past relational experiences, attachment style and lack of education around relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2013; Brian Soller, 2015; Janardhana & Manjula 2018; Xia et al., 2018; Bryant & Conger, 2002; Fraley & Roisman 2015; Reis et al., 1996). The trauma induced emotional and behavioral elements are individualistic in nature which plays a major role in establishing the foundation of relationships. This gives rise to various undetermined questions on individuals micro-actions *but* potent acts in relationship that requires a mindful approach for studying new phenomenon of connecting with self and partners in relationships. This would help further studies in developing interventions on the art of conscious coupling for people to facilitate them towards building and sustaining meaningful relationships at individual, relational and collective levels.

Current patterns and themes

Numerous theories exist in the field of Psychology to explain the conduct of individuals in romantic relationships. In fact, existing researches have explicated behaviors exhibited by

partners and have also discovered interactional experiences of couples among each other with the help of long-established theories and models. These theories/models substantially talk about relationships at three levels:

1. Childhood patterns and activated core belief towards people revealed in later personal adult relationships such as, Internal working model (Bowlby, 1973; Roisman et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2007) and Early Adult Romantic Relationships Model (Bryant & Conger 2002; Xia et al., 2018).
2. Adolescent relationships progress in a specific order of Initiation, affiliation, Intimacy and commitment such as, Phase or Stage Based Models of the Progression of Romantic Experience (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).
3. Attraction brings potential partners together but to nurture a satisfying relationship mutual engagement and reciprocal affiliation is essential such as Evolutionary Theory of love (Fisher, 1994).

These concepts are also extensively used by therapists to understand the behavior which causes clashes in relationships. Even though these concepts are widely used to resolve conflicts, there are many less cases where people seek therapy the first time, they face difficulty handling the indifference with their partners which later leads to resentment. Regardless of young people becoming more involved in romantic relationships, these notions are not being used for individuals at a much early and required stage to provide guidance for facilitating them towards healthy relationships. A study conducted through surveys (Weissbourd, Peterson & Weinstein, 2013/2014) concluded that high school/college students of the United States enquired into questions like: how to be in a relationship? how to handle hard emotions after a traumatic separation? What is love? or how to find potential partners? when asked about the effectiveness of sex education classes. It is vital to fill these gaps for our society and invest in removing barriers towards forming quality relationships.

Vulnerability

The constant human interaction with the world inevitably creates numerous occasions that evoke hard emotions such as sadness, shame, hatred, anxiety, guilt, or worthlessness. These strong feelings are capable of manifesting themselves into different forms of unhealthy behavioral patterns which serve an underlying purpose of feeling loved and accepted because. This continuous process of reinforced patterns creates trauma/fear-based behaviors leading to inauthenticity. The issues researchers have pointed out as inauthenticity (Soller, 2014),

lack of autonomy (Gubbins et al., 2010) and neglect of education on creating relationships (Weissbourdet al., 2013) can contribute to the factors that are responsible for discomfort arising from vulnerability in relationships. People are becoming afraid to be seen, known, and heard for who they truly are and to share the experiences they have lived with their loved ones.

The profound impact of vulnerability:

Every human being has three core desires i.e., “they want to be seen, heard, and loved for who they are” (LePera 2020b). In relationships, vulnerability is when an individual lets another person see their inner world. They allow themselves to be seen for their genuine self and consciously chooses to not hold back their true emotions with their partner. Few pieces of research have suggested that among couples this can be achieved through sharing interests, beliefs, feelings, fantasies (Shaffer et al., 1990; Lazowski and Andersen, 1990), needs, desires, and expectations (Derlega and Grzelak, 1979; Rosenfeld and Kendrick, 1984). It is equally important to study *the ways* partners put themselves out in a relationship, display boundaries, express curiosity, and share their life experiences. By being vulnerable “we step into the uncertainty” (Brown, 2013, Myth 1: Vulnerability is Weakness, para. 4), show up in relationships, take initiatives, freely share thoughts, emotions, and feelings without worrying about the consequences with an intention to connect and hope for it to be received. Many studies have used the term “self-disclosure” to explain this very phenomenon of vulnerability (eg: Sprecher and Hendrick, 2004; Welker et al., 2014; Quek et al., 2015). Much research has concluded self-disclosure as a powerful communication *tool* to nourish and enhance emotional intimacy and satisfaction in any relationship (e.g.: Collin and miller, 1994; Manne et al., 2004; Soliz et al., 2009; Prager et al., 2013). Communication here signifies a two-way conversation between couples as a speaker and a respondent. When one partner expresses openly and the other partner shows presence by positive engagement, it builds trust, intimacy (Welker et al., 2014; Prager et al., 2013; Derlega and Chaikin 1976; Reis and Shaver, 1988), and a sense of belongingness as it results in the feeling of being heard, loved, supported, understood, and validated. This psychological intimacy and joy can be achieved if couples are ready to create and hold space for welcoming each other as a whole person i.e., all parts of who they are. This can help them expand oneself for each other, co-create a safe environment and connect with conscious efforts and intention rather than with unhelpful, faulty conditioning. The two models of social psychology i.e., the self-expansion model (Aron 1996/2004) and social penetration theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) support the former statement as they conclude that these

practices strengthen the relationship. Creating love is a conscious process, as it requires to learn and unlearn to thrive in a relationship. To begin building such connections it requires to feel worthy of receiving love along with the act of giving, appreciating, holding space for partners thoughts and curiosity and appreciation. It is important for couples to be open to building their capacity and resources to experience what they have to contribute in a relationship and what relationship has in store to bring out for them (Groves, 2020). One research finding (Arriaga et al., 2007) proposes that people who feel committed in their relationships make an effort to accept the imperfections and handle any perceived relational threats with their partners in a constructive manner as opposed to people who feel uncertain and less committed in a relationship. Partners who find it difficult to handle any sort of uncertainty such as doubts, questions or insecurity related to relationships (Knobloch and Solomon, 1999) or keep on picking on any unfavorable quality of their partner tend to function on impulse, fixed perceptions, and beliefs which weaken their relationship and perception about their partners. Self-awareness of intention behind being vulnerable to others is also a very important factor as it is often confused and unconsciously practiced as oversharing and emotional vomit in relationships. One research has mentioned that people with anxious attachment style have the same level of intimacy as of secure attachment individuals (Simpson et al., 2011). They do tend to easily get attached and try to increase intimacy through vulnerability but for different reasons through unhealthy patterns in order to feel love. This intimacy even though achieved through vulnerability, is usually fear-based and manipulative. The intent can range from practicing vulnerability with a hidden purpose (e.g., manipulating someone to love, getting experiences validated, expecting others to heal their wounds) to being vulnerable with a hope for connecting at a deeper level with the partner and promoting positive emotions, outlook and healthy transformation in relationship. Information that is not important for the growth of a relationship or pertaining to the partner, can be threatening. A study has shown that when a self-disclosing person indulges into sharing personal information that can quiver the feeling of safety in the relationship can lead to conflicts (Gilbert, 1976). It can't be stressed more that vulnerability keeps the bond fresh and relationship functional as it is what creates intimacy in any relationship. Self-disclosure carries the power of creating intimacy at deeper levels which means it can either enhance or break the relationship, therefore it has greater control over our mental and psychological well-being (Prager et al., 2013). It is essential to share the parts of one's life that are directed towards relational growth and freedom. In one of the telephonic interviews (Hoskins et al., 2008) conducted with women who are inclined towards breast and ovarian cancer (BRCA mutation) were asked if they have shared about their condition to their

partners. The result indicated that several participants despite feeling fearful and anxious decided to disclose their concern to their partners and to their surprise they felt deeply supported and connected because of the compassion and support they received as a response.

Content and order of disclosures

Several researchers have focused upon the order of sharing, area of communication and the type of message that is conveyed through self-disclosure. There are many mixed findings and contradictions in this area of research. One of the research projects has discussed the benefits of self-disclosure on the bases of context (Schumm et al., 1986) according to which the goodness or badness of experience in the relationship depends upon the positive or negative information that is disclosed or shared among couples. On the contrary a researcher has found that, the couples who share and support their partners both, good as well as bad experiences and have an open conversation on anything that is being shared (Levinger and Senn 1967; Goldsmith, 2004) impacts the perceived level of satisfaction and increased sense of value in a relationship. It has been observed that couples usually avoid deep or tough conversations and engage in talks that do not remove the tension in their minds. Research has mentioned that communicating at a superficial level is more common than having an intimate conversation (Taylor, 1968). Research conducted on married couples found that among couple samples they were studying usually disclose trivial concerns or feelings to their partners like body concerns, reproduction related, or general knowledge and discuss less about physical intimacy related concerns (Farber and Sohn, 2007). With respect to the order of disclosure, a research proposed that opening up in a relationship to share the innermost desires and feelings usually happen in a superficial manner at the beginning and with time pave the way up to personal intimate emotions (Altman and Taylor 1973). It can be concluded that it is important for the couples to establish an environment of safety and trust to focus on the feelings and emotions being shared (Duck, 1988; Nystul, 1999) rather than the type of information because it indicates respect for each other's way of being. To support the former statement many researchers have talked about the presence of few components in relationships that increase satisfaction for example: acceptance, approval, being aware of each other's emotional needs, making efforts to create space for new healthy relationship rules, being free to their nature around each other and working through the differences together.

Gender aspects of Relational Self-disclosure

Research on self-disclosure has significantly focused upon gender differences (Cag & Yildirim, 2018; Quek et al., 2015; Rosenfeld and Bowen, 1991; Fincham, 2003). According to a research, women tend to disclose more and demand change in relationships whereas men disclose less and withdraw to the demands of change (Fincham, 2003). It has also been found that women get affected by the level of partners disclosure (low, high or moderate) which is not the case for men (Rosenfeld and Bowen, 1991). To build deeper intimacy in relationships, it is required for the couple to practice vulnerability irrespective of the gender. Mutual self-disclosure is the key to marital satisfaction and relational certainty (Soliz et al., 2009; Prager et al., 2013; Burleson and McGeorge, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2008). An interesting finding (Knoll et al., 2007) suggests that men tend to enhance their positive feelings through disclosure and women tend to reduce their negative feelings through disclosure with each other's support. It is hard to understand the gender differences in terms of self-disclosure as most of the research is women centric encompassing emotional expression. Characteristics that are essential to build and maintain long lasting, fulfilling relationships are "sex typed as feminine" (Cancian, 1986). It has been repeatedly mentioned that women tend to disclose more in relationships than men (Quek et al., 2015; Jourard 1971; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982) and lack of reciprocity or lower personal disclosure cause disappointment (Millar and Millar 1988). It is equally important to shed light towards understanding the behavioral and thought patterns of men as partners, the way they show up in relationships and express their needs through vulnerability.

Cultural aspects of Relational Self-disclosure

The research has shed light on culture in respect to the upbringing of a child, socioeconomic status, life circumstances, implied societal rules, increased complexities, changing economy and societal pressure that impacts the actions, values and stress among people which further reflects in adult relationships (Shulman and Connolly, 2013; Fincham, 2003; Hofstede, 2001; Bradbury et al., 2001). To add richness in this aspect it is important to study how conflicting values of culture and self can affect the perception around self, others and relationship which creates challenges among couples. Furthermore, studying the way adolescents and young adults are trying to take control of their identities irrespective of societal norms or what culture as a whole has taught them through their childhood can give deeper insights.

Communication: the chief aspect of relationship

Communication is a pedestal on which any relationship is formed. Through all the life stages, communication formed with self, others or with the world impacts an individual's beliefs, perception, values, experiences, decision making and cognition which leads to creation of communication rules from which people function and impact their romantic relationships. Few researches have concluded similar results (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Roisman et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2007; Fraley and Roisman, 2015). This part of review is focused upon understanding communication in romantic relationships at two levels i.e., within (internal) and between (external).

Communication & Relational conflict management

Communication in a relationship reflects about the ways a couple handles, resolves and recovers from discord. Open communication between the partners elevates the feeling of support, understanding, affection and sense of value towards each other which also leads to a much more stable and aware psychological state (Brown, Orbuch and Maharaj, 2010; Edwards et al., 2008; Burke et al., 1976). Conflict is an inevitable component of a relationship, which is driven by the way couples interact before, during and after conflict (Connolly and McIssac, 2009). Few studies have explained the importance of self-regulatory processes between romantic partners. Self-regulation helps couples to channelize their emotions towards positive outcomes, make clear judgments, evoke calm response and practice empathy by understanding each other's frame of reference i.e., their attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and emotions (Prager et al., 2013; Salvatore et al., 2011; Gottman and Notarius 2002; Roisman et al., 2004). High emotion regulation in partners have shown their active involvement in relationship enhancing strategies during the time of conflicts like forgiveness (Mirgain and Cordova, 2007), gratitude and savoring. They also practise negotiation strategies like assertiveness, boundary setting, self-disclosure, and emotional expression (Xia et al., 2018) with their partner. It is essential for couples to be conscious of their words and actions during conflict. When the interaction is done with a defensive, derogatory or blaming tone, it becomes difficult for the partners to work together towards the problem because such tones can send messages at a subconscious as well as unconscious level of an individual, hence, it is also referred to as "conflict messages" (Gottman, 1993). Conscious interaction generates an understanding between partners and creates a space of trust. In support of the former statement, research concluded that when a

space of trust is co-created, partners can respond without feeling the need to show aggression or rudeness of any form. Therefore, the way a behavior (especially the ones not appreciated in the other) is explained and perceived by a partner either promotes problem solving or increases conflict and contempt (Fincham 2003/2001). Few studies have mentioned that couples who see each other in a good light with the positive attitude can accept and recognize each other's values and overall nature as compared to those who see each other in a negative light which leads to rejection and feelings of resentment, disappointment and retaliation (Prager and Buhrmester, 1998; Murray et al., 1996; Laurenceau et al., 2005). Many couples rarely see conflicts as an opportunity for increased intimacy and growth. The concept of Intimacy motivation (Sanderson & Karetzky, 2002; Craig et al., 1994) talks in support of the above statement. It mentions the importance of factors like open communication, mutual compromise, and positive involvement during the interaction (conflictual or otherwise) among couples which can increase the feeling of connection and manifest positive memories and moments among them (King and Noelle, 2005; McAdams, 1982). Conflict resolution strategies can be constructive or destructive in nature. Constructive communication includes transparency, ownership, acknowledgement etc which shows dedication in working towards a problem (Delatorre and Wagner, 2019), whereas, Destructive strategies include, ignorance, silent treatment, withdrawal, defensiveness, blame game and contempt (Rubenstein and Feldman, 1993; Gottman, 1999). Few studies have talked about facilitative and restrictive styles of conflict handling (McIsaac et al., 2008). According to these studies, Facilitative communication among romantic partners includes holding space for each other to express their individual feelings and perceptions and approaching the problem together, whereas restrictive style of interaction consists of withdrawal, ignorance and escaping. Guided by the research which measured dissatisfaction in romantic relationships (Cramer, 2000) found that the couples who were involved in using negative conflict styles to solve their differences were likely to separate or experience huge dissatisfaction in relationships. One of the interesting findings proposed by this research was that relationships satisfaction plays the major role in adaptation of conflict management style and commitment towards resolving differences. Therefore. To understand relational interaction processes, it is important to understand conflict, its nature and how differently it operates for everyone in relationships (Horan et al., 2015). Much of the research is presently limited to studying conflict handling among married couples using quantitative studies.

Communication and self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a tool for increasing verbal intimacy in relationships which leads to

satisfactory relationship experiences (Derlega and Chaikin, 1976; Hendrick, 1981; Mervin et al., 1991; Prager and Roberts, 2004). Communication through self-disclosure has been studied broadly as *abilateral dialogue exchange* between a partner who discloses (discloser) and a partner who responds (responder). Many studies have concluded that when couples engage in reciprocal communication it is likely for them to feel deeply connected because it promotes intimacy and interdependent relatedness (Cag & Yildirim, 2018; Quek et al., 2015; Prager et al., 2013).

Therefore, Intimate responsiveness is associated with greater satisfaction in relationships (Welker et al., 2014). Research has pointed out two patterns of self-disclosure (Cag & Yildirim, 2018) i.e., conditional self-disclosure (only if partner disclose, the other person tends to disclose) and non-conditional self-disclosure (one partner discloses despite the level of disclosure of their spouse). It was established that even though the disclosure by a partner is not dependent on the amount of disclosure by others, there is a visible amount of high satisfaction in people with high or moderate disclosures as compared to couples with low disclosures. Therefore, the intensity or frequency of disclosure may vary but mutual disclosure is considered essential for survival of a long-term relationship. Many other researchers have found similar results in alignment with the above-mentioned finding (Manne et al., 2004; Jourard, 1971; Cutrona et al., 2007; Cordova et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2004). Bringing vulnerability to the relationship is important but it is equally important to establish clarity on how these vulnerabilities are expressed, i.e., disclosing one's own life to another and what the speaker gets in response to what they share. Functional and healthy relationships require partners to express their thoughts and communicate openly (Cuceloglu, 1994 in Cag and Yildirim, 2018). Therefore, it takes intention and conscious effort to bring awareness, safety, trust and learn communication skills for fulfilling relationships. This can help partners to know about each other's wants, needs, perception and take it as an opportunity to form deeper connections through their support and understanding (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984; Nystul, 1999; Miller et al., 1983; Reis and Patrick, 1996).

Communication and self

Self-influences the couple's communication rules and interaction patterns around conflicts in relationships. Researchers have contributed to this concept by presenting their findings on personality factors (specifically attachment styles) and its role in conflict resolution. The two styles of attachment are intensively studied: anxious (insecure) and secure attachment styles. Together, these findings strongly indicate that secure attached individuals

practice healthy relationship patterns like interdependence and mutual compromise (Fincham 2003) and experience heightened emotional intimacy as compared to anxious or insecure attached style individuals in a relationship (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan and Shaver, 1987). One study had presented its finding on fearfully avoidant attachment style among couples. It was found that they avoid talking at deeper levels due to fear of commitment and violation of trust (Prager et al., 2013). One of the interesting finding (Kafetsios and Nezlek, 2002) was that the couples with insecure attachment patterns (fearfully avoidant & anxious) had the same level of intimacy as seen in a secured relationship, *but* the reasons for connecting were toxic in nature, for example: traits like codependency, clinginess, self-abandonment, aggression, superficial interaction, overthinking, jealousy, insecurity, and obsession (Birnbaum et al., 2006). The ability to manage relationship threats is very less in insecure attached individuals causing distressed mental state and maladaptive conflict resolution (Prager et al., 2013; Petersen et al., 2017). Studies have concluded that people who have been able to “earn” security in the relationship i.e., people who have overcome their past relational traumas and unhealthy patterns which act as the predictors of dissatisfaction in relationships, experience much more intimacy motivation than any secure attachment style (George et al., 1985; Roisman et al., 2002). Few researches have also shed light on the effect of interaction patterns in relationships on *self-esteem, self-worth, self-doubt and self-critical analysis*. Individuals with higher *self-esteem* are able to trust their partners and show confidence in their relationships as compared to low self-esteem individuals (Prager et al., 2013; Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995). This difference was marked on the basis of a thinking pattern which was built upon an experiment (Schneider & Tessier, 2007) where it was found that teenagers who claimed to be socially confident looked for mutual intimacy in relationships, whereas socially anxious teenagers looked for ways to be taken care of them, their needs and desires. It was found that people who appreciate and consider themselves as favorable and competent in comparison to people who do not feel worthy or competent enough of receiving appreciation from the environment or other people predict the quality of relationship (Levinger and Senn, 1967; Weiser and Weigel, 2016). The way one perceives self-worth gives rise to inhibitions which interferes with their expression of true feelings with their partners and a very calculated amount of self-disclosure exists between couples which leads to lower emotional intimacy (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958). Studies have also found that people who are high on self-efficacy tend to indulge in behavior that helps in enhancing positive relational experiences through acts of openness, assurances, networks and positivity (Weiser & Weigel, 2016; Canary and Stafford, 1992; Bandura, 1977). Personality factors have also been the focal point of many

studies like autonomy, assertiveness, self-expression, accepting individual differences, respectful responses, collaboration, accommodating and compromising (McIsaac et al., 2008; Dildar et al., 2013). The study on triggers that activate internal trauma responses like ego stories, over-introspection, self-blame or the role of inner critic etc, due to intrapersonal communication remains finite.

Hidden communication messages

The responses have the ability to pass on many messages through not just verbals' but also non-verbal interaction. Research (Cag & Yildirim, 2018) referred to social influence processes as powerful as it carries the potential to create perceptions, judgements and feelings in partners through non-verbals' like body language, eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, voice tone and even physiological responses. Author, Karen J Prager (2014, p3) has mentioned the term "immediacy" of communication, which plays a very important role in interaction between couples. Immediacy in communication means how an individual chooses to communicate through verbal and non-verbal messages with their partners. To consider communicating with immediacy reflects the sense of interest, attention, love, affection, understanding and positive feelings towards the partner. This establishes the feeling of oneness between partners through warmheartedness. Therefore, how one discloses their feelings and how others attend to it (Prager and Buhrmester, 1998) plays a crucial role in creating a perceived relational intimacy regularly among couples (Laurenceau et al., 2005; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Cutrona, 1996).

Gender Difference in Communication patterns

A wide range of research has studied gender differences among married couples in association with conflict resolution based on communication patterns. A pattern has been observed in women where they often feel a lack of affection and value because they do not receive a desirable response or emotional reciprocity from their partners on whatever they express. This observation is supported by several findings mentioned at the fore. One study (Mervins et al., 1991) found that married women often complain about their spouses' restraint from self-expression which increases their doubt towards relational intimacy level. Another study evaluated the results based on the data collected from Singaporean and Greek couples (Quek et al., 2015) to which they concluded that among Greek couple's wife cares more about husbands' self-disclosure than men for their wives, whereas in Singaporean couples' women use more of indirect or coated communication style to resolve any issues, which further blocks

clear and open interaction leading to the risk of negative consequences commonly perceived as relational threat. Similarly, in a study by (Millar and Millar, 1988) they found that women who perceived less self-disclosure from their husbands were low on a satisfactory scale in their marriage leading to conflicts. Studying communication using self-disclosure, there was very interesting research conducted by (Komarovskiy, 1964), where he found that wives tend to look forward to sharing their life experiences with their spouse as compared to the husbands in his targeted sample. He also found that women showed greater levels of disappointment because they felt like their expectations are not being fulfilled by their partner because of less involvement through self-disclosure which often led to negative communication patterns. Gender differences were also observed in conflictual communication styles and various personality factors. Few studies (Fincham 2003; Christensen et al., 2006) have repeatedly talked about a type of destructive communication patterns i.e., demand-withdrawal behavioral patterns which occur among distressed couples. They stated that wives tend to demand more, and husbands tend to withdraw. Irrespective of the gender, a partner in an estranged relationship who wishes for a change or hopes for discussing a problem, the other partner will tend to withdraw or escape the talk whereas in some cases both the partners can take the demander or the withdrawal role. Gender differences in other communication factors has also been studied. A study conducted among cohabiting couples (Wildsmith et al., 2013) observed that men and women who considered themselves alone as being the charge of making decisions gave rise to the sense of inequality in decision making which affected the feeling of commitment and permanence in relationship. A study conducted on Indian samples (Dildar et al., 2013) containing distressed married couples found that among men communication at the time of conflict containing factors like aggression, discouragement, un-cooperativeness and disconnection were more prevalent whereas women were mostly non-compliant. These factors together stimulate competitive or avoiding conflictual patterns. A very important contribution through research (Gubbins et al 2010), has answered many questions related to gender differences that are still prevalent in today's world. They found out among married couples that wives were likely to be susceptible to men's level of differentiation (emotion regulation, rationality and balancing individuality and togetherness) than men were. They also proposed that women were more affected and conscious about many components of relationship as compared to men. This gender difference is still prevalent in today's romantic relationships. It has been concluded by research finding (Ortega et al., 2017) that women take more responsibility for relationships than men do which makes women more actively involved in conflict resolution which can be a possible reason for hostility observed in women

as a response to fear of separation. In terms of non-verbal communication patterns, it was found that (Rosenthal and DePaulo, 1979), women are able to construe non-verbal's (hidden messages) better than men which can be a contributing factor towards conflict. Studies have seemed to focus a lot on the *how's and whys* of women's style of conflict management and communication style which has added a gap for understanding men's attitude and expectations clearly. Also, to add more value to the research it can be considered to study these factors in populations and cultures that are less researched (Tillman et al., 2019).

Understanding Intimacy and Commitment

Emotional intimacy gives rise to the feeling of commitment among couples. Intimacy is developed through actions based on an understanding and recognition of the partner for who s/he is as a person whereas commitment is a conscious decision one makes in a relationship. It has been discussed above in this review that self-disclosure is highly associated with increasing intimacy and commitment (e.g.: Quek et al., 2015; Prager et al., 2013; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Sprecher, 1987). Intimacy is more than the sexual act or experiences. When physical and emotional intimacy is both present in a relationship, it creates harmony and commitment toward each other. Intimacy requires investment in a relationship to know each other, rely on each other, express freely and also, maintain one's own identity in a relationship (Erickson, 1963).

Commitment in romantic relationships is in choosing every day to love each other in ways that build connection and assurance. For example: checking in once in a day with each other, accepting influence, having relationship rituals like date nights or simply cherishing and being grateful^[91]. Showing love through hugging, cuddling and kissing along with self-disclosure are also positively related to increased relational intimacy and commitment (Sprecher, 1987). Some of the studies have stressed upon the fact that people see sexual intimacy separately from emotional commitment (Weissbourd et al., 2013; Tillman et al., 2019), whereas they both are important to go hand in hand for healthy elements of relationships. This research has emphasized on the importance of bringing sexual and romantic relationships in light as it can help many understand their ideas around love, increased self-awareness, and indulge in essential daily habits for fulfilling relationships. Much research has focused upon conflict styles and perceived commitment in relationship and found that people who are high in commitment find constructive ways to resolve the conflict that do not cause any damage to relationship as compared to people with low commitment in relationship. People with low commitment act on impulse, retaliate and

tend to be emotionally hijacked which makes them defensive and angry, blocking their ability to see their partners perception (Arriaga et al., 2007; Gottman, 1999; Arriaga et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 1999). Relationships with weak commitment towards each other feel threatened with the conflicts or anything that might be perceived as challenging whereas people with healthy and strong commitment encourage acts that keep the relationship undamaged (Rusbult et al., 2001). In the modern world, it is important to rethink the ways couples can show commitment in relationships. Research (Shulman and Connolly, 2013) talks about a few components that can be worked upon by partners which enhances feelings of commitment. The study talks about balancing individuality and togetherness, practicing interdependency, learning each other's pattern of conflict to work towards mutual beneficial solutions, supporting and believing in each other's dreams and plans, reciprocity and forming deeper authentic connections (Levinson, 1978; Connolly and McIsaac, 2009; Tuval and Shulman, 2006; Adams et al., 2001). Making these efforts as a conscious practice and continuous learning in relationships can increase commitment and strength in helping each other become the best version of who they are along with supporting each other's growth. Therefore, commitment can be defined as a by-product of intimacy felt in a relationship which further prompts conscious transformation of relationship at individual, collective and relational level. It is the key to stable relationships (Xia et al., 2018; Weiser & Weigel, 2016). Much of the youth is facing a lot of uncertainty in life due to changing environmental factors, they are wanting to find stability through commitment in relationships at different levels to experience love, support and understanding (Wildsmith et al., 2013). Hence, it is safe to state that elements of healthy communication, intimacy skills and aspects of commitment when brought into the relationship, it builds intimacy and fulfilling relationships.

Methodology used among the researches

Quantitative methods

Most of the reviewed articles which have used *quantitative methods*, have majorly collected data through surveys and questionnaires (eg: Gubbins et al 2010; Quek et al., 2015; Horan et al., 2015; Pardhi et al., 2015; Kau et al., 2004). Few other researchers have also used Likert rating scales (Xia et al., 2018; Petersen et al., 2017; Appel et al., 2015).

Qualitative methods

Few researchers have used qualitative data collection techniques gaining insights on how peoples respond and express themselves in relationships. Variety of methods used were, observational study (Fraley & Roisman, 2015) where they observed conflict recovery among couples using a coding scheme like evoking conflict, four minute cool down and immediate 10 min discussion on conflict; Laboratory and Videotape based observation (Welker et al., 2014; Arriaga et al., 2006; Gable et.al., 2006); Interview methods like, face to face , telephonic interviews were used (Weissbourd et al., 2013; Levinger and Senn, 1967; Hoskins et al., 2008; Appel et al., 2015; Shulman et al., 2008). Few researchers also used a diary method (Sullivan et al., 2010) and case study/reports analysis (Janardhana and Manjula, 2018), and surveys.

Statistical Analysis:

The common tests used for analyzing qualitative data by few major review articles were t-tests, Correlation, Regression, ANOVA (Gubbins et al 2010; Prager et al., 2013; Arriaga et al., 2007; Xia et al., 2018). In qualitative studies like observations and case study analysis latent profile analysis, ANOVA and MANOVA were majorly used (Delatorre and Wagner, 2019). One of the studies analyzed case reports and diary records to build interventions and themes based on examining and scrutinizing comprehensive data into frequency and percentages (Janardhana et al., 2018).

To understand the direct experiences of people and gather a deep insight of relational practices, it is beneficial to use qualitative research based on feasibility. Surveys and interviews and case study analysis are the best in understanding human behavior meticulously. For example, for understanding people's responses, experiences and the way they view their partner and relationship was used through both these techniques, unfortunately many less researches have gone in depth with understanding the attitudes and behavior exhaustively leading to responses that they measured with laboratory observations. To analyze the underlying themes and patterns in current scenario of relationships, it is essential to pinpoint the symptoms that we need to pay attention to, so people can grow up with self-awareness, strong values and healthy understanding of relationship as a process, for which we need to focus on doing more one to one interaction-based data collection for better understanding of situation using raw experiences, whose results can represent maximum underrepresented population.

Preliminary Study

We conducted primary research as an initial investigation to gather information, and assess the potential for the final research. It also helped us in assessing the feasibility, provided a basis for planning, and designing a larger study i.e., the current research. We decided to use this study to understand the idea of affection, process of it, and coping with the perceived fading of affection to obtain the love one desires or longs for. This helped us in understanding the “cause” and “processes” of dating relationships dealing with disconnection, or falling into the patterns of trauma bonds, and limerence.

To explore this understudied area and guide my research questions, I conducted personal in-depth interviews of 2 hours (at the maximum) in 2021. I specifically chose interviews for this study as my preferred method of obtaining data because of the sparse nature of research on relationship vulnerability, its related aspects, and above all limited research on the understanding of rising complexities in today’s relationship. The strength of the interview approach included interaction with the direct experiences of participants, which helped us explore what, how and why such as, that of relationship paradigms, maintenance roles, and coping with the changes in relationship i.e., fading affection. The research was carried out through the use of interviews, which allowed for the discovery of many patterns, themes, and emotional processes that could not have been attainable through any other method of data collection (Gibbs, 1997). Throughout the interviews, semi-structure format was followed with probes and reflections to understand the issues related to disconnection in relationship. Even though the interviews were very useful, there were limitations. The first shortcoming was the participants backing out from the scheduled interview due to difficulty processing the emotions emerging onto the surface, as they weren’t ready to deal with the reality and asked to leave as they didn’t want to have issues in their relationship by attending to those emotions. Another potential limitation was the need for the researcher to have strong empathy, listening, and facilitative skills to deal with the strong emotions, or anxiety if appear while taking the interviews. I was well equipped to give support and help participants regulate their emotions when needed due to my training and experience as a counselling psychologist.

Findings

The findings were based on the research sample of 15 (13 females, and 2 males) participants within the age group of 20-31 years, who have experienced fading affection and related relationship problems in their relationship. Results highlighted the pathway of experiencing perceived fading affection, the beginning, and continuation of fading affection in

participants and their partners, and the role of vulnerability in securing affection. We also underlined the patterns among participants that of limerence, and among the participant's partners that of toxicity, both of which facilitated trauma bond, impacted unworthiness, and influenced the efforts to remedy the situation. Further results showed that the experience of fading of affection as a process, which comprises accompanied feelings, and behavior over the course of the relationship, contradictions, and coping mechanisms based on participants' narratives. Thoughts that developed, or reinforced as the affection fluctuated were also identified and discussed with the participants. The results further indicated the discovered pathway to building a weak foundation for the relationship, while highlighting the differences between healthy, and unhealthy relationships. The result concluded the experience of fading affection in the relationship as a common phenomenon, but different in terms of experiencing it based on the foundation, patterns, and individual contributions (self-worth, attachment wounds) in the relationship.

To elaborate on the findings, it was found that among unhealthy relationship dynamics their attachment wounds, mate selection, lack of self-awareness, and in the context of love, and tiring out of giving one-sided investment to the relationship led to self-betrayal, whereas for the partners there was evidence of toxic partner in trauma bond relationship where the affection started to fade once the commitment was secured. The response interpretations led us to the understanding of patterns. The fading affection was seen unfolding in a patterned process in the participants, as well as their partners. Among the participants- (a) Intense attachment; (b) the focus on the fulfilment of the needs by participants (worthy of being loved, testing their partner's commitment); (c) total mental capture (crystallization), and (d) deterioration, and among the participant's partners- (a) excessive showering of love; (b) gaining of trust (being a perfect soulmate); (c) criticism begin from a minor conflict, and (d) Manipulation (gaslighting, love bombing, breadcrumbing, ghosting). It can easily be concluded that the participant's desire for love was so high, that their perception or sense of affection fading for them their partners, led to an overwhelming experience. The feeling of "it is not like before" was suppressed until the point of exhaustion at the cost of their own self (emotionally, mentally, and physically). Sadly, their relationship dynamics were strong enough to make them blinded by love until their own feelings deteriorated, and limerence love ended so that they could remove the rose-tinted glasses and see the relationship for what it is, and not what it could be in their fantasies. The experience of fading affection among unhealthy relationships was emotionally daunting for

the participants, whereas the experience of fading affection among healthy relationships was treated as an opportunity for self-expansion, growth, relationship nourishment, and cultivating interdependence.

Therefore, fading of affection in romantic relationships can have a significant impact on emotional openness between partners. When affection starts to fade, couples may start to feel emotionally distant from each other and may become less likely to share their feelings and thoughts. This can lead to a decline in the level of trust and intimacy in the relationship, making partners feel less secure in expressing their emotions. As emotional openness is a key factor in building strong relationships, its decline can have serious implications for the overall health of the relationship. When couples are less emotionally open, they may become more guarded, leading to communication breakdowns, increased conflict, and decreased satisfaction with the relationship. Fading affection can therefore be a significant contributor to the vulnerability of emotional openness in romantic relationships. However, there were few questions that emerged from the findings and analysis i.e., if vulnerability/ emotional openness was used to feel loved, accepted, and chosen in the very beginning of the relationship by sharing personal stories or past experiences, how did participants even defined being vulnerable to begin with? As most of the participants answered from the perspective of what they never received, it was rare to find responses that reflected on their personal contributions to the relationship i.e., in the way they show up in relationships, with what values, hopes, desires, and relationship rules? Similarly, it was shocking to see the trauma bonds, and limerence love patterns in the 11 of the participants who revealed unhealthy relationship patterns. Hence, it was valid to raise question as to how people even view relationship, commitment, or their own self in the context of another? The most important question through which all the other questions were connected emerged through an understanding from the response interpretation that, the belief that intimacy, which is a combination of all the factors of affection that participants consider ideal, is always a reciprocal process between partners, requiring mutual validation, can actually limit us from experiencing deeper and more profound levels of intimacy that might be possible. i.e., self-validated. This type of intimacy helps a person experience intimacy in ways that are self-exploratory, self-expansionary, and clear judgment. Hence, as observed, relationships are only seen as a medium of feeling safe, so what is stopping people from seeing relationships as a place where difficult and uncomfortable growth can happen with or without the desired response from the partners? Is emotional “openness” only limited until one feels safe? Why is it hard to see that when people betray their own truth and integrity to protect themselves, they

harm themselves more than when their partners reject their truth? Therefore, we noticed the urgency to understand the explanation to the cause of continued longing for love wrapped in elusive hope by digging deeper into the root cause i.e., the foundation on which the relationship is built. For which we attempted to explain the cause of disconnection turning into potential toxicity in relationships by focusing on one phenomenon i.e., vulnerability and its interaction with the related aspects that can actually build deep authentic emotional intimacy with self and others.

Summary and limitation

After a careful review of the existing literature, it suggests that there is a limited understanding of vulnerability as a relationship skill along with communication in relationships. Dynamics namely vulnerability, communication and commitment is required to be studied at a deeper and subjective level. The emerging questions such as, what cognitive, emotional, and physiological activation is experienced by people when they find it difficult to share their deepest parts of self, how inner triggers can confuse vulnerability with trauma bonding among conflicts, are factors such as over-giving, attention seeking, or validation being seen as a weakness? Or Are people falling in love for seeking unintended validation of their existence through other people? reflect the necessity of understanding the current challenges being faced due to lack of understanding of art of relationship. Exploring the main research questions will help us gain access to the other rising understudied questions, that can help the society benefit at a greater level. In Depth exploration of these skills in relationships will not only make people self-aware but also take necessary action which will help them build and maintain happy relationships.

Understanding the components of relationships and skills required to sustain a happy long-lasting interpersonal connection among couples can assist people towards gaining psychological/emotional maturity as that can intrinsically motivate individuals and partners to activate their state of consciousness when dealing with relational conflicts and daily interactions for expressing love and affection (Collins, 2003). It is important to study how vulnerability is brought into a relationship as it acts as a core strength of romantic relationships which helps in nurturing, strengthening, transforming and making a relationship where two people are working together on self along with each other by creating one whole. According to Sternberg's theory of love (1986) a healthy and happy relationship cannot alone survive on one component, it requires progression to consummate love which involves intimacy, love, and

commitment in everyday interactions. All the three components are tied together by the quality of communication (Sommer, 2004) individuals indulge in either with self or with their partners in a relationship. As mentioned in one of the research projects (Prager et al., 2013) that feeling loved, reassured and emotionally connected strengthen intimacy between partners as well as enhances relationship towards self. This requires both the couples to participate and learn to transform the relationship by redefining the relational rules and communication patterns (Birchler et al., 1975). Synthesizing, evaluating, and analyzing a large number of review articles shed light on the gaps that exist, the different points of view, and how future research could help close these gaps. Gender-neutral studies must be done in order to understand the perspectives, expectations, and ways of working of both people in a relationship at different stages. Putting more attention on how women communicate and share information than men has led to confusing conclusions because of contradictions and things seen in real life. Surveys aren't very clear because each person has their own idea of what love, sex, intimacy, and passion are. Knowing how a person interacts with these terms can be a good indicator of a healthy relationship. In-depth studies will help come up with conclusions that are in line with the needs and requirements of a changing environment and a culture that is becoming more self-governed. Studies have focused a lot on married couples, even though a lot of the younger generation is in relationships. (Carver & Udry, 2003; Brown, 1999; Jerves et al., 2013) are having trouble understanding relationships, breaking up, and staying together because of unhealthy things like having too many options because of technology, wanting instant gratification, having unresolved trauma, and repeating unhelpful patterns. Self-disclosure has been studied broadly from the perspective of a responder in a relationship (e.g.: Welker et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2004). It is equally important to understand the role of individuals as both, initiator as well as responder, as this can help us gain new insights at cognitive and emotional level of people especially when they speak from the place of vulnerability (Prager et al., 2013). It would be beneficial at societal level to conduct research on a population which is not much represented. Research targeting the population of a specific area to study personal relationships for example: India, has focused extensively upon physical, sexual intimacy, dating violence, separation anxiety and fear of loneliness. It is an urgency that we focus beyond the familial influences and childhood patterns as much as we cannot deny the fact that it plays a major role, we need to accept that individuals are much aware about their operational unhealthy patterns and still continue to stay in their self-created comfort around the negativity. By covering these gaps, it will not only help in understanding how relationships function in today's society but also how authentically individuals show up in relationships, with what intention and

expectations (Impett et al., 2008). Relational satisfaction and fulfilment are by-products of emotions, thoughts, skills and efforts made by both the partners, but to understand the efforts, what motivates them or demotivates them to even activate that kind of conscious effort at first, is of utter importance (Arriaga et al., 2007; Murray, 1999). To experience oneness built on strong connections in relationships, it is essential to have a firm understanding of one's identity (Erikson, 1963; Prager et al., 2013). Even though the components of self-such as self-worth and self-esteem are strengthened through personal relationships (Weiser & Weigel, 2016; Baumeister and Leary, 2000) yet it is necessary to be aware of how much of these components an individual carries into a relationship with them. Many studies have focused upon people acting on their best behavior during the honeymoon phase of a relationship (Quek et al., 2015), whereas a limited amount of research has talked about negative forms of vulnerability that emerge in relationships like emotional vomit or oversharing and incongruence among couples. The dynamics of relationships are changing at a massive level and we remain unclear about the role of vulnerability in adolescence or unmarried young adults. The Focus on premarital sex, cohabitation, hook-up culture, conflict resolution among married couples etc. has limited the scope of studying and understanding the much deeper phenomenon related to it such as negative self-talk, trauma induced behavior, ego stories, self-destructive behavior or cognitive and physiological responses among the younger generation. Bridging these gaps will help in creating interventions for people to facilitate them in creating the relationships, they wish for and can help in developing the powerful and helpful patterns among individuals that will direct their relationships with self as well as with their partners towards meaningful, intentional and joyful experiences. Understanding the information and knowledge gained through the literature review, this article builds its research on the concepts and theories discussed in this review. We have used the existing knowledge and through selective mining used the knowledge on self, vulnerability, communication patterns, and considered effect on couples guide this research by adding novel perspectives with the aim to contribute with a new slant. It is hoped that our findings will contribute to the literature by advancing our knowledge and understanding of how people experience the interaction of the basic elements of a healthy relationship to form, and maintain a relationship, including the how and why of the unfolding phenomenon. The unique aspect of this study included addressing the topic from a novel perspective by holistically focusing on the formation, building, and maintenance of the romantic relationship in various contexts considering the main variables of this study in action.

It is evident from this literature review that more research is needed to focus on the concept brought together in a model to understand the concerning changes in the relationship,

and also in under-represented cultures so that we can have a generalized and elaborative understanding of how people experience the love and closeness through vulnerability, when the difficult parts of self dominates the decision making, conflict management, and general communication in attempt to feel secure, loved, and validated with their significant others, within the relationship. Researchers can also focus on various concepts like vulnerability, self-awareness, and conflict management by deciphering the phenomena's such as trauma bonding, limerence love or toxic relationships to contribute in the field of psychology to mental health professionals which will further bridge the gap between research and application. As, many health professionals are working with increasing number of toxic relationship patterns, but the limited research is not adding any more value to the existing treatments. This can be the new goal for future researches to understand the causes rather than touching the symptoms of increasing complex paradigm that relationship is shifting towards.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploratory mixed method qualitative research was to explore the phenomenon of vulnerability, its elements and emotional impact on the overall health of the relationship i.e., at an individual, partner, and relational level through direct lived experiences of the participants extent of vulnerability and its related aspects based on qualitative and quantitative survey of 31 participants in India. In this chapter the overview, and the rationale for a mixed method research design will be addressed. Along with which the other following areas will be described: description of the sample, data collection methods, process of data analysis, and data collection procedures.

The rationale for a mixed-method Research Design

We chose a mixed method approach for this study, specifically because of its research problem and research purpose i.e., the significant gap in the literature that demanded in-depth exploration additionally, the density of the topic and lack of understanding called for an inductive approach. The research attempts to get to the core of a social phenomenon or activity using the perspective of the research participant. However, it is important to conduct a qualitative aspect of the study when seeking to understand the individual's unique context of the experiences. It is imperative to explore the "what", the "how" and the "why" (the core) of the problem (Creswell, 2013), and then describe in detail what has been discovered. Also, the exploratory design of the study using mixed method aligns with my professional skills and experience because it allows for a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the research problem. My days are spent in curiosity, and unbiased judgments, probing my clients, asking open-ended questions, formulating interpretations, organizing and analysing data, tailoring intervention plans, and writing/maintaining case notes. Therefore, to understanding the complex and dynamics nature of human behaviour and experience, a mixed method design can provide a rich and detailed understanding of this phenomena. We additionally adopted this methodological approach for this study, as we wanted to explore the stories of people containing emotional and behavioral aspects. Quantitative approach like self-report measure can help researchers gain a thorough understanding of the issue at hand. They can also be used to test theories and draw conclusions about the population. Whereas, subjective in-dept surveys can be used to gather the nuanced understanding of the research problem, can also be utilized

to explore the participants' subjective experiences. Therefore, my study being exploratory research, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon rather than to test specific predictions by gaining a better insight through direct experiences of individuals and its impact on their relationships, and emotional well-being. This has helped us explore various themes, patterns, process, and perspectives (Little, 2007; Hesse, 2010) related to how relationships function in varied dynamics, and personal paradigms with which people enter into the relationship. Another reason of choosing exploratory/ qualitative study was the challenges in collecting data due to the complexity of the phenomenon under study, also the less literature available on vulnerability and its related concepts being new and upcoming in the field of romantic relationships. This research method also helped in improving the reliability and validity of the findings as two different types of approaches were combined which helped in triangulating the data, thus increasing the rigor and the confidence in the findings. Exploratory research is used to investigate a topic and obtain new insights, uncover new ideas, and/or expand knowledge about it (Burns & Grove, 1998) as well as reveal the essence of the cognitive processing of a shared experience (Patton, 2002). To apply this approach, it is important to see the experiences and phenomena with openness, curiosity, and a fresh perspective.

Overview of the Research Sample

The sample for my project included 31 participants, 21 females, and 10 males who shared their understanding, and experience with vulnerability in their relationships. 16 of the participants were currently in a dating relationship on the basis of which they filled the survey. The rest of the 14 were broken up with the partner with whom they were in a dating relationship. It is imperative to note that out of the 31 participants, majority of the participants were in an unhealthy, unfulfilling or unsafe relationship. The participants were Indian, residing in different states of the country, and were reported as heterosexuals. The age group of the participants ranged from 23-30 years of age. The length of the participants relationships ranged from 7 months to 8 years. It was important for the participants to volunteer only if they have dated for at least 6 months in the past or are presently dating for 6 months, as that is the average range in relationships considered to be when the honeymoon period ends and relationship starts to transform. Participants who were broken up chose their recent past relationship in reference to which they chose to fill the survey. The demographic information of the participants are illustrated in the appendix section (See Appendix A).

Information Needed to Conduct the Study

The purpose of conducting exploratory research was to understand the phenomenon of vulnerability existing in varying dynamics in relation to other elements such as integrated communication patterns, and commitment. To answer the research questions the following information was needed to conduct the study:

- **Perceptual:** the perceptual information included the participant's perceptions of feelings, thoughts, and behavior defining vulnerability, intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, and commitment. The perceptual focus helped in understanding how participants defined and understood vulnerability, factors contributing to the experience, intrapersonal elements affection the experience, and how the extent of vulnerability impacts commitment, and emotional intimacy. This will also help us in understanding what would be what would be important for other individuals, clinical providers or researchers that will give new direction and information for future research.
- **Demographic:** participants' demographic details including age, gender, residing state, relationship status, and sexual orientation.
- **Literature review:** selective, extensive, and continual literature review, data mining, and analysis to identify the gaps in the research, establish a background of the study, and obtain contextual information. The literature review included the current patterns and themes, vulnerability and its impact, communication as a vital aspect of relationship, and understanding intimacy and commitment to highlight the overview of the previous studies and how we can contribute to the research by using the information and knowledge to guide our research and bridge the gap through our findings.

Overview of the Research Design

This section of the methodology explains the step-by-step research design.

1. After selecting the topic, I conducted a systematic literature review to identify gaps, contextual information, and create relevant areas on affection in a romantic relationship in the literature. The literature review was also conducted to provide background to the current study.

2. Since the study has a qualitative aspect, ethics, and confidentiality was of prime importance. The proposal meeting was held, and approval was granted to conduct the study.
3. A preliminary study (stage 1 study) was done as a part of a financial aid project titled, “Desirous of love, how people experience the fading affection” through in-depth interviews to form the base for this research. The stage 1 research helped me in understanding various foundational aspects of relationships with reference to differing relationship climate that influenced my survey design. The findings helped me in forming questions with better understanding, and knowledge.
4. A pilot study was conducted for this research to guide the research questions, refine the approach, and analyse the direction in which the results are forming. In this stage, the data of the clientele I have dealt with as a therapist was also studied to evaluate the uptake and analyse the case studies.
5. Once the finding was acquired, a purposive, snowball sampling was carried out to reach out to participants who are in a dating relationship or had one in past for more than 6 months. The potential participants were given survey link (google link form), that also included information about the study. Once the participant was interested in contributing to the study, I made sure they were comfortable with the information being asked in the survey, should anyone have a doubt, overwhelming feeling, or resistance in providing some details.
6. Data collection was done via survey, which had an approximate completion time of 1 hour, which was also mentioned in the introduction section of the survey. Before filling the survey, it was made sure that the participants understood the requirements of the study, usage of the data, the risk and benefits of the survey as well as confidentiality assurity.
7. After data collection, I analysed all the data collected.

Data collection procedures

The procedures for gathering data in this study were guided by a thorough evaluation of the literature and findings achieved through stage 1 of the project, i.e., the preliminary investigation. To achieve thoroughness and accuracy, we used techniques including methodological triangulation, bracketing, and in-depth, insightful descriptions of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the study, ethical considerations were kept as a priority. The approval was requested and accepted by Galgotias university's IRB (Institutional Review Board) for the human subjects. The safety, confidentiality, and consent of the participants were taken into account, for which the ethical considerations and confidentiality assurance was given in the beginning of the survey to which they had full rights to accept or deny filling the form. To maintain confidentiality, the data sets used pseudonyms to avoid any form of ethical issues and client violation. The introduction section of the survey, highlighted the ethical considerations, and confidentiality concerns that highlighted the purpose, procedure, risks, benefits, and voluntary nature of the study. To make sure participants are comfortable at the time of filling the survey, it was made sure they were feeling confident sharing their experiences by resolving any doubts or apprehensions they might be facing. The participants were made aware of their right to stop writing in the survey anytime they want without any hesitations as it was possible that the subjective, open-ended questions given in the form could elicit negative feelings, uncomfortable memories, and emotional discomfort to carry on with answering. However, they were informed that the risks are not higher but minimal or mild and few psychotherapy resources were shared in the participant's consent form, in case of the lingering after-effects of the survey filling, as not all negative effects could be known.

Recruitment Process

Purposive sampling of 31 individuals constituted the participants for the study who defined themselves as people who have experienced dating relationships whether present or past. We conducted purposive sampling as it was pertinent and vital to the study because of the difficulty of finding participants in India speaking freely about their relationships considering the culture and societal aspects as well as the sensitive nature of the topic. To understand the lived experiences of the people, we are conducting exploratory research to understand the phenomenon from broader aspects in which purposive sampling is often used. I also used snowball sampling to reach out to potential participants through networking. I sent an email and WhatsApp messages requesting referrals to various known people, also to colleagues in the field of counselling psychology, and other acquaintances. The message and email consisted of the survey link to participate inside of which the purpose, goals, criteria, and procedure of the research study was already outlined in the introduction section. For some referrals, I myself approached them with the survey link through the contact given to me through networking.

Once I received the confirmation of the participants, I crosschecked the received responses recorded on google links. After which I screened the initial demographic details for assuring that they met the inclusion criteria of age, relationship status, and duration of the relationship. For this particular study, I tried to seek both females and males considering the number of researchers being women-centric. However, it was difficult to get more than 10 males for this particular study. All 31 participants (21 women and 10 men) completed their survey forms. Even though I tried to maintain an equal ratio of men and women, it was difficult to obtain more male participants possible because of the emotional openness factor which is highly prevalent in women as compared to men who are pressured by the gendered roles, societal norms that limit their emotional openness of expression (Komiya et al., 2000).

The survey forms

The survey form consisted of 6 sections. The first section included the introduction in which the purpose, meaning of the variables, ethical considerations, potential risk and benefits, prerequisites and time required was mentioned; Second section included the demographic details which included- name, age, gender, currently residing in, highest education qualification, present occupation, sexual orientation, relationship status, duration of the relationship, type of relationship, and confirmation of the one relationship they are referring to throughout the survey; Third section consisted of instructions required to fill the form such as, “The questions might be in present tense, but those who are referring to their past relationship, please fill it while keeping in mind that particular relationship until you finish the survey”, “You may want to take help of any example, situation, or exchange of dialogues that occurred within your relationship with your partner, that you might remember while answering few questions that would best explain the answer”, or “You can answer the questions that are subjective in Hindi, Hinglish, or English. Whatever will best explain your experiences”; Following this section was the fourth part of the survey which consisted of qualitative part of the study i.e., intrapersonal communication, and vulnerability. The set of mixed questions included direct questions such as, “What does it mean for you to be vulnerable/ feel vulnerable in your relationship?”, quote interpretations such as, “Do not underestimate the amount of confidence it takes to be able to say ‘I am unhappy here’”, check boxes which included question such as, “During any triggering events through my partners actions or words in my relationship, such as conflicts, disappointments, differences, unmet needs etc, I feel-”, rating scales which included questions such as, “I am tired of wanting, and seeking love, validation, appreciation,

or reassurances etc., from my partner”, and statement completions that helped us in gaining deeper insights, and cross check the contradictions through triangulation of data with rating scale, and direct questions, such as- “it is sometimes easier to give my needs a backseat, because_____”. The fifth part of the survey consisted of the qualitative aspect including self-report measure of Gottman 4 horsemen to identify the interpersonal communication patterns that exists within the relationship. It included questions such as, “During a hot argument I think, “It doesn’t matter what you say” and I stop listening”; Similarly, in the last section of the survey it consisted of the self-reported measure, that measures commitment among the participants which was developed using the findings of Dr. John and Julie Gottman by Dr. Gina Senarighi, a relationship coach and marriage counsellor. It included questions such as, “I consider my relationship rock solid”. Few questions were removed from the commitment self-report measure, as it wasn’t in alignment with the studies direction and purpose. This in-depth survey was made on google forms, which required approximately 1 hour to complete the form. The time taken was dependent upon the participants way of responding to the questions that required them to think, and explain through their personal relationship examples. It was made sure that the participant was aware and sure about this being a safe space to share their experiences by creating a conducive environment. The survey had an option of providing anonymous names if not comfortable with giving the real names, the emails were kept optional and all the questions were kept compulsory to answer, which were marked by an Asterix. Special attention was paid to preparing for the survey making, such as constructing the research questions, putting forward the formed questions for the participants in the non-biased, and non-directive way, and some questions were kept to identify any discrepancies, if marked by the participants. The preliminary study helped me refine the questions and form a stronger set of questions that were easier to articulate and understand as well as aligned with the research topic. I also relied on my expertise as a counselling psychologist for the smooth formation of the survey formation and its conduct. The survey questions were constructed based on our study's six research questions? The questions were constructed and revised with the assistance of my guide based on the result of the stage 1 study, and the preliminary study. The final survey form was developed which is summarized in Appendix B.

The self-report questionnaires:

Gottman's 4 horsemen self-test questionnaire

The John Gottman's Four Horsemen Self-Report Questionnaire is a tool used to assess the presence and frequency of negative communication patterns in a relationship. The four horsemen referred to in the questionnaire are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Participants in the study would be asked to mark either yes, or no based on their real-life experiences within the relationship especially during conflicts. The questionnaire is designed to provide a quantitative measure of relationship dissatisfaction and conflict caused due to the 4 horsemen, the damaging behaviour. The results of the questionnaire can be used to identify the presence of these behaviours in each participant by calculating the number of yes's received under each category.

Commitment questionnaire

The commitment questionnaire by Dr. Gina Senarighi, PhD, CPC is a relationship expert who has transitioned from being a couple's therapist to a coach, retreat facilitator, and writer. She focuses on enhancing intimacy, promoting authenticity, building resilience against shame, and fostering effective communication in all types of relationships. She built this questionnaire based on the years of research on couples by Dr John, and Dr Julie Gottman. We adapted a few questions from the questionnaire that were pertinent to our study's aim of comprehending commitment from multiple perspectives, rather than just a single dimension. Participants in the study would be asked to mark the frequency with which they agree to the statements pertaining to their relationship experience using Likert scale.

Data analysis

Once the survey forms were collected, I dove into the data, sorting and categorizing it under four key variables of this study: vulnerability, intrapersonal communication patterns, interpersonal communication patterns, and commitment. I sifted through the qualitative responses, carefully combing through the most important parts and identifying patterns that emerged. I coded the subjective responses by finding the most frequently used adjectives, which helped me to condense the meaning and group similar responses together. For this whole process I used content analysis structure which included- decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). For certain questions,

I used double graphs to illustrate the data and highlight comparisons and discrepancies. The responses to rating scales were grouped under three headings: positive, neutral, and conflictual/negative. I recorded the total number of responses that leaned towards the positive side, and followed a similar process to fill in the other columns with the total number of neutral and conflictual/negative responses. The self-report questionnaire of interpersonal communication was scored according to the instructions provided, while the commitment questionnaire featured a rating scale with options such as strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. With all the data categorized and analysed, I drew conclusions about the significance of the findings based on the nature, frequency, and occurrence of the participants' experiences, taking into account the theoretical and contextual underpinnings of this study. I paid special attention to identifying similarities and differences among the participants' experiences, and compared the stage 1 findings with the present findings to provide a narrative and in-depth understanding of the data and answer the research questions through methodological triangulation process (Flick, 2018). As I analysed the data, I made detailed descriptions of what the participants shared about their experiences and how they happened, considering the surroundings or context (Creswell, 2013). Finally, I put together all the descriptions to get a full understanding of how the different factors were related to each other.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The aim of this study is to bring the foundational aspects of relationships i.e., self-dialogue, vulnerability, interpersonal communication patterns, and perceived commitment, together in a working model to see its impact on the adapted roles, changing dynamics, emotional expression, and displayed values, in forming, building, maintaining, and transforming the relationship. Further, this study can help in achieving a greater understanding of this phenomenon and elements of relationships which would also facilitate, and equip mental health professionals to assist those experiencing the loss of connection, lack of loving feelings, and finding it difficult to not able to receive the love they know they deserve. This chapter presents the findings obtained through participants responses from mixed method survey containing subjective in-depth responses as well as self-tests of 31 participants. We have provided a detailed analysis of each finding using narratives, direct quotations, phrases, and recurring adjectives/ words and total number of ratings per question (pertaining to self-report questionnaire) of the survey under positive, conflict, and neutral responses. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the subjects while describing the common patterns found among the interviewees. Few of the themes, and findings elicited from the data are based on varied experiences leading to similar outcomes i.e., the understanding of direct experiences of subjects fits the characteristics of equifinality.

Description of the Findings

This study's findings align with the central principle of General Systems Theory, which states that a “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). This means that vulnerability must be examined through a systems perspective, taking into account how each component and related factors interact to produce a result that is distinct from the individual contributions of each part.

The findings from this study are grouped under 5 major categories. First, the results pertaining to the notion of vulnerability and its related aspects according to the participants responses and will be presented. This section contains comprehensive view of vulnerability that further builds the remaining findings. Second, the intrapersonal communication dynamics will be outlined. This section will comprise of beliefs, values, and expectations i.e., the internal

experience of participants due to perceived threat, and its impact on showing up with emotional openness/ vulnerability. Third, we highlight the contradictions found among participants responses indicting towards the complexities of intrapersonal communication and vulnerability. Fourth, we describe the commitment found among the participants whether in fulfilling or unfulfilling relationships by focusing on the obtained reasons through response interpretations. Lastly, the fifth section uses the methodological triangulation technique to provide in-depth understanding, and validation of the interrelationship of the variable being studied in current research. We used the stage 1 findings of the study titled “desirous of love, how people deal with the lost affection” whose findings were in corroboration with our current findings. We further explain through this process the cause-and-effect relationship among dating relationships i.e., how lack of authenticity leads to unhealthy/ insecure based relationships. Figures are used to illustrate the processes elicited through collective analysis of participants responses. The in-depth review of each finding is expounded upon in greater detail below as the chapter unfolds.

Notion of Vulnerability and its fundamental elements

The findings in this section covers the subjective understanding of vulnerability as a concept in participants romantic relationships, the ideal/ expected and received vulnerability discrepancy and the experience as a whole of showing up with vulnerability and receiving it in their relationships. These findings would be covered under 11 themes namely, (a) Meaning of vulnerability, (b) Degree of vulnerability and coping with felt disconnection, (c) authenticity (expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration, and annoyances, expression of difficult emotions, fears and insecurities, expression of hurt, wants, and needs, expression of real thoughts, feelings, and emotions, expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration, and annoyances, setting emotional boundaries, being authentic) and (d) Strategic vulnerability (other validated intimacy)

(a) Meaning of vulnerability

The survey consisted of few questions such as “what does vulnerability means to you in general?”, “what does it mean for you to be, or feel vulnerable in your relationships?”, and “what are your ideal ways of brining vulnerability in your relationship?”. The descriptive responses of the participants led us to two umbrella themes of defining vulnerability i.e., vulnerability as weakness, and vulnerability as courage (Figure 2).

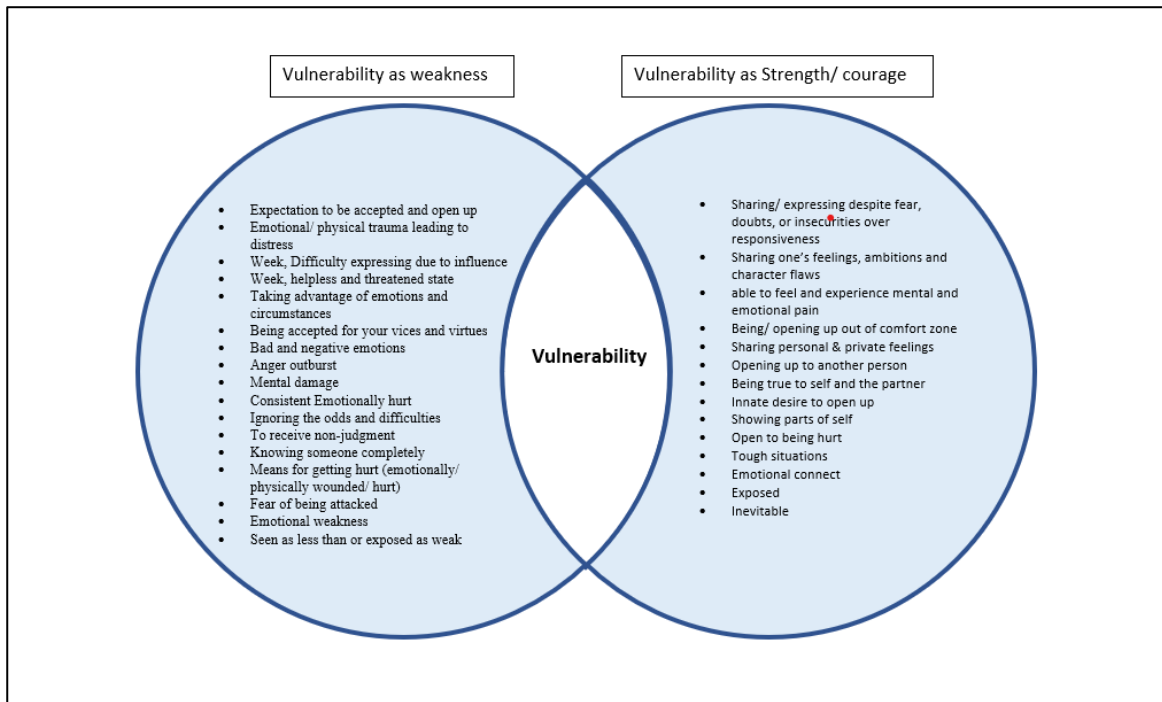


Figure 2: Understanding of Vulnerability as a concept

The responses indicated in figure 1 helped us in looking deeper into participants perspective on what they feel vulnerability is for them in general. Most of the participants viewed vulnerability as a weakness as compared to the participants who viewed vulnerability as a courage. However, despite the understanding of vulnerability as courage by some participants it was observed that the same set of participants even though had an idea of what vulnerability ‘should’ feel like, had hard time cultivating it in their relationships due to various reasons that would be outlined in the following sections. Participants who viewed vulnerability as a weakness described it using the terms such as- mental damage, threatened feeling, negative emotion, fear or a source of getting hurt. For example- Ishani defined vulnerability as “when someone uses personal information, thoughts, feeling to make someone feel insecure or to hurt them to prove their points”, and Sunaina expressed “it is a fear of being attacked”. There were few participants who defined vulnerability as courage and strength such as, Vaani described vulnerability as, “the ability to being open, to share the good and the bad alike”. There was one interesting finding which showed the idea of vulnerability wrapped in conditions of being accepted, liked, or non-judged by their partner or whenever participants chose to show up with vulnerability. For instance, Sanjay mentioned, “Vulnerability is Being true to my partner and being accepted both for my vices and virtues”. Similarly, Kamal expressed, “Vulnerability would reflect an innate desire to open up to another person of one's feelings, ambitions, and

character flaws without being judged on the same”. There were few other responses that fell on the similar lines of conditional vulnerability. This reflects how people are only comfortable with vulnerability if it is responded within their ideas/ expectations and boost worthiness. There were some participants who weren’t aware of what vulnerability is to which they responded as “not aware”, or “don’t know”. A common observation made among the responses that reflected vulnerability as a weakness were that of fear of being taken for granted, fear of being taken advantage of, and being appearing as less than or weak. These reasons did not only effect the participants understanding, and application of vulnerability in their relationships, but their experiences, and fear made them attach their worth with the received responsiveness that led them to shut down, and ignore the difficulties that arise within relationships as a normal circumstance. The subjective understanding of vulnerability as a concept helped us in identifying where participants stand with vulnerability as a skill which further can enhance their relationship health by cultivating emotional intimacy.

(b) Degree of Vulnerability

The degree of vulnerability was analysed through certain questions asked in the survey that reflected the participants extent of brining vulnerability into the relationship and understanding their experience of showing up with vulnerability as a whole. Based on the received responses three themes were formed namely, (i) the extent of vulnerability compared to the original definitions, (ii) ideal/ expected vs. received relationship vulnerability, and (iii) the experience of vulnerability. These themes reflect the participants stance on one of the most important cornerstones of thriving and fulfilling relationship i.e., vulnerability in comparison with their understanding of the concept in general. It not only shows their actual behavioral display within their relationships but also how vulnerability is treated as a conditional aspect of relationship because of personal fear, insecurities, and past hurts. This section has given us insight into certain dynamics of relationships that are unsafe, unhealthy or toxic in nature. It is concerning to note how people are continuing the relationships, or have broken up only when they were on the verge of breaking down and suffered from continuous emotional breakdown.

(i) The extent of vulnerability among participants

The findings from this section were obtained by comparing between the original definition of Vulnerability by the participants, with their responses on questions that reflect their practise of vulnerability in their relationship such as- “what were those moments of connection when you felt most close to your partner”, or “how easy is

it for them to show up, be vulnerable or receive their partners vulnerability”. The rating scale was used ranging from 1-5, 1 marked as the lowest and 5 marked as the highest degree of vulnerability. The personal definitions (original) given by the participants were rated based on the most accepted definition of Vulnerability in the literature of Psychology i.e., “Uncertainty, emotional risk & exposure, The courage to show up and be seen, open expression the thoughts, desires, feelings without worrying about the consequences, and expressing parts of self (shame, least confident etc)”. Further, the questions reflecting their practiced relationship vulnerability was compare to their original definition rating and marked from the range of 1-5. Through this analysis, it was found that even though some participants definitions were within the limitations of psychology defined classification, there was a vast discrepancy in their practise of vulnerability in personal relationships. There were some also many participants whose idea of vulnerability was not close to the Psychology defined classifications (See Figure 3, 3.1, & 3.2).

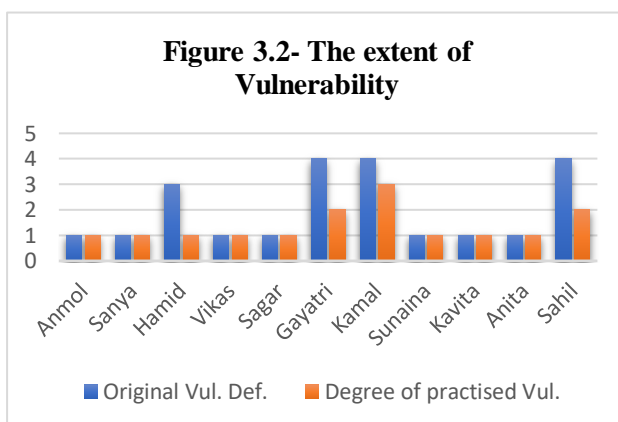
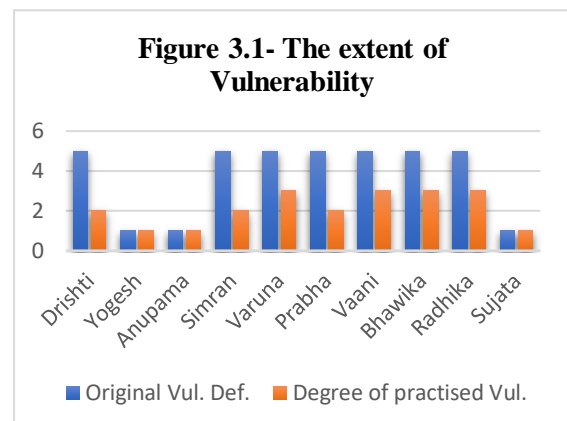
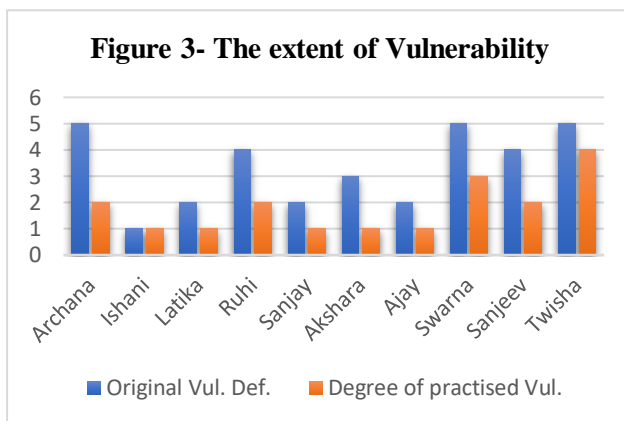


Figure 3: The extent of vulnerability among participants

Hence, it was prevalent among the participants that the knowledge of vulnerability if high, was not consistent with the practise of it in their personal relationships, and with themselves. Similarly, among the participants with low understanding and knowledge of vulnerability had consistent application and using of vulnerability in relationship, which was zero to low. It can be seen that either ways, it meets the case of equifinality i.e., Except few participants, most of the participants whether had high or low knowledge of vulnerability, had difficulty showing up or practising with vulnerability in their romantic relationships. For example- Sujata defined vulnerability as, “For me being vulnerable is when I want to share something but I can't or I am not able to... As I am overthinking a lot and have thoughts of multiple scenarios because sharing something personal is never a good idea”. Going forward with her responses, Sujata shared her closest moments in relationships are when- “When he understands what I am going through, knows that I am pretending to be okay but I am not. When he reaches out and I stay silent, and he stays”. Similarly, an example for people with high understanding of knowledge – Hamid defined vulnerability as- “Being exposed”, whereas his closest defined moments of relationship was- “Facing the problems together as a couple... it's difficult for me to be vulnerable, because I am afraid of rejection... anyhow problems get settled eventually whether expressed my true feelings or not”. There were many such responses that proves the route towards equifinality of low practise of vulnerability in relationship due to fear of rejection, misunderstandings, conflict and rise of other difficult emotions. This reflects a deep routed concern of how it is most difficult to deal with conflicts for people in romantic relationships than the ones they have to deal with within themselves by suppressing their real feeling, thoughts, triggers etc. There were few people whose understanding of vulnerability matched the literature defined classifications and also were practising bringing vulnerability into their relationship. For example- Bhavika indicated vulnerability as, “Exposing to threat”, and expressed her relationships most closed moments as- “Exchange of thoughts and personal belongings; taking care of your partner when no one else can; physical intimacy”. There were only few more responses that were close to how participants actually defined their idea of vulnerability.

One of the important observations made through the participants response analysis were that somewhere people desired vulnerability, hoped to express more than they do, knew what they seek out of the relationship they are/were in, however, they

weren't in relationships that were fulfilling their hidden desires of love and emotional intimacy which is to be achieved through the skill of showing up with vulnerability. Another important finding in this section was that of how people associated every moment of vulnerability in terms of how it was received. For example, statements such as, "When he understands and care about me", "the little things other person notices about you", "the time she showed her acceptance of my feelings for her", or "expected him to understand, which he did". The responses past the initial moments of connection, started to become the deciding factors among many participants whether to continue showing up with vulnerability and how much in their relationship, which often led to other validated intimacy dynamics. Therefore, the discrepancies reflect the understanding of vulnerability in general as well as the kind of relationships that are different than participants idealized, or expected version. It is important to note that most of the people noted down their closest moments or connecting moments with their partners with reference to the initial phase of the relationship, when the relationship was new or in "honeymoon period". The further sections would highlight the eventual unfolding of the experience of vulnerability over the period of time in their relationships.

(ii) Ideal/ expected vs. Actual vulnerability

This section of the findings put lights on partners understanding of relationship vulnerability, exchange of vulnerable moments, and dynamics of relationship climate by focusing on the ideal and actual vulnerability discrepancies. The survey consisted of statement completion question, "My ideal way of showing up with vulnerability with my partner would be ____" and a question asking participants "What does it mean for you to be/ feel vulnerable in your relationship? The responses indicated participants given, received and expected relationship vulnerability which reflects the discrepancies in their thoughts, actions and behaviours in their romantic relationship and its maintenance (see Figure 4).

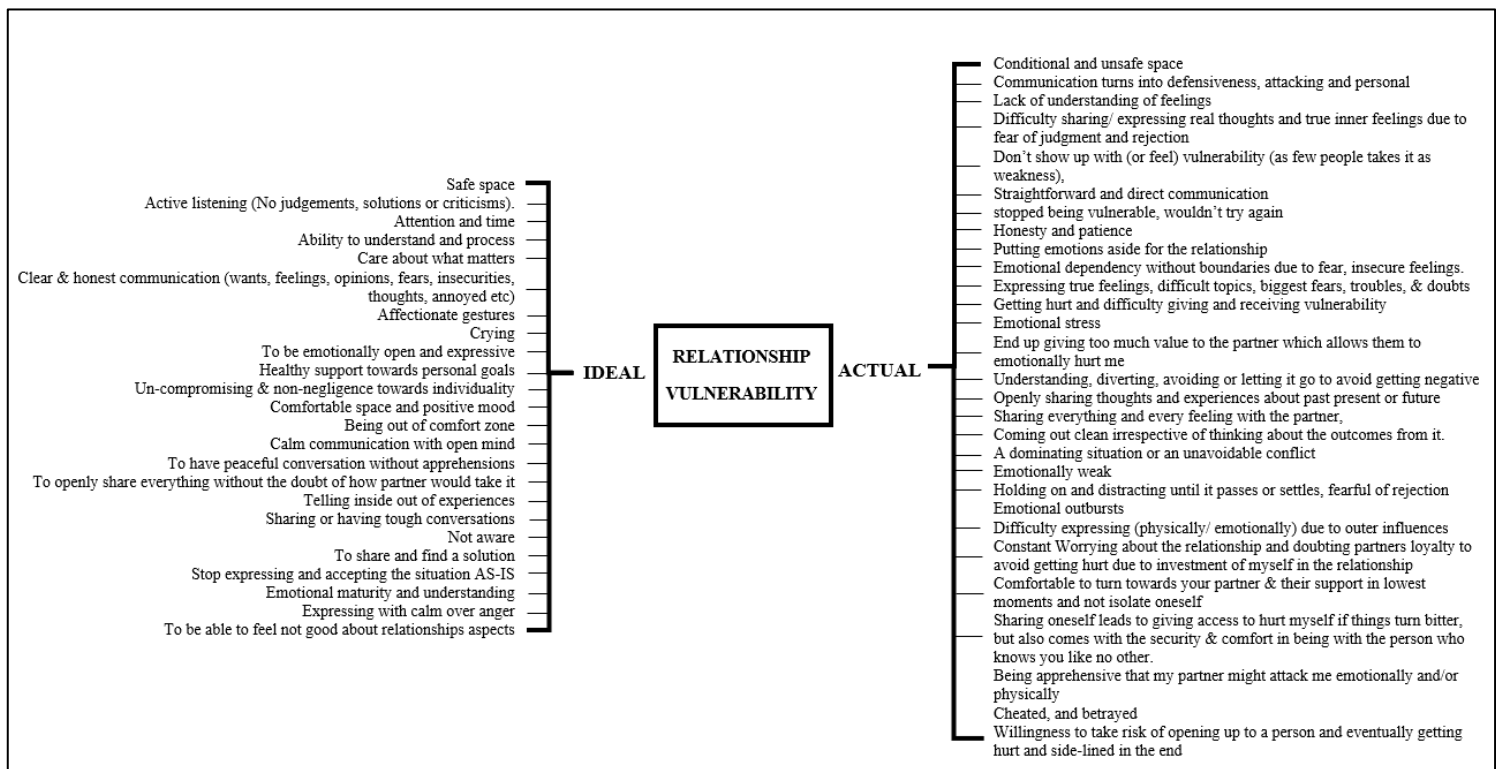


Figure 4: Ideal/ expected vs actual relationship Vulnerability

As represented in Figure 4, the difference can be seen in terms of ideal and received relationship vulnerability. The ideal vulnerability consists of positive expectations in terms of exchange of communication with their partners. For example- Archana expressed her ideal vulnerability as, “Ideal is to be able to have a complete safe space without judgements, solutions or criticisms. Received is a conditional space... in which I often end up feeling attacked and therefore defensive because my partner couldn’t understand my feelings”, Whereas her expected moments of vulnerability are expressed through totally different desired communication patterns, she indicated that, “To be in a safe place when I am sharing such sensitive feelings. To not be judged or ridiculed” is what it should feel to be vulnerable in the relationship. Similarly, Anmol shared it feels “emotionally weak” whenever he has or tries to be vulnerable with his partner, at the same time his ideal vulnerability is that of, “to be able to express how I feel”. There were majority of the participants who showed discrepancies in their ideal/ expected and actual vulnerability state that exists between them and their partners. There were few participants whose ideal and actual relationship vulnerability space matched. For example, Kamal indicated his feelings about being vulnerable in his relationship as, “It takes a lot of effort to open up to an individual. By being vulnerable, you are handing your partner the keys to yourself which could be a

bad idea, should things take a turn bitter, however, also knowing the security and comfort in being with the person who knows you like no other”. On the other hand, his ideal vulnerability consisted of statement, “Telling her about anything that pops up in mind”. There were only few participants whose ideal and actual vulnerability patterns matched. There were also few participants who weren’t aware of what it feels like to be vulnerable, to feel vulnerable or to use it for generating closeness. However, they were aware of what they expected as their ideal vulnerability. It was interesting to note that most of the participants who weren’t aware, or didn’t have a good relationship with vulnerability, has an ideal/ expected vulnerability context revolving around partners response towards them, or any lack in their relationship (or partner) that stops them from being vulnerable i.e., express their most distressed feelings, thoughts and emotions.

Few responses indicated the anger, hopelessness and exhaustion from not able to show up, feel seen, heard or valued by their partners due to holding in or suppression of real thoughts, feelings, or needs. The lack of honesty in relationship is what was seen to be the basis of holding a relationship for the longest time possible instead of authenticity. This gives rise to the most unfulfilling relationships, where unmet needs leads to resentment, when kept inside, turn around the dynamics into toxicity, or insecure relational environment. For example, Sagar expressed his ideal vulnerability as, “Stop expressing and accepting the situation as-is”, Sanjay shared, “I would never try being vulnerable again”, or Ajay indicated, “I tend to put my emotions aside for the relationship”. There were many similar responses pertaining to this section, or others which indicated the alteration in own needs to align themselves with their partners at the cost of their self. It was also observed that there were responses that indicated how vulnerability felt like burden, weakness, and emotional dependency that made them felt that it will destroy their relationships, or that they will appear as too much, or will lose their worth if appeared as “needy”. However, there was a huge inconsistency when that was compared with their actual vulnerability that they desired.

This wasn’t completely the case for few participants who expressed being in an environment where they could show up with vulnerability and received reciprocation, and responsiveness from their partners. Even from such cases, there were participants who shared their past in the beginning of the relationship to feel validated, loved, or accepted by their partners. The survey also indicates that there were few participants in

the survey, as well as in the interviews who tested their partners in ways to understand if they can handle their life's events, history or anything they felt shame around so they can form trust. For example- statements such as, Sujata shared, "I shared everything despite of what he said many times before, that my past didn't matter... I wanted to see if that was really the case... After which he didn't leave or ignored me next day or pity love me... I can trust now". These findings remained consistent with the findings recorded during interviews of the stage 1 research in where the focus of the participants was to fulfil their needs. Out of many ways, testing their partners commitment was one of the main techniques to feel sure, secure affection and develop trust at once. Similar answers were recorded, which were a mixed responses of giving up on needs to enjoy the glory of the new relationship, to maintain the feelings of worthiness, to seek reciprocity, and to test the level of commitment.

In conclusion, the findings of this section suggests that participants even though aware agrees to settle for bare minimum till the point of no return, emotional exhaustion, or until their partners moves away/ breaks up. The responses recorded by the participants on the survey indicated the following, (a) There was a huge discrepancy between ideal and actual relationship vulnerability, (b) The feeling of vulnerability or the understanding of their own ideal vulnerability was impacted by their past experiences, personal insecurities and fear, (c) The vulnerability practised in relationship is limited and bounded to partners positive response, acceptance, and approval. If not validated, the needs, wants, desires, and expressing honest thoughts are altered at the cost of self to protect oneself from hurt, keep the partner by their side, and increase the longevity of the relationship, (d) There were very few participants who appeared to be in a safe relationship where their ideal/actual relationship vulnerability matched, however, their responses suggested testing behaviour, and emotional conflicts as to whether to hold back or express to not come across as needy or too much. These were also the reasons to hold back real thoughts, feelings or emotions among all the participants. Therefore, using vulnerability to secure affection appeared common among majority of the participants (e) Vulnerability being considered as weak in unsafe relationships, and the way people experienced the response towards their openness with their partner, had motivated them to not connect through vulnerability, but temporary moments of connection based on superficial conversations, and pretence to protect oneself, partner and the relationship.

(iii) The experience of Vulnerability as a whole

This section of the study displays the findings that indicates the experiences of the participants showing up with vulnerability in their relationship as their felt experience of the same. We analysed the recorded responses into four categories, felt experience, vulnerability context, phase of the relationship, communicating feelings (hurt, negative, sad, triggered etc) generated through partners words/ hurt and coping with felt disconnection (See, Appendix B). As illustrated in the table (Appendix B), it can be seen that majority of the participants had negative experience with vulnerability i.e., when they showed up with openness, honesty or real feelings, they didn't find the desired responses from their partners that induced negative felt experience. For example- Ishani shared,

“When I was being misunderstood during arguments after being constant assured that I can be myself and was asked to be myself. Now I don't feel like sharing my thoughts even when someone is genuinely making efforts for me because that feeling of being misunderstood and judged is a very bad feeling and I don't want to feel that feeling again now I restrict my true feelings”.

Similarly, Sagar shared,

“Throughout my relationship! I used to worry all the time that she is not loyal with me but was not able to break the relationship. It was a 100% negative experience, initially the only response from my end was to ask her, bug her, take stress, think all the time but with time I kind of digested and accepted all these. Later in the relationship I never asked her about her doings. I kind of let loose of the thread that was holding her and stopped worrying about the situations. This kind of impacted my vision for the future of that relationship and stopped trusting her even if she was correct”.

There were many similar responses that indicated how participants when tried to show up with vulnerability, didn't led them to the desired responses from their partners that made them suppress their real feelings, and continue with the relationship with unmet needs, suppressed emotions, and lack of honesty. This also means that going forward with the relationship after repetitive indication of partners behaviour towards them, they chose to settle for something they knew they didn't deserve, but due to lack of self-esteem, or self-love, it led them to settle for the bare

minimum. There were few participants who responded with positive felt experience when they showed up with vulnerability. However, out of the participants who marked their experience as positive, had mentioned it to be the case limited to the initial phases of the relationship. For example- Akanksha shared,

“I was floored and I felt very secure and safe at the moment of sharing my past in the beginning of the relationship. I was very harshly judged before for all the choices I had made but my partner did not say or do anything at the moment and I was extremely scared of how he would react. He was very reassuring and he was least impacted by it negatively... My needs are all unmet which were once met and were most important to me... I wanted to depend on him... but he stopped validating me”.

Similarly, Sahil indicated that,

“I felt most vulnerable during the initial stages of my relationship when I started dating my ex-girlfriend. It was a positive experience and later on it helped me in communicating my emotions with clarity & what I felt about while discussing matters that were connected to both of our lives... Later on, she became cold hearted and that's why I left expressing myself”.

There were similar responses that indicated that even though many participants labelled their experience as positive they meant it with reference to the time, they felt most connected to their partner. The question on the survey asked was, “*When have you been most vulnerable with your partner? Was it a negative or positive experience?*”. It was interesting to note that people had felt most vulnerable with their partners in the beginning of the relationship, which didn't continue for many participants who labelled it as a positive experience. Later, the failure of positive exchange of dialogues, converted into relationship with suppressed difficult emotions. Likewise, people who labelled their experience as negative started to show up with safety over vulnerability. Both of which led towards inauthenticity and lack of emotional intimacy in their relationships as reflected in the participants responses. The difference lies in the way people perceived the question which took them to their most vulnerable moments.

There were some participants who continue to feel positive with their courage to show up, because of their partners reciprocation, understanding, and safe

relational environment. For example- Gayatri expressed, “Talking about my past, it was a positive experience as my partner was quite supportive and he accepted my past. I feel very comfortable opening up to my partner as I know he will understand things”, and Bhavika indicated, “When we shared each other's secrets. It was positive because I felt relieved and liberated. The experience strengthened our trust and bond”.

Analysing the responses led us to the conclusion that many people based their trust of sharing themselves and their stories over how accepting their partners could be in terms of validating their past. Majority of the participants shared their past in the beginning of the relationship to see if their partner could handle it. If it was handled as per their desires, it led towards trust, motivated towards giving more, or confidence in speaking their minds. However, if anything beyond their past such as expressing their hurt or disappointment caused by their partner was discussed, was never understood, or led to conflicts that made them decide to never speak their mind again. This indicates a very deep-rooted concern of how people’s expectations, standards, values, needs and above all self-worth is dependable on the responses they would receive from their partners. The major part of which involves and depends upon speaking from the place of authenticity, which if shut down because of undesired partner response, how is longevity of the relationship going to make up for the intimacy required to build thriving relationships?

There were few participants who tried to speak their mind, communicate their real feelings regarding felt distance, hurt, or disappointment that arose in the relationship. When these participants spoke with honesty, they were not being seen, heard or valued. The decision or choice made was to abandon self to keep the relationship, give up on own needs, and take a backseat. Whereas, for very few participants who were responded with active listening, love, and understanding continued showing up with vulnerability in ways that they feel were important for them, and the relationship. Irrespective of the felt experience, the vulnerability context with which participants showed up fell under the following categories, Past baggage/ secrets, Expression of oneself during conflicts, regarding relationship dynamics (commitment, loyalty, trust etc), Daily hassles/ difficult time in personal life, Relationship concerns (hurt, unresponsiveness), and personal insecurities/ weaknesses. Followed by which were the received responses on their decision to

show up with vulnerability which fell under two categories, namely, emotional validation, and emotional invalidation, for example- taken for granted, using their past against them, active listening, misunderstandings, support etc. It was interesting to note that majority of participants with positive experiences were those who felt accepted while sharing their past traumas, or baggage.

(c) Authenticity

To understand the context, meaning and intentions around vulnerability, we formed 5 categories to understand the level of vulnerability practiced among the participants in their relationship in varied situations that are difficult and conflictual in nature. The 6 categories were as follows, (i) Expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration, and annoyances, (ii) Expression of difficult emotions, fears and insecurities, (iii) Expression of hurt, wants, and needs, (iv) Expression of real thoughts, feelings, and emotions, (v) Setting emotional boundaries, and (vi) Being Authentic. The responses provided by the participants for these 6 categories were used to analyse the content and code their responses through inductive approach, which led us to an understanding of pathway towards authenticity and inauthenticity in relationship. It was interesting to note that even though there were two prominent pathways leading from secure establishment, and insecure establishment of connection, there were also responses that were contradictory in nature. For example- participants whose responses were towards secure attachment, had marked strongly agree, or agree on questions such as, “If what you shared in your vulnerable space wasn't responded to in ways you expected, how likely was it that you stopped showing up with openness, and gave in to the ways that were less reflective of your inner emotional world”, or “I do feel I stay quiet as much as I would like to say, or react differently than i would whenever i am hurt, or disappointed, because sharing my feelings and thoughts in the past created conflicts, or difficult emotions”. However, there were few participants whose answers were in alignment with their subjective responses. Therefore, it can be said that, there were very few participants who were sure of being in a fulfilling relationship with emotional security, and majority of participants who were in insecure based relationships, and some participants who were unaware about their relationship standing in terms of how they feel about the relationship as a whole, and if they were okay with their actions which were not in alignment with their actual values. This would be covered elaborately in intrapersonal communication patterns section. The independent findings of the 5 categories were as follows-

(i) Expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration, and annoyances

The overall findings of this category reflected that majority of the participants has difficulty expressing concerns, personal triggers, frustrations, or annoyances that were majorly caused in the relationship due to partners actions, or words (See, Appendix C). One of the direct subjective questions i.e., “*How challenging is it for me to communicate my underlying feelings of triggers caused due to my partners actions or words*”, resulted in 23 conflictive responses, and 8 positive responses. The conflictive responses included the reasonings of why is it a challenge or an attempt of their expressions which generally end up futile. For example- Ishani shared, “It is difficult for me to express or communicate my feelings at the moment of argument due to bad temper I try to control my aggressiveness and then try to make communication little later which at times diffuses my point because the moment is gone and my partner didn’t have that kind of patience”; Saloni indicated, “It is difficult for me, as I feel it would be used against me. My partner criticized me with my triggers like I don't like domination over my opinion as it triggers some childhood experiences, but even knowing that my partner uses it to make fun which make me feel hurt and now it’s difficult to communicate”. Similarly, Gayatri expressed, “It is quite challenging at times. Many a times there have been discussions with my partner which does not end to be positive and his way of expressing things reminds me of my past relationship. I have expressed the same to him but it has not ended up well. The way he way responded and behaved never gives me a courage to speak to him about my past relationship ever”. The positive natured answers included answers like, Radhika shared, “Our relation is very open and honest. I communicate all feelings and likewise”, or Latika indicated, “I’m usually able to easy and quickly discuss on the spot, unless we haven’t had the time to discuss”. There were similar responses which indicated the challenges participants face, or not in expressing their concerns, frustrations, triggers, or annoyances. Much of the response did suggest that the way partners responded effected their attempt to approach with openness and honesty, however, due to the limitations of the survey, it was limited in subjectively understanding the way a concern was kept forward. However, we managed to understood the participants approach towards communicating concerns through interpersonal communication patterns questionnaire which says a lot about their ways of putting forward the concerns. A question involving rating scale under this category i.e., “*It is easier for*

me to react, than speak from the place of vulnerability whenever I am emotionally threatened, triggered, or made feel unsafe”, majority (21) of the participants answered strongly agree to agree, and 10 rated disagree to strongly disagree. However, there were certain responses in the survey that does indicate that once the trust was established in their most vulnerable moments i.e., sharing past concerns, the triggers or concerns were kept forwards until it met with undesired responses and higher misunderstandings/ conflicts. The moment a disconnection was established it did affect the way an individual showed up which in this study shows participants tried their best to avoid until they could. For example- Sanjay shared, “I just pretend they are not there, I simply don’t express”, Ajay indicated” I get clingy and become more desperate and tend to think I did something wrong”, and Archana mentioned, “At first I completely shut down and even distance myself a lot... after sometime I only initiate to resolve this which often led to conflicts”. There were many similar responses from participants that expressed it is easier for them to ignore than communicate, which has also been proven multiple times in the survey under various situational questions which are reported in the findings throughout.

(ii) Expression of difficult emotions, fears and insecurities

The findings of this category indicates that majority of the people fear and face challenges in expressing their difficult emotions, fear and insecurities (See, Appendix C). This category of being vulnerable tried to understand the responses of people when they are often in a situation with their partner such as conflicts, misunderstandings, disagreements, etc i.e., anything that makes them feel emotionally triggered, and perceive a threat. The difficult emotions such as triggered feelings, fear of being abandoned, or any raised insecurity can cause conflicts (external, or within). However, it is a most common occurrence in any relationship provided it is dealt with awareness, courage and love. Communication being a two-way process, is what either establishes safety or heightened insecurity. Hence, it is important to understand how people experience and express difficult emotions, fear and insecurities that is generated due to conflicts and its impact on the relationship. One of the questions under this category was, “*I often run behind my partner to seek reassurance, understanding, or validation after a conflict*”, to which, 19 were conflictual responses (Strongly agree to agree), and 12 were positive responses (strongly disagree to disagree). When asked to interpret a quote on how

difficult it is to go through when you aren't able to express the true feelings that are difficult such as fear, unhappiness, unfulfillment, putting forward needs, etc (See, Appendix C), there were majority of the participants who expressed their feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and difficulties. For example- Sanjay shared,

“As far as my relationship is concerned, I felt it a lot of times & there were moments I had to suppress my feelings of dismay & sorrow coz I knew that the person I was with, even if I would have said something reasonable, then also it's gonna be taken in some other context and it wouldn't have led to any conclusion”.

Archana also expressed that,

“I feel completely rejected and un-important. I just shut down not wanting to say or contribute anything to the conversation as everything starts seeming pointless. I feel like saying something like I am unhappy here or I hope we never got into a relationship... but I don't say such things because I feel these feelings are momentary and are result of the anger I am feeling at the time. Also, I am aware how my partner will get hurt if I say such things”.

There were many similar responses obtained that mentioned how it is difficult for them to express their true emotions, fears, or insecurities that arise due to triggers or conflicts. It was also observed that some participants mentioned few adjectives such as, “unheard, unloved, unconcerned, blame-game, misunderstandings, non-reciprocity and dismissed” as few of the most occurring reasons of not expressing the true feelings. It was interesting to note how few participants who were in current relationship, as well as people who were presently single but had referred their past relationships had similar path towards difficulty in expressing concerns. Some of the participants responses indicated their fearful mindset towards dealing with arising difficult emotions in the relationship such as, Ishani shared, “Being in relationship you constantly feel the unsaid pressure of putting your best foot forward to sustain it and that fear of oh what if I fail again can really make you compromise with the thoughts or ideas you believe”. Similarly, Prabha shared, “It takes a lot to break another person's heart and tell them you're unhappy in this relationship because maybe the other person is happy being you in whatever circumstance but you think that you're giving up easily and earlier than the other one is”. There were few other responses that collectively suggests a deep desire to abandon oneself in order to maintain the presence of their partner and

avoid feeling threatened/ rejected in any way. This can keep people stuck in negative cycles and fantasies for who or what their partner/ relationship can be. This can also be supported by the majority of the participants saying yes to the disappointment of unfulfilled desire to change their partner as they wished them to.

There were few responses that were positive, which included having tough conversations with partners as a part of process towards healthier relationship. For example, Ruhi shared, “There have been fights when I have expressed all of this. At the end, i realize that the key lies in telling the other person how you are feeling”; Bhavika shared, “Doesn't relate. I have communicated always about my feelings and thoughts”. There were other similar responses that aligns with the above responses. It is important to highlight that the responses indicated that for not all participants with positive responses had an idea of sharing even though it isn't validated by their partners. Only few of such participants mentioned being okay sharing their feelings even if it invited conflicts, as it will only create more distance if suppressed. The neutral responses indicated ignorance, aligning every time with partners need, creating situation to avoid conflicts yet share, and don't know how to express. There were few answers that reflected the neutral responses. It was also noted that “being unhappy” in a relationship and its arising concerns were seen as a doomed relationship by most of the participants. Only few saw it as a part of a relationship which needs to be handled together as a couple. The constant feeling of unhappiness can indicate the end of relationship, but it involved factors such as having tough conversations, which if not initiated, or worked upon can often lead to prolonged suffering before separation.

(iii) Expression of hurt, wants, and needs:

This was one of the most important categories i.e., expression of hurt, wants, and needs because unmet needs are the birthplace of insecure attachment patterns, relationship breakdown, resentment, as well as trauma bondings. It is not possible for partners to meet all the needs, until asked or expressed, which can cause hurt in the process. Hence, it is important to show up with courage to express one's own needs, wants, and hurt or else it will end with conflicts, emotional exhaustion and loss of confidence. The rating scale questions involved questions such as, “I feel emotionally invalidated by my partner whenever I share feelings that matters to me”, “If something was shared in the space of vulnerability, it was used against me in conflicts to get back at me, to prove me wrong, or to make it my fault”, or “When

my partner doesn't- meet my emotional needs, or treat me in ways I would feel loved, heard, and validated, it's hard for me to express the arising difficult feelings, or the emotional impact caused due to his/ her actions". The majority of the responses were towards strongly agree to agree, and few responses were towards strongly disagree to agree (See, Appendix C). When asked about their ways of handling the hurt when their needs go unmet, or if their partners actions made them felt angry, anxious or insecure, many participants answers fell under conflictual nature. For example- Sanjay indicated, "Do nothing stay quiet"; Sujata shared, "Blame myself for being in a way that my partner doesn't like. I will blame myself for all the things that I don't like in myself even if he said about only one thing. I will take everything and beat myself up for few days"; Ishani shared, "binge eat my emotions or let it be under the carpet until I don't feel ready to put it out loud in a better manner", and Hamid shared, "Distract myself by doing something else". There were many other responses that aligns with the examples of responses above for the way people manage the hurt and generated hard/ negative feelings in the relationship. There were few positive responses under this category which reflects healthy communication, and healthier approach towards communicating one's own needs, wants, or hurt. For example, such responses indicated statements like, "talk openly about my feelings", or "talk about it to gain clarity". There were few more responses that were in alignment with the other responses.

An observation made throughout the research which was consistent with these findings that, people tend to believe that vulnerability comes only with the partners response, or when they would like to share something until they feel it is enough tolerated. Whereas, vulnerability isn't just expression of concerns in response to which there will always be a validating response, but can also mean expressing what one needs by their partner to do for them, what they don't appreciate, or how their partners can help them feel secure to talk in a calmer way irrespective of the response anticipation. In other words, to reach out and to respond needs practise, expression and patience, to let other person know how to love you when you are triggered even if it means resolving conflicts later in a calmer way. If not received or reciprocated in any kind of way from their partners, they get to choose to step into the vulnerability or suppress it. There were 26 out of 31 conflictual natured responses to, "Even if somewhere I know I am not going to receive it, I want wanted my partner to do more of ___", to which responses that were recorded were as

follows- affection, emotional maturity, emotional bonding, understanding, feeling loved, open conversations, expressive, etc. (See, Appendix C). The mentioned needs of participants are the foundation of a secure relationship. However, it can be seen that irrespective of whether participant is broken up, or presently dating, either way, many responses reflected the weak foundation of the relationship. This gives rise to the vagueness and contradictions among those participants who responded with open expression of their feelings. This would be elaborated in the section headed vagueness in understanding vulnerability.

(iv) Expression of real thoughts, feelings, and emotions

This category highlights the findings based on the recorded responses on questions attending the expression of real thoughts, feelings and emotions. The questions were mixed with subjective open ended questions as well as rating scales such as, “If what you shared in your vulnerable space wasn't responded to in ways you expected, how likely was it that you stopped showing up with openness, and gave in to the ways that were less reflective of your inner emotional world”, or “If my partner can't understand where I am coming from, feel negatively towards me, complains about something s/he didn't like, gives not so good feedback, or feels not excited about the relationship at some point in time. It makes me react in ways such as ____”. Most of the responses were conflictual in nature, and less positive. There were few neutral responses that indicated the similar reasons such as unawareness, unacceptance/ un-acknowledgment, confusion etc. The questions addressed the few scenarios such as, likeliness of stop showing up with openness due to unexpected/ undesired responses to what is shared in the vulnerable space, voicing disagreements, staying quiet over expression or voicing own opinion, and holding back honest reactions to hurt as expression of feelings caused conflicts and misunderstanding in the past with their partners. It can be said that if majority of the participants felt emotionally conflictual, or are unaware/ denying of their self or relationships emotional health is like building a pathway towards relationship breakdown rather than building thriving relationships. For example, 22 participants accepted that they hold back their real feelings, or stay quiet comparative to how much they would actually like to express aligns with inauthenticity i.e., not being true to self, or the partner and the relationship as a whole. Similarly, 20 participants expressed their fear of inviting conflicts into the relationship if they would express their thoughts, or honest feelings which were majorly with regard to how their

partners are making them feel intentionally or unintentionally. When participants were asked when is it easier for them to express their real honest feelings (whether positive or negative), or approach their partner with openness, there were many conflictual responses (See, Appendix C), such as, “when I am drunk”, “extremely overwhelmed or when I can’t take it anymore”, “if partner is busy”, “after being asked multiple times”, or “it is better to hold back”. There were few neutral responses as well such as, “only if given reassurances”, “if reciprocated the same amount of dedication to share”, or “mature responses”. On the other hand, there were few positive responses for when they are able to express their honest feelings to which participants responded with statements such as, “It is easier anytime I would want to talk”, “it is the right time to express”, “when feel calmed down after taking space”, or “attending to each other point of view”. It was interesting to note that participants who expected their partners to respond in ways they would feel safe to share, were seen in three ways, 1. It was never communicated but simply expected, or 2. If not responded after saying few times, given up and settled for whatever it is, and 3. Applied conditions in the ways they would want their partners to respond which if not lived up to create stuckness, or negative cycle. Participants responses on, “If my partner can’t understand where I am coming from, feel negatively towards me, complains about something s/he didn’t like, gives not so good feedback, or feels not excited about the relationship at some point in time. It makes me react in ways such as _____”, were also majorly emotionally conflicting in nature. For example, Archana’s response summed it all for many participants, she indicated,

“My efforts are wasted, me trying to keep myself in the back so that we don’t fight gets pointless ... I feel stupid for suffering silently when the outcome was ultimately the same”.

Similar response was recorded that contained the same underlying meaning. There were other responses that reflected self-sabotaging, shutting down, self-doubts, under-acknowledge the feelings, insecurity, dejected, and putting self on the back seat. For example, Bhavika shared, “Not giving myself much attention and not acknowledging how I feel”, Sujata shared, “I am hurt, I will go in self-sabotage mode. I will be sad for days, won't say anything, won't talk to anyone. Will be alone in my bed then I will force myself to clear my head and go for a walk”, or Sagar shared, “I become less expressive from an emotional point, become less available

emotionally, stop caring”. There were few feelings that were expressed such as helpless, hurt, sad, misunderstood, agreeable, etc (See, Appendix C). There were few responses which reflected that their point of having a conversation was to try their best to change their opinion about themselves, or feel heard at any cost. On the other hand, there were very few positive responses which indicated talking and expressing concerns as well as understanding the partners point of view. It is important to note that many participants did mention about, feeling worried/ fearful, get distant for longer period of times, or use silence. Even though taking space before reacting, or expressing is a good regulation practice for having productive safe conversations, it was unclear as to if they avoided talking about it once calmed down i.e., ignored after a period of time, or did come back to the concern. Except very few participants who indicated such responses, did had vagueness appeared in their responses upon cross checking, which does leads to conclusion that the matters and emotions remained unresolved in their relationships. For example, one of the participants shared that he would always express whatever he feels through partners actions, but on the other hand he does mention that it is always challenging to express my real feelings as it might hurt the partner because of which there are many things he has held back or suppressed. There were many similar contradictions. Whereas, for the very few exceptions whose answers matched were comfortable sharing their real feelings and also didn’t hold back anything they felt will invite conflicts.

(v) Setting Emotional Boundaries

Setting emotional boundaries is a huge part of healthy functioning of the relationship provided it is learnt how to set boundaries over the period of time. It involves vulnerable emotions and at the same time require one to speak from the place of vulnerability, as it is a part of who a person is and if violated can cause attachment reinjuries, increase conflicts, or build resentment. To understand along with the other factors of vulnerability, there were two direct questions which were, “It is difficult for me to set emotional boundaries with my partner”, and “I do sometimes feel my partner violates my emotional boundaries, or downplays my feelings. When this happens, I tend to find myself become agitated and angry, or letting it slide, and not create a scene” (See, Appendix C). It was found that participants responses reflected huge discrepancies in terms of how they view, and

practise vulnerability versus their comfort over setting boundaries, and maintaining it. It was seen that 10 participants had conflicted i.e., negative response, 14 participants had marked sometimes, and 7 participants had marked never in response to the question whether is it difficult for them to set emotional boundaries in their relationship. Whereas, when asked about their partners violating their emotional boundaries which motivates them to let it slide, and suppress their emotions, 8 participants responded with negative ratings, 7 marked sometimes, and 16 marked never. It was clearly evident that majority of the participants who had marked positive yet contradictory- neutral responses were for the following reasons, (a) it never occurred to them to set emotional boundaries, (b) unaware of emotional boundaries, (c) didn't require to set emotional boundaries in their relationship yet, (d) unsaid expectations of meeting their every emotional need, and (e) heavily dependent on partners response to their emotional boundary setting attempt. On the other hand, people who marked negative in their rating scale, i.e., always too often meant that they had difficulty setting emotional boundaries, but showed contradictions in terms of their partners never crossing their emotional boundaries, or always crossing their emotional boundaries that they have to shut their emotions, or avoid expressing them. It was reflective with comparison to other responses that people did face challenges in setting emotional boundaries, maintaining it, and being assertive if any boundary was violated. This category of the findings also suggests that the skill of setting emotional boundaries are lacking in the relationships as the findings show evidence that majority of the participants hold back their real thoughts, desires their partners to be more emotionally available, feel the need to hide their parts of self, and only expresses that they assume would be validated or not change anything in their relationship due to any misunderstanding or conflict. For example, Sanjay shared, he always faces emotional invalidation from his partner, faces difficulty in setting emotional boundaries, but his partner never violates his boundaries or he doesn't let it slide. He also responded to the question of expression of hurt, needs or wants, as "I do nothing, and stay quiet". He also shared keeping his expectations to almost nothing as his partner never cared enough to understand him. Sanjeev shared, he never feels emotionally invalidated by his partner, but his partner does violate his emotional boundaries that makes him take a backseat, as he agrees that sharing his real feelings can lead to conflicts and due to unexpected responses, he has started to be less expressive of his inner

emotional world. There were many similar contradictions which would be explained descriptively in the following sections. Therefore, it can be concluded that, majority of the participants did faced difficulty setting emotional boundaries, few participants never had any difficulty with setting emotional boundaries, and some participants are unsure about this part of vulnerability. Unsurety can be due to few reasons that came out of the findings, (a) lack of self-awareness, (b) lack of self-worth, (c) lack of relational skills, (c) unrealistic expectations, and (d) Shape-shift with partners due to fear.

There were very few participants whose answers matched in terms of setting emotional boundaries, and maintaining it. For example- Vaani didn't had difficulty expressing her true feelings even if it might invite conflicts, she was open to set and maintain emotional boundaries, even if sometimes her partner violates it. There were 2 more responses that were in alignment with their other responses.

(vi) Being Authentic:

Authenticity in this research is defined as being true to self, and the others. It involves components of self-awareness, courage and being in alignment with own beliefs and values. To understand this from participants perspective, we had few questions in the survey that would help in understanding the presence, and state of vulnerability in the participants relationship. It included the questions such as- "I feel/ felt like hiding parts of me from my partner because", "Things that stop me from being vulnerable in my relationships are/ were", or "What are the things that are/ were difficult to share with your partner as it may cause you risk of rejection, change in perception, judgment, or long conflicts i.e., things could go wrong, or even lead to break up?". It was evident from the responses that authenticity, or to show up with vulnerability was at its lowest among the majority of the participants. It can be concluded so because participants fear, lack of self-worth, and guarded (protection from hurt) actions were the factors driving the relationship to maintain it anyhow. For example- Archana shared, "He wouldn't understand or worse understand wrongly", Ishani indicated, "might mis use those parts to make me feel less about myself", Ajay shared, "Somewhere I don't want to hurt my partners feelings", Aruna shared, "My past was full of trauma so I don't want my partner to think negative about me", or Sujata shared, "I am not confident of those parts. I hide it to hide my insecurities. I don't want to show my vulnerable side to him because

what will I do if he leaves me?”. There were many similar responses that represented the need to hide parts of themselves that make them who they are, or are responsible for their triggers because of perceived relationship threat. There were many important things that were mentioned by the participants that they couldn’t share because of apprehensions, and lack of understanding (See, Appendix C). For example- dissatisfaction in the relationship, feelings about the relationship, support on past trauma or issues, personal insecurities, everything, and my mistakes. One of the participants mentioned anything that triggers her partners confidence was never shared. This reason was among many others that kept the participants from speaking their mind and heart as the underlying reason remains the same- the fear of rejection, abandonment, and failure. There were also participants who resisted sharing the things they like to do, but avoided sharing with their partners as they didn’t support them on the same such as, friendships with opposite gender, interests, or day to day activities. There were very few participants who shared being open, and vocal about their own story, feelings, and things that are important for them that their partner knows. For example- Kavita shared, “Sharing feelings is very much important in any relationship and we both understand it and share things openly.”, or Twisha indicated, “sharing every part of me makes me feel more loved and understood”. There were also few responses that indicated that there is nothing yet that they feel the need to not share, as they are open, and mutually understanding. However, there were few participants who shared that even though relationship wouldn’t be much impacted, they still would avoid anything that will cause fights or arguments. Therefore, to emotionally express oneself isn’t easy for the participants due to reasons such as, being labelled, judgment, partners lack of emotional availability, distrust, blame games, no space for feelings that matters, or feeling rejected/ unaccepted (See Appendix, D). The findings also indicated that participants stopped themselves from being vulnerable due to many factors that include emotional invalidation, conflicts/ misunderstandings, unhealthy communication patterns, difficulty expressing, and fear/ insecurities. There are many more listed in detail in Appendix D. It was interesting to note how the participants identified their worth with their past relationships and distrust in their present relationship despite the duration of the relationship that they couldn’t feel confident enough to share even though they wanted to. There were very few participants who waited to share their past when

they felt safe and could trust the ability of their partners to hold space for them. However, for the participants who hid it out of fear despite the desire to confide with their partner speaks volume about the foundation of the relationship as the individual attributes that partners go into the relationship with such as lack of self-worth. Therefore, the authenticity with which partners showed up in their relationship was low/conflictive among most of the participants, contradictory in few, and positive in least among all the participants.

(d) Strategic vulnerability (other validated intimacy)

Strategic vulnerability in this research was referred to as vulnerability with an ulterior motive, hidden agenda, or using vulnerability to build connection i.e., conditional vulnerability. This type of vulnerability if used doesn't create authentic connections but superficial connections because it weakens the foundation of the relationship leading to scraping of emotional intimacy. One of the questions in the survey to understand participants use of strategic vulnerability was, "I shared my past wounds with my partner in the beginning of the relationship, in ways that made me felt accepted, affectionate, validated, and wanted" (See, Appendix D). In response to this question, 22 participants marked from often-sometimes, whereas, only 9 participants shared never. For the participants who shared never was because of two reasons, (a) they wanted to take time before opening up to understand if their partners are safe and capable to hold their stories, and (b) they were shameful and fearful of expressing the parts which they desired to share. Most of the participants who marked positive fall under the latter reason. Whereas, participants who marked often-sometimes i.e., 22 participants, came up with responses that generated reasons for them to share their past too early in the relationship, which were, (a) To test if their partner can handle it, (b) To feel validated, (c) to feel accepted and assured of being loved despite their past, and (d) to not feel guilty of not sharing later on as they were unsure of their partners intention, or future reactions. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is the presence of self-validated intimacy and other-validated intimacy among the participants which is highly dependent on their own view of themselves. Merely being vulnerable because one hopes to share, or connect is way different than disclosing with an intent to feel validated, or reciprocated. The former builds deeper emotional intimacy, and latter is the reason for stuckness, toxicity, lack of boundaries, and emotional exhaustion.

A subjective question asked to the participants in the survey was, "Based on my partners response, sharing or expressing from the vulnerable space made me feel/ felt like ____". Upon

analysis, it was found that majority portion of the participants responses fell under conflicted adjectives which suggested negative feelings, and disturbance, whereas, few participants response fell under positive feelings, and few under neutral responses. Few of the responses that indicated negative experience were such as, Archana shared, “Majorly I feel disappointed because he tries to help me by giving me advise of how I could become more strong and I could interpret things differently ... and I don’t like or want that advice in that moment so I feel disappointed”, and Sahil expressed, “Worthless & of little use, coz it lead me to nowhere but a position where I felt tricked and alone”. There were many other responses that indicated how it made them doubt their self. Statements and words like, “I am too much, I am a burden, I am not valued, negative, hurt, isolated” etc. On the other hand, the few positive responses indicated the trust in the moments of connection. The most common words that came up were, felt “safe, heard, assured, valued, and relieved”. However, there were many limited responses that reflected feeling positive. The responses to understand participants level of authenticity and strategic vulnerability helped in understanding the contradictions more clearly as most of the responses indicated disappointment, unawareness, and thoughts of breaking up whenever they felt negative through their attempt to share something important to their partners. There was one participant whose response summed it all for how people choose to be vulnerable based on partners convenience with an intention to avoid fight, and share how much ever would be appreciated and not judged. The Gayatri response was, “It depends on the situation, he has been supportive throughout but there have been times wherein he fails to understand my perspectives... His anger stops me from being vulnerable, less understanding in some specific situations.”

Intrapersonal communication Dynamics

Intrapersonal communication was a part of the survey which helped us in understanding the internal experience of participants related to showing up with vulnerability and how is it affected by the internal functioning of the participants. Therefore, the participants were required to fill out a mix form of questions (qualitative and quantitative) in relation with vulnerability. To understand the internal communication and experience that can impact the way vulnerability is looked upon or used in a relationship, we focused on 4 aspects which were, internal triggers, values/ beliefs, expectations and self-concept (or ego stories). This section of the findings is divided into 4 themes formed out of the participants responses, i.e., (i) The progression from triggers to the emergence of vulnerability among participants, (ii) Self-concept: Values/ Beliefs in relation to self and vulnerability, (iii) Expectations vs. Standard,

and (iv) Perception among participants. These themes were generated keeping in mind the importance of self which holds the greatest value in the way people show up in relationships. Therefore, it was important to understand how participants internal experiences influence the level of vulnerability in their relationship which further impacts the emotional bonding between couples.

(i) The progression from triggers to the emergence of vulnerability among participants:

This theme delves into how, when participants face a perceived threat, it leads to triggers, attachment fears, self-beliefs, responses, and ultimately shapes perceptions and expectations in relationships (See, figure 5).

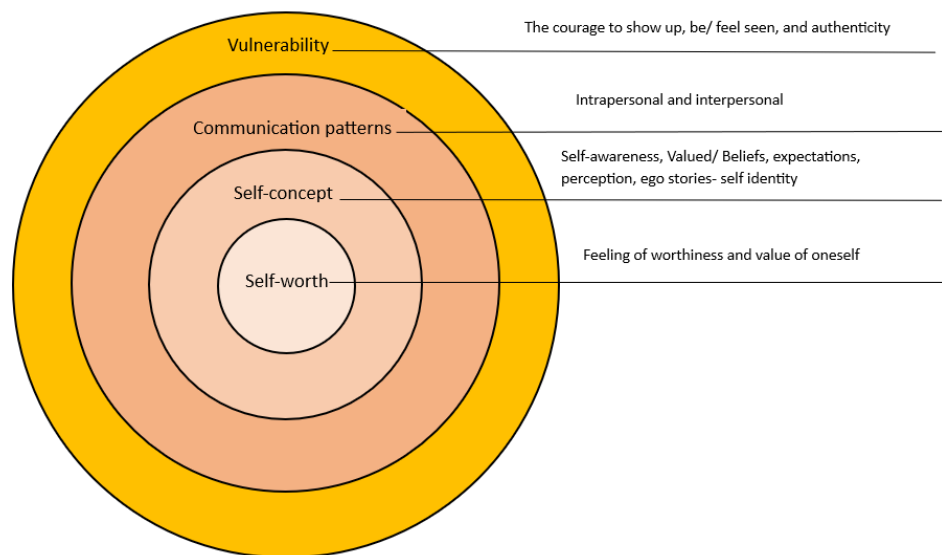


Figure 5: Progression from triggers to vulnerability

There were major contradictions in terms of how participants viewed vulnerability in general, desire to show up with honesty, want to rely on their partners to feel seen, and yet end up with bare minimum expectations to get through the perceived threat without any negative feeling or affect (See, Appendix E). For example, Ajay shared, he feels his partners response (lack of attention) triggers him feeling like “Like my opinions didn’t, or never matter” which leaves him feeling invalidated. This further activates the ego stories such as, “To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight”. This ego story further diminishes his desire to express due to deeply held belief around vulnerability i.e., “I want to see my partners feelings but when I do, I have a hard

time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away”, which further leads to the response, which he expressed as, “There are very little things that I don't express to my partner. And I do it because umm somewhere I think it's my insecurities that's causing them and it might affect our relationship”.

There were many similar responses that indicated participants difficulty to act in alignment of their actual values, needs, or want to connect with their partners through vulnerable sharing, however the consistent feedback leads them to lower down their expectations, suppress their real feelings, and show up with ways they feel their partner can handle to avoid fights, feel hurt, or to protect the relationships longevity.

There were many participants whose choice of responses on their resonance with vulnerability, checked this statement, “I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and I have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away”. This statement was seen as one of the other statements that many participants chose which not only reflected their understanding of vulnerability as a whole, but also reflected how fear-driven and emotionally disconnected the relationships are due to the lack of knowledge on vulnerability and further using it in ways that were unhealthy. It was unfortunate to notice that many individuals who wanted to be vulnerable, hope to connect with their partners simply to share, or wished to feel seen by their partner whom they loved and trusted, moulded these values based on the treatment and reactions they get from their partner. It is safe to say that many participants who chose this statement despite of showing up with lower extent of vulnerability in their relationship, imagined their partners not able to handle their emotional vulnerability as a sign to try harder to prove their worth at the cost of their self, or thoughts that reinforced their ego stories which kept them in the loop of “not being too much”, “not to be a burden”, “to not create a scene”, or “it's too little to over-react on” and so on. For example- many participants shared their perception and expectations after trying to show up with vulnerability and share their internal experience with their partners as, Yogesh shared, “I just stop myself from telling things to my partner which can hurt her and accept what is happening unless and until it is affecting my mind and peace too much”, and Sagar indicated, “I felt not important to my partner... She never used to reciprocate correctly and was the biggest reason why I stopped sharing my feelings. In the long run I used to feel burdened and stressed all

the time". The difficulty of expression, and holding many parts of self not only made partners felt emotionally disconnected with self, as well as with their partners but also enhanced their fear, and other difficult emotions. For example, words such as, "fear of confrontations", "fear of being rejected", "avoid embarrassment", "avoid hurt" etc were seen across the responses. One of the participants who shared being in 8 years of the relationship in her past indicated, "There are many things you hold onto when you are in a committed relationship. The fights and the arguments over a period of time feel unnecessary and negative". This belief was seen among many participants as one of the reasons to avoid sharing their real feelings i.e., to avoid hurt, negativity, conflicts, and unnecessary discussion, irrespective of the duration of the relationship. Mutual compromise and finding common ground after having a safe space for each other's vulnerable emotions is very different than attempting to be vulnerable which if not accepted or left feeling more distressed leads to compromise and shut down. Much of the responses didn't only indicate partners beliefs around "having a conflict-free relationship", but also "how relationships should be" based on their past experiences of childhood, as well as adult romantic relationships. Hence, being vulnerable isn't directly proportional to the amount of time spent in the relationship, but is directly proportional to the want of showing up with vulnerability whenever the need arises. No amount of suppressing unresolved emotions and making peace with the inability of the partners to support their emotional vulnerabilities with empathy can make up for the emotional disconnect that people otherwise hope to change by keeping themselves emotionally shut, or keeping the parts of who they are hidden to avoid hurt. For example- Sunaina shared, "There were things which I did not like but the moment I mentioned about it, it gave rise to fights. So, then I stopped being vocal about all my feelings. I stopped standing for things which matter to me because of the fear of losing him again". Simialrly, Archana shared, "Yes I feel that my partner won't understand where I am coming from and in the process, I might end up hurting his feelings which might later manifest into misunderstandings and resentment that I don't want to deal with". There were many such responses that indicated not acknowledging own internal triggers, and eventually lowering the expectations of their partners acknowledging it too which either way led to perpetual conflicts. It could be seen that it was a negative cycle which many

participants were stuck in i.e., Event- Trigger- Suppress- reinforce existing beliefs- altering expectations- Emotional burst out- unhealthy conflict and repeat.

There were only 2 participants whose responses indicated challenging vulnerability beliefs, but positive response to their triggers and expectations, i.e., even though they felt triggered due to their partners actions, they did approach them with vulnerability despite holding deeper belief system of vulnerability being hard. For example, Kamal shared, “I want to see my partners feelings but when I do I have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away... However, It's always good to communicate. There is no point to holding stuffs in and tormenting oneself over it. One needs to have clarity in relationships and properly communicating forms the bedrock. Relationships do not die because of lack of communication; they die because there is an absence of feeling during communication”. There were 4 participants whose responses indicated positive vulnerability beliefs and aligned responses despite negative triggers. For example- Kavita shared, “No, I am very free to share my thoughts with my partner, and I feel really blessed that he understands me and especially respects me”.

It was also interesting to note that for some people being vulnerable wasn't a choice they made with discernment but something that either comes naturally to them, or depends on the way their partner receives their subtle ways of showing up with vulnerability i.e., partners response and receiving capacity. This could also be proven because of the contradictions such responses held in terms of functioning belief, and overall ratings given to the questions that indicated their value system and actions. For example, Varuna shared, “talking about vulnerable feelings is weak, my true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when I am overwhelmed by my feelings, it's hard for me to be vulnerable because I don't know how, and It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection”. With these set of beliefs, she also had negative self-belief and considered vulnerability as something which isn't appreciated in relationships, however, she expressed “I'm not very good at holding difficult things to myself... avoid as much as I can to be vulnerable”. There were many other statements that indicated being vulnerable with convenience but not choice/ requirement such as, “I always opened up about past or basic concerns, but rest I don't express to avoid fights or stress”, or “It doesn't affect me much until it is shared”. There were few more similar responses (See, Appendix E). Such responses did indicate 7 things in the survey

based on analysis of the overall responses, (a) vulnerability was often confused with self-disclosure, (b) vulnerability was about comfort, (c) vulnerability was used to feel accepted, loved and seen, (d) lack of self-awareness, (e) Malleable values, (f) If responded positively, vulnerability continued, if not, vulnerability stopped and (g) actions reinforcing ego-stories due to unmet needs. These patterns indicate the foundations of relationship on which it is built, and maintained. Based on the analysis it could be said that it was maintained in two ways- (a) interdependency and self-validated intimacy, or (b) co-dependency, and other validated intimacy.

It is important for vulnerability to be defined, and contains boundaries. It is vital for people to be aware about what makes their most authentic self and have the courage to show up or else they would never feel fulfilled, and find themselves in relationships that are “as good as it can get” which somewhere at deeper level is ego driven love and not authentic cantered love. Therefore, in conclusion to this section it can be said that the progression from internal triggers to emergence of vulnerability are based on various factors which are, (a) self-awareness, (b) self-identity, (c) values/ beliefs, (d) choice, (e) vulnerable sharing (expressing, response, boundary, alignment, and intention), and (f) feedback to make informant decision. Accordingly, it can be said that intrapersonal communication has a huge impact on the extent of vulnerability (Figure 6).

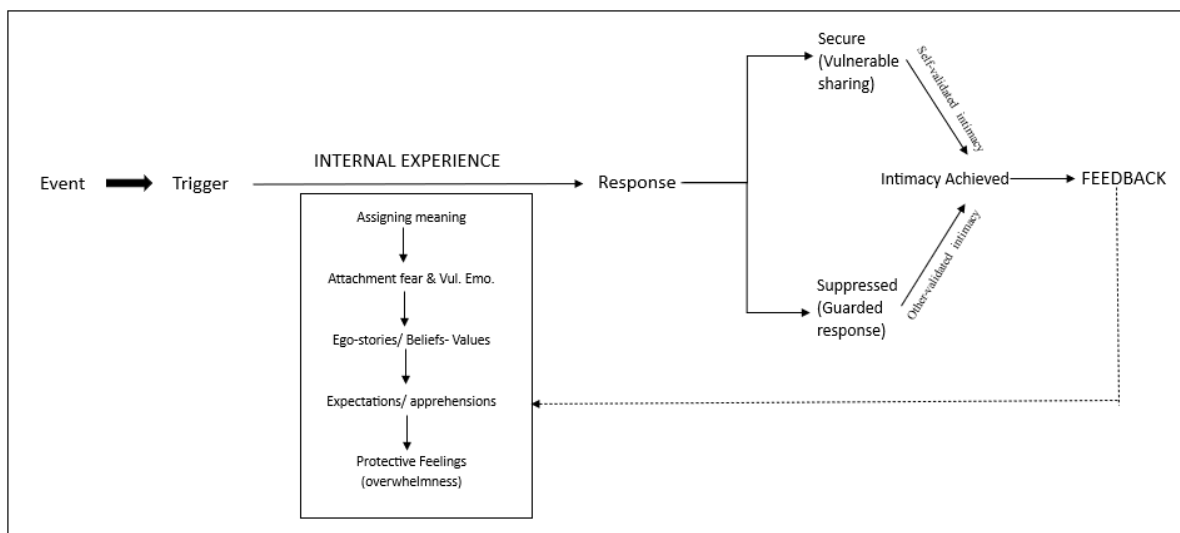


Figure 6: Internal experience leading to emotional intimacy

(ii) Self-concept: Values/ Beliefs in relation to self and vulnerability:

Self-concept is a broad term that simply means how people see themselves, and determines the way people show up in relationships. We tried to understand the basic components of self-concept by focusing on values and beliefs pertaining to self and vulnerability. In a healthy romantic relationship, it is essential to be able to rely on your partner to be able to fill your core values which would include certain needs that are to be met for a person to be able to have a fulfilling relationship or else, issues will be difficult to overcome in one's relationship. Having able to express these core values, and sharing compatibility on it strengthens the relationship and generate the feeling of togetherness that helps in navigating conflicts in a healthy way. However, before relying on the partner to fulfil these needs around values, it is important to understand if people are aware about their own set of beliefs and values that influence their actions or words, and whether they live up to the values or beliefs they want to live by. Therefore, we built a set of questions that focused on the values influenced by the beliefs and vice-versa on the way participants show up in relationships to fulfil their needs of being seen, heard, and valued. The findings also highlight the underlying meaning that participants hold in general while viewing relationship, and self (also as a partner). Questions such as, "I expect my partner to understand why, and when I am getting triggered without me having to tell him/her each time it happens", "I often find myself rationalizing that I shouldn't complain about something that may across as 'too little' to talk about", "I withhold, distort, hide, pretend, take a backseat and align myself to my partner ways, and wishes- to avoid fights, disconnection and any negative energy between us", or "I am afraid of being misunderstood because ___". There were more mixed set of questions that focused on understanding the values, and beliefs that participants function upon in their relationship. The beliefs around needs were evidently indicating low self-worth, operating from insecure attachment, difficulty communicating without feeling bad about self, and contradictions which showed lack of self-awareness, or cognitive dissonance. There were few questions that highlighted the need of giving oneself a backseat, or do things they won't normally do to feel loved on majority of the participants marked strongly agree to neither agree, nor disagree. For example- 22 people responded that they do withhold, distort, hide, pretend, take a backseat and align themselves to

their partner ways, and wishes- to avoid fights, disconnection and any negative energy, and 18 people mentioned that they hold back to be loved and seen as a perfect partner. There were similar responses on other questions (See, Appendix F), that indicated that participants did hold back their own needs, to be able to feel loved rather than being viewed as “too much” or any other label they were fearful of receiving or feeling. This also reflects three scenarios which was gained from the participants responses, one, the trust that participants had on their partners to be able to rely on them for reassurances that they needed to be able to share the emotions without feeling judged, and second, not receiving reassurances from their partners without them having to ask them, led the participants to give in to their ego stories (negative self-beliefs) and automatically took a back seat, or third, that the conflicts as a consequence of them sharing their needs, emotions, or thoughts led them to emotionally shut down. When asked about their experience on “it’s easier to give my needs a backseat because_____”, 25 participants out of 31, answered in conflicted tone. Few who took upon them as their responsibility to one-sidedly meet partners needs shared few responses such as, Gayatri expressed, “I am the one who needs to understand things better”; Hamid shared, “My partner means more to me and it’s okay to keep my needs aside; or Drishti shared, “It happens sometimes because his needs are much worthier than mine”. There were other responses that indicated fear, avoidance, and suppression as ways to maintain the relationship, for example, Aruna shared, “I do not have that much energy to argue, because I can’t handle emotional distress”; Twisha shared, “I do not want to deal with it myself”; Anita shared, “I want my partner to be happy in a relationship with me “, and Ajay shared, “I want this relationship to work as I want to grow old with her”. There were many other responses that used one words, expression such as, “to avoid fight”, “led to unnecessary fights, or arguments”, and some showed complete hopelessness such as, “it is not worth fighting for”, or “no-one cares for my needs”. Therefore, this shows the belief-system and strength of the values that large portion of the participants carried into the relationship. It was interesting to note that there was vagueness in few questions. When cross checked with the questions, it resulted in the analysis that for few participants who marked their responses differently than as compared to what they expressed in subjective questions reflected discrepancy. This discrepancy was insightful in ways that, (a) there were values that participants wanted to live by, however since it wasn’t in alignment with their beliefs and

partners responses, they shifted it to align with their partners needs and conduct, and (b) most of the participants responded with what more they can do or cant, rather than what their partners can give or receive. However, when asked about what they wanted in return of them over-functioning in the relationship, many responded with basic elements of relationship that were lacking in their present or had lacked in their recent past relationships. We will address this descriptively in the next section. To understand fear better, we asked questions such as, “I am afraid of being misunderstood because ____”, to which the recorded responses helped us dig a deeper into their belief system. For example- Archana shared, “It leads to major conflicts and sometimes trust issues”, Bhavika shared, “I expect my partner to understand me without me saying so much”, or like Aruna shared, “Because of my childhood traumas or sometimes abandoned feeling”. There were few more responses like, “feel disrespected every time”, “leads to complications”, and “I have difficulty communicating my feelings clearly”. There were many similar responses that were in alignment with the above responses (See, appendix F). These responses also backed up the ratings that were received such as, 20 participants agree holding back to avoid being labelled as oversensitive, or over-reactive, 25 participants in total marked rationalizing their negative feelings as “too little” to talk about, and 22 people mentioned tiptoeing around their partners to speak their feelings without being afraid of making their partners disappointed or hurt them in some way. There were also few contradictions in the rating when asked about if they ignore something they feel negative about the relationship, 16 people were leaning towards agreement, whereas, 15 people were leaning towards disagreements. But the results suggested otherwise i.e., maximum number of participants were not comfortable expressing their own needs, wants, or feelings that they felt are bothering them. The spiral of self-doubts based on the participants attempt to feel loved, understood and validated, or to simply feel heard, when these needs were left hanging they gave in to the ways that weren’t too fulfilling for them. When participants were asked to mark if their partners reactions make them feel good or bad about themselves whenever they share something, 24 participants shared that they do feel affected, 4 shared unawareness as to how they feel, and 3 shared maintaining peace with their partners reactions. The beliefs that were formed following the reactions which left them triggered were majorly conflictive in nature. For example, Archana shared, “That I am not important or I am the one being stupid and oversensitive”, Bhavika

shared, “I may have this as my destiny”, Gayatri indicated, “He is not supportive, doesn’t wish to understand my emotions, is very self-centred”, or Sanjay shared, “Let it be, can’t do anything about it”. Sunaina captured the essence of trying harder even if it means going against or shutting down. She expressed,

“My partner will never understand me. For him I am the bad person. But the inner me knows I am not the bad person and that my feelings for him is pure and loyal. Probably I should not be with him to save us both from this negative situation but I can't live without him. So, I will try to change his perception towards me”.

There were many similar responses which were recorded. It was clear from the response whether present, or past relationship that participants tried until they couldn't take it and felt exhausted from being someone they are not. Many participants tried until the point of no return in ways that were emotionally taxing for them to keep their partners by their side, avoid feeling negative about oneself i.e., to protect getting hurt, and maintain the relationship. For example- Archana shared, “Dealing with my own unhappiness is much easier and better than dealing with the sense that my partner is unhappy because of me”, Ishani mentioned, “to maintain the peace within and in the relationship because who will”, Swarna shared, “I can’t handle too much emotional pain and hurt”, Drishti shared, “to escape from the argument”, or as Sanya shared, “don’t want to deal with it”. There were other similar responses that indicated the avoidance, ignorance, shrugging off, or denying the reality of the relationship, as conflicts are the part of the relationship that either builds or breaks the connection. For example, as Vikas mentioned, “Caring makes you weak. If you care then they will walk over you”. It was seen that majority of the participants tried to avoid conflicts to maintain connection which is a recipe for a heartbreak in the long run. Many responses shared protecting oneself from hurt because it is “mentally exhausting” and “emotionally draining”. It was interesting to note that holding back one's true self was not seen as emotionally draining but conflicts caused due to being their own self was mentally tiring because of which participants seem to settle for the bare minimum being received whilst over-giving in the relationship. Even though participants convinced themselves that avoidance is the best strategy to maintain peaceful state of mind, as well as relationship climate, it was seen that those participants did “created” situations to gain attention, validation, love or some care that they originally wish from their partner. For

example- Hamid shared, “Start another conflict so that the one before it goes away”, Yogesh responded, “Uploading WhatsApp stories”, Sanjeev mentioned, “Withholding affection”, Latika mentioned, “sometimes being dramatic”, Radhika shared, “continuing an issue”, and Sujata shared, “Never did this. Instead, I go in opposite direction. I feel that I am not lovable, I am not worthy, doesn't deserve it. Let's break up and just not deal with it”. The analysis of the collective responses led us to few common ways that were practised to receive the love they felt they deserve, or to get the response they wished their partner “should” be providing for them to feel secure which were, protest behaviour, passive aggression, over-functioning to make-up, and emotional drama (See, appendix F).

There were few questions that reflected that beliefs participants hold regarding their partners actions towards them in the relationship. When asked about if they expect their partners to understand when and why they get triggered without them having to tell them each time, 28 participants answer towards agreement, and only 4 responses were in disagreement. The reason for this came out to be the challenges face to communicate real feelings, holding back in anticipation of the failed/undesired responses, and lack of self-worth (avoiding feeling too much each time rather than asking for reassurances). It was interesting to see that the other 2 questions pertaining to participants held values/ beliefs around how partners should be with them reflected how participants are struggling with holding the values they truly hold onto. For example- When asked about “if they believe it its their partners role to handle their insecurities, moods, know their needs after a certain point in time into the relationship, and if they don't it means they don't care or love them enough”, 13 participants marked towards disagreement, 10 marked towards neutral, and 8 responses were in agreement. Similarly, when asked if they want their partners to meet their needs in a specific way to make them feel secure, 18 marked in disagreements, 2 marked neutral, and 11 marked in agreement with the statement. These questions didn't only give us an insight into the struggle participants are facing in holding their core values as their primary needs to feel secure, but also that some of the participants who marked in disagreement or neutral included the same participants who are willing to give their needs a backseat, alter their values, and avoid conflicts to maintain their relationship. On the other hand, one more speculation can come forward based on few subjective responses, that few participants had given up on the idea of getting their needs met in ways they would

feel loved, or the openness with which they could should up in the relationship provided they felt safe enough. In short, settled for what was being given because of the lack of self-worth and difficulty being in alignment with their deeply held values. This can also be backed up with the responses on whether participants felt comfortable in only giving love, but also receiving it. 15 participants marked in agreement with the statement, 3 marked not sure, and 13 marked in disagreement with the statement. Hence, it proves that giving love is easier for the participants than receiving it for 3 reasons, (a) beliefs and learnings around self, love and relationship, and (b) acceptance of not deserving love due to partners incapability to love them in ways they would feel loved, and (c) difficulty asking for what they need to feel loved. Large number of participants responded that they do feel hurt, and restless about coming across as inadequate, less than or imperfect than they feel they need to be, for example- Archana shared, “I think I work very hard for this relationship with the many sacrifices I make... all of that’s seems pointless”, Bhavika mentioned, “I never thought I will be all this”, Radhika shared, “I am a perfectionist”, Gayatri shared, “I am trying my best for this relationship, working too much on my flaws”, or Sujata mentioned, “I am a people pleaser. I like when others say that i am perfect, loving, caring etc”. Sahil captured the essence of the feelings that were similar to other participants. He indicated,

“Because the other person may perceive things according to their convenience and if they are not satisfied in any condition, then it pains the heart that even after doing so much & putting a lot of worthy effort, it all comes down to nothing”.

Therefore, it is safe to state that participants did focus a lot on them being inadequate, full of flaws, contemplating on what more they can offer, where they can compromise, i.e., putting energy into being flawless, perfect and deserving of love by altering their own parts of self, contrary to focusing with the same energy on what they are actually receiving and taking it as feedback to make informant choices which do not come at the cost of their self.

There was one response that reflected a belief a male participant held which was, “I am a man. I am supposed to be adequate, good, and fulfilling for my partner”. Even though we don’t have enough responses to generalize the results, it was still important to note this response, as in general men have the internal, societal, or family pressure of being the provider, unexpected burden of “being a

man” which entails being less expressive, being successful, giving up on dreams to look after family and so on. This area of research in relation to vulnerability, and fulfilment in relationships can be looked upon for future directions.

The participants were asked what do they believe they need to offer in a relationship to feel loved. The responses obtained were substantial. For example- few of the responses were, unconditional support, light-heartedness and love, emotional support, empathy, love, honesty, support, trust, patience, truth, efforts, respect, etc (See appendix F). There were few individuals who also shared that, “they don’t know”, “they wish they knew”, “shut down your feelings”, “accept more demands”, or “don’t know what more they can do”. This shows the difficulty people are facing in the relationship in terms of giving or receiving love which doesn’t fall within the boundaries of healthy relationship or even their own deeply suppressed values/ beliefs.

Two participants acknowledged that they were not fully invested in the relationship and not giving their partner the love, they deserved. Despite this, they were still trying to make the relationship work without being open and emotionally intimate. Their responses revealed a lack of vulnerability and closeness, likely due to difficulty in being open with one another. Even though these 2 participants mentioned openly about being aware, there were many more participants whose subjective based responses indicated the level of awareness as to what they want in their relationship, and how they perceive their ideal affection to be as. However, even they continued the relationships until they could or are still continuing the relationship by going against their own self.

All participants held healthy ideas, values, and beliefs about love and relationships, but there was a significant difference in how majority of participants applied those ideals to their experiences. These ideals often conflicted with their own set of values and reinforced negative self-beliefs whenever they felt unloved or unreciprocated.

There were also responses from few participants whose responses were towards positive and indicated healthy relationship. Even though there were few contradictions as highlighted above, this paragraph puts light on only those participants who were in alignment with their own values, and the ways of showing up in the relationship. When asked if they were afraid of being misunderstood, created situation to gain attention, give their needs a backseat, or what beliefs they

form when feel hurt, invalidation unloved, or undervalued, their responses indicated mutuality, and interdependency in maintaining the relationship. For example, Latika shared, “My needs are being met so far”, Ruhi shared, “I’ve learnt to not look at myself in the wrong light during fights. Not completely”, Twisha shared, “I have always been loved and validated for my efforts, care and every small thing I do that makes my partner smile”, and Varuna shared, “He listens to my side of the story as well and we have a rational discussion so I very rarely feel misunderstood”. There were few beliefs that came up that reflected the strong values that people go into the relationship with, which helps them distinguish between what is working and what isn’t which further increases healthier exchange of communication. For example- Vaani shared, “No, i don't need to come across as someone perfect. We are who we are. It’s, take or leave it”, or Kamal shared, “It's always good to communicate. There is no point to holding stuffs in and tormenting oneself over it. One needs to have clarity in relationships and properly communicating forms the bedrock. Relationships do not die because of lack of communication; they die because there is an absence of feeling during communication”. There were not many responses that indicated stronger values, but fear to which participants held onto. It was observed that among individuals who were in alignment with their values, regulated their triggers, were vulnerable with their partners, and were reciprocated in ways they felt heard, loved, and seen were more open to growth, making tough decisions, and having tough conversations. There were also some participants who are recovering from their past hurt, and are working on believing their own self, and what they genuinely believe they deserve in the relationship. For example, there were very few responses (2) that reflected the challenges they face to express their needs, real feelings, or have tough conversations, but after several conflicts, or indirect attempts they realized the only way to grow is to go through it and being honest. In short, to let themselves be seen.

In summary, as the findings of this section were analyzed, it became clear that the participants' values, beliefs and the way they show up in their relationships were in a state of flux. For many of them, it was a constant battle between holding on to their own values and needs, and the need to keep the relationship going. The participants who found it easier to alter or suppress their own values, needs and feelings did so because of deep-seated issues such as low self-worth, unresolved emotions and past traumas that had left them with an inability to communicate

effectively (apprehensions, bad experience, past hurt, fear), and own their parts of self. This often resulted in them feeling trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and insecurity. On the other hand, some participants showed a stark contrast between their beliefs and actions. Their responses indicated that they were struggling to be true to themselves, and the constant need to conform to learned ideas of love, guard their feelings and live up to their partner's needs and abilities had left them feeling unfulfilled. Many of them were grappling with cognitive dissonance, feeling torn between who they were and who they felt they needed to be in the relationship. However, there were a few participants whose responses stood out. These were the ones who were in alignment with their values and actions, and their relationships were characterized by a sense of fulfilment and contentment. These participants had overcome the triggers that held them back and had found a way to communicate openly and authentically with their partners. They had found a way to accept the behavior they deserved and had created a safe space for themselves and their partners to grow and evolve or in some cases make tough decisions. In conclusion, it can be said that the intrapersonal communication dynamics play a critical role in guiding one's way of showing up in a relationship. The ability to be true to oneself, to communicate authentically and to accept the behavior one deserves is key to a fulfilling and satisfying relationship. It is a journey of self-discovery, and one that requires courage, vulnerability and a willingness to let go of old patterns and embrace new ways of being.

(iii) Expectations vs. Standard:

This part of the findings focuses on the expectations that are built based on the participants beliefs, and the predictions of what will happen based on their past experiences. We also highlight the observed differences in the participants who were able to differentiate between setting expectations versus those participants who had personal standards. It was found that the major difference between the participants with high expectations and high standards were that the people with standard over high expectations (a) weren't tolerating the behaviour that wasn't meeting their values/ standards, (b) were more open and honest rather than being ambiguous in terms of being understood, (c) did initiate the first step to connect, (d) managing expectations, and (e) the communication was a two-way street. Whereas, for people with high expectations in relationships in which their partners weren't meeting their standard were deeply disappointed and felt unfulfilled

because, (a) incongruency in relationship expectations and what they were receiving, (b) result of unmet needs, (c) proving self to be worthy (taking a backseat, stopped communicating real feelings), (d) unrealistic expectations in love based on beliefs, and values, and (e) Tolerating behaviour, and internal experience rather than embracing with honesty. These differences are further highlighted with reference to the responses and examples. Based on the responses (See, Appendix F) obtained from the participants we came forward with three categories that were the reflection of participants expectations i.e., changing partners, and something in relationship, expression of concerns or real feelings with regards to response anticipation, and emotional boundaries.

Expecting change in partners or relationships- the survey included 3 questions that gave us insight into the participants feelings around hoping to see their partner change. Questions asked were as follows, “I feel disappointed whenever I am not able to see my partner change as I hoped, or love me as I wanted, or hardly make any efforts for me and the relationship”, or “Things I wish I could change in my relationship and in my partner towards me___”. The results indicated that 24 participants marked strongly agree- neutral responses, and 7 participants marked disagree- strongly disagree. It is important to note that out of 7 participants who marked not being disappointed, not all were in alignment with their other responses. For example, few participants responses even though suggested they weren’t disappointed, they did expect their partners to change something towards them to feel more loved, or satisfied, and at the same time felt it is better to hold back such concerns to avoid fight. Therefore, there was contradiction in the positively marked responses pertaining to few participants. There were only 3 participants out of 7 who had congruency in their thoughts, actions and behaviour i.e., they were able to communicate through their needs, feelings, or expectations which might not be being met by their partners despite worrying about the consequences or conflicts. Also, they did mention not wanting to change anything in the partner or the relationship, and if there was something they wanted to change, they were able to talk through it each time as a couple. Therefore, this reflects that rest of the participants (4) who marked positive responses were not in alignment with their own thoughts, needs, and actions. It was also observed from their responses that these participants were either clinging onto the hope or fantasies, relying on their occasional rewards of their over-giving/over-functioning, or lowered their

expectations to settle for what is even though it brought disappointment, and emotional stress. There were other set of 24 participants who were in agreement or were vague in terms of feeling disappointed not being able to see their partners or relationship go in ways they feel loved and appreciated. We identified many responses from the subjective questions that gave us insight into what participants were secretly hoping to receive or change within their partners. For example, Sahil shared, “Telling me the truth and not lying blatantly even in small issues which hold no importance in our lives”, Archana shared, “If we could be more involved in each other’s life on a deeper level”, Sanya mentioned, “His behaviour at times towards me (casual attitude)”, and Swarna expressed, “it would be much better if he would like really allow me in his inner personal space”. There were few more similar responses that indicated more involvement, better behaviour towards them such as less controlling, respect etc, able to speak openly to their partners, or less compromise from participants end. There were also some responses that indicated hopeless, confusion, guilt, regret, and anger such as, Akshara shared, “Honestly, everything”, Sanjay shared, “If I didn’t cared that much”, or Aruna expressed, “I don’t know”. One of the questions under expectations asked was “What do I at-least hope to get in return from my partner while I continuously give, or over-function in the relationship___”. To this question there were many responses which fell under emotional availability, support, presence, feeling wanted, empathy, vulnerability, acknowledgment and communication. For example- Sunaina shared, “To understand that I whole heartedly love him and expect him to at least value my feelings”, Gayatri mentioned, “Support and better understanding”, Akshara expressed, “Is to understand where I am coming from” or like Aruna mentioned, “I just Want his time to feel that I am important for him”. There were also few responses that reflected the beliefs that were formed based on their transaction of communication i.e., experience with their partners in terms of giving and receiving love. For example, Latika shared, “For me it’s all or nothing, same for my partner”, Twisha expressed, “Both give equally. Sometimes one has to give more and other person has to give less and vice versa” and Hamid mentioned, “Expecting something in return is always a disappointment waiting”. Based on the overall responses, it can be said that certainly these beliefs were influenced by their past experiences but, they were showed up in two forms, (a) breaking old patterns/ shifting ego stories, and (b) Negative childhood, or adult relationship experiences

patterns. Either of which was deeply dependent on the ways participants showed up in their relationship, focusing on two-way street communication, and using the feedback of lack of presence of ways of communicating to make choices.

Another category included expression of concerns or real feelings with regards to response anticipation. There were 4 questions that focused on understanding the participants expectations around being able to be open and honest with their partners even if it invited conflicts at certain level. Questions such as, “it’s safe and better for me play unbothered in front of my partner for little things that hurt me, because it never ends well”, or “Based on previous failed attempts of sharing or expressing myself that ended up badly, I only share or express things that my partner can handle so my relationship isn’t impacted” were asked. Majority of the participants response indicated that they either agree, or don’t know they feel regarding it. It was interesting to note that the responses that were neutral which in general indicated unawareness, difficulty in acknowledging, or confusion had their own set of judgment on which they felt it’s better to play unbothered. For example, it was seen that they held back on things that were emotionally impactful, things that mattered to them (especially If they felt it was small enough reason), or their heightened emotions. In short, it was based on their convenience and situation. It can easily be said that people with neutral responses even though held back on difficult conversations, they did shared things that were less threatening to them. This aligns with the properties of conditional vulnerability to lack of it. When compared the responses between the two questions which were, “I have stopped sharing much about my real feelings, and thoughts, or mere opinions due to lack of understanding, and un-responsiveness?”, and “It is much easier to share my daily hassles, or surface level concerns than sharing my inner experience, deeper emotions, and underlying feelings”, the contradictions were found that also justify the above findings. One the former question, 18 participants marked in disagreement, and 12 participants marked from agreement-neutral, whereas in the latter question, only 11 participants shared disagreement, and 20 participants marked in agreement-neutral responses. This means that participants lack of self-awareness and knowledge in terms of what their real feelings, and thoughts contains are limited to what their partners can handle which suggests lack of vulnerability, and vagueness in its idea. Real feelings pertaining to surface level concerns, or daily hassles being much easier to share than actual inner experiences and emotions were

confused as the former doesn't help in forming emotional intimacy at deeper, stable, and safe level. Vulnerability if not reciprocated or accepted was being minimized to mere self-disclosure by majority of the participants. To justify this, the responses recorded on "The thoughts of setting emotional boundaries around hurt, disappointment, certain hard emotions, or personal triggers with my partner, makes/made me think, and feel like ___" obtained were highly conflictual/ negative in nature i.e., only 4 responses were positively inclined and rest of the participants marked responses inclined towards negative. For example- Gayatri shared, "My partner will not agree to it", Bhavika shared, "I may be misunderstood", Yogesh mentioned, "Not sharing my feelings to my partner", Swarna indicated, "that I might not be so loveable and it's making it tough as well as expecting a lot from his side" and Archana indicated, "Long endless discussions and tiring conversations which will lead to misunderstandings". There were many similar responses that expressed difficulties in setting emotional boundaries as it makes them feel unlovable, burdened, too much, unworthy, bad or terrible partner/ person, stubborn, or difficult. Few of the responses also indicated not being aware of what emotional boundaries are or how to set them in the relationship. For example- Sunaina shared " I never had the thought of setting emotional boundaries", or Anmol shared, "I didn't set any emotional boundaries". There were similar responses that used words like, "hurtful", "task", "burdened", "frustrated", "weakness", "not sure what to say", or "difficult".

There were very few positive beliefs around emotional boundaries and also few of the participants practised those as it was helping them communicate and feel better. For example, Sujata shared, "I am okay. Setting boundaries and talking about it has made it easy to talk to and it's like I can talk to him about all this", or like Varuna indicated, "My partner is mostly very understanding. So, talking about difficult things and even when I don't feel like sharing difficult things, he understands that also and gives me my space and time I need and then we talk about it whenever I'm ready". There were very few responses that indicated regret or hopelessness of even thinking of setting emotional boundaries as in the end they get hurt.

Therefore, expectation from the partners, and self was clearly identified from these findings. It was observed that majority of the participants had set expectations based on their previous experiences with their partners that made them feel either

safe, or unsafe i.e., (a) whether their partner can handle the concerns they want to share, (b) attached worthiness threat, (c) choice of vulnerability, or self-disclosure, (d) managing expectations, (e) ability to grow out of old patterns, (f) Holding onto the elusive hope (change, fix, or save). All of these reasons are majorly impacted by the intrapersonal communication i.e., how an individual talks with themselves and form a concept of who they are as they evolve along with the experiences. Hence, according to these findings it can be said that smaller number of participants had steady standards, whereas rest of the participants had fleeting expectations which didn't included self-care, or self-love in hope to build the relationship they desire by being someone they feel they need to be in order to secure their fantasy or hope (pursuit of ideal relationship). It was remarkable that the study found that many participants believed that expecting vulnerability from their partners, and going to great lengths for them, would lead to a more fulfilling relationship, rather than starting from "self" in ways an individual treat themselves and show up as an individual, or partner.

(iv) Perception among participants:

This part of the findings is focused on understanding the way participants perceive their relationship, and worthiness amongst all the other interacting dynamics of intrapersonal communication. When asked participants if they felt they have settled for less than they deserve in their relationship, 12 participants responded in agreement, whereas, 19 participants responded in disagreement. Looking at the findings overall for this part of the study, all the 19 participants response on this question didn't match their other responses on the survey which reflected their inner experience of emotional struggle. However, it did fall under the reasoning of misalignment/ cognitive dissonance, lack of worthiness, lowering standards, unawareness, or difficulty accepting the reality. This was the case for neutral responses as well. For example, Hamid shares it is unlikely that he has settled for less than he deserves in the relationship, however, he feels the need to change few things about his partner or the relationship so he feels loved, or valued, feels the need to play unbothered by things that concern him or avoid sharing deep feelings to avoid conflicts as he feels he is always misunderstood, and feels expecting anything would always be a disappointment waiting. There were also few beliefs that indicated over-correction of self, continuously giving oneself backseat etc because of his fear of rejection.

There were many similar responses which can be categorized in alignment with above example. It seems that the participants' perception of their relationship, despite any emotional turmoil, is closely tied to their overall self-esteem. i.e., awareness, self-identity, held beliefs, values, expectations, and likeliness to shape shift. It was also observed that majority of the participants who were currently in dating relationship with reference to which they filled the survey had marked neutral or disagreement responses except few who accepted settling for less than they deserve in the relationship. However, there were other set of participants who had referred to their recent past relationship had responded with very likely to likely. It was interesting to observe that the patterns and responses did contain the similar underlying meaning irrespective of the current or past relationship, and many pathways were leading towards equifinality, but acceptance of whether one is in a relationship they think isn't suitable or compatible for them was only seen among the ones who had exhausted all efforts in the past relationship which included putting partners on the pedestal and keeping oneself the least priority. Whereas, participants in the current relationship were in the process of giving their all to make the relationship work despite the signs of emotional struggle and unmet needs. This can be said based on the responses given by these participants as described in the above sections. This observation does not take into account the small number of participants who were aligned with their values, were willing to be vulnerable in their relationships, make tough decisions, and were self-aware, regardless of whether they were currently dating or broken up.

Participants also responded and elaborated on their experience of not feeling worthy to their partner. However, there was a noteworthy observation that the participants (19) who mentioned in disagreement to settling for less than they deserve in the relationship, only few of them mentioned not feeling unworthy to their partner (11). Out of the 11 participants, 6 participants were in alignment with their other responses that reflected their beliefs, values, and actions. Rest of the 5 participants were not in alignment with their responses. It was observed among these remaining and other participants whose responses were negative or conflictive that, lowering one's standards, compromising one's needs and desires to align with the partner's ability, and settling for the temporary rewards of love and care in exchange for one-sided emotional labour was a common experience. However, this is the most dangerous understanding of love and healthy relationship as it can cause

deep impact to one's individuality. Participants who shared feeling unworthy, elaborated on their reasons. For example, Sunaina shared, "My partner treated me in a way that is was all my fault, that he is the good one and I am the bad one doing all the mistakes", Sanya shared, "Never giving importance", Aruna indicated, "Because he is not taking care of my emotions and vulnerabilities", or like Ajay mentioned, "Because I sometimes thinks that she deserves better or she can find someone better". There were similar responses that indicated lack of importance and emotional availability as primary reasons for feeling unworthy to their partners.

The participants with healthy intrapersonal dynamics mentioned how they feel worthy to their partner. For example, Twisha shared, "I disagree - my partner cares about my feeling and respects me and my work", Vaani shared, "I felt valued and heard. Being not heard in a relationship is a red flag for me", and Ruhi shared, "I don't feel unworthy. Everyday gestures speak a lot".

Therefore, based on above findings and analysis it can be said that maximum number of participants didn't perceive themselves or their relationship as satisfactory or fulfilling, and 11 participants were found to respond with no discrepancies in their other responses. The feeling of unworthiness even though reinforced by partners actions towards them, it was also the lack of communicating what one needs, or wants to feel worthy in the relationship as another reason to add to the feelings of worthlessness. It was also seen that the accountability of one's own worthiness was attached to the partners responses, but relationship climate was seen as taking over-responsibility of saving it, or maintaining it. Whereas, in safe relationships, it was seen that participants and their partners were interdependent, freely communicated their thoughts/ feelings, and mutual efforts were present to maintain the relationship. Hence, the perception was dependent upon the way an individual view themselves and show up in relationship with values or expectations that shift their perceptions based on circumstances. It is evident that relationship with self, sets the tone of other relationships.

Highlighting Contradictions- The complexities of Intrapersonal communication, and Vulnerability

Based on the above findings it was found that most of the participants had vagueness and contradictions in their responses which consisted of subjective and objective responses. The inconsistencies reflect the integration of two variables i.e., intrapersonal communication

dynamics, and vulnerability which influenced their final response to an event or the way they show up in their relationships (See, Figure 7). This contradiction was majorly stemming from the internal experience and how they were received by their partners whenever an effort was made to connect in the smallest of the moments. The discrepancy in “who I am”, and “who I think I need to be to feel loved in the relationship”, influenced the actions and disturbed the inner balance in order to feel loved, seen, valued, and heard.

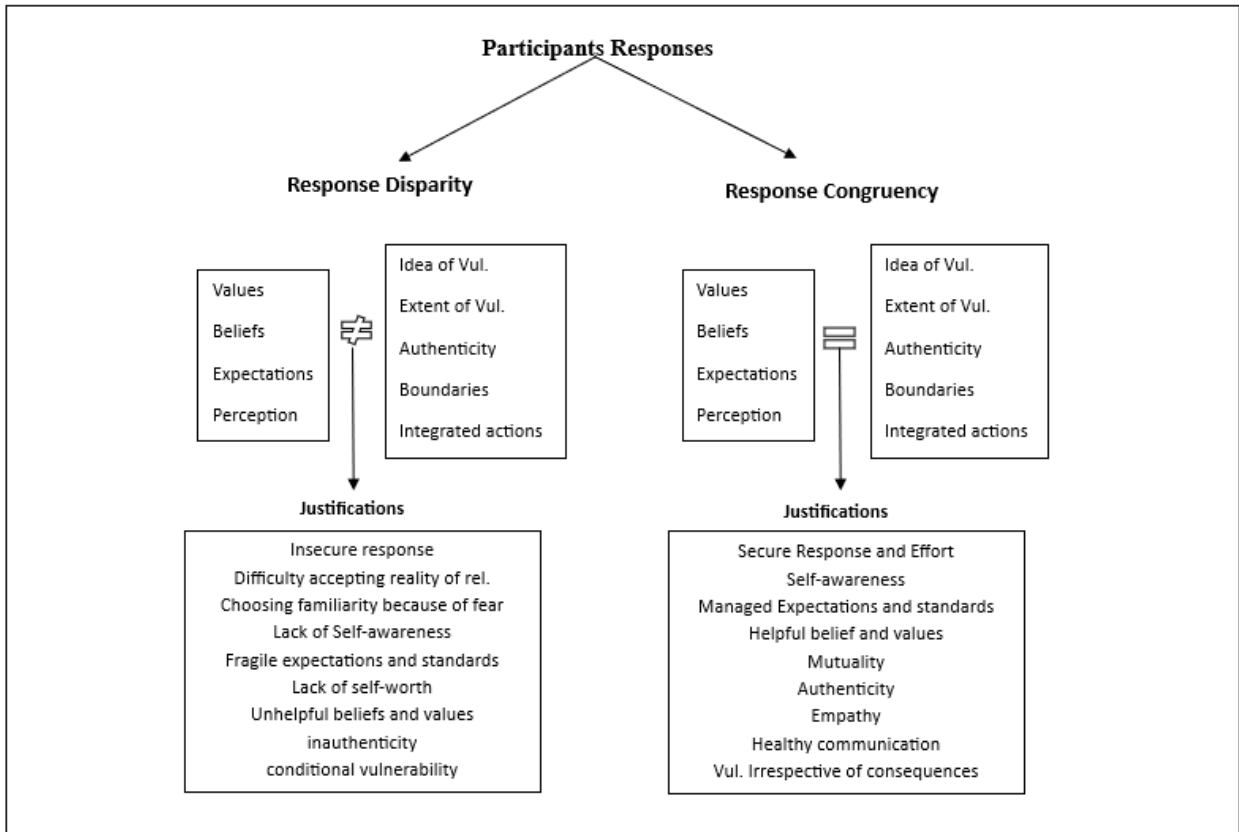


Figure 7: Response disparity, and response congruency among participants

As it can be seen in the figure 7, it the inconsistencies are justified using the explanations that were found through data analysis. Below are few examples of the participants to explain the contradictions-

- (a) Sunaina shared she doesn't control how her partner sees her, find herself doing things she won't normally do, or show up in ways she feels she should. Even though she disagreed with the statement, on the other hand whenever she used to feel invalidated and threatened in her relationship, she expressed, "My partner will never understand

me. For him I am the bad person. But the inner me knows I am not the bad person and that my feelings for him is pure and loyal. Probably I should not be with him to save us both from this negative situation but I can't live without him. So, I will try to change his perception towards me”.

- (b) Gayatri mentioned her relationship to be open and honest. However, her responses indicated that she is trying too hard to change and make this relationship work. For example, she used statements like “I am the one who needs to understand things better”, or “I am trying my best for this relationship, working too much on my flaws” when asked if giving her needs a backseat is easier for her and if she feels she is coming across as imperfect or inadequate. Her responses also elicited the reasons she believes she needs to hold back sometimes because, her partner wouldn't understand if she does something that is against his preference or understanding. She indicated, “I know I am not going to receive it, but I want my partner to me Understanding, there have been times when he fails to understand my point of view. Moreover, it is his thought pattern that matters and I at times do not get a chance to justify my point”. It was evident from her marked responses that she does hold back at times to be liked, wanted, or chosen to be seen as a perfect partner.
- (c) Sanya shared, “I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away”. Based on this response her other responses were totally opposing the belief. She feels doubtful of whether she has settled for the relationship she is in, holds back and let go of the concerns because it invites conflicts, and least expectations she holds in the relationship is for affection, understanding and to be treated as a priority at times to feel important like she matters. On the other hand, she feels its easier to hide certain parts of her as it is possible for the relationship to end. She expressed disagreement when asked about whether she finds it easier to talk about surface level concerns than deep level concerns or stopped expressing due to lack of understanding or unresponsiveness. However, she felt it is safe to play unbothered for the little things that hurt me because it never ends well as it helps in maintaining peace.

There were many such examples that reflected such contradictions and influenced actions which ultimately fell down to fear, self-beliefs and proving one's worth at the cost of self. There were many responses which indicated their ideal vulnerability as able to share openly and that their openness is accepted, and reciprocated which often left them disappointed,

hanging in between or regret. This further impacted their way of showing up in relationship i.e., by putting one's own self, needs, and desires at the back burner and going along with the flow without intention, meaning and living for momentary emotional connect. For instance- the choice of sharing or showing up with vulnerability wasn't the question of trust, or ability to differentiate between privacy or secrecy, but, it was an action done to secure affection, feel accepted, or approved, and loved. To feel assured that they are still loved despite their past. The fear-based loved was more common than secure-based love. Similarly, many participants didn't rely on themselves to feel regulated or understand their own feelings, but they learned to either suppress or depend on their partners to handle their emotions to feel cared for. Despite the received disagreements on they want their needs to meet in a specific way or that they expect their partners to handle their emotions or moods. Few other contradictions were similarly based on beliefs, values, expectations, perception, and influenced vulnerable sharing. The roles individuals take in relationships such as over-functioner, dependent, performer, denier, or protector (as seen in the participants responses), are coming from a place of self-protection and safety seeking due to perceived threat and meaning making of an event (Refer, figure 6). Individuals frequently cling to the familiar, or engage in cognitive dissonance even when they are aware that they deserve better, even if doing so means they have to settle for less. This is due to the fact that unfamiliar things can be frightening, whereas familiar things create a sense of security and comfort. This is a sort of self-sabotage that people engage in to protect themselves from the possibility of feeling abandoned or of having their personal fears come true.

Interpersonal communication- the four horsemen of conflict

This section of the findings focused on understanding how any conflict, or difficult conversations that might be perceived as threat was communicated in the relationships by using Gottman's 4 horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) self-report questionnaire. It was found that Stonewalling was used among the majority of the participants, followed by defensiveness and criticism (See, Figure 8).

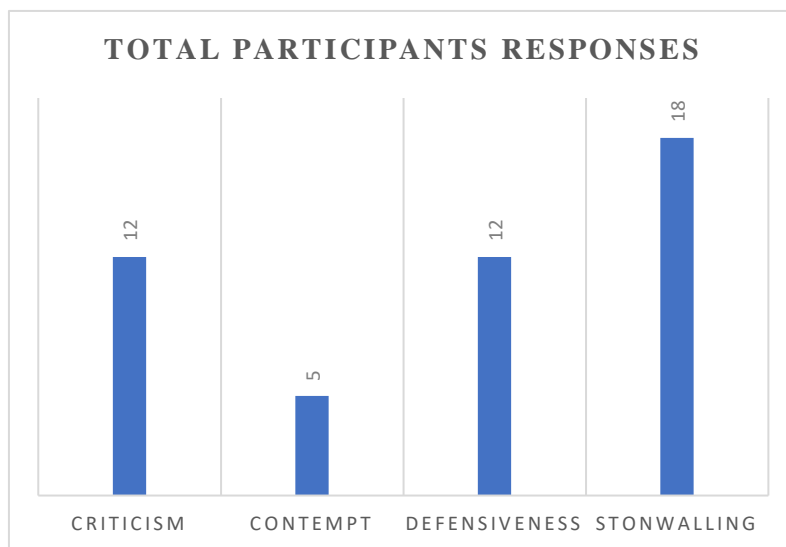


Figure 8: Interpersonal communication among participants

Contempt was seen used amongst only 5 participants as compared to the other ways of communication. There were 11 participants whose response indicated combination of dominant ways of communication such as, stonewalling and defensiveness, or stonewalling, criticism, and defensiveness etc. The results represented below were in alignment with the results reported above i.e., the way conflict was handled reflected and confirmed the level of vulnerability among the participants. For example- majority of the participants marked “yes” on the statement (under stonewalling), “When my partner complains, I have to control myself to keep from saying what I really feel”, “I think that it is best to withdraw to calm down, avoid a big fight and not get my feelings hurt” or to a statement resonating criticism, “I let things build up for a long time before I complain. I don’t complain until I feel very hurt”. Even though for the participants who marked in agreement with this statement didn’t get their dominant communication technique as that of stonewalling, there were majority of the participants who were in agreement, which also resonated with their responses which reflected their choice of taking a backseat, and not be vulnerable if it causes fights in order to protect themselves. There were many other responses that indicated the occasional use of defensiveness, and criticism for the participants who had 1 dominant communication style. For example, one of the participants scored, 6 on criticism as well as on defensiveness, and 7 on stonewalling, or other participants scored, 6 on criticism, defensiveness as well as on stonewalling, and scored 7 on contempt. There were many other similar values that indicates the use of communication styles based on the situation, perceived threat, internal trigger, and exchange/ transaction of messages within the couple. As the questions were argument-specific and focused on deep emotional events and

influenced actions, it can be said that it was rather valid for the participant to feel protective of getting hurt, hurting their partner or the relationship because, (a) lack of tools to access one's own emotions and regulating oneself, and (b) lack of support and understanding from the partners. Since, the pattern observed among these participants based on their responses were that of one-sided efforts to no efforts, or expressing only what is safe to partner attending to only what s/he is comfortable with and many more, it can be said that two insecure attachment style patterns were in function, amongst which one of the partners sacrificed, pursued, or maintained relationship by suppressing one's own individuality which further was leading to emotional struggle and reinforcing existing defense mechanism. Among the couples, two different attachment styles cannot co-exist without the efforts to understand each other's needs and functioning in a relationship and also catering to these needs to build secure balanced relationship. To achieve this, an individual has to be aware, see their worth, and practise vulnerable sharing with discernment. Few participants who were in alignment with their self, and the way they showed up in the relationship with vulnerability, even though had answered yes to some of the statements, there overall responses on the survey did indicate mutual understanding, resolving conflicts with the partners, self-regulation, and having tough conversations despite conflicts. It can easily be said that almost everyone has developed these styles of conflict handling, or communication styles to communicate one's own feelings, or emotions based on childhood learnings, and other past experiences. As individuals turn into adults and get into romantic relationships, these patterns of communication become the medium to protect themselves from the potential hurt which if navigated with awareness, support, understanding, and compassion, it can lead to healthy transformation in the relationship. As some of the participants as seen through the findings who were guarded, and holding onto their real feelings to protect oneself from hurt, were stuck in the negative cycle and couldn't make decisions that were in favour or alignment of who they really are. It is important to note that these styles surface when they feel triggered due to partners way of communicating something which can involve a complaint in the form of criticism, or tone of speech while attending to their partners attempt to express their feelings, or distancing during conflicts. In short, these communication styles are a two-way street (verbal/ non-verbal), which are influenced or activated by the way a couple communicate with each other especially around conflicts, or as a reaction to perceived threat.

Participants' conflict resolution practices in light of their intrapersonal communication and Vulnerability:

The following examples from obtained responses show the experience of few participants to explain the integration of all three variables. For instance-

- (a) Response Disparity (Acceptance)- Ishani scored, 7 on defensiveness, 6 on stonewalling, 4 on criticism and contempt. Her responses fell under the category of response disparity as her beliefs, ideas, values, and influenced responses, which effected her ways of showing up in the relationship, were misaligned. She expressed whenever she felt disrespected by her partner, she felt defensive, misunderstood, like leaving, or like her opinions never matter which triggers her ego stories. She mentioned she feels, “I am unlovable or difficult to love, no-one will ever love me or stay with me the way I wish, I and my feelings don’t matter enough, I lost in proving myself again, or it’s always my fault as it is, stop being a burden...”. Following which she agrees to feel like pretending someone she is not to make things better in her relationship, feel disappointed with her partner not loving her in ways she deserves, or change as she hoped. She expressed some deeply desired values such as, “Speak up more about how I felt and not always compromise on my needs to save the relationship, it is okay to make mistakes, and its important to set emotional boundaries”. However, she further expressed her partner cannot handle her expression of real feelings and desires instead it creates more conflict, so maintain the peace in the relationship, it is rather best to hold back and suppress my needs and emotions. As she shared, “whenever I try to share something important to me and make sure that I tell them it’s important and the person has responses like oh it’s okay it happens sleep over it or try to make some stupid random joke to make laugh because the person doesn’t know how to respond to it”, or “Not ask the question regarding the persons behaviour even its hurt badly, be happy all the time because the person can’t handle my tears or sadness or anger”. Therefore, at the end of the day she tiptoes around her partner, suppress her emotions, put her needs at the backseat, and protect herself from getting hurt in the relationship by defending her position to feel heard, and not in the bad light or else it reinforces her beliefs of being “difficult to love”. Hence, the cycle continues.
- (b) Response Disparity (vagueness)- Sanya responses on conflict handling communication styles indicated, 4 on contempt, and 7 on criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling. She expressed whenever she felt not understood or unimportant to her partner during

conversations, she felt hurt, angry and misunderstood. During which her she expressed her activated ego stories are usually that, “If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., and don’t overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn’t such a big deal as it is. just let it go”. Following which she expressed her disagreement in deciding to stop sharing her real feelings/ emotions due to unresponsiveness, or that she is tired of pretending someone she is not to maintain the relationship. Also, she indicated that she has, “Learned to share my own vulnerability, and I have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away”. However, on the other side of the responses which required her to express her feelings in elaborative form, she mentioned she doesn’t know what holds back her being vulnerable in relationship, she considers vulnerability as a weakness, she feels its better to hold back or not share things that her partner can’t handle (withhold, hide, distort or pretend), or would lead to conflicts due to misunderstanding, or lack of understanding. She holds values such as, “I need affection, attention, I expect my partner to understand why, and when i am getting triggered, without me having to tell him/ her each time it happen, or I do not feel secure, or fulfilled until my needs are met in a way I specifically want from my partner”. Her set of held values are different than her actions i.e., to express her needs, wants, disappointments, what is working, and what is not which she resists to protect the relationship. She also feels confused whether she has settled for less than she deserves in her relationship as she shares the disappointment of not feeling loved in ways she would want, change her partner as she hopes, or feel like a priority at times due to lack of affection and understanding. Therefore, holding back goes a long way for her until conflict arises, it leads to reactions stemming from criticism, defensiveness, or stonewalling and perpetuates a negative spiral in her relationship where the issue remains unresolved while reinforcing the deeply held beliefs.

- (c) Congruent Response (Alignment)- Latika scored, 2 on criticism, 1 on contempt, and 3 on defensiveness/ stonewalling. She shared whenever she feels targeted or attacked by her partner, she feels hurt, sad, defensive, and misunderstood. When feeling targeted and triggered, her ego stories get activated which she expressed were as follows, “I am not a good enough partner, and I can’t trust my partner”. Following which her responses did indicated certain set of values she holds, for example- “it is giving all or nothing in the relationship”, “I have learned to share my own vulnerability, I have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away”, or “I sometimes expect my partner to understand my triggers without me having to tell him each time”

etc. Her overall response indicated that she regulates herself by taking some time off from the conversation, or space until she feels she can get back to it more calmly. She also shared few sentences which reflected her emotional trust that is developed in the relationship due to showing up with vulnerable emotions and which were welcomed in a safe space. Statement such as, “I feel I can communicate when I’m unhappy; Discuss it with my partner immediately and I know he’ll leave everything to listen; I can tell him what I want, and he will eventually understand; or I was heard”. She shared her fears of not being able to express her true feelings, being misunderstood, and her partner feeling like he doesn’t know her. However, she believes in sharing her real feelings, negative aspects of herself, and not hold back if something bothers her irrespective of her being hurt, or inviting conflicts. Therefore, the exchange of communication, patience, self-regulation and co-regulation sets the base for environmental safety in which Latika could share her feelings from the place of authenticity.

Therefore, the above examples did reflect the effect of integrated communication patterns (intrapersonal communication- interpersonal communication), and its influence on showing up with vulnerable sharing. It was observed that, the lack of communication due to fear, failed attempts due to lack of understanding/ un-responsiveness, tired of initiating tough conversation, or being misunderstood chips away the trust and lead to two ways of coping as a couple- (a) turning towards each other during or after conflict i.e., coming back to each other to share and co-create safe space, or (b) turning away from each other during or after conflict, i.e., not coming back to each other to resolve but move on without attending the unresolved/ lingering hard emotions. This further leads to connection, or disconnection not just between the couples, but also within oneself. As seen in majority of the participants, they were willing to abandon oneself to feel chosen, prove their worth, and secure the relationship under the veil of avoiding conflicts to maintain peace to protect themselves from their worst fears, and beliefs true. In conclusion, the way participants responded in conflicts i.e., using criticism, contempt, stonewalling, or defensiveness, had one thing in common which was to protect oneself, avoid or numb difficult emotions, and find relief. The experience differed for each participant due to self-awareness, sense of worthiness, belongingness, and courage to be vulnerable.

Illustrating the in-depth description of the findings from above sections

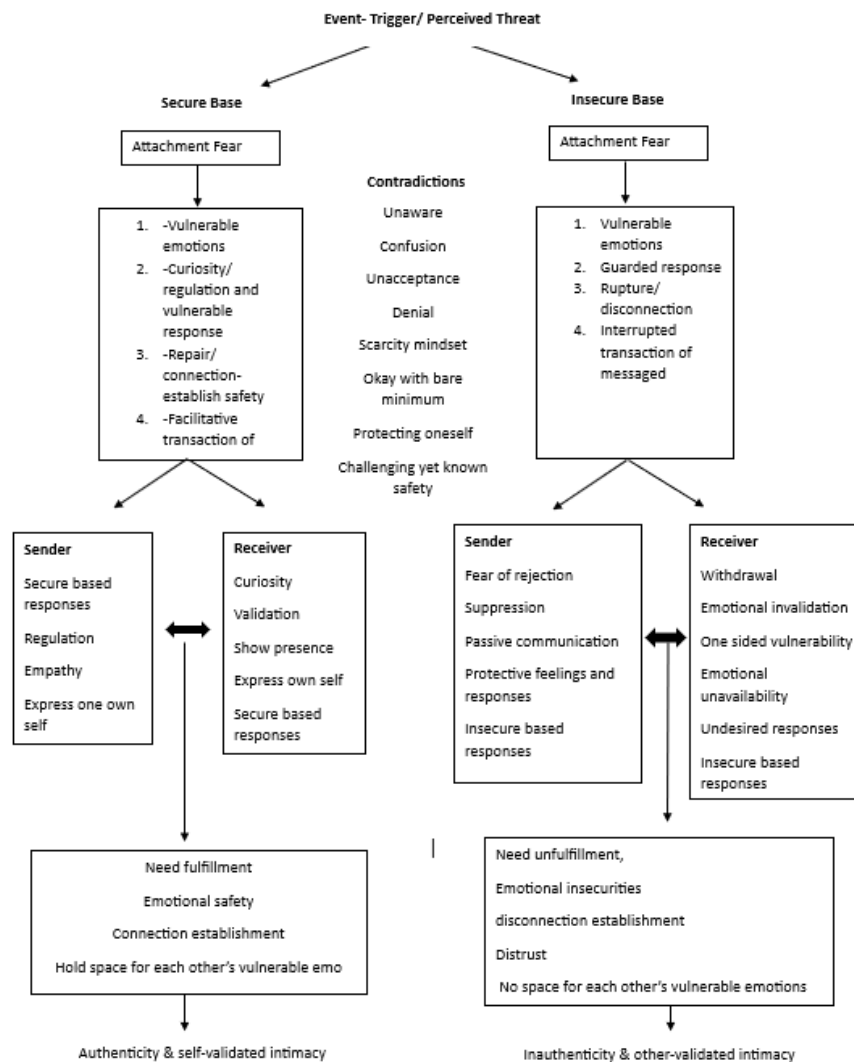


Figure 9: Compiled illustration of relationship vulnerability in varied dynamics

Commitment

Commitment was evaluated using the self-report measure created by using Gottman's years of research findings on commitment among couples. Based on the responses of the participants it was found that in general there was "high" commitment among all the participants. This means that participants who are in unfulfilling relationships and whose responses signify dissonance also feel high commitment in the relationship. This finding wasn't very shocking as based on the analysis, it does project that the such participants do enter the relationship with an insecure, or unhealthy idea of love, relationship, as well as own worthiness. From a cultural aspect, it

has been observed in India that longevity is the measure of success or health in a relationship, otherwise it would be the biggest failure of their lives. Considering this mindset even though positively evolving does impact the conditionings of the children who now sit with conflicted ideas or whether to stay committed no matter how incompatible and miserable they (or both) are, or not. For example, as Ishani shared, “Being in relationship you constantly feel the unsaid pressure of putting your best foot forward to sustain it and that fear of oh what if I fail again can really make you compromise with the thoughts or ideas you believe or function so it takes hell lot of amounts of confidence to share what you are expressing especially the negative feelings”. There were similar responses recorded that indicated how people viewed themselves as failures, or doubted their own abilities to maintain a relationship that they felt angry on themselves to even put their heart on the line for somebody they really loved.

In this self-report questionnaire, there were questions such as, (See, Appendix G), “When I am feeling bad”, “my partner is willing to meet my needs, I will sometimes make major sacrifices for my partner even if it goes against what I need”, or “Being a team is sometimes more important to me than my own needs”. It was interesting to note that all the participants inclusive of the participants with difficult relationships were highly committed in their relationships. Through the overall responses excluding the participants with aligned responses, it was evident that, (i) commitment means giving your all even if it means one is gaining nothing in return, (ii) outwardly sourcing their worthiness i.e., highly dependent on the longevity of the relationship at the cost of their self, (iii) making peace with the circumstances due to the level of emotional/ time investment, denying reality, fear, or stuckness (toxic pattern of what love should look/feel like), and (iv), accepting less than one wants and fighting to find happiness in the times one wishes would last forever while convincing this is the best they deserve, all of which refrains one from building deep connectivity but superficial/ temporary connection.

Therefore, there were two ideas of what commitment is, was extracted from the findings. The first idea of commitment is one that is cluttered by constant worries and insecurities. It's like walking on a thin line, where every step is a calculated balance between giving just enough to keep the relationship afloat, but not too much that it becomes overwhelming. It's a constant game of trying to read your partner's mind, searching for that one sign or moment that reassures you that everything is okay. It's a cycle of over-functioning, trying to be the perfect partner, and living for that one moment of validation. Whereas, the second idea of commitment is one of security, trust, and dependency. It's like standing on solid ground, where you can rely on yourself and your partner, even when things get tough. It's about

being able to let go of the need to control and instead allowing the relationship to unfold naturally. This idea of commitment is about finding a balance, where both partners can feel secure, trust and dependent on each other and give each other space to be seen for who they are. The difference between these two ideas of commitment is the level of emotional stability and security they provide. The first one is filled with doubts, insecurities and anxiety, while the second one is filled with trust and emotional security.

Understanding and validating the interrelationship of the variables in-depth using Methodological Triangulation

This section of the study incorporates the results and observations to highlight the consistencies founded among interviews, and survey consisting of similar set of variables (See, Figure 10). The interviews were taken of 18 individuals to understand the base of the relationship for which we conducted a study on, “Desirous of love, how people deal with the perceived fading of affection over the period of time”. This study helped us in understanding the base/ foundation of the relationship, how people view affection (ideal vs actual/ received), and evolving feelings, actions, and thoughts over the period of time i.e., after the honeymoon phase ends and it feels like “it isn’t like before”. Whereas, present research understands the explanation of the cause of fading affection by focusing on the integration of self, and impacted conflict handling style on vulnerability and perceived commitment. These studies were separated by a period of six months. The stage 1 findings which was conducted via interviews gave us insight into understanding the base of the relationships and its current patterns existing in modern/ today’s dating relationships, elicited certain discoveries that helps in explaining the reasons behind participants settling for bare minimum, going against their own needs, and altering their intimacy requirements to keep the partner, love or the relationship.

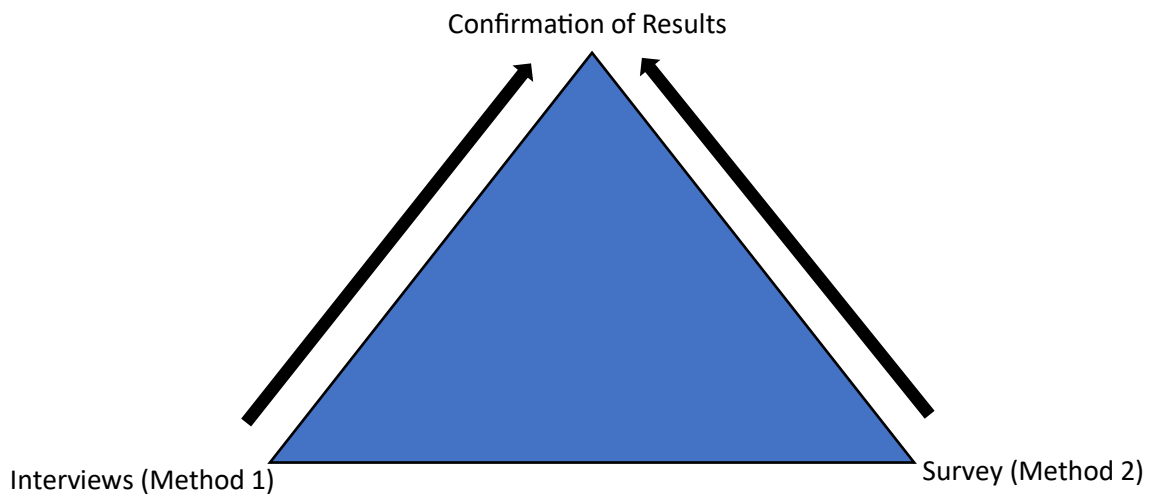


Figure 10: Methodological Triangulation

In conclusion of the present findings, the results of the majority of the participants indicated lack of self-awareness, negative sense of worthiness, and value/belief system impacting the integration of vulnerability in their relationships, discrepancy in the ideal vs actual relationship vulnerability, conditional vulnerability, and dysfunctional idea of commitment. The findings elaborated in the sections above fall consistent with the results formulated from the recorded interviews and data analysis.

(a) Vulnerability as a context

Vulnerability was one of the elements majorities of the participants defined as their ideal affection standards. The theme of vulnerability contained similar set of responses (See, Table 1). The similar set of ideal vulnerability responses were achieved. The importance of vulnerability was ironically one of the most important ways of affection among the participants set as an ideal affection, but it was the very area where they were scared of bringing vulnerability into the relationship.

Vulnerability	Experiences accepted without judgement
	Expressing deep honest feelings
	Sharing real honest feelings and not compromise
	Affection towards My family, career, past- my world
	Authenticity
	Social Treatment towards partner
	Sharing emotional experience
	Friendship (not just romance)
	Honest thoughts around situations, conflicts, or us in general
	Sharing dreams and goals
	Showing sides that are risky like insecurities
	Personal deep understanding
	Private Boundaries
	deep heartfelt talks
	Expressing sense of honesty towards relationship, self and each other
	Welcome me to be a part of their inner world
	Include in their important life events
	Even if we can do things independently, sometimes it's good to rely and convey through actions that "I am there for you"
	Intentional Sharing (healthy/unhealthy)
	Taking responsibility of our actions
Share their past experiences to know where they are coming from/ sharing true underlying feelings	
Easy sharing of disappointments, or hurt caused in the relationship	
Respecting/ Accepting each other thoughts, likes, dislikes, values	

Table 1: Vulnerability as a context obtained from stage 1 study

It was stimulating to find how the results from these findings resonated with the results from the stage 1 findings that helped us in understanding how people view affection, its elements and phenomenon of fading affection. The importance of vulnerability was ironically one of the most important ways of affection among the participants as an ideal affection, but it was the very area where they were scared of bringing vulnerability into the relationship. it will be elaborated in the sections below, but understanding vulnerability as an affectionate way of showing love through participants words are captured as follows. For example: Monica shared “vulnerability to me is letting the person know that I like, I might not be good for you, or trying to show you that I am better, letting them know my insecurities, and in the sense of emotions and expressing them”. She continued sharing that “as in the past I tried to look very confident so they think I am a good student, I am sorted etc, but when now I

am with someone, I really feel i want to be with, I want them to know who I am as it naturally will strip off the image you try to create in the beginning which isn't true". Sanaya shared "expressing the needs, desires, wants, dislikes and specifically important things from the past that can impact our relationship etc are the most important things for me as sharing is the most central part for bonding". Similarly, most of the participants shared how they want the embracing of each other as they are with their flaws, sharing openly without having to fear the change in perception about them and to show up with their real thoughts with the assurity that that they will understand.

(b) Feeling of safety

Feeling safe is the base of any relationship. Establishing and maintaining safety in a relationship is the core of all the other feelings, as the level of safety decides for a person if they are loved completely, if they are cherished, and if they trust their partner to provide them with warmth and understanding of their emotional experiences. Therefore, mutual affinity and healthy attachment can foster these feelings of safety. For all the participants they described the feeling of safety with 2 umbrella categories- (a) the non-judgmental relational climate where they can be who they are, and (b) emotional availability. Most participants shared phrases such as- "I could just be myself", "I could express my needs and hold expectations", "my partner held space for me to share my concerns, issues or challenges", "I could share my views without having to worry their shift in perception about me", "I felt cared for and recognized which made me felt safer", and "I could confide in my partner and let my guards down". It was evident in the responses that for all the participants it was important for them that their partners listen to their life experiences, express their day-to-day challenges or consistent personal problems, and trust them with their emotions, feelings and moreover with themselves. The idea of safety, on one hand, in most of the participants were towards their need of feeling accepted, approved and seen. On the other hand, for some people, safety was measured with the effort to accommodate each other trigger points, and making the efforts to be there for each other in a way they would feel loved, cared for and embraced. Unfortunately, the latter idea of safety existed in limited participants who were finding ways to make each other feel safe and consciously be in a relationship. Most of the participants felt safe too quickly only to find themselves replaced at the position of unsafe within few weeks of happiness. One of the acquired reasons was, the feeling of safety was very situational, in terms of how much they could

share and in what environment for them to explore, and be their own self. Other reason was hugely based on the response of their partners which was affected the emotional safety. The response of the partners defined their level of interest and emotional presence in the participant's sharing of the events. Most of the participants referred to this emotional presence and availability was with reciprocity, listening, responding and contributing. However, participants forgot to notice in love, before functioning through their adopted, learned or preconceived idea of what safety looks like, whether, their partners are contributing, if they are comfortable or interested, if their own feeling of safety is highly outsourced, what is their intention of sharing, and the capability and state of mind of their partner. If they noticed anything different from what they imagined, it turned into an internal conflict which resulted in a common solution of "try harder" or "fight". Therefore, among interviewees excluding the participants in the healthy relationships, the idea of safety was highly dependent on their partners, partners actions, partners responses, and limited to making themselves feel better, without establishing any strong sense of security within themselves as a baseline. With constant repositioning from safe to unsafe, was seen to be derived from their core beliefs of what safety is in a relationship. for some it meant "to sacrifice to feel safe", for some it meant "to try harder to see my worth through my partner", and for some "bending down, ignorance or blame games". Irrespective of the core beliefs, safety can be established with mutual support, understanding and empathy, however, such participants couldn't feel safe after the initial period was over. The initial phase was marked by the feelings being reciprocated, partners understanding where they are coming from, partners reminding the participants of their strength during low days, encouraging them to be themselves and embracing them with all their love, affection and thoughtful gestures that earned themselves the label of "best partner ever". For some participants, the feeling of safety persisted throughout the initial phase until the fading of affection began. For other participants, the feeling of safety was unstable even in the initial phase who tried harder to feel secure by ending the perceived threat through any way possible. Therefore, the feeling of safety among all the participants relied on the same elements (relational climate, authenticity, responsiveness, emotional availability, accessible and engaged), that are essential for any relationship or couple to build emotional closeness, intimacy and connection. The major difference was found not in the feeling of safety but in the ways of obtaining safety, which will be discussed in the following article. It was also found that the participants in unhealthy relationship dynamics with fragile

self-esteem and self-worth couldn't reflect deeper within themselves to question their contribution towards the feeling of unsafety within themselves. It was difficult for them because of their toxic partners. It can be assumed that people with different attachment styles and couple with a toxic trauma bond, will experience the safety differently. There are high chances for two different attachment styles to work their ladder up to secure attachment style if both the partners are committed towards working for the relationship. However, comparatively, in unhealthy relationship bonds, the chances are bleak for the responder or the partner who has toxic traits who is in a relationship with the sender or the partner with attachment wounds and who is blind in love.

(c) Expectations attached to show up with vulnerability

Safe, validated, wanted, reassured and warmth were the prominent feelings that emerged among the participants in the initial phase of the relationship. However, it is important to note that for majority of the participants these feelings were limited to how they felt approved, and accepted while sharing their past issues, and parts of self which they felt embarrassed, or shameful of to avoid hurt. Emotional connect and togetherness can be referred to as the conclusive feelings which carries the essence of the foundations on which the relationships are built. Emotional connect was found to capture the feelings of being seen, heard, valued and understood. As discussed above the core of every feeling promotes a deeper feeling of worthiness, importance, and value. The participants shared their experiences of feeling the emotional connect because they felt the feelings of reassurance, validation, togetherness, wanted etc which fulfilled their needs. The important function of emotional connect is tied with the way a partner shows up in the relationship for the other as well as listening to the partner. In the initial phase when the participants felt emotionally connected, they shared their interest in cultivating more moments of connection through efforts and giving to the relationship in every way they can. People in a relationship want to know if they are loved? if they can count on their partners? if they will respond when they will need them? does their partner needs them? are you listening to me? or am I important in your life and much more? The answer to these questions lies in the behaviours displayed throughout the relationship which also promotes safety and stability in a relationship. In this study, when the participants got the answers to such questions, their relationship attachment needs started to get fulfilled such as: to feel seen, to know that their partner can accept their vulnerability, to know they can trust their partners, to know they are not too much,

to know they can get it right in their partners eyes, to feel wanted etc. These feelings were enhanced and nourished when the participants felt touched, joyful, confident, astonished, and loved differently as compared to their past which fostered into the bigger feelings. These also started to create a foundation for the relationship which was based on trust, communication, non-judgment, admiration for one another, love, appreciation, connection, safety, and kindness. It is important to note that the degree or intensity of these feelings differed based on the individual attachment of meaning to the feeling and influence of past experiences. For example, vulnerability was very much limited to sharing past experiences to gain validation on their decisions, whereas, vulnerability goes far beyond just sharing hurtful stories. Hence, it is safe to say that the feelings in the initial phase were limited to surface level until the distress. Similar to emotional connection, togetherness represents the core of feeling belonging, loved, appreciated, and acknowledged. The feeling of togetherness was achieved through alike set of behaviors that enhanced their bond and strengthened the trust upon their partners. The above-mentioned prominent feelings fostered togetherness as it involved affectionate gestures, thoughtful creation of moments, intentional spending of time together and much more that generated the feelings of belongingness, recognition and loved among the participants. All the participants shared feeling special and close with their partners in the initial phase of the relationship, which added up to the feeling of togetherness as a whole. Therefore, the feelings of emotional connect and togetherness comprises of all the feelings of varied intensity and meaning that were experienced by the participants in the earlier phase of the relationship that fulfilled their all the relationship attachment needs.

(d) After the Initial phase

All the participants gave number of feelings and action responses that made them feel that “he or she is the one” or “this is here to stay” in the initial phase of the relationship. No matter how unique the experience was, the feelings that were touched and awakened in them, was not just through their partners actions but what those actions meant for them. Everything boiled down to the trust they were building on the other person based on how much they were feeling seen, heard, valued and understood. Simply put, they felt that they had someone to rely on who is going to be there for them. The affection can be viewed through systems thinking i.e., how all parts interact together to create something different that each individual part contributes. It is

important to note that numerous pathways of experiencing affection led to the same outcomes, in this context, all the gestures, actions, feelings or thoughts, irrespective of its uniqueness made every participant felt affection which further enhanced the experience of the relationship and perceived commitment.

- (i) The shift to the position of emotional unsafety: The participants experienced a ‘sudden’ shift in their position of feeling safe with their partner to unsafe. The reason for all the participants were aligned with the change in behaviour they observed in their partner for them. These changes were not expected by the participants, judging on the basis of the initial phase of the unsafe/Insecure, fear of showing vulnerability, worthlessness/Shame, invalidated, emotional neglect, emotional detachment, indifferent, fear of abandonment, obligated, indignation, loss of sense of self, unbalanced, emotional exhaustion, dependence, disillusionment, emotional deprivation, betrayed, uncertainty/ instability, resigned, and fading love. These were the feelings that emerged among the participants responses when asked about the any changes they felt in the effort made by their partner to show affection towards them. They shared their partners change in the way they treated them, as well as the level of investment they used to provide for the relationship. For example: Akanksha shared “my partner started giving me very less time... he stopped being curious about me really soon after I started to feel sure about the relationship”, Harsha mentioned, “he wanted to control my life, and everyday decisions... my partner ghosted me when things got tough... he started projecting as if he owns me”, and Shivanshu shared, “I never got the space to express my requirements... attempt at open conversations led to conflicts, which used to backfire at me... I couldn’t be vulnerable with her”. Most of the participants, along with the ones mentioned in the example, shared how the Figure of affection decreased gradually, or really fast in their relationship. The feeling of insecurity increased when the participants started to feel invisible to their partners. The phrases containing deep hurt and activating of attachment issues, such as “I am not loved anymore”, “I am not worthy”, “I am too much”, “something is wrong with me”, or “I am not enough”, started to increase. These were directly related with the behavioural patterns they observed in their partners for example: little to no affection, inattentiveness, manipulation, deflection, gaslighting, blame games, no space to share a part of themselves, or indifferent. These will be explained

in the sections below in detail. Their feelings shifted from feeling loved to unloved, reassured to anxiety, and trust to distrust, in short, emotionally safe to emotionally unsafe all together. These participants also shared their experience of the affection through their partner which was specific to the ways they liked it, i.e., their needs, likes, dislikes, desire, and wants were considered by their partner which as reflected in their actions were no more present as soon as the initial phase passed. It was interesting to note that most of the participants shared their partners decrease in the affection started with the beginning of their commitment towards their partner i.e., when they finally trusted their partners intentions, felt safe, gave all the love, and expressed affection through committed actions. The dynamics shifted from their partners eagerly giving the participants affection, to the participants desperately asking for it by proving their worth. The feeling of unsafe was also marked by the feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and confusion/ doubts.

- (ii) Fear of Abandonment: The participants shared this fear of abandonment in association with their hope of trying, and giving all the love to anyhow feel control over the situation of fading love. This fear had certain other emotions that made it more active among the participants. The participants shared feeling ignored, challenged, threatened, triggered, and anxious. All the partners behaviour, and participants own feelings created a fountain of emotions that were of fear. For example: Shivani shared “He didn’t continue any gestures, or take care of my needs like he used to... I felt anxious, and fearful of being left alone”, Tiska shared “with the investment, it was diff to let go of the imagined future with him, each time it felt this time it would work out if I try harder”, and Tanya shared “I didn’t speak my mind and my heart nor with him, or anyone else... I was too scared to lose him, I felt like I would be lonely, and I won’t have anyone”. Similar responses were obtained from the other participants as they started to feel insecure because of their partners change in action. The fear of abandonment was the major drive for the participants to go against themselves, and keep the relationship, by giving in until the point of exhaustion. Participants also reported the feeling of helplessness, worthlessness, and suffocation. The attempt to ask for some support to handle their fear, usually ended up in conflicts, making the participants feel like they are too much for their partner, and they need to stop expressing their needs.

- (iii) Fear of showing up with vulnerability: As mentioned in the descriptions of the feelings in initial phase, vulnerability was very limited in terms of its idea among the participants. Therefore, they were never really vulnerable that involved any kind of emotional risks that could have occurred if they expressed their real thoughts, feelings, goals, dreams etc. It was also described in the findings above, the fear of their rejection, or abandonment was momentarily suppressed, but the existence of it was constantly present in the participant's mind. Participants shared, their fear through expressing the fear of losing the love they are getting, but it wasn't on the surface because of the affectionate gestures that they were receiving. Based on the participants experience, the middle phase is characterized as a stage where, couples have conflicts, the ecstasy decreases, and the real parts of self, start showing up in the relationship. As compared to the initial phase, the relationship demands vulnerability at high levels in the middle phase when conflicts are occurring, so the relationship becomes interdependent, loving, and conscious. However, among the participants they were shared that in the initial phase their partner "just get them", they understood them, their needs, and if they had to express what they were going through, or rather had gone through, was made easy by their partner to share with them. However, Vulnerability in its essence is when one person chooses to not hide their emotions, or desires from others. It is intentional, and doesn't include sharing secrets to feel approved. The participants felt vulnerable when they relied on the approval of their past experiences, so when the real present situation happened where they had to share their emotions, wish, desires, or ideas of how they see something, they couldn't. Therefore, it explains the participants sharing having difficulty with emotional intimacy. Most of the participants shared they couldn't speak their mind, they were not getting a platform to speak from a place of authenticity, they felt stuck, and even if they tried speaking their mind, it wasn't accepted, but dismissed. Some participants also shared the lack of vulnerability from their partners side, as they were only interested in the superficial conversations. Participants shared having deep, meaningful conversation, that help them get to know some sides of their partners that no one would know, as a part of affection. Initially, this need getting unfulfilled was overlooked justifying through the time factor. However, in the middle phase, it persisted, and they experienced no emotional involvement from

their partner. Most of the participants shared the judgments that were provided by their partners if they try to show up with their real feelings, and thoughts about certain issues they might be feeling in the relationships. For some participants, it was the judgments that were passed on their personal life events, on which they once used to receive empathy and understanding, and for most of the participants, it was the information from the moments of their vulnerability, that the partners chose to use against them to win any conflict, or have an upper hand. Therefore, the participants shared holding back, and giving in to their triggered automatic thoughts.

- (iv) Space provided to be vulnerable by the participants partners- In the initial phase of the relationship participants felt emotionally connected as they felt reassured, validated, warmth, trust and loved. The behaviour of participants from initial phase which were, consistency, curiosity, expressing/ display of love and affection, emotional availability, reassurance, appreciation and acknowledgement, involvement participation, communication, commitment and integrity, and healthy compromises and adjustment, shifted towards controlling/ manipulation (gaslighting), emotional unavailability, pocketing, lack of investment/ efforts, lack of vulnerability/splurging, and unhealthy communication patterns. As the behaviour shifted of the partners, participants vulnerability decreased. In short vulnerability was highly dependent on how much their partners could make them feel worthy.

(e) Coping with the perceived threat (The fading of affection)

This section contains the coping behaviour that was common, and most used among the participants in unhealthy relationship dynamics. The coping behaviour was not necessarily associated with a positive way of coping i.e., it was made clear to the participants that anything that they did throughout the relationship to cope with the change, the fading affection, or the overwhelming feelings, anything that they did to maintain a relationship while experiencing the fading affection will be considered their ways of surviving. The three aspects of coping that came forward were- emotional drama, self-abandonment/ persistent self-betrayal, and holding onto despite mistreatment.

- (i) Emotional drama: Emotional drama was one of the most reliable coping mechanisms among the participants. When they started to feel out of control

due to lack of affection from their partner, they turned to emotional drama as it was temporarily stimulating in terms of feeling connected, or supported in some way from their partners, which usually the participants defined as “affection like before”. As the affection started to fade many participants started to create emotional drama of various kinds to seek attention, solve their doubts, or feel like their partner still cares for them. Protesting behaviour, testing behaviour, and passive aggression were major forms of emotional drama exercised by the participants. Even though they received a temporary relief, it was fleeting, reactive, and used to fill the void that was existing between them. For example- Tanya shared “I used to do things on purpose that he didn’t like if I do, to get the attention, or make him feel bad, and chase me a little”, Meera shared “I often exaggerated situations to get his attention because I needed him”, and Akanksha shared that, “If he acts indifferent towards me, or shows no intention to talk to me after conflicts, I go out of the house, and not come back until he calls me to check in if I am okay... and if he doesn’t, I do things like sleeping on the floor, not eating food, etc to get his attention, so he cares”. Therefore, there were many situations that participants shared they did to create some scenario that will get them some attention, and care. Another reason that the participants shared to use emotional drama was to test their partners in ways that were unique to their experiences. For example- test to check if they still hold some affection for them in their heart, if their partner is being open to them about their whereabouts, if they are lying or being honest, and if whatever worst they the participants assumed due to absence of affection was true or not. Therefore, emotional drama even though stimulating, was basically acting out of an emotion, that one or the other way a form of self-punishment. In many participants few other patterns were also observed, such as – arguing for the sake of arguing to get some response out of their partner (anything was better than silence), trying to make their partners feel how they have been feeling by doing things their partner would notice for example- comparing them with people in their life, and many other ways of passive aggression as an outlet of their emotions like sarcasm, taunting, etc. Emotional drama played out in various ways among the participants, however it was short lived, and eventually they completely became emotionally unavailable for themselves over the period of time.

- (ii) Self-abandonment/ Persistent self-betrayal: This coping mechanism consists of myriad ways of coping that were seen across the participants. All the participants in toxic relationships used many forms of self-betrayal or self-abandonment such as- sacrificing own needs, wants, or interests to please their partner, letting themselves take a backseat through downplaying their controlling, or other wrong behaviour, no self-care practises were carried out, hiding their true emotions, and not setting boundaries out of fear of rejection. Participants shared that when they started to realize the affection was fading, and their partners actions were making them feel not good enough, they started to act, and feel different. Participants whose partners cheated on them, or lied to them, ended up giving them more than required chances out of a feeling that this time they might love them more if they forgive them. The increase in self-doubt was also a factor contributing towards self-abandonment/ betrayal as participants shared that they started to second guess themselves, went against their intuition, constantly apologized, over-giving, or constantly pursued, and chased their partners by suppressing their real feelings. Each time they went against themselves to protect oneself from potential rejection, they abandoned, and betrayed themselves. For example- Harsha shared “I was okay sacrificing everything, if that is what would make my partner happy”, Sulekha shared “I was surprised with myself, and didn’t like myself of doing things to keep him stay but I did, to please him or have a peaceful relationship), and Tanya shared “I gave everything in my power to not lose him... I changed myself, overlooked faults, forgave, loss myself, and was faking happiness”. Many participants also shared that everything in the relationship became about their partners, there was no space for them, and their life anymore. There were many responses that were similar to these examples. Participants described using examples form their experienced of fading affection as to how they left their own side to make their partners stay. It was observed that the participants never realized they are losing their own self until the end of the middle phase, that was when they were disillusioned. Even though, they were aware of losing oneself in the process of coping with the fading affection, the need to feel chosen, and reciprocated was so strong, that they were okay doing it until they had no energy left, or were detached themselves with their partners, which happened towards the end of the last phase of the relationship for most of the participants. This will be further

explained in the pathway that leads to the foundation of the dysfunctional relationship.

- (iii) Holding onto despite mistreatment: This was at the heart of the above-mentioned coping strategies, to hold onto the relationship at any cost until they themselves questioned the very cost they were paying. Most of the participants shared that even though affection faded, they still held onto the hope because of the confusion i.e., the affection never completely faded as their partners gave them on and off affection. Most of the participants also knew that they were settling for bare minimum, but since they didn't know their way out, they accepted it as their fate, or something that they have to adjust with until the rest of their lives. Another reason of holding onto despite mistreatment was because of attachment, and fear of losing that attachment because of strong fantasies they had about the relationship, love that they thought they would now secure for the lifetime. Most of the participants when noticed the changes in the beginning they were confident of fixing it, or changing they're by giving themselves to the relationship. Most of the responses carried the underlying meaning of "if I love them, and they see my efforts they will treat me better", or the mistreatment was rationalized using phrase such as – "it is just a phase", "they are going through tough times", "my partner isn't much expressive as it is", "my partner will change if I make him/her happy", or "my partner needs time to trust me or open up to me". Therefore, the participants shared that the bare minimum was enough for them to continue the relationship at that point in time. They showed confidence in making the relationship functional with it, as maybe this is what real love feels like. Towards the end of the relationship, when the fantasies/ or illusions of love were shattered, participants shared that they knew they were dragging it. Till the very end, most of the participants in the toxic relationship couldn't leave the hope, or end the relationship because they couldn't despite feeling resentment, and disaffection themselves. The relational dynamics were such that their minds were feeding on the hope that was setting them back, the hope became destructive as that was the only thing they were left with when they experienced their heartbreak, and hurt, each time their partner put them down.

(f) Observed Patterns and Pathways

There were few common pattern and pathways that were discovered which helped us in highlighting the patterns among the participants that contributed towards their negative or emotionally distressed experience of dealing with perceived threat of fading of affection. We also discovered a pathway to a weak foundation of the relationship, which was common among the participants in unhealthy relationship.

Patterns among participants:

- (i)** What participants brought to the relationship by way of individual attributes (i.e., self-esteem, conditional worth, needs and wants, expectations, emotional health, communication style, coping skills), and past romantic relationships (preconceived notions, perception of the efforts needed for example, false self, meaning of safe, love, etc). Through the data it was evident that participants had conditional worth, and excessive attachment needs of being wanted, loved, chosen, or valued. Their low self-esteem blocked them from practising from the space of autonomy and authenticity which resulted in lack of boundaries since the beginning of the relationship. It was noticed that the only expectations they had from their partners were that of whether their partners are showing enough affection to them, for them to feel good enough (worthy). For example- Some participants who had “mixed feelings”, or “occasional weird vibes” from their partners in the initial phase, were willing to deny it as their partners were showing them enough affection for their needs to be fulfilled. Among other few participants, if their partner showed any amount of control, they perceived it as care, and attached it with the feeling of being wanted, which resulted in higher amount of control later in the relationship. Expectations sounded like, “I want my partner to be there for me”, “I want them to understand my needs”, “my partner should validate me”, “I want him to be emotionally responsive”. Even though these expectations sound realistic, it wasn’t easy for the participants to communicate these expectations to their partners as for them it might have come at the risk of sabotaging the “good relationship”, or feeling “needy” that will make their partner drift apart. For participants who didn’t feel affectionate in the ways they would have wanted, chose to go along with their partners ways, as it would have been emotionally risky for them. Therefore, the participants

self-esteem, and worth were highly identified by their partners actions, and how their partners perceive them. There were majority of participants who expressed their love for their partners by comparing them with their previous partners, or difficult childhood relationships. Their responses did reflected the preconceived notions they were carrying while taking this relationship forward- "I would feel complete if they love me consistently with the same intensity", "The relationships needs lot of efforts, or work), "One shouldn't have any expectations in the relationships", "sacrificing oneself is okay", "You need to earn the love", "Commitment means sticking around even if it doesn't serve you", and "Saying no means rejecting their ideas", "speaking up will ruin the good perception", or "over giving/ appeasing can fix the relationships". There were also some unconscious biases that were found among the participants such as- halo effect (justifying poor behaviour, fitting into the idealized version, positive attributions based on one good action), and affinity bias (similar backgrounds, being friends first could make the relationship go long term, familiarity with the likes/ dislikes/ past, clicking instantly like known forever, interests, similar troubled past history). The participants with the preconceived notions had a version of their partners, their idealized picture of a relationship, and its future, which limited their resources to pick up opportunities of knowing the truth that existed beyond that picture they created for themselves. Also, among many participants, the existence of false self, and understanding of the term's safety, and love was influenced by their childhood, and past romantic relationships. Such as, a participant shared, "if I will please my partner, they will always stay beside me", another shared, "to keep the relationship intact, I must do whatever makes my partner happy", "If I hide my true emotions, I would be loved more", "I would feel worthy, if they will reciprocate my love", "I can abandon myself, in order to keep my partner", "it's okay to keep my needs at the backseat" or "To love harder, can save my relationship". There were many more responses that carried the essence of the defensive façade they carried with them to protect themselves from the potential hurt, or the similar hurt in the past. The meaning of love, didn't really come off as clearly among the participants, it was simply tied to the extreme loving gestures that made them feel loved. Love was confused with limerence, lust, or simple attachment. Similarly, feeling of safety for them meant to be able to feel worthy, and

validated through their partners reactions. All the 11 participants carried this form of safety, which was highly dependent, and unmanageable if their partners didn't react the way they expected.

- (ii) Minimizing/ denying early relationship problems/ concerns- This factor majorly consisted of all those red flags, that the participants either ignored/ denied, or accepted them as it felt safe to them because of their conditioning around love. For example- Harsha shared her experience-

“My partner used to show possessiveness, anger, and used to try to control me in the beginning of the relationship. I used to feel that he is doing it because he loves me, and care for me. I thought it's because he needs some time to trust me. I used to share deep conversations with him, but from his side, I used to feel at times like it is only the physical attraction for him... But I felt affectionate with his presence, so I thought it was healthy romance, as I felt heard, loved, and committed. As the relationship continued, he got very insecure, and started projecting onto me as if he owns me... I wasn't feeling that it was right... I used to wait for him to reach me out because I felt I can help him to change for our better future”.

Similarly, there were many experiences where the initial ignorance led to increase in those very behaviours they denied. Many responses aligned to the Harshas' feeling, and actions mentioned in her illustrations. For some participants there were not very visible/ direct red flags, or which weren't “too much of a big deal” but they did feel like certain things such as- “I don't think my partner will continue doing this in the future”, “I thought I can handle it” or “I didn't know my partner is going to treat me the same way like s/he treated others, as I am special”. These phrases were all referring to the doubts that stirred in their minds in the beginning of the relationship. Many participants shared how their partners were not open, emotionally involved, controlling, or making space for their needs in some way, but as there was a high of the new love, and reciprocation from their partner, that it was easy to overlook these problems, or minimizing it to as being non-threatening.

- (iii) Low affection, higher commitment (giving actions)- It was seen among the participants that more they sensed less affection from their partners, more

committed they became to give love to manage the differences, perceived threat, or to seek affection. The participants shared holding back their feelings, fear, or concerns which also contributed towards the difficulties in setting boundaries, as the participants had one purpose at that time to feel loved, worthy, and wanted, as opposite to what their partners were making them feel unloved, insignificant, and not chosen. All the participants shared that the purpose of giving more love despite the noticeable changes in their partners affection with all their energy was to keep their illusion of love safe, and anyhow feel loved even if they had to create the situation to evoke some responses from their partners. The giving actions included- showing extra love, agreeing to their partners wants, over-compensating, over-compliance, or being over-apologetic, etc. In short, every giving action included a part of self-abandonment.

- (iv) Enduring the betrayal of trust- All the participants developed trust early in the initial stage of the relationship based on their partners affectionate gesture, and communication. The more their partners made them feel seen, wanted, and loved, more they felt they could trust them. Hence, participants shared feeling emotionally safe with their partner. However, there were many moments of disconnections, from tiny to macro ruptures, that started to scrape their trust away. They never felt safe again in the whole course of their relationship, as they did in the initial phase. The participants shared many ruptures that started to break down their trust, and not just towards their partner, but within themselves. Some of the moments were- their partners didn't respond to their bids of connection, one-sided emotional work, avoiding hard conversations, boundary violation (unset/ unsaid boundaries), unmet needs (seen, heard, valued), and consistently feeling as if their partner is inaccessible. These were the major moments of ruptures, that broke down the trust. There were three people, for whom including these micro ruptures hidden in the everyday events, involved macro ruptures such as, cheating, and on-off break up. Albeit of its awareness, they prolonged the suffering by functioning on the attachment they felt by being in survival state. Along with this, they endured the consistent feeling of betrayal through rationalizing, justifications, and denying negative behaviour i.e., the repetition of missed moments of connection, caused ruptures without repair leading them to protect the relationship by handling it all by themselves. For example- "I must have overreacted", "He isn't usually like

that”, “They must be having a tough day”, “it’s okay, my partner often apologizes, he must feel guilty”, “My partner loves me, s/ he won’t hurt me deliberately”, or “It will get better with time”, were few of the responses to rationalize the moments when they felt unsafe due to broken trust.

- (v) Efforts to fix the partner, and the fading affection - Much efforts were taken by the participants to solely solve the situation, every problem that existed between the participant, and their partner became their problem to fix. All the participants found themselves in the pattern of self-abandonment, persistent self-betrayal, and taking a backseat while their partner controls them, and their life. Participants response shows that they were in a one-sided relationship, they double down, and kept giving in an attempt to convince their partners to care for them, respond to them, and offer something to them, i.e., they see their worth. The participants attempt to save the relationship were coming from their past learnt narratives, such as, if they will neglect their own needs, they will be easier to love, and worthy of the relationship. Therefore, the participants were performing in the relationship to achieve an outcome of being wanted. The efforts made to fix the partner, or the fading affection was was to please them, chase them, protest, emotional drama, passive aggression, give-in to the control, sacrificing their own self, giving extra love to make their partner realize their love for them, and dealing with the insecurities by choosing a safer option (that aligns with their illusion/ fantasy) through active defense mechanisms. The dealing with fading affection became much bitter, when they had to leave their own side, and confirm to their partners needs wants, like, or dislikes.
- (vi) Resigning to control- Participants did share about trying to have open conversations, express their feelings, and share their concerns/ challenges they are facing in the relationship. However, it never worked out for them, or in their favour i.e., they never felt acknowledged, understood, or heard. They reported their partners bombarding them with blame, criticism, projection, manipulation, etc that was both painful, and exhausting. The unresolved conflicts started becoming a trigger for the participants, which added on their fear, dysregulated their nervous system, and destabilized them. Since limerence love, and trauma bond were in action, it was difficult to see any other option than giving in to the fear, one-sided investment, and doing all they could to fix the conflicts to feel stable, and safe. Hence, they started to try, and do things their partners way in

order to resolve conflict, and somehow get back to the affection that they experienced in the initial stage i.e., they resigned to control. As Sulekha captured the essence of this factor-

“He suddenly stopped showing affection, or any of those little gestures that were important to me. His actions, and words never matched, he started with constant controlling... I started feeling that all this is creating a distance. I made efforts to convey my feelings, and concerns. All the attempts changed into heated arguments, with illogical reasonings, and blame. It continued for a long time. After every time I made an effort to talk with him, he started to turn away from me, or sometimes ghost me, and that kept me hanging. I wanted to talk about what is going on, but I didn't have anyone to turn towards. I can't even get out of it because I didn't want to, and I didn't even have any solutions because he didn't want to solve it. When I used to manage to reach out to him, he used to show hyper behaviour, that used to make me think as if I am so bad, and worst. It felt like he wanted to punish me, and make me feel as if I am undeserving. I started believing he is always right, and I am always wrong. I started listening to him to do whatever he wanted, and take it on me for whatever he did, as in I started apologizing to keep things going. He used to sometimes verbally abuse me if I did something which he didn't wanted me to do. I took accountability of his actions. I wanted him to love me like I loved him, and the way he used to”.

There were many similar responses that were recorded from the participants experience that showed their resignation to control.

- (vii) Loss of sense of self- Most of the participants reported feeling “not like themselves”, and doubting their own self for every decision, not just in the relationship, but in other aspects of life as well. They recognized their lost confidence, disinterest, and loss of enthusiasm in meeting other people, difficulty doing the things they once liked, or pursued. They lost their bearings, identity, and self-worth, and will internalize, or do anything to avoid anything that can lead to perception of being rejected, or abandoned. Some participants even shared their friends, and family noticing the changes in them, and expressed concerns. Some of the common phrases that were found across participants were, “I used to feel guilty after doing something I didn't like for

my partner each time”, “I started doubting everyone’s intention towards me”, “My performance started to get effected”, “I stopped taking care of myself”, “I felt nothing I will do is ever good for anyone”, “everything is about my partner, I don’t think my existence matters”, “I didn’t know if my thoughts were even real”, “I went against my own intuitions” or “I lost my self, and individuality”. The major contribution apart from the partners actions towards their loss of sense of self were, there unhealthy coping mechanism (actions leading to self-betrayal, self-deception, and self-abandonment).

- (viii)** Shattering of illusions/ fantasies: This was majorly that occurred in the participants end phase of the relationship. Even though disillusionment was a part of the middle phase, but every effort was made to postpone it, deny it, or fight it. However, it couldn’t be continued for long, as all the participants shared the responses that signifies their illusion shattering, and fantasy bubble being burst as they were in the end phase of the relationship. For example- Akanksha shared, “I started seeing him for who he is, not who I thought he might me, or could be”; Harsha shared, “I realized it isn’t a right relationship, Shivanshu shared, “I realized I have become so accustomed to her behaviour, that I believe her by default... I had accepted that this is going to end”, or Vaishali shared, “I couldn’t see him for who he is”. There were also responses that concluded that they accepted that the bliss they experienced, and they seek isn’t going to happen “forever”, “It is not for lifetime”, and in some cases participants shared that that feel their components of illusion were even existing ever until now in their relationship. Therefore, when they realized it, and accepted their disillusionment, deterioration began. Red flags were seen as red flags, and the perceived green flags were considered fake, out of obligation, or felt indifferent towards.
- (ix)** Last ditch efforts to seek affection- As it was difficult for the participants to leave the relationship, or completely withdraw from seeking affection, they made some efforts to seek affection, or closure of whether were loved. This time, the difference was in the ways of seeking affection. The last-ditch efforts included involved a lot of passive aggression, and protest behaviour to stimulate some responses, or express their resentment, or unresolved issues towards them. They tried to maintain some level of efforts to resolve the issues, or restore the connection. It was like relying on their last set of resources to remedy the

relationship. The participants shared their reasons to try until the very end, and making last ditch efforts were as follows- some shared “They didn’t know how to handle life, once they will be gone”, Some shared, “they still felt like they can forgive them, if they reciprocate in some quantity”, and few also shared, “they didn’t want to leave with guilt of not trying enough, as their partners were the only one for them”, “they wanted to feel loved, and test if they are needed”, or that “They wanted to prove they are deserving/ worthy”. There were also some fewer common efforts such as trying an open relationship, or retaliating in the ways that were physically harmful to oneself. For example- Mohan shared- “My partner suggested an open relationship for a while, as we were not able to maintain the relationship. I felt not right about it, but thought that it’s okay, let’s try and do this as well, at least she is trying something to mend our relationship. With open relationship, came on and off break ups, bottling of feelings, Jealousy, and made things more complicated. Soon, she told me that she was with someone else for some time, it was hurtful, but I wanted to work on it till the end. The physical intimacy became limited to just mere physical attractiveness, the emotional connect was gone. I started to live with the old memories, as I felt estranged, and detached... I still wanted to do something out of my way and understand her and the relationship, and gave each other a chance. I started to chase her, approach her, and talk to her, but it didn’t succeed. I felt surprised on the red flags I have been ignoring until now”. There was another uncommon way of doing something to seek love, care, or to do something to postpone the perceived hurt. For example- Ishani shared-

“My partner used to always show his extra concern, and control around my occasional drinking. He would be very insecure if I am coming late, going out, or drinking with my friends. When it came towards the end, I didn't want to harm myself but I wanted a getaway or something like that. So, I used to be with my class groups, sitting and talking, leaving my phone at the bunk or not talk at home and all those things. So, Not attending my phone, not taking calls, isolation, not attending, not being there for him. Sometimes I used to intentionally show him what I am doing for him, or tease him with things I know would annoy him. This did elicit some response from him which weren’t as I

expected, I just used it to get back at him so he knows I am hurt, or show him that I will do what I want”.

Therefore, there were these two uncommon last efforts that were found among the participants. Albeit of the different the intention remained the same for all the participants i.e., to see if they still hold some value in their partners life, if they still have a chance, and if the relationship still has a future like they imagined. They needed to express, feel loved, cared for, and reciprocated on their efforts.

- (x) Lost passion, and out of love/ affection- Many participants shared that they developed feelings of indifference, and detachment in a way that they stopped seeking their validation consistently. Even though they had fear of letting the relationship, or the partner go, it was marked with the essence of, “I didn’t care anymore, it is the way it is now”. Few participants, took this as a hope that their partners would realize on their own if they withhold affection, some understood this feeling as something that they have to settle for their life, and some participants knew that their relationships don’t withhold any future. Some even used the phrase, “I didn’t think I love my partner anymore”, or “I don’t want to make any out of the way efforts to give, or get affection”. This feeling was majorly a part of the last phase of the relationship, whether they continued the relationship, or broke up. For example, Tanya shared, “I felt totally demotivated to be with him anymore, I felt like my wish to be with him, or for him to be there for me ended”; Akanksha shared, “I constantly feel why do I need to stay around with someone else, if I am not appreciated in any way, anymore? It’s always at the back of my mind that if now is the time to get out of it, or do I need to stay? Little things have started to annoy me, and I have stopped paying attention to his gestures, I rather treat him like a colleague”. Similarly, Tiska shared, “My feelings towards him changes drastically, there wasn’t affection, or love anymore. I stopped paying attention to his words, to make sense out of it”. Therefore, there were many responses that showed how the disillusionment among participants was an exhaustive process leading towards overall deterioration. Also, the reason to push past the disillusionment when it occurred first in the middle phase of the relationship was because participants perceived

their relationship as “real”, “only one”, or the one that actually has a “potential”. Their intent to work on it, to achieve their desire to connect, feel loved, and reciprocated was done at the cost of their self. Which then forced them to settle for mediocrity, and find ways to just co-exist by resigning to control, or trying to change things. Finally, for all the participants it led to the diminished desire of being in their relationship, and increase in the desire to get out of it. All the 11 participants either waited on their partners to walk out, and meanwhile make some efforts to seek some kind of response from them, or few chose to held onto the hope, and feel stuck, trying to settle for the bare minimum. The major reason that came forward for feeling the lost passion within themselves among the participants was that of shattering of illusion, and falling out of limerent love. Another act of staying until they initiate separation was because of trauma bond effect on them, and their self-worth. The fear, void, and longing to feel loved never really ended until the very end.

- (xi) Holding on to elusive hope, and self-care- On the one hand, the participants were holding onto the relationship, knowing that they are dragging it out, whereas, on the other hand, they started to pay attention to themselves, their emotions, and life in general when they somewhere had gained acceptance that this will end sooner or later. Once the illusion broke, acceptance occurred, and they stopped trying to change their partners with rigorous efforts, they started to see the cost of the relationship on themselves, their health, and the drained energy each day. For example- some participants reached out to their friends, some did what they have been told not to do by their partners, some focused on their physical health, and some pursued their hobbies they left. Even though, they could never completely let go, but their intensity of focusing every bit of their attention, energy, and emotions towards their partner reduced, and shifted some energy towards gaining some control over their lives.

Hence, these were the various common factors extracted from various unique experiences, which suggests that there are multiple pathways leading to the same contribution, and endpoint. It was interesting to note how they tried to save their relationship from their partners fading affection towards them, and ended up losing their own affection due to consistent failure of obtaining love, approval, reciprocity, or validation. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned factors

are the responsible elements of the participants that contributed into their experience of dealing with their partners fading affection.

Common Pathway towards building weak foundation of the relationship

The pathway toward the unfulfilled relationship, and how the participants went through the experience of an unhealthy relationship, and negative feelings until the very end of the relationship was found based on response interpretation. We discovered a pathway toward unfulfilled relationships that were common in all 11 participants. This research question would be explained under four themes describing the pathway. Each of the themes contains a narrative form of examples to explain a phenomenon obtained from interviews. The following sections shed light on the process of how the functioning of people in unhealthy relationships experienced the fading affection, and changes in the relationship, as well as self. These factors can also be considered as the root of forming the weak foundations, and unfulfilled relationships that can be easily confused as love and keep them coming back to an unsafe relationship.

Theme 1: Tolerating the unhealthy behavioral actions- The desire to be chosen

While exploring the interviewees' romantic relationships, most of the people came forward with implicit patterns where they have been suppressing their real needs and feelings in order to be loved and chosen by their partners. Through analysis, it came out that the idea of love and survival among individuals was folded into conditioned responses whenever they felt threatened. A deep desire to abandon oneself in order to maintain the presence of their partner and avoid feeling threatened/ rejected in any way is a trauma response i.e., any perceived threat will cause stuckness in the sympathetic state leading to present itself in various ways (Vincent, 2022) to feel in control again. For instance:

Akanksha remarked,

“After a few months, he stopped being curious about me, and gave me very less time... I was not getting that much affection but whenever I was getting the affection it was in the ways I liked it... Got confused about how worthy I am to him... It felt like a phase that would pass... I actively sought validation to justify if this relationship was not a mistake”.

Harsha captured her experience in the following sentences:

“He used to show possessiveness and anger... I felt good that he is caring for me... he used to control me... I used to feel he was doing it because he loves me... He increased his controlling behavior towards me... Everything started going according to him... I wasn't feeling that it was right... I justified his actions... I was okay sacrificing if that's what makes him happy”.

One thing common in these stories was sticking to the point of exhaustion with the hope of making it work. For example, Harsha remarked “I can help him to change if I try harder and have a better future together” and Shivanshu mentioned, “I gave her many chances and assurance that I am going to stay and handle the difficult situations with her... I felt there is still hope for the future, and wanted to hold onto that”.

Theme 2: Realisations and wishful thinking- Fear of not being good enough

To feel worthy and fulfil the longing through the constant need for validation that ‘I matter’ (Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005) in this relationship, is a very complex and challenging process. People whose core worth is dependent on others tend to ignore the red flags for a longer period of time regardless of someone not being compatible, equally emotionally invested, or aligned with them. The hope of making the relationship work at any cost is because they doubt whether they will be accepted or ever feel emotionally reciprocated. This continuous exposure to relational threats leads to nervous system overload which shows up as learned patterns and behaviours to feel safe again, loved, and acknowledged for their presence. This section explores the people's realisations of the red flags and yet how they suppress that part of their voice [self-blaming, self-critical analysis, or justifying/rationalising their partner's mistakes to name a few (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021)], to achieve relief from the perceived threat/suffering through various self-sabotaging acts. For instance:

Akanksha remarked-

“My needs are all unmet which were once met and were most important to me...The relationship has become a third thing for me now and still, I go out of my way to do something about it somehow...I feel he is making choices over me, because of which I start ranking myself and I feel stupid and least in his life... I mostly try to

maintain a distance from him and I try to just harm myself in some ways like purposely cancelling a plan, sitting outside of the home for hours, sleeping on the floor, not eating dinner, etc. to get his attention”.

Sharon shared:

“He stopped showing me those little gestures of affection... His words and actions never matched... I was chasing him after every time he ghosted me and I ended up apologizing to keep things going... I listened to whatever he said and did what he wanted... I couldn't get out of it because I didn't want to...I tried my best, I tried pursuing, chasing, bending down... I don't think it was enough for him... Started to make choices on the belief that I am just not working hard enough in my relationship”.

In adult relationships, individuals start showing up as someone in advance that they perceive their partners want them to be because of the internalised core beliefs such as ‘I am unworthy of love, ‘I don't deserve a good’, or ‘I have to be perfect or they will also reject me’ (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Few interviewees shared their experiences at times when they were conscious of their choice of abandoning themselves and pushing away their emotions in order to feel loved and maintain the relationship. For example, Anmol shared “I felt like he was the only one in the world for me... I should try harder and not give up... I felt upset... maybe I need to change for him to like me more”. Shefali said, “I didn't like myself doing things to make him stay but anyways I did it, to please him or have a peaceful relationship”. Akanksha's Statement sums it all up “even though I try to show an exterior wherein I am my own person; I think I am hugely becoming influenced by only what he wants”. Therefore, some people feel the need of performing in relationships because they want to feel loved, chosen, and wanted even if it costs them to lose touch with the parts of themselves that are authentic and vulnerable.

Theme 3: Acceptance and decisions after disillusionment- Falling out of love with the version/idea of my partner

People carrying the memories of childhood emotional neglect and the weight of those ego stories into adult relationships suffer this constant fear of being neglected or abandoned when it comes to perceived insecurity in relationships. People with such wounds have a void due to unmet needs which they try to fill by seeking love at the

cost of their 'self' to compensate for the childhood neglect. In unhealthy relationships, it is easy to confuse infatuation with love. Such couples are often stuck in the power struggle phase (Mersy, 2022). They usually fight in this stage holding onto the hope of changing their partner as they imagine them to be, to fit the potential that they perceive for them. Potential plays a very important part in such dynamics (Pharaon, 2021a). It acts as a motivation for people to let go, justify and rationalize those behaviors of others towards them that are hurtful and demeaning which leaves them emotionally detached. People in love with the potential of their partners drift away from reality which creates an illusion of safety and connection as a defense mechanism. Individuals when suddenly found themselves in the most stressful state where they couldn't do anything more than they already are doing, their 'perfect relationship' came crashing down which forced them to see what is actually happening in the 'reality'. Participants could see how they were enduring unhealthy relationships that prolonged their sufferings as they carried the role of keeping up and living up to the responsibility of making their relationship work anyhow despite personal challenges. This surfaced the hoarded resentment, and suppressed emotions, and led to burn-out.

This section talks about the participant's experiences of how this process of feeling and bringing attention to what they are receiving or giving led to acceptance and coping in their own ways. Some people mentioned the challenges and patterns in relationships they observed, and how they went from experiencing burnout to not denying their partner's actual behavior anymore. For example, Harsha shared:

"I figured it wasn't the right relationship but I still continued for a while because I was feeling committed... He used to block my messages and calls for some months and unblock me on his own for no particular reason... I felt challenged and threatened in unhealthy ways which were not good for my health... I still had expectations of him reaching out and doing something for us... He wanted me to take every step for our relationship, his actions made me feel that I have to do all the work for this relationship... I justified enough of his actions, and tried to support and appreciate his efforts... Now, I couldn't give more chances".

Shivanshu remarked:

"I realized she was always the same since the beginning, just that I couldn't figure it out earlier... She wasn't investing even a little towards the relationship, it reflected in her actions and in the relationship... I realized why she is with me and the

reason wasn't love... She wasn't the one I would look up to, I couldn't respect her anymore...It was like I was used to her doing and how the relationship was working, I was accustomed to her behavior I realized... My overall potential and confidence were decreasing...I was settling for less”.

Some participants also talked about things they have given up on that they once used to seek from their partners constantly. For example, Akanksha remarked, “To have no expectations, and think of him as a friend”. Shivanshu said, “I always wanted to hear her side as well, but it never reciprocated...stopped speaking what's on my heart or mind”. Few participants also mentioned their discomfort in asking that may put forward their vulnerability of what they want from their partners because of the involved emotional risks, for instance, Manvi remarked “There is a big gap between what I expect and what he does... If I figure it out and tell him what I like and dislike, will he do something about that”. On the contrary, some also gathered the courage to speak about what they have been suppressing for a long time. For example, Sneha mentioned, “My behavior of letting him do whatever he wants and not expressing my real feelings, made him incapable of understanding my perspectives... It is better now that I communicated”. Akanksha remarked that she told her partner, “I can't trust you whether you will understand my emotions or not”.

It is seen that to accept, requires a lot of effort to step out of the known, tune with parts of self, and view things with conscious awareness. The consistently growing Love/Hate dynamics and finding oneself led down each time they gave in their all with nothing in return except disappointment, gave people a sense of acceptance. Despite the imbalance, participants had let go of the potential, or fantasy of their partners, but were holding onto the tiny hope of their relationship working for them. Albeit of the presence of hope, they were no more blind in love, but rather had faced deterioration themselves in terms of their feelings towards their partner. Hence, it became realizable for them to allow the struggle, notice the flow of their real feelings, stay with it and remove the rose-tinted glasses to observe and question what's in present. For example, Akanksha mentioned, “I felt like I gave up a lot to be in this relationship... why do I need to stay around with someone else if I am not appreciated in any way anymore”. Tavleen remarked, “I understood what he is doing is wrong and I shouldn't listen to him”. Such reflections did create a window for some participants to make a choice for themselves, that serves them or is consistent with their needs, growth, and healing.

Since, it was difficult for them to let go of the relationship because of trauma bond cycle, they started to make changes in their own life while staying in the relationship, such as focusing on their hobbies, reaching out to their families/ friends, taking care of themselves, doing something for self-etc.

Theme 4: Coping and consequences- Reconnecting with self and expression of emotion

Moments of Misattunement i.e., when needs that can make one feel wanted, loved, seen, or heard are not regularly responded to or attended to and are left unrepaired, leads to relationship breakdown and ruptures. Misattunement acts as a catalyst for damaging relationships. It is the millions of small moments of transaction happening between the couples each day that causes distrust and hurt which can be handled with mutual repair effort. It is an important relational skill that can be highly challenging in unhealthy relationships to develop because of extreme imbalance. The part of the section contains how few participants could assess how the relationship makes them feel, realized that they can feel better without sourcing it from their partners, and focus on their own needs, wants, and comfort rather than putting all the energy into the relationship and analysing how their partner can change them. For example, Tavleen said,

“Earlier, I used to focus a lot on what he said, later I knew this is how it is so let him be... I stopped caring about what he will feel or if he will care... I started looking after myself, taking care of myself, and trying to feel more confident about myself”.

Akanksha remarked:

“More than associating whatever I am doing with him, I try to associate it with me... earlier I used to think that will he like it or not. Now, even if that thought comes to my mind, I try telling myself that if I am feeling like it, I will do it. So, I am trying to bring a self-factor into my decisions... Even though I do not get the response I need, because I associate some stake of the activity with myself too, there is a part of me which feels happy”.

Some of the participants were able to live through the stress and identify the changes required in the relationship as a whole to move towards growth. For example, Manvi shared “the relationship at the moment needs for us to talk more about certain

things that are difficult for me to bring up and see how we can grow up as individuals together”.

For some people, this process of noticing and shifting inwards led to coping to deal with the awakened sense of unfair treatment. For instance: Shivanshu said, “I started talking with my best friend... I pursued my hobbies like playing guitar, some other work to keep my mind busy... Make myself calm... Give myself some time before reacting”. There were similar responses from a few other people who started investing in themselves as a way to cope. While few people displayed healthy coping strategies, there were also people who showed maladaptive coping as an outlet for their feelings. For instance: Akanksha mentioned “I just wanted to express it to him in some way, that he is also oblivious to my life... But, in a way, I wasn't feeling guilty about it... I think the intention was just for me to tell him that I feel distant from him”. Tavleen remarked “Taunting and sarcasm from my side began as an outlet of my feelings... it felt comforted in some ways”. Shivanshu mentioned, “I started testing my theories with her in my own ways... it helped me feel right and in control”. Even though the process of coping in terms of approaching the situation with a choice and consciousness began for some participants, it wasn't easy for them to adjust to the reality of the relationship and consequential changes. The interpretations and analysis also led to the conclusion that partners could realise it's not the question anymore whether they are worthy of love but that if their partners are capable to love them the way they want to feel loved if they let go of the version, they are hoping their partners would change into. It was surprising to see how disillusionment happened after years of relationships with the participants who were in limerence love. For instance: Sharon mentioned, “Now, I couldn't accept the person he is”, Shefali shared “my perception of him started to change”, and Tavleen shared “he isn't who I thought he is or can be”. To sum up the similar responses, Akanksha captured it the best by sharing “I realised he has a version of me that probably does not exist...I also started feeling he isn't who I thought he might be”.

Therefore, the pathway towards unfulfilled relationship began from the excessive desire to be chosen, to be defined by the other, and outsource the worthiness. Most of the participants were low on self-esteem when they started dating their partners due to their childhood experiences, and dating history that has developed very low self-esteem among them. Therefore, settling for anything familiar, or the potential of their

partners was much easier for them than forming healthier relationships. Over the period of time this is how their relationship ended by gaining some kind of emotional freedom within themselves but it left them with emotional trauma/ wounds.

(g) Differences in participants from healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics

The patterns that were found among these 4 participants were that of the factors that contributed towards building of healthy relationship foundation/ dynamics. The process happened in various stages even though not explicitly stated, we could see few factors that happened one after another in all 4 participants. The patterns were as follows- intense love and getting serious (attachment), disillusionment, personal insecurities, managing conflicts as a team, Deepening bond, and enduring love. It was interesting to note that these patterns were not solely of the participants, but also their partners as the responses signified except one pattern, namely personal insecurities.

- (i) **Vulnerability:** Vulnerability was seen among all the 15 participants. The difference lied in the intention, boundaries, and ways of being showing up with vulnerability. Among the healthy dynamics couples, vulnerability was differently expressed with varied intentions. In the initial stages, for example, one of the participants shared being vulnerable by sharing the most personal parts of her life in order to see if her partner could handle it, or provide her with the support with a non-judgmental environment. The other participant shared being vulnerable came naturally to her as her partner provided her with the acceptance, and recognition that she always wished for. She expressed feeling comfortable, and safe sharing her past, hurt, deep wishes etc. The other two participants shared taking time to bring vulnerability into the relationship as they were worried about their partners reactions to them sharing the part of who they are, as well as not comfortable opening up too soon due to previous past experiences of people taking them for granted without respecting their sharing moments. It was interesting to note that among these 4 participants the context, intention, and meaning of vulnerability evolved among these participants. The intention was not just out of obligation, or excitement, but as participants shared that being vulnerable needed a lot of courage from them to speak their minds, to make mistakes, to own the mistakes, to discuss the disappointments, to set boundaries, and to do something out of their own comfort because they felt the

relationship, and the partner was worth it. Two participants shared feeling challenged in opening up their closed parts of themselves, or the parts of them they might be ashamed of because they need time to feel more secure, and safe within and develop trust in their relationship. The vulnerability was practised mutually in these 4 relationships as expressed by the participants. However, the one thing similar between unhealthy, and healthy relationships using vulnerability was in the initial stage i.e., using vulnerability to feel loved, gain acceptance, and consideration from their partners.

- (ii) Fading Affection, and coping: As the initial phase passed, and disillusionment started to come to the surface, participants shared feelings as if their “relationship isn’t like before”, or “my partner is changing”. The participants shared the changes in the efforts made toward them, the arising differences that became noticeable each day, or the conduct during their first few conflicts that made them question their partner's affection towards them. For example- Monica explained,

“I started seeing our differences, noticed the differences in our ways of spending time with each other, our needs, or talking to each other. It was little difficult for me to adjust to it when I started noticing it. This did create some conflicts, and assumptions in my mind to which he used to take his own sweet time to come back to, discuss, and open up. Also, certain expectations that I had which were very important for me was not getting fulfilled it didn’t feel good, like I could understand, but I didn’t like it. This sometimes made me angry, and distant from him as I felt there was a big gap between what I expect and what he does. This made me critical, and doubtful about the relationship, also afraid at times”.

Therefore, there were many similar kinds of responses that reflected the phase where participants experienced the feeling of decreasing affection. However, the Fading affection as defined by these 4 participants was actually the result of disillusionment, which is normally a process that healthy relationships go through. The difference in dealing with fading affection lies in its coping. The unhealthy relationships relied on reducing their vulnerable space, creating emotional drama, consistent self-betrayal, and holding onto despite mistreatment. Whereas, among these 4 participants coping began with

noticing, internal emotional conflict, and then trying to talk it out with their partners in some ways to understand if they can handle the differences. The coping wasn't just about the participant trying to reach out, it was also based on how their partners responded to them reaching out with the concerns they were facing due to the feeling of fading affection in the relationship. As mentioned in the unhealthy relationship dynamics the participants reached out to their partners for trying to speak about their feelings, and what was bothering them, but it was met with under-acknowledgment, and gaslighting tactics, which resulted in the onset of a toxic relationship climate. Three of the participants had communication at the top of their chart to overcome this phase. They shared feeling insecure, and fearful of past being repeated, but their partners response gave them a reason to trust their relationships, as well as gave them a choice to overcome the change in the relationships together, and take responsibility of their own insecurities while learning to trust, and respect the differences. One of the participants entered this level of understanding towards the end phase, as they both couldn't handle the differences, and conflicts in the middle phase as and when she experienced fading affection and related experience. For the rest of the participants, this whole process occurred in the middle phase, and continue till the present phase of the relationship, whereas for the one participant the whole middle phase was taken to understand how to overcome this power struggles, differences, disillusionments, and learn to embrace the change, make efforts, and be there for each-other in ways that show love, and understanding.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine the phenomenon of vulnerability in relation with integrated communication patterns and perceived commitment among dating relationships with an objective to dig deeper into the rising complexities of the relationships in today's world. To obtain this we formulated an extensive online survey with mixed-method approach with a sample of 31 individuals who were in dating relationships. The objective of the study was to delve deeper into the concept of the phenomenon, exploring its reasons, characteristics, and mechanisms (why, what and how), while also taking into account various under-researched factors.

This chapter provides the interpretations of the findings presented in the findings section with a more integrated view. The discussion chapter is focused on answering the 6 main research questions of the study. First, how is vulnerability viewed as a need for attachment or a means of establishing a connection in relationships? Second, what are the factors of vulnerability effecting emotional intimacy? Third, how does vulnerability (or lack of it) effects the foundation of the relationships. Fourth, how does the integrated communication patterns lead towards emotional connection/ disconnection? Fifth, does the meaning of commitment impact the way an individual shows up in the relationship? Sixth, what are the differences between those who showed up with vulnerability, and those who struggled with being vulnerable?

Research Question 1:

How is vulnerability viewed as a need for attachment or a means of establishing a connection in relationships?

The first research question was to understand participants' perspectives on vulnerability both in general and in the context of their relationships. The collected factors were conceived in the data analysis as they would appear in their connection, which is explained below. The idea of vulnerability in general was seen under two themes i.e., vulnerability as courage, and vulnerability as a weakness. These ideas were impacted by the participants characteristics (Hemesath, 2016) such as individual attributes (elf-esteem, needs and wants, values, emotional health, communication style, coping skills), previous relationship history (e.g., past romantic relationships), and family of origin dynamics (e.g., poor role models, abuse, conflict resolution

patterns, attachment style), which they also bring into the relationship. As poignantly stated by Ishani, “when someone uses personal information, thoughts, feeling to make someone feel insecure or to hurt them to prove their points”. On the other hand, despite personal characteristics such as past experiences etc, some defined it as courage. As expressed by Archana, “It means to be in a sensitive state of sharing one’s private and most personal feelings and feeling exposed in the process”. Even though there were few individuals who viewed vulnerability as a courage, there was a huge discrepancy in the implication of same in their relationship which further hindered their efforts to achieve emotional intimacy.

As the need for affection is defined by Schutz (1958) as an interpersonal need, which is behaviourally defined as developing and maintaining satisfying relationships with others and characterized at the level of one's own self-concept as the perception of one's own lovability (p. 20). Therefore, the majority of the participants were showing contradictions in terms of what they really believe, and what they feel they need to be to feel close and build connection with their partner i.e., connecting through inauthenticity was favoured over connecting with authenticity. One of the studies (Horan, & Booth 2013) has found the existence of deceptive affection in various participants' relationships. It concluded that the volunteers for the study were involved in the inauthentic expression of affection in the form of verbal and non-verbal cues. The reason for deceptive affection was mainly to withhold affection, avoid or manage conflicts, emotional management, or preserve relational stability. This argument has also been supported by various researchers (DePaulo & Kashy's, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1996). However, Horan & Butterfield 2011 claimed the risks that come along with inauthentic/ deceptive expression of affection transmission between couples. He mentioned that it can alter the relationship quality, and satisfaction and cause conflicts if deception is detected. If deception goes unnoticed, it can cause the sender psychological discomfort. Thus, providing affection without the presence of that emotion is deceptive. Even though some researchers argue that it can still provide benefits, it is pivotal to highlight the failure of relationships due to inauthenticity in relationships. It can also alter the way people perceive and give affection, handle conflicts, or communicate their real feelings or thoughts, which was the case for large number of participants.

There were many participants who shared that relationship vulnerability is the bedrock of the relationship provided they feel accepted, approved, validated, and loved. These were the same participants who carried the idea of being vulnerable but couldn’t stay in alignment with their own beliefs and values due to their worth attached with the response received on their

attempt to be vulnerable with their partners. As stated by Kavita, “Vulnerability would reflect an innate desire to open up to another person of one's feelings, ambitions, and character flaws without being judged on the same”, or Sanjay indicated, “Being true to my partner and being accepted both for my vices and virtues”. Therefore, the difficulty opening up with their partners was limited in understanding. It can be said because, it was found that majority of the participants viewed vulnerability as a way to connect but with intentions to feel accepted, and validated for the very parts they carry shame, or guilt around, such as, sharing past traumas, sharing past relationship stories, sharing personal life events and related feelings, or telling what they didn't like to their partners. Whereas, vulnerability is much more, it involves seeing oneself as a whole human being, able to make tough decisions, courage to stand for oneself despite the risk of disappointing others, expressing one's own insecurities, sharing with partner what ones need to feel secure or loved, or telling partners how they are genuinely feeling about the relationship or their actions, irrespective of the consequences but in hope to be received with care (Nasir, 2022). Many participants who even attempted to speak from the space of actual vulnerability seemed to have bad experiences in the way it was received, hence, decided to hold back, stop being vulnerable and viewed it as something not acceptable. As Varuna indicated, “Every time I've been vulnerable around my partner, he has been the nicest anyone could ever be to someone. Hence, I now share a very comfortable space with him. Nonetheless, being vulnerable is a difficult thing to do in itself so I do try to avoid it as much as possible (maybe because being vulnerable is never appreciated generally by people), but every time I've been vulnerable around my partner, I've never regretted anything or felt guilty or stupid about anything”. She also added, “1. talking about vulnerable feelings is weak. 2. My true self is often clouded by triggers and I have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings. 3. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because i don't know how. 4. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection”. This and many other similar responses do indicate the conditions such as desired responses, accepted feelings, or validation, only if received, vulnerability becomes easier, if not, it's okay to take a backseat rather than using vulnerability to speak up for self, take tough decisions and honour one's own true feelings with the feedbacks being received.

Therefore, the thin line between self-disclosure, and vulnerability was blurred among most of the participants. Vulnerability and self-disclosure are related concepts in relationships, but they are not the same. Vulnerability refers to the act of exposing one's feelings, thoughts, or weaknesses to others. It involves opening up and taking the risk of being seen and potentially judged. On the other hand, self-disclosure is the act of revealing personal information about

oneself to others. It can be viewed as a form of vulnerability, but self-disclosure can also occur without being vulnerable. In other words, self-disclosure can be a way to share information without exposing one's innermost feelings or thoughts. Self-disclosure cannot exist without the courage of being vulnerable. Vulnerability is much more than self-disclosure; Opening one's heart towards the possibility of getting hurt is much deeper than simply sharing one's life events or dreams. It is the way towards authenticity in relationship. This helps couple connect with conscious efforts and intention rather than with unhelpful, faulty patterns. As Schor (n.d.) stated, "Disclosing familiar and comfortable parts of yourself doesn't evoke the electricity of self-confrontation and personal growth common to intimate experiences". When people are comfortable with being vulnerable, they are free of shame and low self-worth (Brown, 2013, *Vulnerability and Shame* in one book, para. 11-12), which helps them to channelize their emotions constructively and have either difficult or easy conversations with their partners without the fear of being judged or influencing the relationship in any negative form. Few studies have concluded that couples who engage in deep conversations, personal sharing of pleasant as well as unpleasant matters with their partners easily define the strength of their relationship (Levinger & Senn 1967; Laurenceau et al., 2005). Therefore, relating with each other through intimacy requires vulnerability where people take "emotional risks" (Brown, 2013, *Myth 1: Vulnerability is Weakness*, para. 4) based on the trust that whatever it might be that the other person is feeling, will be openly shared and discussed constructively with respect. Most of the participants shared that it's much easier to play unbothered, talk about surface level concerns, daily hassles, or avoid bringing up anything their partner wouldn't accept, or respond appropriately. This finding was in alignment with the research conducted by (Taylor, 1968; Farber & Sohn, 2007) who found that among married couples, trivial concerns are much favored over deep conversations. As postulated by risk regulation model, Murray et al., (2006), self-protection goals are targeted to reduce the potential rejection risk which blocks the emotional vulnerability to achieving a satisfying/ fulfilling relationship. For maintaining this balance people develop a risk regulation system that observes the signs of affection from partners and if positive, would choose promotion goals over self-protection goals. People with lower self-esteem has a low sense of worth which makes it challenging for them to hold a strong sense of self that consequentially to which they will rely on self-protection to provide them a buffer against a perceived pain and potential rejection (Luerssen et al., 2017).

Research question 2:

What are the factors of vulnerability effecting emotional intimacy?

Turning Vulnerability into weakness. Based on the responses we could identify that except 4 participants, other 27 participants had wrapped the sense of vulnerability into weakness, a route towards emotional distress and burnout. As participants shared in their experience the way relationship vulnerability felt like or the ways of being vulnerable in their relationships, we got responses such as, will never try being vulnerable again, it means to put your needs aside for the relationship, creates emotional dependency, or giving too much value to the other which leads to hurting oneself in the end. Such responses were found amongst many other responses that were falling in alignment with the options given in the survey which resonated the most with the participants i.e., “talking about vulnerable feelings is weak , My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable, when I am overwhelmed by my feelings, It’s hard for me to be vulnerable because I don’t know how, It’s hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection, I want to see my partners feelings but when I do, I have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away, and I often responds to my partners vulnerability by getting defensive, telling them they shouldn’t feel the way they do, or shutting down. The lack of trust, lack of self-awareness, heightened insecurities and fear, or difficulty accepting partners truth were the major concerns that came out of the way participants saw emotional vulnerability, or vulnerable sharing. This might also lead towards the confusion between emotionally reactive, or emotionally vulnerable (Bakshi, 2022). Vulnerability is often misunderstood as a sign of weakness, (Brown, 2013; Young, 2015) or something to be ashamed of. People may try to avoid being vulnerable and showing their emotions because they don't want to be seen as overly emotional or "weak." But in reality, vulnerability is actually a sign of strength and bravery. By being vulnerable and open about our emotions and feelings, we allow ourselves to experience a full range of emotions, including love, joy, empathy, and belonging. However, if we see vulnerability as a weakness, or if we believe that emotions and feelings are something to be ashamed of, then it can become difficult to be vulnerable. We may fear judgment or criticism, and try to avoid any situation that may make us feel vulnerable. But in doing so, we also miss out on the opportunities for connection, growth, and self-discovery that come from being vulnerable. In summary, vulnerability is not a weakness, but a necessary aspect of emotional openness, self-growth, and healthy interpersonal relationships. As also concluded by few studies that, the ability to be vulnerable and share emotions is associated with better interpersonal relationships and overall well-being

(Kane et al., 2019). Another study shared that people who are more vulnerable and transparent about their emotions tend to have more fulfilling and trusting relationships, and that vulnerability can actually improve relationships by increasing intimacy and trust (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). According to what Brene Brown (2010) has said, "Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the centre, of significant human experiences." When we close ourselves off from being vulnerable, we also close ourselves off from the potential of love, intimacy, and meaningful connections with other people. If we close off one door of possibility, we close off them all since all of these experiences enter through the same door of openness.

By being vulnerable, we can experience a full range of emotions, connect with others on a deeper level, and grow as individuals. Berscheid (2006) has highlighted a form of love she called as "attachment love". She has defined attachment love as a form of "automatic protection" that helps us feel protect against any perceived harm or threat as being close to a significant other. Similarly, the idea of vulnerability based on participants has been about trying to prevent the feelings of rejection by controlling the outcome at the cost of their self rather than trying to connect with self and manage the reaction or the intense internal experience to the fear induced feelings of being rejected (Mananno, 2022). In conclusion, with this perspective of seeing vulnerability, the majority of the participants were in self-protecting mode confusing emotional reactivity with emotional vulnerability and feeding the existing narrative of vulnerability is weak.

The role of self. Lack of self-worth, and self-awareness was at the core of impacting vulnerability among the participants. The responses of maximum participants under intrapersonal communication were in alignment with lack of self-worth, low self-esteem, or lack of awareness. For example, when asked about how easier it is for them to give their needs a backseat, we got many responses such as "to feel safe", "because of past abandonment", "because of childhood traumas" and "to avoid complications, misunderstandings, and conflicts", (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As Archana got the essence of the shared fear among most of the participants- "Dealing with my own unhappiness is much easier and better than dealing with the sense that my partner is unhappy because of me". Similarly, we found in our stage 1 study that worthlessness was the core feeling that emerged with the perceived threat of fading affection which was after the honeymoon phase ended (6-7 months). The participants shared the worthlessness in 4 broad ways- feeling undeserving, insignificant, incompetent, self-doubt, and shame. The participants shared feeling undeserving of love, or the love that they were getting, was maybe the love that they actually deserve. Some participants shared labelling

themselves as, or internalizing the words their partners called them if they asked for something they wanted as needy, stupid, dramatic, or stubborn. The good enough love, became the best kind of love, because they were standing at the place of fear, and weak sense of connection/belongingness. The participants shared feeling insignificant because of their partners actions towards them in social group, or when they were called as overthinker, or oversensitive. At this point in the relationship, the feelings of being seen, heard, and valued that used to feed the worthiness of the participants, vanished. Now, they were badly wanting to feel seen, understood, or heard by shutting down, diminishing the expression of self and being self-critical. Phrases such as, “I can change for my partner, “I can make my partner change”, “I will give chances, so my partner choses me”, and “I can sacrifice to make my partner happy” became the mantra for protecting oneself from the hurt, and stopping the fear from turning into reality. The “Am I not good enough?”, or “is this just enough love, good for me?”, was the constant battle which caused cognitive dissonance among the participants. All the participants due to anxiety, and fear used their defense mechanisms to take control to feel better, to protect themselves, even if it meant self-deceiving. Similarly, responses from the present research were towards agreement, and vagueness when asked how easier it is for them to play unbothered in the relationship, or to avoid sharing or expressing true feelings as it never ends well. The conflicted responses were the same participants who shared practising emotionally taxing ways of dealing with the sense of invalidation, and unmet needs in their relationship such as, avoidance, anxiety influenced responses, pretence, withholding, distorting, etc to not be perceived as “difficult” by their partners. Based on the participants responses, sense of low or dependent worthiness was the drive of every behaviour they displayed in the relationship.

Studies (Buhler et al., 2021; Bakshi, 2022; Luerssen, 2017) have revealed that people with low self-esteem or relationship insecurities may sacrifice themselves for the sake of their partner in order to feel loved and accepted. One of the studies (Berk et al., 2008) shows how people perceive and respond to the opportunity of affectionate communication. They concluded that people with lower self-esteem expressed less affection than desired which resulted in less positive reactions (cognitive, emotional, and physiological). They also stated that participants with lower self-esteem tend to believe that their affection is not making a difference in their partner's emotional/ relational experience wherein the partners reported feeling emotional boost, positive and satisfaction during the affection exchanges. Similarly, prior researchers have determined that people with lower self-esteem impact people’s way of interpreting their partner's affection and have difficulty accepting or receiving affection (Swann, 1997)., and in

some cases, they might even project their feelings that even their affection is not welcomed by their partner and thus withholding affection (Berk et al., 2008). Albeit some awareness regarding the way people with low self-esteem perceives, gives, and receives affection, researchers have somewhere missed the point that no two perfect people come together in a relationship, meaning, if a person enters with some insecurities and project onto the partner, we don't know the personal insecurities or issues of the partner that may reflect in their way of responding as well as how the response of the partner can support, help or heal a person (individually and together). Our findings fall consistent with the research (Schneider & Tessier, 2007) concluding that grounded on the level of self-worth, or the way an individual holds their own perception either leads to finding mutual intimacy in relationships or they look for ways their relationship can help, save, or protect them by attending to their needs and desires.

Conditional vulnerability. The findings of the current study concluded that vulnerability was boundaryless, conditional, and had an intent (hidden/subconscious purpose). Only 4 participants shared that they showed up with vulnerability, opened themselves up, and made informant decision of the feedback such as communicating with honesty. Therefore, conditional vulnerability cuts out the whole purpose of connect when the intention is to manufacture the same in another in the form of received validation or acceptance. People with low self-esteem were highly dependent on this form of vulnerability rather than opening themselves up to the possibility to connect in hope to receive the same in return and if not received, were less likely to blame themselves, their worthiness for the disconnection (Young, 2015). The connection with oneself reflects in the way one is comfortable being vulnerable or else any disconnection formed in the relationship reinforces the negative internal experience leading to influenced response. Very few researchers have thrown light on the conditional vulnerability or emotional expression leading to disconnection (Johnson, 2008). Few researches (e.g., Brown, 2012, Johnson, 2008; Bakshi, 2022) suggests that when couples engage in conditional vulnerability, they limit their emotional openness and expression, leading to a lack of intimacy and connection. This can create a cycle of emotional disengagement, where partners become increasingly distant from each other and more guarded in their emotional expressions. Similarly, (Campbell et al., 2005) found that partners who express high levels of positive emotions towards each other tend to have more secure and intimate relationships, while those who engage in conditional vulnerability (e.g., expressing positive emotions only when their partner is responsive) tend to have less secure relationships. There is limited research specifically on the reasons behind conditional vulnerability in relationships.

However, some studies have explored related concepts and behaviors that may contribute to conditional vulnerability such as insecurity, attachment style, fear of abandonment, past experiences etc, which all points towards the sense of worthiness one identifies with. Therefore, it can be said that conditional vulnerability in relationships can lead to disconnection when partners who decided to show up with vulnerability based on the partners responses. When partners engage in unconditional vulnerability, they create a more secure and intimate relationship that promotes emotional openness, expression, and connection. Yet, if their bravery in revealing vulnerability isn't met with a secure environment in the relationship, they must rely on their own inner connection to make choices aligned with their desires, needs, and beliefs.

The partners role or contribution. There is no denying that relationships are a give and take (Pendell, 2002). The imbalance of it can cause disruptions in the functionality of the relationship. Sue Johnson (2008), found that being responsive is one of the most critical aspects of a relationship. When partners are responsive to each other, they show that they are present and available to support one another, which can help cultivate intimacy and emotional closeness as it sends the messages of being interested in your partner's emotions, personal world, and being there for them when they need your attention and support, curiosity, validating emotions, expressing empathy, and being present with your partner. Similar is the case with vulnerability i.e., even if one decides to show up with vulnerability, eventually it will only be maintained if there is mutuality, effort, and openness from the partner's end. It cannot alone survive on one-sided openness as the other remains guarded, or lack emotional maturity. As social exchange theory posits that the exchange of communication between the sender and the receiving partner is conducive to receiving affection from their significant other (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996; Villard, 1976). This can set the norm of reciprocity (Uehara, 1995) among couple members which is also one of the most important characteristics of healthy relationships. Reciprocity balances the exchange of resources between couples that maintains the balance of feeling loved. It helps in making the relationship satisfying and emotionally safe. It has been studied that the risk of expressing affection or affectionate communication can result in a lack of reciprocation (Floyd & Pauley 2011; Floyd & Burgoon, 1999), or not feeling reciprocated in a way that is expected (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999).

Based on the recorded responses it was evident that majority of the participants who had difficulties being vulnerable with their partners was not just because of lack of self-worth, but also because of distrust on their partners for support, understanding, and validation which

are the basic needs of any relationship to feel fulfilled (Menanno, 2022). Opening up to the partners only when feeling secure falls under the conditional vulnerability. It is the hardest to open up to another when feeling triggered, insecure, or hurt. This is where a two-way healthy exchange of messages come forward. Most of the participants shared how they attempted to express their hurt, or disappointment but eventually had to emotionally shut down, as it was dismissed, invalidated, or made felt stupid which only reinforced their deeply held negative beliefs in return. For example, Archana explained, “my ideal way of showing up with vulnerability is to be able to have a complete safe space without judgements, solutions or criticisms. Received is a conditional space where I can feel safe until a point post which I often end up feeling attacked and therefore defensive because my partner couldn’t understand my feelings”. Similarly, Sunanina expressed, “We both are matured enough to listen to each other’s vulnerabilities. And we both give the shoulder to one another when needed without judging anyone”. There were many similar responses that indicated the actual response to the partners showing up with things that matter to them were often not held with safety, or handled with empathy. Therefore, the partners response towards the extent of emotional openness is equally important.

It was noticed among the participants that almost all the participants except 2, shared their past stories with their partner in the beginning of the relationship in ways that made them felt secure, accepted, or loved. The acceptance of something (parts of an individual) that one holds embarrassment or shame towards, can often lead to the feelings of love and intense attachment provided it continues. However, inconsistency, and breaking of trust in the smallest of the moments were more evident in the participants over the period of time in their relationship, as compared to the consistency and strengthening of trust. Showing vulnerability tale bravery, but bravery needs to be balances with discernment. In participants, it was seen that they used vulnerability to see (or test) if their partner can hold safe space for them, their emotions, and love them despite those parts of them they feel embarrassed about which left them disappointed, and boundary-less after a certain point when insecurities, and other triggers started to come into the relationship. Taking work from both ends with patience to see if one feels accepted, seen, values, not shamed, or cared for takes time, and usually start with small doses of putting oneself out there. In this case, none of the participants feels their partners earn the real them, but rather focuses on being someone they feel they need to be because of their partners incapability to hold space for them, or meet their needs. Lack of self-awareness and lack of emotional openness also plays a role here. Therefore, in conclusion the participants

neither could find safety and connection in relationships not within themselves. Moments of Misattunement i.e., when needs that can make one feel wanted, loved, seen, or heard are not regularly responded to or attended to and are left unrepaired, leads to relationship breakdown and ruptures. Misattunement acts as a catalyst for damaging relationships. It is the millions of small moments of transaction happening between the couples each day that causes distrust and hurt which can be handled with mutual repair effort. It is an important relational skill that can be highly challenging in unhealthy relationships to develop because of extreme imbalance (Bakshi, 2022).

Response Anticipation. The analysis helped us gaining an insight into how people anticipate responses before choosing to show up with vulnerability. This was usually influenced by past experiences of responses received from their partner (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999), or assuming the responses due to insecure attachment styles (Mikulincer, & Shave, 2007). For example, Sahil stated, “On some occasions I would be able to communicate with my partner about how I am feeling regarding the incident and on some other instances I feel so derailed and uncertain, that I am not able to process the line of action which leads to lack of communication. So, this in itself I feel is quite a challenging task to communicate my underlying feelings of trigger caused due to partners action”. There were many similar responses that were recorded inclusive of the majority of the participants agreeing to the statements such as, “I do not share what is important for me when I feel my partner might not validate what I have to say, or when my partner When my partner doesn’t- meet my emotional needs, or treat me in ways I would feel loved, heard, and validated, it's hard for me to express the arising difficult feelings, or the emotional impact caused due to his/ her actions”. Very few studies suggest that response anticipation can play a significant role in limiting emotional vulnerability in relationships which further leads to lack of intimacy and connection (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Response anticipation is highly related with the attachment styles which impacts the emotional openness in the relationship which further impacts the emotional intimacy (Collins & Read, 1994).

Our findings also concluded that not just attachment styles, but the level of self-awareness (Fruzzetti, 2011), and the minimum level of self-validation and self-love with which an individual enters a relationship plays a role in dealing with conflicts effectively and self-regulation techniques needed to give, receive or expect responses were also crucial in impacting the dynamics of relationship in terms of honesty, openness, and intimacy. For example, few studies have focused on the emotional expression from the self-awareness

standpoint (Overall & Lemay, 2015; Brandão et al., 2020). Their findings were related with our assumptions, and findings, i.e., it was found that individuals who are self-aware are more likely to effectively communicate their needs and respond to the needs of their partner, leads to a stronger and more fulfilling relationship. Additionally, when individuals hold back their real feelings, needs, and desires, it can lead to a decline in relationship satisfaction. The study also found that when individuals settle for the bare minimum in their relationships, it can lead to negative interpretations of their partner and the relationship itself, causing further harm.

Responsiveness isn't an easy phenomenon practiced in a relationship. As seen in this research it was attached with needs, expectations, attachment styles, and self-narratives which gave rise to response anticipations that obstructed intimacy and authenticity. The pursuit of validation on self-disclosure or attempted emotional expressiveness became an issue when the partners response was internalized as it wasn't in alignment with their expectations and needs. Few studies shared that these perceived relational threats due to responsiveness are the possibility that the other person will misinterpret the display of affection (Villard & Whipple, 1976), that they will view it as inappropriate for the relationship, the context/situation, or other factors (Floyd & Morman, 2000), that their partner will violate their personal expectations (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1997), or will fail to reciprocate (Derlega et al., 1993). These were all present in the participants experience with showing up with vulnerability, and receiving invalidation, or other responses that activated their internal triggers. For example, many participants shared their fear of being misunderstood, or difficulty expressing their unhappiness because it might not end well, or even lead to separation. As Archana shared, "I feel completely rejected and no important. I just shut down not wanting to say or contribute anything to the conversation as everything starts seeming pointless. I feel like saying something like I am unhappy here or I hope we never got into a relationship... but I don't say such things because I feel these feelings are momentary and are result of the anger I am feeling at the time. Also, I am aware how my partner will get hurt if I say such things". Similarly, Ishani mentioned, "because of the bad feeling you get when you get misunderstood even when you tried your best talk about your feelings the exhaustion the disappointment it's not something I want to feel".

Therefore, running the risk of disapproval, unacceptance, ridiculed, or rejected were one of many reasons (Derlega et al., 1993) that made the participants take a backseat and respond with inauthenticity in the times when they felt most exposed. Developing intimacy entails looking inward and opening up to one's partner. And it is more than just mere self-disclosure. Not all intimate experiences encourage and evoke self-confrontation and personal

progress, and disclosing parts of oneself that are familiar, comfortable, and most likely “good enough” hinders the development and growth of self, and relationship as a whole. The interpersonal aspect of the process, in particular the reaction an individual expects and receives from their spouse, is just as important as how one feels about what they are going to reveal (Schor, 2014). Based on the findings of this study most of the participants need for emotional reciprocation, validation, responsiveness, and reassurances, when not fulfilled led to self-betrayal such as holding back needs, dishonest communication and letting hurtful behavior pass etc. Therefore, it helped us in understanding the baseline with which people they had entered the relationship i.e., when they pursued responsiveness in the moments of sharing, and expressing, the unhealthy, insecure, and misdefined conditioning, needs, expectations, and values were the underlying motivation, which only caused more inner, external conflict and led to reinforcing their insecurities and emotional closeness which obstructed the connection and trust.

Deeply held beliefs about love, and relationship impacting emotional openness.

From the findings achieved, it was evident that the idea of love and relationships were dysfunctional and unhealthy among majority of the participants. These ideas do not just involve defining of love/ relationship but also the set norms, expectations, self-conduct, and decisions involving what to accept or not what is given in the name of love. Even though there was no way to relate with direct experiences of the participants due to the nature of the methodology which as survey, it was certainly evident in the overall behavioural and emotional responses given by the participants. For example, staying unhappy in relationship to maintain the longevity of the relationship or else it will be the biggest failure of their life, giving one’s own need a backseat because other persons need is much worthier, sentences like, “I can sacrifice to make my partner happy; I or my partner can change”, or agreements on statements such as, “I feel disappointed not seeing my partner changed as hoped”. These statements give us an opportunity to reflect deeper into the concern i.e., conditioning around what love and relationship should feel like. It is unfortunate to see that participants in the age group of 20-30s do not understand how it feels to be loved in ways they somewhere believe they deserve because of the constant need to put oneself in the backseat to feel chosen, loved, or validated.

Some of the possible explanations are given below with reference to the few studies which fall in alignment with our findings. (a) Cultural norms- these are one of the most important explanations of why individuals engage in self-abandonment or self-sacrifice in romantic relationships. For example, research has shown that women may be socialized to

prioritize their partner's needs over their own in relationships (Kidder, 2018). As Kenrick, 2006 has shown how cultures can impact the way individuals view love, and marriage. Similarly, one of the studies shared a possible reason for why among women it was found that there was no connection between emotional deprivation, and emotional intimacy i.e., that women already expect men to be less affectionate, and that their act of giving affection overpowers the need to receive affection (Floyd, 2019, 2006). Floyd (2006), claimed the benefits of giving as higher than the benefits of receiving in a way that wives will be more likely to perceive the received affection as sufficient or less likely to perceive the affection deprivation if, they are communicating more affection to their spouse. Even though giving in a relationship is valuable and has its own benefits, we can't overlook the long-term consequences it can cost if "women" (or any person) are perceiving the affection (need, feeling, and behavior) as sufficient when in reality it is there enthusiasm to show affection and give it their all to the relationship. On the contrary, Esther Perel quoted "desire fades when we disconnect from ourselves and become selfless, which is the enemy of desire" (Young, 2015), the possibility of which increases if we become self-less to the point that we start taking responsibility of the other person needs, wants over our own each time; (b) Investment model of love- research conducted by social Rusbult, (1991) found that individuals who have a strong "investment model" of love in which the resources invested are at risk of losing its value if the relationships end, that is why maintaining a relationship is highly based on the amount of investment. This elicits a perspective as to for individuals who believes that the key to a successful relationship is making sacrifices and investing time and resources, are more likely to engage in self-abandonment behaviors. These individuals often prioritize their partner's needs over their own, leading to feelings of low self-worth and a lack of fulfilment, (c) The romanticism of love- individuals who have a belief in the "romantic ideal" of love, where love is seen as a source of happiness and fulfilment, are also more likely to abandon their own needs and desires in order to please their partner (How romanticism ruined love, n.d.). The literature is scant in providing the interplay of such microlevel behavioural actions that can impact the relationship well-being. These individuals may feel pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations about what a loving relationship should look like, leading to self-abandonment; and (d) Identifying "wholeness", and measuring "success in life" with the longevity of the relationship is itself a concept so unconventional, or non-conforming, that it puts pressure of failure, control, and lack of achievements in life. Similarly, believing that the sense of belongingness is only achieved through "romantic" relationships is another idea which leads to stress, and decrease in emotional well-being as not only is this dangerous at multiple levels for an individual to lose

his/ her own sense of self, but also staying in the abusive/ toxic relationships so they are not seen as a failure or seen as unworthy of being loved.

When an individual steps into the relationship, their preconceived notions, ideas, narratives and beliefs about love, relationships, self or the other profoundly influence the foundation of a relationship. As Sternberg (2000) mentioned that the acquired love stories adapted since childhood from various sources such as books, media or observation guides the kind of a lover an individual becomes in their relationship. He also claimed that the closer an individual's love story matches their mates, the more satisfying a relationship (Sternberg, 2006). On the contrary, Esther Perel, a leader in the area of relationships talks about the clashes due to the way we function as a partner in a relationship.

“When you pick a partner, you pick a story, and then you find yourself in a play you never auditioned for. And that is when the narratives clash” (Schwartz, 2018).

In order to create more fulfilling and equitable partnerships it is crucial for individuals to recognize, accept, and challenge their deeply held beliefs that are forcing them to bend in relationships at the cost of self, face difficulty communicating, and consider fear-induced love as forever. As found among the participants, emotional openness or vulnerability being often confused with mere self-disclosure, expecting partners to accept everything without having opinions, getting each need fulfilled, or over-sharing/ obligatory sharing. Hence, future studies can look into this concept in-depth using interviews as it can help us in generalizing the findings.

Research Question 3:

How does vulnerability (or lack of it) effects the foundation of the relationships.

It can't be emphasized enough; the foundation of the relationship sets the probability of its future or whether it will last. Based on our findings we found 5 kinds of situations that required vulnerability i.e., (i) expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration, and annoyances, (ii) expression of difficult emotions, fears and insecurities, (iii) expression of hurt, wants, and needs, (iv) expression of real thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and (v) Authenticity. Each participants responses on the categories were analysed and it was found that majority of the participants were inauthentic in their relationships which means they were not true to themselves, or their partners because of fear and stuckness in the negative cycle which was in turn being reinforced based on communication patterns existing between the partners. The

researchers have defined authenticity as the extent to which individuals are true to themselves and express their true thoughts, feelings, and desires in their interactions with others. It has been found by Wang (2015) who aimed to examine the relationship between authenticity and relationship satisfaction and stability that the individuals who were more authentic in their self-disclosure and behavior reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and stability as well as an impact on self-esteem. This suggests that when individuals are able to be true to themselves and express their authentic selves in their relationships, it can lead to greater intimacy, trust, and connection with their partners.

In the beginning of the research, we proposed a working model of vulnerability and how it impacts the connection formed between couples that is of either interdependency/ authentic love, or co-dependency/ ego-based love (See Figure 1). It was evident through the findings that the foundation of relationship must be built on authenticity since the beginning which isn't limited to sharing your past stories/ trauma very early in the relationship but emotional expression or authentic communication which gives each other a space to build trust, understand each other needs, and work towards growing the relationship together. Whereas, 27 participants out of 30 had a weak foundation of relationship which was built on superficial connection, initial high, and waiting on the adrenaline spikes of momentary connection which makes them feel "everything is fine, or that they are still loved". In short, what started as a perceived strong bond, ended with settlement with the bare minimum because fear took over the initial high/ joy of love where everything feels best. Therefore, the way relationships were maintained were not only unhealthy, but also the reasons to maintain a relationship was far from alignment with their own desired/ ideal values. Reasons such as- time invested, emotional attachment, to avoid failure, fear/ insecurities, to be seen as good enough or easy-going partner (not needy), be in alignment with the partner's needs to feel loved/ chosen, etc were few of many other reasons that gave us insight based on the responses recorded. Investment model developed by Rusbult (1980), posits that relationship is dependent on the investment an individual puts in a relationship. The amount of investment is made in the form of personal resources such as emotional, structural etc., (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Johnson, 1973), that are at risk of losing its value if the relationships end, that is why maintaining a relationship is highly based on the amount of investment. Therefore, it can be concluded that the desire to persist, maintain and commit to a relationship and emotional attachment is based on the factors such as level of satisfaction, commitment, interdependence and investment. However, it was also found in the study that despite the lack of satisfaction, and interdependent, the participants

continued to over-function due to the felt commitment. Hence, the micro behavioral actions that actually leads towards forming the interdependence, trust, or how people view/ mould their idea of satisfaction or commitment in a relationship are understudied. As most of the participants marked in agreement to the statement, “I withhold, distort, hide, pretend, take a back seat, and align myself to my partners ways and wishes to avoid fights or any negative energy between u”. Similarly, partners responses indicated that there was huge disconnection whenever they tried to express themselves. Such as, as Sagar shared, “Yes, many things I had held onto as she never used to reciprocate correctly and was the biggest reason why I stopped sharing my feelings. In the long run I used to feel burdened and stressed all the time”, or as Sujata expressed her experience of opening up with her partner, “Was judged harshly. Everything I feel insecure about is because I was compared with other girls based on that, that too by the person I was thought I loved and wanted to spend my life with. He was already in relationship, lied about it still told me that I am fat and failure in life”. There were many such responses that indicated disconnection which didn’t led to break-ups but prolonged suffering by shutting down one’s own voice. These findings were also in alignment with the stage 1 study. Therefore, it does indicate that even though one of the reasons to maintain a relationship is investment which is based on the perceived level of satisfaction, it isn’t the case with the individuals who are operating on the unhealthy/ unhelpful set of beliefs of maintaining a relationship driven by their fear as they are not in alignment with themselves or lack relational skills. For example: participants were caught up in the process of pleasing their partners, feeling complete, get their needs met through incompatible partners, attracted to their partners to whom they felt they can change (Pharaon, 2022a), consistently giving to earn love or compromisingly waiting to receive some affections were indicating towards weaker foundation built on inauthenticity, lack of emotional expression or vulnerability, leading towards weak foundation of a relationship.

Being vulnerable with others isn’t just the focal point of this study, it was equally important to understand the participants practise of being vulnerable with oneself, embracing vulnerability, practising it and to feel it. Afterall, foundation of the relationship is built on the relationship one has with oneself. When participants believed their own ego stories, and felt that their “true self” is unacceptable to someone they love, they ended up protecting themselves with guards, and walls which took the shape of self-defeating/ self-abandoning behavior. For example, avoiding in-depth conversations, avoiding standing up for oneself, not setting boundaries etc to avoid the risk of uncertainty and try to control the worst that they imagine

can happen, i.e., rejection, or shame. Therefore, it couldn't be expected that if participants didn't have a safety net to rely on i.e., embracing themselves, it was harder to show up with vulnerability in relationship. For example, few of the participants shared how they avoided sharing few parts of who they are because they felt embarrassed, were ridiculed, or to avoid avoid sympathy among few reasons to hide their parts of self because they themselves were distant with these parts that make them who they are. However, in contradiction they were hoping for their partners to understand it, embrace it and not make them feel worst about it. Which, in reality was an unrealistic expectation and also was misaligned with their real actions because either way whether they attempted to share (or not), they continued feeling the same and used guarded responses to protect oneself. Taking responsibility of one's own happiness first, and then building trust in the small moments of connection through emotional openness actually builds a strong foundation among couples (Shackleton, 2022b). In such relationships as founded in the current research, the role of self and how they find or seek love, is from a disempowered place instead of an authentic motivation to connect which further led to misalignment. The co-dependency, self-identification through others idea of them, self-sabotage, ego love, or fantasy bonds are some of the ways worthiness wounds showed up as to feel loved, validated and secure (LePera, 2022).

It is one of the most important relationship skills to unlearn the conditioning, express real feelings, and set expectations based on the reality of the present. Few researchers have studied the role of prospection in interpersonal relationships. It has been found that people's prediction of the future of the relationship tends to be positively biased (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). Studies have contributed in favor of this bias, for example, people optimistically perceive the longevity of their relationships (Helgeson, 1994; MacDonald & Ross, 1999), people's positive predictions of how their relationships will turn out have actually unfolded differently (Lemay et al., 2015), and married couples believed that their relationship will improve in future but rather the relationship quality declined (Lavner et al., 2013). The similar was the case in the stage 1 of the study as well as the current research. The feelings of, this is going to last forever to waiting on their partner to break up was a huge transition over the period of time as relationship grew, was seen among the participants who gave interviews for the stage 1 study. It has been supported that relationship expectations and greater mental interpretation of relationship satisfaction guides behavior (Lemay, & Venaglia, 2016), lead to constructive conflict resolution (Rusbult et al., 1991), and accommodating behavior Lemay (2016). Albeit the support, where do we draw the line whether people are bringing persistence into the

relationship through an optimistic prospective or bringing toxic positivity to avoid feeling worthless, less deserving, or unimportant because of the emotional burden they carry into the relationship? It is important to understand that relationship is a two-way street. Even those people holding positive prospection of their toxic relationship with their partners can involve in “constructive” behavior to manage conflicts and threats. Their behavior will exist on the continuum of over accommodating to over apologizing. It is vital to understand at what cost do people indulge in behavior to maintain, give and receive in a relationship?

Therefore, it can be said that, (a) the participants ability to develop internal vulnerability i.e., the relationship and level of acceptance one has with themselves impact the way they show up with vulnerability in the relationship, (b) The relationship started off with intense sharing of past experiences among majority of the participants which later decreased to superficial conversations, (c) the partners responses were emotionally indifferent, and invalidating which in turn reinforced their negative self-beliefs, and protective feelings, (d) the context of commitment, investment, and other reasons to maintain a relationship was fragile i.e., participants suppressed, shape-shifted, or tried to maintain peace of “my needs wont me met in ways I feel loved”, and (e) The relationship of the participants (except 4) were built on inauthenticity irrespective of the duration of the relationship, and (f) the extent of vulnerability and feeling the need to suppress one’s own needs due to unmet needs led to other-validated intimacy, in turn co-dependent, and further disconnection with self and others at deeper level. Hence, 27 participants from this current study showed weak foundation of their relationship impacted due to lack of vulnerability at all levels i.e., internal and external. Similarly, these findings were validated by the themes discovered in the stage 1 study that reflected the pathway towards formation of weak relationship foundation. The themes were as follows, Theme 1: Tolerating the unhealthy behavioral actions- The desire to be chosen, Theme 2: Realisations and wishful thinking- Fear of not being good enough, Theme 3: Acceptance and decisions after disillusionment- Falling out of love with the version/idea of my partner, and Theme 4: Coping and consequences- Reconnecting with self and expression of emotion.

Research Question 4:

How does the integrated communication patterns lead towards emotional connection/disconnection?

The study focuses on the integration of two crucial forms of communication - intrapersonal and interpersonal - and their impact on the phenomenon of vulnerability. Our

investigation aimed to uncover how these integrated patterns of communication can shape an individual's level of vulnerability, which in turn, can greatly influence the foundation and commitment among participants that further shape their experiences. From the findings achieved, it was evident that the idea of vulnerability, expected vulnerability, and within relationship experiences related to vulnerability (i.e., actual vulnerability) had huge contradictions amongst each other. Upon analysing the intrapersonal communication set of patterns it was observed that the narratives an individual holds about themselves i.e., the ego stories were the driving factor of the internal and within-relationship experience of responding to perceived relationship threats.

Intrapersonal communication

We focused on understanding the internal experience of participants due to perceived threat caused by emotional disconnection. The findings were categorized as internal triggers, beliefs (ego-stories), values, and expectations. We found that 27 participants out of 31 shared the same process of internal experience leading to the response. The responses indicated the deeply held beliefs and few responses even shed light on the values around relationship that one holds. For example, statements such as, “Don’t overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn’t such a big deal as it is. just let it go”, “I shouldn’t ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when I am hurt, I can’t come across as clingy, needy, or difficult”, “I am unlovable or difficult to love- No-one will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish”, “If I mattered my partner would have done better for me”, or “To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight”. These set of statements and many other similar beliefs were carried unresolved in the relationship due to- difficulty expressing because of lack of unresponsiveness which in turn reinforces their beliefs of being unlovable, or because of difficulty being emotionally expressive at all due to fear/ insecurities. In most of the participants it was seen that they fell in the former possibility while gradually shifting to the latter part of the possible reason. Very few participants shared holding back even though their partners are supportive as they themselves feel embarrassed. One of the studies (Zagefka & Bahul, 2021) highlighted people with low self-esteem may have difficulty forming and maintaining close and secure attachment with their partners due to the functional beliefs driving their internal and external experience. Furthermore, negative self-beliefs can also influence communication in romantic relationships, as individuals with low self-esteem may avoid expressing their thoughts and feelings, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. As participants were seen avoiding feeling self-critical by avoiding deep conversations that

mattered to them, they continuously found themselves in the cycle of proving their worth by emotionally shutting down.

These findings are in alignment with the research on falling out of romantic love (Sailor, 2013), in which they, negative sense of self, and gradual decline as two of other themes that explains the phenomenon of falling out of romantic love. Since the participants shared a lack of reciprocation and equal attachment with their partners during their relationship, it led to one-sided investment and maladaptive coping mechanisms which in turn led to loss of one's own individuality and sense of self. It is not directly studied how personal values play a role in emotional regulation; however, few researchers have found the impact of emotional regulation strategies on relationships (e.g., Goodall, 2015; Favero et al., 2021). Even though we are unclear of the value set in terms of defining it, it was evident based on the responses that participants belief system did impact their values, for example, familiarity over unfamiliarity, disaffection over singlehood, or tolerating the violation of boundaries over assertiveness etc. These values were seen repeatedly in participants responses (Bakshi, 2022). These value sets were built on their past experiences, and adult relationship experiences that reinforced their lack of worthiness. Hence, participants belief system led to self-abandonment, and lack of emotional expression keeping them in in relationships they felt they settled for. Limited researchers (Vernon, 2012; Peel et al., 2019) found that individuals with insecure attachment styles and negative core beliefs about themselves were more likely to engage in self-abandonment in romantic relationships. These individuals often put the needs and wants of their partner before their own, leading to feelings of neglect and low self-worth as indicated by the results of our studies conducted for this research.

However, literature remains scant in understanding how people change their standards, and expectations around love when it comes to feeling wanted, and valued by the person they love. The loss of oneself is one of the most common factors that clients often share in counselling sessions, the reasonings of which might lie in understanding the experience of how people experience the shifts, and changes in the relationship over the period of time. As Esther Perel, a relationship expert said, "desire fades when we disconnect from ourselves and become selfless, which is the enemy of desire". The desire fades when after a point the assumption of taking responsibility for the partner's needs and catering to them over our own becomes the goal (Young, 2015). When there is a shift in the desire, and changes in the relationship that threatens the security, and love of an individual, it can change the way a person sees themselves and feel about themselves, or activate their past unhealed wounds, that will ultimately show up

in the relationships. It is not just about how much affection is given or received, it is also about what each person brings into the relationship based on their personal characteristics, attachment wounds (destructive side of lack of self-worth), preconceived notions, and skills like emotional regulation, or self-awareness, and relationship skills and ideas that can impact the way affection is perceived, or asked for. One of the studies based on 6,712 samples of participants (Jerabek & Muoio, 2018), concluded that 70% of the people do not believe they are good enough for anyone; 42% have an intense desire to be liked by anyone; 60% of the sample have a strong need to be approved by others, and 66% people believe they are worthless, and useless. The statistics are alarming, as with the increasing complexity in the relationships, and in individuals' mental/ emotional well-being, people are bound to find themselves in destructive, imbalanced relationships, that do not serve the higher purpose of relationships such as self-expansion, holistic growth, and interdependence formed through connection.

Interpersonal communication

The interpersonal communication was used to understand the partners response to conflicts, and perceived threats using Gottman's 4 horsemen self-report measure which involved criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1993). Majority of the participants had combination of criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling. The initial attempt of emotional closeness when dismissed, build an environment of creating safety and stability by avoiding conflicts, which by default when occurred at times led to responses from the participants that were coming from a place of misattunement, lack of self-worth, and response perception. Another possible reason that can be counted is lack of trust in oneself, and the other to not define oneself and their worth based on the responses of the partner. Even though participants made every attempt to avoid conflicts at all costs, they blocked themselves from the reality that their relationships were reflecting which further led to unhealthy emotional reactivity over choosing to respond with vulnerability.

It was also evident through the responses that participants use of these 4 conflict handling techniques was due to their partners lack of emotional availability, and understanding as they end up feeling all those things, they somewhere had internalized about themselves. Eventually, when fights occur, or perceived threat arises it involves passive aggression, emotional drama, and protest actions to protect oneself. Many participants even showed how the unresolved emotions were carried along, and they only had to initiate or play unbothered to not stretch the conflict, or perceived conflict that can occur due to honest conversations. As

mentioned in the above section, self-regulation wasn't present in the participants due to triggers clouding one's ability to handle emotions, and dependency on the partners to make them feel better by handling their emotions. Therefore, stonewalling, criticism, contempt and defensiveness were prominent among the 27 participants who felt attacked, targeted and responded through the guarded responses to avoid hurt, or to be seen in bad light.

The book written by John Gottman, (2007), highlights the importance of building a strong foundation in relationships based on trust, respect, and positive communication. The authors found that couples who avoid the Four Horsemen and instead promote healthy communication patterns have a better chance of creating a long-lasting and fulfilling relationship. Both were not found among the 27 participants based on response interpretations. Instead, it is important to note that, the role of the participant as a partner in the conflict management was mostly trying to find courage to bring a concern to their partner, which resulted in unhealthy conflict patterns, leaving the participants feeling unloved, worthless, misunderstood, and doubtful. Therefore, there were some participants who shared that even though they apologized, or felt they were wrong, they somewhere never wanted to agree with that. They also shared about how they felt the need to defend themselves, but since they knew it won't lead anywhere well, so they held back, took it upon themselves, and finish the conflict. By this time, it was more of a cycle they were stuck in. Slowly, participants shared how they stopped bringing any concern forward, or to confront them, but rather wait and observe them closely for any acts of affection they show towards them especially after a conflict. The unresolved feelings were too overwhelming for the participants to deal with, so there coping mechanisms were purely driven by the fear of abandonment, and lack of worthiness.

As mentioned in the research around conflict that unhealthy communication patterns often lead to less conflict resolution, unresolved emotions, and more conflict escalation (e.g., (Markman et al., 2010; Zamir et al., 2018). Our findings similarly suggests that negative communication patterns can be reinforced over time and can become entrenched in the relationship due to historical stressors such as, past relationship can shape an individual's perceptions of conflict and influence their communication style in current relationships, and lack of emotional regulation. We also found that participants engaging in stonewalling, criticism, contempt or defensiveness often interacted with negative self-talk due to lack of self-worth influenced by self, and others. Individuals who engage in critical of themselves, may engage in self-criticism, leading to feelings of low self-worth. Similarly, individuals who experience contempt from their partner may internalize that contempt and believe that they are

not worthy of love or respect. This in turn reinforces their own set of negative self-beliefs. Negative self-talk can reinforce negative beliefs about oneself and one's relationship, which can have a lasting impact on an individual's mental health and well-being. This was the case for all the 27 participants who participated in the survey. As Ishani indicated, "when I was being misunderstood during arguments after being constant assured that I can be myself and was asked to be myself Now I don't feel like sharing my thoughts even when someone is genuinely making efforts for me because that feeling of being misunderstood and judged is a very bad feeling and I don't want to feel that feeling, so now I restrict my true feelings", and as Anmol expressed, "I felt targeted, and emotionally weak when she spoke about our difference in caste and she being the same height as me and I was mocked for that. The negative thing is she was constantly comparing me with other guys in terms of job, height. She was always complaining that I never do anything like she says". There were many similar responses that indicated the pattern of communication that was between the couples irrespective of the past, or current relationship. these patterns were influenced by the values, and beliefs at greater level, for example, some people shared that their love was greater than their needs being met, so they were okay sacrificing it but yet felt unfulfilled, and hoped for their partner to be more emotionally available, or change as they wished; another participant shared that its best to give one's own need a backseat as it saves one's own dignity and honour; "Caring makes you weak. If you care, they will walk all over you". These were some of the deeply held values beliefs being influences by the narratives (ego stories) that people internalized which in turn effected the way they showed up in the relationship.

The extent and subjective experience of vulnerability that is affected

Based on the findings and analysis, it was evident that the negative patterns of communication effected the way individuals opened themselves up in the relationship to be seen, own their truth, or express themselves in ways that were authentic. In short, the courage to be vulnerable with oneself, and in the relationship was highly influenced by these communication patterns. Vulnerability was used to secure affection as seen in the participants in the beginning of the relationship where they tested if their partners can handle their past/history. Participants judgment on their partners being a safe person as well as to hold them worthy of sharing their vulnerable parts were merely limited to their presence, and approval on their past negative experiences which validated them of their choices, actions, and decisions. It didn't take any participant much time, to build trust on their partners. As relationship progressed for some participants what they shared in the vulnerable space was taken advantage

of, their feelings were dismissed, or were criticized. Even though vulnerability is healthy, without boundaries, it is very harmful. Vulnerability was often confused with splurging, or emotional venting. As relationships started to progress, their partners stopped listening to them, whenever they were showing up with vulnerability of any kind. It was interesting to see that the same vulnerability was used to connect in the later stages of the relationship where they sensed the drop in affection from their partners through creating negative, harmful situations for themselves, to get a response, in the hope of building a connecting moment. For example- Some participants shared their most personal past story to show them their wounds, their suffering, and gain some comfort, while some shared with an intention to test if they can handle their past, and there were few who were vulnerable because they only knew how to connect through traumatizing experiences. Participants vulnerability appeared to be boundaryless, intentional, and misdefined. However, it was the very thing used to secure affection in some way. Participants also showed difficulty in expressing the vulnerability that involved speaking their mind, openly sharing their thoughts, emotions, desires, needs, or wants, because it involved higher emotional risk of potential rejection. It was interesting to note that the participants had the courage to speak their mind, share their desires, needs, or deep thoughts till the time they received higher affection, or approval that they were looking for. However, as the desired responses decline, so their courage to open up. Based on participants sharing of their experiences, one of the reasons can be re-shifting of the focus on getting approved, accepted, or chosen, so they avoided conflicts, sharing their real feelings, desires, needs, and thoughts. Participants shared that they were really worried about the changes in the perceptions, therefore to maintain a certain image of themselves, they had to hold back. Brene Browns, (2012) longitudinal study has concluded that low self-worth has also been linked to reduced emotional openness and vulnerability. People with low self-esteem often have negative self-talk and beliefs about themselves, which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment. This, in turn, can prevent them from opening up emotionally and sharing their thoughts and feelings with others. In addition, people with low self-worth often avoid vulnerability because they believe that their true selves are not worthy of love and acceptance, leading to a fear of rejection and a reluctance to be open and honest with others. Therefore, the vulnerability was hugely impacted the way it was seen, understood, influenced, used, or expressed. Research is scant to support how the misunderstanding or misconceptions around a certain relational skill can cause relationship issues, in this case vulnerability. There the misunderstandings or misconceptions surrounding emotional openness can contribute to difficulties in relationships and emotional regulation. It is important for individuals to have a

clear and accurate understanding of emotional openness and its role in promoting healthy relationships and personal well-being.

The cycle/ pattern

The participants were observed to be stuck in a negative cycle of communication which impacted their way of showing up in the relationship and also the adapted techniques of relationship maintenance. As shown in Figure 6, it is evident that the partner when perceive any threat, reinforces their negative self-belief, activates the ego stories, and response based on the conditioned or internalized values. When conflict occurred, they gave guarded responses to prove their worth, self-protect, avoid fights/ tension, and control their fears from turning into reality such as fear of being alone, rejected, or abandoned. The underneath of all actions and reactions were the unmet needs, longing, and desire to be seen, and heard. This is turn effected the way they showed up with vulnerability, as they switched to other-validated intimacy due to weak sense of self. This whole process continues after every attempt of them to feel secure in their relationship. According to Blatt's theory when a self-critical individual gets triggered, their mind activates a negative relational schema pattern in their interpersonal relationships during conflicts. These schemas include the image of themselves, the others, and an assumed script of interaction which evokes poor conflict management, inappropriate responses and agonizing sense of self (Baldwin, 1992). Therefore, these negative schemas can lead to unhealthy behavior patterns which in turn feeds self-critical analysis (Ortega et al., 2017). This cycle can cause stuckness, and build space for resentment due to unhealthy dynamics, and over-functioning.

Research question 5:

Does the meaning of commitment impact the way an individual shows up in the relationship?

Commitment is an element which can change depending upon the perceived relationship health. In the initial stage of the relationship i.e., in the honeymoon period, commitment and integrity was seen as one of the affectionate forms of communication which was included in each participants ideal ways of affection as unfolded in the stage 1 data interpretations. Commitment involved very small moments of connection for participants which was filled with micro-actions such as- being seen in positive light, include them in their plans (I becomes we), support them, encourage their dreams or to pursue a hobby, or having conversations about building a future together which was backed up by showing up each day.

Therefore, consistency in terms of commitment and integrity appeared to be highly valued in the initial phase of the relationship which also helped them judge the certainty of the relationship or hope for the future. Similarly, in current research the beliefs around feelings of commitment were wrapped in actions over words said by the partner. However, we observed in both the research that- in stage 1 study we observed that as affection decreased, commitment increased, and in present research we found that participants low level of relationship satisfaction or fulfilment made them felt more committed to the relationship. As in social exchange theory by Thibaut & Kelley (1959), commitment is seen as a choice based on a cost-benefit analysis of the relationship, with a focus on the rewards and sacrifices. According to this theory, individuals assess the rewards and sacrifices associated with the relationship and weigh them against alternatives, including being single or being in another relationship (Nickerson, 2021; Cook & Emerson, 1987). If the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs, commitment is seen as more likely to occur. In this theory, the rewards can include things like love, companionship, and support, while the costs can include the time, energy, and resources invested in the relationship, as well as any negative aspects such as conflict or stress. Based on these explanations, the responses recorded of the participants, most of the participants agreed that, they did settle for less than they deserve in the relationship, and those who didn't had contradictions with regards to other responses (excluding the 4 participants). Therefore, it can be said that the imagined cost of being single, or the "efforts" needed such as emotional investment in another relationship was too much for the participants to deal with in exchange for the false security/ comfort of being in an unfulfilling relationship. The rewards received were the presence, temporary moments of connection, and avoiding the emotional stress of dealing with difficulties that arise with making tough decisions such as leaving the partner. Commitment is a dynamic process, with individuals continually re-evaluating the costs and benefits of the relationship and adjusting their level of commitment accordingly. The literature is scant in terms of proving direct association between commitment as a single most factor for engaging in self-sacrifice, and self-abandonment due to the factors we found in this research such as fear, values, trauma bonds etc. We did find that individuals who were highly committed to their relationships were more likely to engage in self-sacrifice in order to maintain the relationship. A study found that (Impett et al., 2005) avoidance sacrifices harmed connections over time. Well-being and relationship quality were also linked to partner sacrifice motives. Similarly, another study (Van Lange, 1997) found that, willingness to sacrifice was linked to strong commitment, high satisfaction, few possible alternatives, and significant investments. Feelings of commitment mostly mediated the links between these variables and willingness to

sacrifice. Also, being willing to make sacrifices was linked to better couple functioning, which was measured by the level of dyadic adjustment and the likelihood of the couple staying together.

Therefore, based on response interpretations and analysis, it can be said that commitment seen as equal to obligation, sacrifice, failure if not maintained, or over-giving despite emotional distress, are the ways many participants view commitment. Which further impacts the way they show up which is with self-betrayal, and conditional vulnerability i.e., only being vulnerable or expressive of their own truth when they feel it will be accepted. For few participants they even mentioned of not speaking anything like this which is risky or uncertain until they make sure their partners are busy, or in a very good mood which made them felt their emotions will be received with respect, and understanding. However, this wasn't the case each time, as eventually they started to prefer keeping it to themselves until they can't take it anymore, or conflict arises which further leads to unhealthy communication. Based on the responses on the commitment questionnaire, it was evident that commitment was high irrespective of the ways they perceive their partners behaviour towards them, or the relationship health. There were contradictions in terms of how few people marked the responses in vagueness as compared to their other responses for which the possible reasons listed were hat of difficulty accepting, moulding own set of needs, and maintaining peace with the bare minimum sense of fulfilment. One of the studies (Stanley et al., 2010) has focused on the type of commitment that influences individuals to stay in relationships. They explain that constraint commitment (values or other obligations to remain married), rather than dedication commitment (a genuine need to be with the partner) were at play in the marriage's demise. Intriguingly, and in line with these findings, constrained commitment is a key reason why people choose to stay in unsatisfactory relationships like marriages (Stanley et al., 2010), and as in this case dating relationships. This study agrees with the findings of Johnson (1991), who proposed a three-part structure for commitment (i.e., personal commitment – wanting to stay married; moral commitment – feeling they should stay married; and structural commitment – constraints making it difficult to leave). The healthy form of commitment shouldn't feel obligatory, as Blau, 1964, p.84 describes commitment and mutuality in a relationship is based on couples interdependency, growth of affection and commitment in the similar pace which further tends to nourish the love one shares.

Research Question 6:

What are the differences between those who showed up with vulnerability, and those who struggled with being vulnerable?

There were total of 4 participants who were in alignment with their responses out of 31 participants. It was interesting to see that including these participants, they had the similar internal trigger experience, but the difference was in the way response was effectively communicated, and if not, they felt safe enough to be perceived as imperfect, insecure, and turning toward their partner. The same was reciprocated from their partner's end. The major difference lied in the following, (a) self-awareness, (b) self-regulation, (b) mutuality and equal partnership, (c) managed expectations, and standards, (d) open to feedback, and growth, (e) accepting relationships comes with hurt, conflicts, and work, (f) not outsourcing one's worth, (f) trust, and (g) making tough decisions that serves them and the relationship without compromising their authenticity.

Even though these participants were in alignment with their own values, and ability to grow out of old patterns they carried into the relationship, it remains a little unclear if they are able to be emotionally expressive "until now", or were able to be emotionally expressive in the case of past relationship, was it because of partners response, or despite of which they could continue to be vulnerable. These 4 participants did mention the resonance with the following statements, "I can connect with my feelings and I have tools for when they overwhelm me", "I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and I have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away". As, one interesting finding suggests that people who embrace each other's vulnerabilities since beginning with understanding, acknowledgement and support, helps in balancing the threats that get triggered internally because of the emotional baggage or poor past experiences that are carried into the relationship (Salvatore et al., 2011).

Psychosocial implications

The findings of this research have various psychosocial implications that also contributes towards the main aim of this study i.e., to bring a relationship revolution by understanding its foundation, dynamics, and maintenance attempts. By shedding light towards the understudied areas, and behaviours that actually builds or breaks the relationship has elicited important results that would not only help mental health professionals, but also individuals to promote and facilitate healthier relationships by potentially reducing the psychological distress associated with relationship challenges. This study also normalizes the existence of stress due

to dating relationships in India (considering the country still working towards understanding it as a normal phase of life) and how it is becoming the prime cause of depression, loneliness, and anxiety so that the interventions start at the roots of the early development of the child. Hence, this research influences attitudes, behaviours, and possible interventions in society and how it could affect the emotional, and mental aspects of individuals or groups.

Recommendations For Individuals Entering Romantic Relationships and for Professionals

For individuals:

Based on the results of this study, individuals who are in existing relationships, considering entering into one, or are in early phases of the relationship one should- first, focus on being a whole, happy individuals. This includes embracing one's own flaws, processing through their past traumas, personality, values, and learned internalized beliefs which further impacts their mate selection, or confined ways of being in a relationship. Second, individuals must be aware of their own needs, and wants in order to become self-aware, and confident. This will help them build healthy standards, stand for themselves, and not settle for any "good enough" relationship due to fear or lack of self-worth. Understanding that their needs matter, and right partner would not overlook their emotional needs is the base for security any individual seeks, which if not received can either lead to self-betrayal, or self-growth. To form the trust with oneself, it is important for the individuals to build self-trust, awareness of their needs, how they feel loved, and realistic expectations. Third, understanding that relationships do not need to be romanticized, or kept on pedestal i.e., they do not need to hold back their real feelings, emotions or thoughts because of past experiences, defensiveness, or personalization. Everyone should be safe enough in a healthy relationship to open up, hold space for each other, turn towards each other, make mistakes, and find middle ground. It is very important to distinguish between healthy vs unhealthy or safe vs unsafe relationships as it takes a toll on one's mental health. Fourth, relationships are of many kinds, feeling of belongingness can be achieved through friends, family, community, interest, and so on. Fixating on having a partner and maintaining it at any cost even if it isn't serving one well, doesn't go long way. It rather, does the opposite of the feeling of belongingness i.e., you feel unloved, unheard, and undervalued in relationships that one is settling for. Fifth, partners change, and grow. No one can remain same over the period of time. Accepting it and meeting one's partner where they are at emotionally, is one of the prime factors of building togetherness. In some cases, it can act as

feedback if you find it worthy of staying with those changes if it is affecting one's mental health. Similarly, hurt is a part of being in a relationship which can be navigated with healthy communication skills as well as stronger self-esteem. Sixth, going to therapy is one of the best ways to resolve internal conflicts, break through the old patterns, and achieve all of the things one needs to feel whole as an individual such as, relationship skills, overcoming past traumas, normalizing of feelings like shame, equipped to deal with conflicts, or building an authentic self. As relationship with oneself sets the base of all the other relationships. If one isn't conscious or intentional of forming healthy relationships, it will continue to reflect the same patterns one has found themselves stuck in forever. Seventh, believing that one can "fix" their partner, or letting go each time any treatment you didn't appreciate assuming things will be better, or minimizing the noticed red flags should never be done, or assumed. Not saying no to these things, only makes you say yes for the relationship that are unhealthy, and incompatible at multiple levels. Eight, one should always know the difference between self-disclosure, and vulnerability. Self-disclosure and vulnerability are two interlinked concepts that play a crucial role in building authentic and meaningful relationships. Self-disclosure refers to the act of sharing personal information, thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others. This act of openness and transparency can help establish trust and intimacy in relationships, making it easier for individuals to connect with each other on a deeper level. However, for self-disclosure to be effective, one must have the courage to be vulnerable. Vulnerability involves exposing oneself to the possibility of being hurt or rejected, by revealing one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and insecurities. This can be a difficult and scary thing to do, especially when there is a risk of being judged or misunderstood. However, the reward of being vulnerable is immense, as it opens the door to deeper and more meaningful connections with others. Being vulnerable also allows individuals to be more authentic in their relationships. When individuals are able to open up and share their true selves, they can avoid falling into unhelpful or faulty patterns of behavior that can prevent them from forming deep and meaningful connections. By embracing vulnerability, individuals can foster intimacy, empathy, and understanding with others, which are essential components of any healthy relationship. Therefore, for individuals entering romantic relationships, facing concerns in their relationships, or are in the early phase of the relationship it is important to remember to be a whole individual, and that vulnerability is the key to authentic connection with self and others.

For Professionals

The most important is right education on what are relationships, love, and role of self in relationships. the significance of educating young adults on the aspects of healthy romantic relationships. In today's society, young adults are often exposed to unrealistic and harmful ideas of what love and relationships should be through media and pop culture. This can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction in their own relationships. Therefore, it is crucial that they receive education on what makes for a healthy and fulfilling relationship. This education should include topics such as communication, trust, mutual respect, and boundaries. By learning about these elements, young adults will be better equipped to navigate their romantic relationships and avoid toxic and unhealthy patterns. Moreover, education on long-term relationships is also essential. Young adults need to understand that a successful relationship takes effort, patience, and compromise. They should be made aware of the common challenges that arise in long-term relationships, such as boredom, conflicts, and changes in priorities, and how to deal with them effectively. By equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for building and maintaining long-term relationships, we can help set them on a path towards happiness and fulfilment in their personal lives. Therefore, educating young adults on healthy romantic relationships and long-term relationships is crucial for their personal growth and happiness. By providing them with the tools and knowledge they need, we can help them avoid harmful patterns and build fulfilling and enduring relationships. Second, mental health workers can play a crucial role in this by getting to know their clients and encouraging individual or couple therapy. In therapy, they should focus not only on the main issue but also on any additional emotional concerns that may be affecting the relationship. Assessing the client's past and how it may impact their mate selection choices is also an important aspect of therapy. If there are concerns of insecure attachment, mental health workers should work on reducing negative reactions that could be detrimental to the relationship. Third, Skill building, including behavior modification and communication skills, is highly recommended for preventing toxic relationships from developing. By addressing these factors, individuals can have the tools to build and maintain healthy, fulfilling relationships. Fourth, Informing patients that if their partners are unwilling to participate in couples therapy for the relationship, they will continue to develop as individuals, will heal, and may not view the relationship in the same way, which may result in them having to make difficult decisions at times, is an important step in the therapeutic process.

Other Salient Findings and Discussion Points-

Participant vagueness

There was some degree of ambiguity and uncertainty on the part of the participants, despite the fact that the vast majority of them were able to answer the interview questions and numerous significant insights were gathered from this research with respect to idea of vulnerability, worthiness of their own needs, expectations from self, partner and the relationship, and functioning in alignment with their ideal set of values. First, it reveals an education gap when it comes to the topic of romantic love and stable partnerships. Secondly, these findings are in line with earlier studies that have highlighted the complexities of love and the challenges of discussing it in romantic relationships (Carter, 2013). Third, there seems to be a significant disconnect when showing up with “vulnerability” due to lack of consistent terminologies which can be confusing and overlapping. Third, the lack of consistent terminologies, which can be confusing and overlapping. This tends to create a huge divide when it comes to the concept, or practise of "vulnerability." Fourth, the lack of self-awareness, and internal vulnerability among individuals which also is a part of relational skill for a fulfilling relationship.

Gender in research

Even though there was not an equal number of gender participation in both the studies (stage 1 and stage 2), my data analysis didn't show any significant difference pertaining to vulnerability experience, and communication dynamics. This is a significant addition to the literature because it implies that men and women fall in love for the same reasons, seek the same things out of a loving relationship, and react similarly to displays of vulnerability and commitment. The same pattern was also observed in their internal experience of the triggering event, and its impact on the responses. As opposed to research explaining the (Hesse & Tian, 2019) absence of an association between emotional intimacy and affection deprivation for women in their samples by pointing out the standard expectation of men being less expressive, women were more likely to expect affection deprivation as they are able to distinguish between their unmet needs for affection and the general feelings toward the relationship. My experience as a therapist and 5 years of working with couples, make it safer to say that acceptance of what is given which opposes your actual needs of feeling loved, can cause greater unhappiness and stress among people irrespective of gender. Nevertheless, societal conditioning and childhood learning can become a barrier to developing a fulfilling relationship for both parties, as when conflict arises, everyone wants to feel heard in their own ways until keeping it unresolved is

what drives their relationship. In the end, both the genders wanted to feel heard, loved, and valued. Also, as contrary to the gender stereotypes, males in this study did show emotional insights, expressiveness, and putting efforts for the relationship along with the hope they receive from their partner such as attention, understanding, or presence. Also, past studies shows that the attributes that attract men and women in long-term partnerships are the same (i.e., physical attractiveness, honesty, intelligence, emotional stability, and personality).

Commonality of staying or maintaining unsafe/ unhealthy relationships

Staying in an unhealthy or unfulfilling relationship appeared to be way more common. This finding was also inconsistent with the stage 1 study along with the current study findings. However, because of the scant literature and little research (e.g., trauma bonds) on this phenomenon of staying in an unfulfilled relationship, the commonality hasn't been fully examined. It would be useful to understand the rising concerns, complexities, and perplexed dynamics of modern dating relationships. Few of the reasons (Bakshi, 2022) that arise from the findings and through interviews were that of fear of being alone forever, societal and internal pressure of maintain a relationship, the mentality of "this is as good as it can get", internal belief of deserving what is being served in the name of love, and fantasy bond or passionate love. It would be useful to have comparison studies with in-depth exploration.

Intimacy through the lens of Vulnerability

Intimacy as defined by Justin Schanfarber, "Intimacy is the feeling that comes from revealing our inner self to be actively witnessed by another", is the simple representation of what intimacy is. However, it has been observed in my previous study, as well as current study that individuals are far away from the idea of what relationship is for? what intimacy is, or how it is achieved? rather it is folded in their romanticized version of love, getting ones needs met, lack of self-regulation, lack of emotional skills like self-validating, outsourcing their worth, seeking external validation, and self-betrayal in the name of love. Based on the findings and research, it can easily be said that relationships are the prime reasons of depression, anxiety, grounds of self-betrayal, and with changing paradigms, or evolvement of the relationships comes conflicts which is the starting point of relationships progress towards failure. As the study highlighted it is unclear if the 4 participants who shared being able to show up with vulnerability as they have never been invalidated, and always felt heard, what if they show up and their partners do not validate, would they be then inclining towards resisting revelation of

their real feelings, and thoughts? Relationship is ever-changing, multidimensional, and complex system which if not understood, will continuously keep people stuck in the insecurities, heartbreaks, and jumping from relationship to relationship in order to find “the one” person who gets them or pursues the present one to make oneself feel heard. This was the case in most of the participants as well from both the studies. However, it is important to discuss and find the changing dynamics of today’s relationship in relation to the understanding of intimacy and what they really seek from the relationship. Intimacy when achieved through vulnerability by embracing oneself and yet revealing oneself it comes from a place of authenticity, for example, it helps in seeing opportunities in every reciprocal response, learn to validate oneself, represent oneself, builds capacity for disappointment, redefine rules, and soothe oneself no matter how they are received. Above all, helps them experience and build intimacy in ways they actually deserve and want. There's nothing "wrong" with expecting one’s own partner to give safety and validation in order for another to be vulnerable, but making this a condition of one’s own honest self-disclosure restricts closeness, and intimacy that can be available to them in the relationship whose route is the same through- internal vulnerability. Therefore, understanding vulnerability from this angle can also help in facilitating individuals towards healthier relationships.

STRENGTH, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research encompasses several strengths. First, the data collection included a mixed method survey in which we used qualitative method to understand the phenomenon of vulnerability and intrapersonal communication. Whereas, quantitative method was used using self-report questionnaires as related aspects of vulnerability. Along with which, we included the findings of stage 1 study whose data was collected using qualitative technique via interviews, using methodological triangulation technique to validate and present a deeper understanding of the romantic relationships. These methodologies have been used along with the existing literature on romantic relationships, vulnerability and its related aspects such as self which has helped us reflect on the existing/ current understanding, and concepts of relationship, emotional openness, role of self in showing up with vulnerability, and love. The interviews and survey containing subjective data as responses to open ended questions gave us an insight into the relationship trajectories, causes of increasing complexities, emotional reactivity vs emotional vulnerability, and related experiences of individuals. This gave us a direct and deep insight into people's experiences in relation to the feelings, thoughts, and behaviour towards vulnerability and related concepts that impact the idea, and choice of incorporating vulnerable. Lastly, combining the skills of a researcher and the practical and professional experience as a therapist while taking the interviews, forming a survey, and the following analysis helped us in exploring and underlying the fundamental meaning of the received data.

However, the research does consist of certain limitations. First, it was challenging to work with couples due to unwillingness, lack of participation, and in some cases, couples were separated. Hence, data was collected from one of the couple members via interviews as well as surveys. We could only reach out to people via social media platforms, who were willingly and emotionally ready to invest their time and energy to share their stories. Second, it was noted that out of 31 participants, only 4 participants were in alignment with their responses i.e., their experiences suggested congruency in their feelings, thoughts, actions, and expectations. However, it was difficult to assess the healthy dynamics formed due to presence of vulnerability in-depth. Furthermore, another notable limitation was the sample size (n=31), although it appeared essential to forgo breadth for depth in order to address our rudimentary (nascent and limited) understanding of the topic (Hurt, 2012). Consequently, I believed that a small, non-random sample was appropriate for a comprehensive examination of this understudied lived experience. A modest sample size was also suitable for a more comprehensive qualitative analysis as we reached a saturation in terms of the data being recorded from the participants. Also, being a professional Counselling Psychologist with the experience and knowledge of the topic being studied in this research, I felt it was necessary to acknowledge the impact of my background on my research. I attempted to set aside my previous understanding of working with couples, and individuals to the best of my ability, qualitative research is subjective by nature. Nevertheless, I aimed to utilize my expertise as a strength in this investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Future research could conduct the longitudinal research with couples to due to the nature of the study. As it will be impactful to understand the partners role rather than just the participants in the relationship effecting vulnerability, communication patterns, and commitment. For example, 4 participants who shared being vulnerable and were in alignment with their responses, it wasn't clear whether they would stop being vulnerable if the partner made them feel unheard more than their tolerance i.e., if being vulnerable was completely dependent on the partners mutuality and safety provided. Even though it is a necessity, but vulnerability in essence needs to be shown irrespective of the partners response or consequences which can be hurtful. Therefore, understanding the couple dynamics keeping vulnerability as a centre of the study can help us understand if when one partner isn't able to provide safe space to the partners, will they be willing to show up with honesty and authenticity. So, the future research can study how the concept of being vulnerable shifts as the relationship evolves pertaining to safe, and unsafe relationships. Hence, it will give us deeper insight into the interplay of various components in connecting and building the foundation of the relationship. Another future

direction for the research should be that of connecting through vulnerability in the initial stages of the relationship. The idea of vulnerability was very vague in the responses obtained by the participants, however, the confusion with emotional venting, testing behaviour, and receiving validation/ approval-based intention isn't equivalent to being vulnerable. Hence as the study shows that people connect with superficial conversations in the beginning of the relationship, we have observed a shift in the requirements of today's relationship where people expect vulnerability, but are themselves avoidant or embarrassed to show it. Therefore, understanding of the shifts as the generation is changing it is also important to understand the variety of dynamics that people consider to connect with and if they are able to use it appropriately in their experience. Another idea for people who study romantic relationships is to come up with a standard way to talk about vulnerability, love, and commitment. Each term should have a clear definition that people all over the world can agree on and that can be used to make interventions or suggestions for professionals who deal with relationship problems. Therefore, having more concise and clear terminologies in association with the interlinked terms such as self-disclosure would be beneficial. Another prospective research could be enriched by examining the gender differences. We didn't find any gender differences in our studies; however, it would be beneficial to understand the differences related to vulnerability and its related aspects. Even though there were similar requirements and understanding observed throughout the responses of both the genders, females, and males, it would be too early to tell what effect and stages each gender goes through for the same process. As it cannot be denied males due to society induced stereotypes, and childhood conditioning, it can be difficult for some men to express, provide emotional support, regulate or process which can show up in the relationships until provided a mutually safe platform to learn, grow and transform. Lastly, the research can study in-depth the progression of relationships in which people are "settling for just enough love" due to the fear, being not happy and reporting lacking of love feeling. It will help identify the increasing pressure of not just maintaining, but also being in a relationship at any cost which usually either ends up in separation, or prolonged suffering. Hence, studying the views, and dynamics of this shift can help us understand the cause of suffering in relationships rather than liberation.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of conducting exploratory research was to understand the phenomenon of vulnerability and how it interacts with other elements, such as integrated communication patterns and commitment, in different ways. We found that there was a significant impact of integrated communication patterns on participants' courage to show up with vulnerability. In total of 31 participants, we found 4 participants to be in alignment with their responses, i.e., their internal experiences were managed through self-regulation, as well as co-regulation; they turned towards their partner as they felt safe to open up; they shared the courage to showing up with vulnerability at the times which could bring conflicts, or risks as consequences; and in some cases, they made tough decisions to end the relationship. However, it was uncertain among these 4 participants if they would continue to be emotionally expressive, and connect through authenticity if their partners fail to provide them with validation more than their tolerance. Nevertheless, there were hints of trust in few responses that suggested that they had conflicts, which were attended to by turning towards each other, taking initiatives, or expressing with honesty. The rest of the 27 participants showed response disparity. This set of participants had difficulty showing up with vulnerability due to, fear, lack of self-worth, lack of self-awareness, difficulty regulating oneself, and conditional vulnerability. Their relationship with vulnerability was that of intention to feel validated, approved, and accepted which made them feel safer (if attended to by their partners) until the next trigger or else they

were in a constant state of heightened emotional stress, avoidance, denial, or one-sided emotional labour until the cue of being loved was given by their partners. Eventually, they stopped showing up with authenticity, rejected themselves, and anticipated partners negative response, or inability to provide them a safe space as an opportunity to prove their worth by holding back, and pretending to be someone they felt they needed to be. Based on the analysis, we also found that commitment was high irrespective of the unfulfillment experienced by the participants. This wasn't an expected yet an unfortunate finding, due to the cultural context where longevity is valued over quality of the relationship, romantic relationships are kept on a pedestal, and huge failure is attached to the notion of "not" being in a relationship, or broken up. It can also be concluded that self-disclosure (sharing past stories, trauma) was considered as one of the primary reasons of established connect and safety achieved in the relationship as almost all the participants shared, this type of self-disclosure that they did in the beginning of the relationship to "get it out of the way", "test their partners acceptance towards them", or "to take a step back if it was going to be a problem". However, among 27 participants after few months of developing instant trust due to gained approval over their past, wasn't able to maintain the trust. As when uncertainty, conflicts, emotional exposure, or unmet needs due to partners actions, or words arose, they couldn't respond from the place of vulnerability, or connect with themselves at the time of triggers. Therefore, there was difficulty in understanding the concept of vulnerability among all the participants. The difference among the participants who were in fulfilling relationships was that of growth and evolution of meaning of being vulnerable in the relationship developed as they took chances along the way for which the main reason was, they didn't outsource their worthiness to their partners response. It was observed among both the stages of the study that the noticed red flags, unresolved emotions, negative feelings, bad treatment, and imbalance was wrapped under the explanations that were in alignment with their ego-stories, influenced values, and expectations to live up the image they feel they require to hold, or to protect themselves from being hurt and fulfil their fantasies/ love based on potential over reality. The implications of the findings achieved can be used for future studies as mentioned in detail under the strength limitations and future directions, to understand the arising complexities of the relationships that people are becoming ready to adjust in a toxic/ unhealthy relationship over choosing to step out of it and work on being a whole person while intentionally building a relationship which serves them well. Therefore, understanding the modern dating relationships dynamics of upcoming generation where people are wanting to build authentic and long-lasting connections through longitudinal studies can give an insight

into the conflicts over the desires of being in one and settling for the bare minimum due to the fears, and internalizations of the world around.

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APPENDIX A- DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participants Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Relationship Status	Duration of Dating	Still Dating	Past Relationship
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Archana	Female	30	Dating (committed)	4 yrs.	Yes	-
Ishani	Female	27	Single	7 mos.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Latika	Female	28	Dating (committed)	8 mos.	Yes	-
Ruhi	Female	23	Dating (committed)	2.5 yrs.	Yes	-
Sanjay	Male	25	Single	1.5 yrs.	-	Yes (committed+ LD rel.)
Akshara	Female	27	Single	7 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Ajay	Male	27	Dating (committed)	10 mos.	Yes	-
Swarna	Female	24	Dating (committed+ LD)	10 mos. + (history of on & off)	Yes	-
Sanjeev	Male	25	Dating (committed)	14 mos.	Yes	-

Twisha	Female	24	Dating (committed+ LD)	7 mos.	Yes	-
Drishti	Female	26	Dating (committed)	5.5 yrs.	Yes	-
Yogesh	Male	27	Single	11 mos.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Aruna	Female	27	Single	1.5 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Saloni	Female	23	Single	1.5 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Varuna	Female	24	Dating (committed)	3 yrs.	Yes	-
Prabha	Female	25	Single	8 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Vaani	Female	26	Single	1 yr.	-	Yes (committed+ LD rel.)
Bhavika	Female	29	Single (C)	2 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Radhika	Female	26	Dating (committed)	13 yrs.	Yes	-

Sujata	Female	30	Dating (committed)	1 yr.	Yes	-
Anmol	Male	28	Single	6 yrs.	-	Yes (committed+ LD rel.)
Sanya	Female	28	Dating (committed)	12 yrs.	Yes	-
Hamid	Male	27	Dating (committed)	4 yrs.	Yes	-
Vikas	Male	27	Dating (Committed+ LD)	2 yrs. 3 mos.	Yes	-
Sagar	Male	29	Dating (Committed +LD)	3 yrs.	Yes	-
Gayatri	Female	26	Dating (committed)	3 yrs.	Yes	-
Kamal	Male	30	Single	1.5 yrs.	-	Yes (committed+ LD rel.)
Sunaina	Female	30	Single	1.5 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)
Kavita	Female	22	Dating (committed)	5 yrs.	Yes	-

Anita	Female	29	Single	3 yrs.	-	Yes (committed+ LD rel.)
Sahil	Male	29	Single	2 yrs.	-	Yes (committed rel.)

APPENDIX B: THE EXPERIENCE OF VULNERABILITY AS A WHOLE

Names	Felt Experience	Vulnerability Experience Context			Communicating Feelings	Coping with felt disconnection
		Context	Given	Received		
Archana	Positive	Past life events	Shared hurtful Past	Safe space, non-judgment, approved, loved	Challenging	take space- cool down- give benefit of doubt- rationalize- try to avoid getting emotional in conversation I every time initiate/ avoid as its pointless.
Ishani	Negative	Any opinions, ideas, or expression/ sharing	During arguments, and on being expressing being myself	Misunderstood, judged, invalidated, attacked	Challenging	make up for the conflict through gift giving- feel blamed of unpleasantness- avoid the emotional hurt caused by my partner- fearful of abandoned- hence, shun feelings that can cause unpleasantness
Latika	Positive	Past baggage & Rel.	Sharing past	safe space and open discussion, emotional support		Discuss with partner
Ruhi	Positive	Childhood trauma	Sharing when clouded by trauma	Could support and handle the emotions by saying the right words		Overthinking, anger outbursts, lashing on to him
Sanjay	Negative	Giving my best	Everything right I felt I said and did	Nothing	Challenging	It's useless your partner will think what he wants to think love and loyalty is important
Akshara	Negative	Past	Shared in vulnerable moment	Used against in argument	Challenging	Overthinking
Ajay	Negative	no Commitment in Rel.	Ignored and tried until she accepted. if pushed harder, she would accept	Treating as an option	Challenging	Convey my feelings, but always taken in other ways and lead to fights. So, leads to aggressiveness

Swarna	Negative	Confusion, dependency, tough communication around rel. dynamics	talking, restricting, going silent, doing what feels is right for the rel. to keep going without hurt	agreeableness, and non-understanding	Challenging	Fight due to insecurity or go silent
Sanjeev	Negative	Communicating real feelings	By holding back due to fear of conflicts and being an introvert	lack of understanding, handling my way of being, and break-up	Challenging	Overthinking- keep thinking whole points continuously
Twisha	Positive	Difficult times in life	Sharing and opening up	Loved and understood	Challenging	I talk to my partner and discuss with him patiently and solve the matter.
Drishti	Negative	Long distance	Holding back and carrying on	lack of communication and understanding	Challenging	Anger outburst
Yogesh	Positive	No-reply messages to	Gentle communication around what she could handle	Understood	Challenging	I just stop overthinking and start to play video games. Also, I start to be more busy in my office work so that I get distracted.
Aruna	Negative	Past and personal weaknesses	Sharing what's difficult for me, past, my actions, thoughts etc	Unsafe space	Challenging	Talk to other people who love and respect me
Saloni	Negative	Put my guard down, sharing triggers,	Expressing opinions, wanting support, past wounds	used against, no understanding, unsafe space	Challenging	talk to friends- then with partner- find positivity somewhere in the actions (rationalize to minimize the impact)
Varuna	Positive	Life hassels daily	Shared and vented out my problems	Listening and providing support and understanding		Talk to my friend
Prabha	Negative	Real Feelings	Shared feelings my	Used against me, not understood, unsafe	Challenging	I don't do anything; I will try to understand things from a different point of view to avoid getting negative

				judgmental space		
Vaani	Positive	Hurt and disappointment	Expressing and ranting my feelings	Understood, emotionally available,	Challenging	I take a break, a little distance to clear my head. I need to think on my own
Bhavika	Positive	Secrets	Shared past and choices	Support and relieved	Challenging	I overthink at times, exercise, go shopping, cry out
Radhika	Positive	Feelings, past	Shared every feeling related to anything	secure space		For me coping mechanism involves trying to think from both sides. Perspectives and putting yourself in other's shoes then evaluating self-choices. It's a complete analysis of the situation. Coming up with a coping plan and facing it
Sujata	Positive	Past traumas	Expressed past to see if he is okay with it	Safe space, saw me the same, approved	Challenging	I never learnt how to cope with this. I stayed miles away from relationships, I guess. Initially whenever I argued in last relationships i used to cut the call and focus on Netflix. From the moment I am up, my Netflix is on till I am going to sleep. Doesn't matter I am working, studying or cooking. But now I prioritise what I am feeling so I just write it down, calm myself down, go for a walk and then I try to talk again, understand them too
Anmol	Negative	Real feelings about rel.	Expressed what i don't like in rel, in her beh	Criticized, bringing up break up, comparison with other guys	Challenging	I thought rationally and tried to tell her things in a possible practical way to convince her
Sanya	Negative	Feelings, emotions	sharing what can be handled by partner	Lack of response or understanding	Challenging	don't know, I agree if i convince him to see what i see, things will be alright
Hamid	Positive	Past	Shared past rel.	understanding	Challenging	I try to distract myself from thinking it over again and eventually it gets settled

Vikas	Negative	Issues in rel.	Expressed	Influenced responses		Either Work or play on PlayStation and to do meditation and do pooja and to play with small children
Sagar	Negative	Loyalty concerns	gave safe space, expressed, msgd, went out of my way, stressed	Non-responsiveness and lies	Challenging	Taking some time to think on it and discuss the situation with my best buddy. Sometimes the discussion used to help since only I was overthinking and not my best buddy
Gayatri	Positive	Past Rel.	Expressed past rel. issues	Supportive and accepted my past	Challenging	I talk to him about it and feel relaxing. Definitely there is an anger outburst but not on everybody.
Kamal	Negative	Rel. concerns	Expressed	lack of communication and respect		One needs a lot of patience to be in a relationship. Gentle persuasion, if not overbearing generally sorts out any insecurities. Insecurities will always be resent but micromanagement will only stress oneself more so...
Sunaina	Negative	past, feelings and hurt due to his actions	Being open about my feelings	Used against me, unsafe space	Challenging	Making my partner promise me that he is not going to leave me.
Kavita	Positive	Real feelings	Honest expression	Safe space and reciprocity		If someone is feeling insecure with his partner then it is better to share it with someone reliable. Because feeling of security from inner voice is enough to check whether I am secure with this person or not.
Anita	Negative	Doubts, commitment issues	Expressed, gave chances	Distrust, lack of understanding, break up	Challenging	I draw my emotions out while crying, dance it out when i am angry, while overthinking i talk to our mutual friend
Sahil	Positive	Only initially - Expression of real feelings	Initially expressed emotions with clarity	Safe space, encouraged and assured	Challenging	I will make her realize my insecurities by my body language & gestures towards her, if that doesn't help i'll have a fruitful discussion on those lines and if that also

						doesn't help, I'll maybe digest those feelings and do something else to distract my mind.
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APPENDIX C- AUTHENTICITY AND ASSOCIATED THEMES

THEME 1	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Expression of concerns, personal triggers, frustration & annoyances	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>How challenging is it for me to communicate my underlying feelings of triggers caused due to my partners actions or words.</i>	8	0	23
<i>"Disconnection can trigger a vulnerability so emotionally painful, that we will do anything to avoid it"</i>	discuss with partner, listen to concerns, analyse & process thoughts in my space, calm myself & understand partners perspective/ thoughts, face it, should be equipped to deal with such situations together, talked directly (communicated) to solve concerns, judge the situation well- if called for its okay to let go of the rel. not serving, talking clearly with partner about feelings	Depends on the relationship health- (if I think the relationship will last then I talk to my partner about it and we can work on it. If i think, the relationship has run its course, then it's okay. It has come to an end), agree to this	Shut down/ numb, distance myself, consistent one-sided initiations towards resolving, conceal/ hide thoughts, no safety for attending difficult emotions, becomes needy & seeks attention/ time in indirect ways, distract + pretend nothing happened, don't express, unheard, unloved, becomes clingy/ desperate, self-doubt (i am the always wrong), no-minimal connection for days, disappointed, hurt and angry, stay confused, ignore and rationalize partners distant actions within self, talk with other people (with whom feels safe), abandoned, miscommunication & misunderstanding leading to more conflicts, distract by keeping myself busy, push other person away before they push me, become a bitter person due to fear of being left alone and hurt, angry or silent (let go), i just see where i went wrong, feels like breaking up, over-thinking, clouded negative thoughts, consistently clingy until sure he isn't going anywhere, cry and self-doubt, reconcile when matters go out of hand
<i>It is easier for me to react, than speak from the place of vulnerability whenever I am emotionally threatened, triggered, or made feel unsafe</i>	10	0	21

THEME 2	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Expression of difficult emotions, fears and insecurities	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>I often run behind my partner to seek reassurance, understanding, or validation after a conflict.</i>	12		19
<i>"Do not underestimate the amount of confidence it takes to be able to say 'I am unhappy here' ". - Vienna Pharaon (How does this relate with your experience, and feelings in your relationship when you are unable (or able) to express your true feelings of hurt, disappointment, unhappiness, unfulfilled, fearful, etc with your partner?)</i>	can communicate unhappiness, tell any which way that's the key, in touch with my feelings, and communicate if hurting, openly shared feelings/ thoughts, expressing it can be a process not end, space for discussion than discuss	Bring partner in good mood before expressing every time, don't know how to, if worst has happened say it ultimately, not experienced yet (but contradicts other statements, - adjust with bare minimum), feeling of unhappiness splits relationship (passion dies out)	Rejected, unimportant, invalidated, futile, unable to express unhappiness, doesn't express true feelings, feels momentarily/ temporary anger, avoid hurting, unsaid pressure of being best in rel., compromised thoughts/ feelings to avoid break-up/ complications., difficulty expressing negative feelings, fights followed with expression of real feelings, avoid, feelings went unheard, creates misunderstandings, activate triggers, better if i hold back to avoid fights, fearful, hurtful, avoid feeling negative, feels like giving up too soon as compared to the partner, can hurt another person, find faults within myself is easier than express difficult emotions, blaming each other for hurt/ unhappiness, difficulty leaving relationships, instant disconnect makes my love go away, difficult communicating real feelings, unhappy with behavior that couldn't be changed, okay to let go & move on, ego clashes, lack of reciprocity made me kept my feelings inside, lost confidence in sharing due to lack of responsiveness, situation doesn't allow at times to communicate real feelings, should back off & leave if unhappy, sharing or confronting such feelings never led to change in partners behavior, suppressed lot of real feelings/ such thoughts due to lack of understanding, emotional maturity, due to difficult responses (projection, taken in other way, offended etc)

THEME 3	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Expression of hurt, wants, and needs	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>When my partner doesn't- meet my emotional needs, or treat me in ways i would feel loved, heard, and validated, it's hard for</i>	7		24

<i>me to express the arising difficult feelings, or the emotional impact caused due to his/ her actions.</i>			
<i>I feel emotionally invalidated by my partner whenever i share my feelings, or express any concerns that matters to me.</i>	11		20
<i>If something was shared in the space of vulnerability, it was used against me in conflicts to get back at me, to prove me wrong, or to make it my fault</i>	13		18
<i>I feel I have to ask each time for my partner to meet my needs, it loses its value and importance for me. Hence, I have stopped asking, and adjust with whatever it is</i>	16	5	9
<i>I often feel hurt and distant because it is always me who expresses, and be vulnerable</i>	13		18
<i>If my partner hurt me in any way whether intentional, or not, which made me feel angry, anxious, and insecure, I often</i>	Let them know despite difficulties, taking space to be calm before sharing, ask for space/ time	Go silent, talk to other people, cry, confront	Binge eat, put it in the backburner, Do nothing- wait for it to pass, withdraw, aggressive, distance for long hours, feel neglected, cry for some time and let it go, beat myself up for days (self-doubt/ criticism/ blame), distract to avoid more fights, stop talking and make partner realize their mistake through passive-aggression, anger outburst, stop expressing because its futile
<i>Even if somewhere, I know i am not going to receive it, I want wanted my partner to do more of</i>	always there for me, open, nothing yet	dont know, never expected, dont expect much	emotional bonding, emotional maturity, conflict handling with respect, change in views, big surprises, understanding, love in ways i feel loved, genuinity, love & care, honest real conversations, something that they want to do and not obligatory, care for me enough, open conversation (expressive), physical intimacy, affection, trusting intentions, care & effort, love& respect, empathy and emotional availability, visiting me more often, being liberal, uncontrol ling, clingy, being a good listener, not overpowering my thoughts, feeling, etc.

THEME 4	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Expression of real thoughts, feelings, and emotions	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>If what you shared in your vulnerable space wasn't responded to in ways you expected, how likely was it that you stopped showing up with openness, and gave in to the ways that were less reflective of your inner emotional world</i>	10	4	17
<i>I often feel pressured of saying the "right thing" over what I really wished i could say.</i>	18	3	10
<i>It is difficult for me to voice my disagreement with my partner</i>	13		18
<i>I do feel I stay quiet as much as i would like to say, or react differently than i would whenever i am hurt, or disappointed, because sharing my feelings and thoughts in the past created conflicts, or difficult emotions</i>	9		22
<i>If my partner can't understand where i am coming from, feel negatively towards me, complains about something s/he didnt like, gives not so good feedback, or feels not excited about the relationship at some point in time. It makes me react in ways such as</i>	Talking and expressing the concerns, try to understand partners viewpoint,	Silence, let it go,	Wasted efforts, taking backseat, suffering silently, stupid, pointless fights, futile conversations, bad, do anything to fix it, invalidating, Anger, self-doubt, frustrated, leaving, feeling not good enough, crying, sad, misunderstood, shutting down, distract, unacknowledgement towards my feelings, self-sabotaging mode, worried, helpless, disappointment, annoyed, sad, ignorant, emotionally shut, stop caring, anxiety, doubt and insecurity, dejected, rage, failure
<i>It's easier for me to emotionally express my inner feelings, thoughts, or opinions (whether positive, difficult or negative) to my partner when</i>	Its easier any time, when time feels right, confused, safe space, when feel safe/ heard, being understanding/ understood, someone is emotionally available, give respect, space/ state of mind to talk out	Only if reassured, when feel heard, chatting or being face to face, if feel it will be listened to, reciprocate, give love, non-judgment, mature responses, reciprocate the same amount of dedication to share	Extremely Sad, when overwhelmed, Can't take it anymore, Drunk, extremely emotional, Never was, if only sure about partners mood, after being asked multiple times, only when partner shares, when partner is already engaged, if partners doesn't have any opinion., when asked, better to hold back in LD, insecure conversations spoil rel., based on partners mood or else distract,

	or hear about individual viewpoints, attention		
<i>Did the thought of sharing your real feelings made you feel fearful of inviting conflicts into the relationship?</i>	11	5	15

Theme 5	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Setting emotional boundaries	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>It is difficult for me to set emotional boundaries with my partner</i>	7	14	10
<i>I do sometimes feel my partner violates my emotional boundaries, or downplays my feelings. When this happens, I tend to find myself become agitated and angry, or letting it slide, and not create a scene</i>	16	7	8

THEME 6	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Being Authentic	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>To control how my partner sees me, I find myself doing things I won't normally do, or show up in ways i feel i should.</i>	17	6	8

<p><i>I feel/ felt like hiding parts of me from my partner because</i></p>	<p>open about myself, felt loved and understood, wait until assured about partners care towards my feelings, took time to open up, bad, ugly, good- all shared, bedrock of rel. to open up,</p>	<p>Not aware, expect partner to open up, partner stopped caring- stopped expressing</p>	<p>Misunderstandings, worsen the relationship, incapable to understand, misuse the information, make me feel inferior, inconsiderate responses, partner doesn't care, avoid hurting partners feelings, protect harsh reality, judged, wont appreciate, To avoid negative perception about myself in the rel., lack of understanding, inferior feelings, shameful, no confidence in certain parts of me, fear of partner leaving, avoid fighting, save rel. from bad impact, fear of rejection, immaturity, avoid unwanted arguments, due to failed supportive responses, disapproval, avoid blame, based on partners response</p>
<p><i>What are the things that are/ were difficult to share with your partner as it may cause you risk of rejection, change in perception, judgment, or long conflicts i.e., things could go wrong, or even lead to break up?</i></p>	<p>Shared everything, processed before sharing, mutual sharing, with courage asked for commitment</p>	<p>first thing- shared about past,</p>	<p>Unfulfilling/ unsatisfactory relationship, personal insecurities, feelings about the relationship, asking help/ support for my personal concerns, about future, everything (couldn't talk openly- feelings, emotions, ideas etc), mistakes, cheating/ betrayal, actions through guilty conscience, scared of disappointment, hurt, individual differences and choices, Family problems & personal behavior, anything that might shake the confidence, status differences & feeling inferior- hiding few things due to it, no use, resist fighting/ arguments, past relationships, appearance based insecurities, future related, health concerns that might impact relationship, sexual needs, opposite gender closeness/ friendships, day-today activities, avoid judgment/ blame/ or distrust, confronted with mistakes after suffering, sharing about family/ friends/ relatives</p>
<p><i>It was once easy to emotionally express, and feel seen by my partner... but it isn't/ wasn't anymore, as</i></p>	<p>easily express feelings, emotionally expressive</p>	<p>Takes time now- but over the time it happens, don't know, paths/ goals didn't sync-match, never thought about it,</p>	<p>True emotions & feelings, hurt & opinions, wounded/ difficult parts of self apart from happy self, everything, things impt to me and my feelings, deepest insecurities, waiting for tough time to end, partner stopped being expressive, emotional invalidation (expressing concerns, feelings etc). REASONS- inconsideration, resentment, emotionally unavailable, taken for granted, cheating, felt rejected, to avoid judgments, judged harshly, been labelled- called names, felt distant, no use, distrust, and blame games, lack of empathy & understanding</p>
<p><i>Things that stop me from being vulnerable in my relationships are/ were</i></p>	<p>good communication, emotional expression</p>	<p>don't know</p>	<p>Conflicts, misunderstanding, being judged, miscommunication, difficulty expressing my intentions/ thoughts/ feelings, withdrawn & invalidation, past, emotional dependency (pleasing over affection), lack of communication , overthinking, keeping positive perception intact, shame &</p>

			embarrassment, lack of understanding, insecurities/ apprehension/ assumptions, fear of not being accepted, fear of being ridiculed, unattended emotions, heartbreak, unhealthy communication patterns, self-respect, rejection, holding back, emotional unavailability, partners reactions and inability to understand beyond, unresponsiveness, nothing matters about me in the rel., pleasing, public relationship, lack of empathy
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APPENDIX D- STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY

Strategic vulnerability	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>I do not share what is important for me when I feel my partner might not validate what I have to say.</i>	15	6	10
<i>Have you held information (a part of your life that impacted you) from your partner that made you feel that she/ he wouldn't accept, or might cause a change in their perception about you</i>	11	11	9
<i>I shared my past wounds with my partner in the beginning of the relationship, in ways that made me felt accepted, affectionate, validated, and wanted</i>	9	8	14
<i>Based on my partners response, sharing or expressing from the vulnerable space made me feel/ felt like</i>	Safe. Comfortable. Heard., valued, mutual trust, relieved, secure.	don't know, I avoid being vulnerable, involuntarily, mixed experience, not bad.	Disappointed, I need fixing/ advice, feels like s/he wants me to change, I feel too much, i feel difficult, dejected, hurt, stupid, taking responsibility for every wrong, not good enough, unhappy, inactive, bad about self, of no use, powerless, i am better alone, Isolated, self-doubt, pursuing, withdrawal, situation-specific vulnerability (open to listen or not), better to keep it inside, stressful, worthless, betrayed, alone

APPENDIX E- PROGRESSION FROM TRIGGERS TO SHOWING UP WITH VULNERABILITY

NAMES	INTERNAL TRIGGERS		EGO STORIES (SELF-CONCEPT/ SELF-WORTH)	NATURE OF VULNERABILITY	PERCEPTION/ EXPECTATIONS
	TRIGGERS	REASON			
Archana	Defensive, Hurt, Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, Criticized, Unfair, Worried, Unappreciated, Disapproving, Like Leaving, like my opinions didn't or never matter, I had no idea what I was feeling, blank, & Lonely	I felt targeted/ attacked,	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- No one will ever love me or stay with me the way I wish. 2. I am not a good enough partner., 3. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 4. I can't trust my partner., 5. I shouldn't ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i can't come across as clingy, needy, or difficult., 6. Don't overreact, or be over- sensitive, it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go., 7. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight.,8. Nothing	1. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away. 2. I often responds to my partners vulnerability by getting defensive, telling them they shouldn't feel the way they do, or shutting down, 3. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection	Yes, I feel that my partner won't understand where i am coming from and in the process, I might end up hurting his feelings which might later manifest into misunderstandings and resentment that I don't want to deal with

			works out the way i want in this relationship., 9. I am too much for the other person		
Ishani	Defensive, Misunderstood, Criticized, Like Leaving, & Like my opinions didnt, or never matter	I felt disrespected,	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- No one will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish., 2. I am not a good enough partner., 3. I am to be blamed., 4. I and my feelings don't matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 5. nothing ever goes right for me., 6. I can't trust my partner., 7. It's always my fault as it is, stop being a burden	I want to see my partners feelings but when i do i have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away	The only feeling of being left behind and that I couldn't even save this relationship that feeling/thoughts of failure and it's not a pleasant feeling
Latika	Defensive, Hurt, Sad & Misunderstood	I felt targeted/ attacked	1. I am not a good enough partner, 2.I can't trust my partner	I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	Nothing I've held on to
Ruhi	Hurt, Angry, Unfair, Worried, & Disapproving	I felt not important to my partner	1. Don't overreact, or be over-sensitives. it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go	I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	Nothing I've held on to

			2. It's always my fault as it is, stop being a burden		
Sanjay	Misunderstood	I felt disconnected,	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- No one will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish	My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings	Oh its killing me but what's the point in criticizing no one cares at all, focus on work that's the answer
Akshara	Like my opinions didnt, or never matter	I felt unheard	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- No one will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish., 2. I am not a good enough partner., 3. I and my feelings don't matter enough, I lost in proving myself again	My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings	The fear of being misunderstood
Ajay	Like my opinions didnt, or never matter	I felt a lack of attention	1. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight	I want to see my partners feelings but when i do i have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away	There are very little things that I don't express to my partner. And I do it because umm somewhere I think it's my insecurities that's causing them and it might effect our relationship

Swarna	Defensive, Hurt, Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, Unfair, Unappreciated, & Disapproving	I felt unheard	1. I am not a good enough partner., 2. I should find a way to feel that i am still loved, and emotionally safe even if it means creating a situation to elicit a response., 3. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 4. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight	1. My true self is often clouded by triggers and I have hard time being vulnerable when I am overwhelmed by my feelings. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	It might trigger and end the whole relationship.
Sanjeev	Defensive, Hurt, Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, Criticized, Unfair, Worried, Unappreciated, Disapproving, Like Leaving, like my opinions didn't or never matter, Lonely, & I don't have anything valuable to offer	unsafe	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- No one will ever love me or stay with me the way I wish., 2. I am not a good enough partner., 3. I am to be blamed., 4. I should find a way to feel that i am still loved, and emotionally safe even if it means creating a situation to elicit a response., 5. I am a worthless person, invisible to my partner, and is least cared for., 6. I and my feelings don't matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 7. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 8. I can't	1. talking about vulnerable feelings is weak. 2. My true self is often clouded by triggers and I have hard time being vulnerable when I am overwhelmed by my feelings. 3. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because i don't know how. 4. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection. 5. I want to see my partners feelings but when I do is have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away. 6. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and I have learned to hold	Fearful of confrontation

			<p>trust my partner., 8. Let's just do what my partner wants, I can keep my needs aside., 10. I shouldn't ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i cant come across as clingy, needy, or difficult., 11. Dont overreact, or be over-sesnitive. it wasnt such a big deal as it is. just let it go., 12. Its always my fault as it is, stop being a burden., 13. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight., 14. Nothing works out the way i want in this relationship., 15. I am too much for the other person</p>	<p>my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away. 7. I often responds to my partners vulnerability by getting defensive, telling them they shouldnt feel feel the way they do, or shutting down</p>	
Twisha	Hurt & Sad	i felt like the "bad person"	<p>1. Dont overreact, or be over-sesnitive. it wasnt such a big deal as it is. just let it go., 2. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight</p>	<p>1. My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or</p>	N/A

				<p>pushing it away. 3.</p> <p>I often responds to my partners vulnerability by getting defensive, telling them they shouldnt feel feel the way they do, or shutting down</p>	
Drishti	Angry & Sad	I felt a lack of attention	<p>1. I should find a way to feel that i am still loved, and emotionally safe even if it means creating a situation to elicit a response</p>	<p>1. My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings. 2. I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me. 3. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away</p>	Avoid fights and hurt
Yogesh	Sad, Like Leaving, like my opinions didn't, or never matter, & Lonely	I felt cold towards my partner	<p>1. I and my feelings dont matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 2. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 3. Let's just do what my partner wants, i can keep my needs aside., 4. Don't overreact, or be</p>	<p>1. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away. 2. I often responds to my partners vulnerability by getting defensive, telling them they</p>	I just stop myself from telling things to my partner which can hurt her and accept what is happening unless and untill it is

			over-sensitive. it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go	shouldnt feel the way they do, or shutting down	affecting my mind and peace.
Anupama	Hurt, Sad, Misunderstood, Unfair, Worried, & Lonely	I felt disconnected	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- Noone will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish., 2. nothing ever goes right for me ., 3. Nothing works out the way i want in this relationship	1. Its hard for me to be vulnerable because i dont know how. 2.I want to see my partners feelings but when i do i have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away	I feel embarrassed.
Simran	Hurt	I felt that my partner is not attracted to me in any way	1. nothing ever goes right for me., 2. I cant trust my partner., 3. I shouldnt ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i can't come across as clingy, needy, or difficult., 4. Its always my fault as it is, stop being a burden	Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection	Yes i did, i didn't speak about it as my partner was not enough understanding, and it irritated me for a while and i felt very bounded
Varuna	Hurt, Angry, Sad, & Misunderstood	I have never experienced such a strong feeling ever	1. I am not a good enough partner., 2. I am to be blamed., 3. I and my feelings dont matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 4. I shouldn't ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i	1. talking about vulnerable feelings is weak. 2. My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings. 3. Its hard for me to be vulnerable because i dont know how. 4.	No, I'm not very good good at holding difficult things to myself.

			cant come across as clingy, needy, or difficult.	Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection	
Prabha	Defensive, Hurt, Misunderstood, & Criticized	I felt disrespected	Don't overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasnt such a big deal as it is. just let it go	1. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	There are many things you hold onto when you are in a committed relationship. The fights and the arguments over a period of time feel unnecessary and negative.
Vaani	Hurt, Angry, Unappreciated, & Disappointed	I felt unheard	1. I and my feelings dont matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 2. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight	1. Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	Communicating about the past is difficult for me. There is a particular way that people react to certain incidents and events, and they get a very particular look in their eyes, its like a look of pity and then they try to explain a lot of my behavior stemming from there. I avoid talking about the past, until i feel I am in a good space to bear any

					reaction that might come. It doesn't affect me much until it is shared.
Bhavika	Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, Unfair, Unappreciated & Lonely	I felt powerless	I am unlovable or difficult to love- Noone will ever love me or stay with me the way i wish	1. talking about vulnerable feelings is weak. 2. My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings	Being alone and not having anyone to share your daily routine scares me out. Hence I have kept things to myself and not expressed at many occasions
Radhika	Hurt, Angry, Sad & I had no idea what i was feeling blank	I felt disconnected	1. I am to be blamed., 2. Dont overreact, or be over-sesnitive. it wasnt such a big deal as it is. just let it go	1. I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	I am someone who shares their feelings and opinions very openly. I feel communication is the key. I say whatever comes in my head.
Sujata	Hurt	I was criticized	1. I am not a good enough partner., 2. I cant trust my partner	1. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	I have told him everything but not shared two things. Initially we both said everything because we were both not expecting that this relationship will work. So we

					gave each other every reason to run. But our insecurities didn't matter to each other. So now how can I tell him that I didn't share these two things. I know one will not matter but another one is kinda imp and I dnt know how will he react. He might feel betrayed that I have so many months to tell him but I choose not to. But really I forgot. I dnt know what to do now
Anmol	Angry, Misunderstood, Criticized, Unfair, Worried, Unappreciated, Disapproving, & Like my opinions didnt, or never matter	I felt a lack of attention	1. I am unlovable or difficult to love- no one will ever love me or stay with me the way I wish., 2. I should find a way to feel that I am still loved, and emotionally safe even if it means creating a situation to elicit a response., 3. nothing ever goes right for me., 4. I can't trust my partner., 5. I shouldn't ask my partner to meet my	1. I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	I didn't hold anything, i always opened up. (About past or basic concerns) - rest to avoid fights, stress etc

			needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i cant come across as clingy, needy, or difficult., 6. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight., 7. I am too much for the other person		
Sanya	Hurt, Angry, & Misunderstood	I felt not important to my partner	1. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 2. Don't overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go	1. Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I don't know how. 2. It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection.	Yes agreed, happens a lot
Hamid	Hurt, Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, & Unfair	I felt unheard	1. I shouldn't ask my partner to meet my needs, or be emotionally activated when i am hurt, i can't come across as clingy, needy, or difficult., 2. Don't overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn't such a big deal as it is, just let it go., 3. I am too much for the other person	It's hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection	Being Rejected
Vikas	Hurt, Angry, Sad , Worried, & Like Leaving	Disrespected and Lack of attention	OTHER- If I am not respected and loved properly then it is preferable to move	I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me	One thing, she needs to devote more time into the relationship: reason to not

			away from her and move onwards and upwards.		say it is that I think that she will get hurt
Sagar	Hurt, Sad, Unfair, Worried, & Lonely	I felt not important to my partner	1. I am to be blamed., 2. I and my feelings don't matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 3. I can't trust my partner., 4. Don't overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go., 5. Its always my fault as it is, stop being a burden	My true self is often clouded by triggers and i have hard time being vulnerable when i am overwhelmed by my feelings	Yes, many! She never used to reciprocate correctly and was the biggest reason why I stopped sharing my feelings. In the long run I used to feel burdened and stressed all the time
Gayatri	Hurt, Angry, Sad, Misunderstood, Unappreciated, & I had no idea what i was feeling, blank	I felt disrespected	1. I and my feelings dont matter enough, I lost in proving myself again., 2. nothing ever goes right for me., 3. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me., 4. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight	I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	There are times when I need to think before sharing things with my partner because I sometimes fear what if he misunderstands me, but sooner or later I do share everything with him.
Kamal	Hurt, & Sad	I felt disconnected	1. Don't overreact, or be over-sensitive. it wasn't such a big deal as it is. just let it go., 2. To make things work one of us	I want to see my partners feelings but when i do i have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away	It's always good to communicate. There is no point to holding stuffs in and tormenting oneself over it. One needs to have clarity in

			has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight		relationships and properly communicating forms the bedrock. Relationships do not die because of lack of communication, they die because there is an absence of feeling during communication
Sunaina	Defensive, Hurt, Angry, Misunderstood, Criticized, Unfair, Unappreciated & Like my opinions didn't, or never matter	I felt like i couldn't be honest	1. I am to be blamed., 2. nothing ever goes right for me., 3. I am ashamed of my past., 4. Nothing works out the way i want in this relationship	Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection	The fear of losing him again. There were things which I did not like but the moment I mentioned about it, it gave rise to fights. So then I stopped being vocal about all my feelings. I stopped standing for things which matter to me.
Kavita	Sad	I felt powerless	1. To make things work one of us has to hold back, act mature, and not extend the fight	I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me	No, I am very free to share my thoughts with my partner and I feel really blessed that

					he understands me and especially respects me.
Anita	Hurt	I felt not important to my partner	1. I cant trust my partner	1. Its hard for me to be vulnerable because I am afraid of rejection. 2. I have learned to share my own vulnerability, and i have learned to hold my partners vulnerability instead of blocking, or pushing it away	It stopped to before as she said she was under medication it could affect her mental health. But it was a good decision to confront and communicate with her as she wasn't ready for the commitment.
Sahil	Hurt, Misunderstood, Unfair, & Disgusted	I felt unheard	1. Nothing ever goes right for me., 2. If I mattered to my partner, he/ she would have done better for me	1. I can connect with my feelings And I have tools for when they overwhelm me. 2. I want to see my partners feelings but when i do i have a hard time trusting it will last, so I subconsciously push it away	Yes there were many truths which I came to know from certain credible sources about my partner and those were never shared with me or even if they were told to me, it was all a book of fabricated lies. I have never told her about all this, because there is no point living & spending your life

					<p>with a Chronic Liar and I don't think even if I tell her, that's gonna help me coz I had already decided that I would not want to continue any further with her and that's why I silently walked out of her life.</p>
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APPENDIX F- BELIEFS/ VALUES AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS

Category 1	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Values/ Beliefs	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>I get frustrated pretending to be someone that I am not with my partner, as I feel helpless as to how to make things better.</i>	16	3	12
<i>I am tired of wanting, and seeking love, validation, appreciation, or reassurances etc., from my partner</i>	15	3	13
<i>I do not feel secure, or fulfilled until my needs are met in a way i specifically want from my partner</i>	18	2	11
<i>I am often afraid that I will hurt and disappoint my partner without being conscious of what i am saying, or doing each time, especially around conflicts.</i>	8	2	21
<i>It is easier for me to give love, than receive it. I feel pressured, or overwhelmed to "just" receive the love in any form, without feeling like having to give back each time</i>	13	3	15
<i>I often shrug off whenever i feel</i>			

<i>something negative about the relationship, or my partner</i>	15	9	7
<i>I expect my partner to understand why, and when i am getting triggered, without me having to tell him/ her each time it happens.</i>	4	15	12
<i>My partners reaction to what i share makes me feel good or bad about myself</i>	3	4	24
<i>I often find myself rationalizing* that i shouldn't complain about something that may come across as 'too little' to talk about.</i>	6	14	11
<i>I often hold back to be liked, wanted, or chosen to be seen as a perfect partner</i>	13	10	8
<i>I withhold, distort, hide, pretend, take a backseat and align myself to my partner ways, and wishes- to avoid fights, disconnection and any negative energy between us</i>	9	13	9
<i>I have found myself begging, ignoring, crying, demanding, blaming etc, in my relationship whenever my partner fails to do what I asked her/ him to do multiple times, or if i feel not understood</i>	15	10	6
<i>I feel that it is my partners role to know</i>			

<i>what i want, need, or handle my insecurities, moods etc after a certain point in a relationship. If they can't without me telling them about it, it means, they don't care or love me enough</i>	13	10	8
<i>I often hold back to avoid feeling labelled as oversensitive, or over reactive *</i>	11	10	10
<i>Its difficult for me to feel that i made a mistake, that i am at the wrong, or that i hurt my partner. I need to feel that i am heard and not seen in a bad light</i>	16	10	5
<i>It is sometimes easier to give my needs a backseat, because</i>	Needs are being met, I come back to it if others seem to need more, trying to prioritize myself	I can sustain until it becomes consistent	Some battles are not worth the fight (given-up), brings and keeps or maintains peace in rel., never cared/ asked about my needs, Tired of communicating, to make this relationship work, to avoid fights or unnecessary conflicts, unwanted arguments, fear of rejection, don't want to deal with the consequences, his needs are much worthier than mine, dont have energy to argue, causes emotional distress, it will hamper the relationship, tough to express wants & needs, partner means more to me, i can bear it, Need to understand and act mature so keep the needs at the backseat, I cared for her to hurt her, in hope of less arguments, to keep my partner happy, best thing to maintain dignity & honour.
<i>The beliefs I form about myself, and my partner when I feel invalidated, unloved, and undervalued by him/her are</i>	I've learnt to not look at MYSELF in the wrong light during fights, we need to talk about it, assured my worth despite fights (during triggers), loved and validated for my efforts, care and every small thing I do in rel., despite	Needs self-evaluation and evaluation of everything that went wrong	I am un-important, I am the one being silly & oversensitive, I am difficult to love, he doesn't understand where i am coming from, doesn't matter let it go, brutal, its okay, i am not worthy, it is difficult, fights, I should stay calm & not overthink, I can't love someone, relationship will never work for me. Or sometimes I feel attacked., Negative about myself and my partner, doesnt love me enough, i try not to think or distract, difficult to let go, its my luck/ destiny, I am not good enough, I am not pretty

	negative thoughts i know these are momentary roller-coaster of emotions, she ensured i was loved dearly,		enough, My partner will break-up, lacks attention/ affection- don't want to deal with it, I am at the wrong, Unable to express things properly, Gives less time to relationship, I don't matter in my partners life, I'm being side-lined, I am under-valued,, He is not supportive, He isn't willing/ open to understand my emotions, My partner is very self-centred., My partner will never understand me. I am the bad person for my partner, I can't live without him so i try to change his perception towards me., this is going to end and future plans are waste of time and efforts, I feel that I am not lovable, I am not worthy, doesn't deserve it. Let's break up and just not deal with it.
<i>I hate being coming across as inadequate, imperfect, anything less than I feel I need to be because...</i>	partners care towards needs, understanding me and empathy, it's okay to not come across as perfect, embracing self, accepting each other	Don't know, I feel everybody has their own perspective of perceiving things or humans, so it is fine	Sacrificing and effort for the relationship seems pointless, I am not the perfect partner or person, No use in the relationship, inferior/ powerless, feel weak and hurt, Not able to give what i should be in the relationship, imbalanced, targeted, unhealthy, frustrated or angry, problem, conflictual confusion, started to believe I am, live up to perfectionism, it means people won't like me, disrespected, judges my intentions or efforts, partners responsiveness (incomplete and insensitive responses), i need to work on my flaws, I am a man, fearful of not being liked, don't want my partner to perceive me this way, everything seems worthless- efforts, love, everything comes down to nothing, people love you or see you as per their convenience and wants
<i>I am afraid of being misunderstood because</i>	Not afraid- communication is key, active listening and safe space, understanding	careful to not be misunderstood	Major conflicts, distrust, feeling of exhaustion, feeling disappointment, feeling burdened, cant appear as a stranger to my partner, I am bound to be misunderstood, followed arguments, difficulty expressing my feelings without hurting, leading complications, difficulty communicating, of my guilty actions, during argument i feel impatient, fear of abandonment/ rejection, unheard, childhood trauma, hurt my feelings, creates barriers, builds pointers to argue, disrespected, Expect my partner to understand without me saying much, leads to chaos, masks my true intention, makes relationship difficult, shatters confidence, increasing self-doubt, creates distance, create complications, distrubs mental/ emotional peace, can lead to break up, not understood or liked for who i actually am

<p><i>I protect myself from getting hurt in ways that are emotionally taxing for me because...</i></p>	<p>Hurt is a part of relationship, communication, work on self, grow</p>	<p>don't know</p>	<p>Dealing with my own unhappiness is much easier and better than dealing with the sense that my partner is unhappy because of me., to maintain peace or else no one will, it's easier to avoid/ defend than get into the drama, i feel overwhelmed, of my past, can't handle emotional pain, introvert, fear of rejection, to feel safe, to escape from arguments, avoid hurt, avoid conflicts, I am weak, hard time coping, to avoid consequences or result of getting hurt,, to avoid negativity, its exhausting to deal with self-doubts, avoid emotional draining, toll on mental health, hold back, avoid stress, avoid dealing with it, protects me from hurt, "caring makes you weak, people walk all over you"., to avoid bad impact on relationship, getting hurt is a process that impacts daily life routine, it impacts my daily functioning if i don't protect myself, impacts other relationships</p>
<p><i>I have created situations in my relationship to receive love, attention, or some care i wish from my partner by</i></p>	<p>receive love anyway, asking for it/ expressing, speaking honestly, positive efforts, doing stuff for my partner that they like, visiting her, giving surprises, public acknowledgment,</p>	<p>self-doubt</p>	<p>Protest actions, being overly-accommodating, pretence, doing things partner doesn't like, being dramatic, try hard to get attention, talking to others, giving my all, disturb him, passive aggression, drama, withhold affection, anger, uploading stories, by showing happiness and active in my own life, holding back my feelings, complain on stupid things to get attention which isnt a real problem, going quite, continuing an issue, paying extra attention and giving, irritated, ignored, passive aggression, start another conflict so one before it goes away, continuously reaching out, testing behaviour, giving chances, or withdrawing, making partner accept fault, over-giving, defending myself</p>
<p><i>What do i need to offer in a relationship to feel loved?</i></p>	<p>being honest with self and partner, empathetic, being present, being there & listening, partnership, being warm and responsive, naturally feel like giving (not pre-decided)</p>	<p>no clue, don't know, wish I knew, love??</p>	<p>Unconditional support, light-heartedness and love, always be happy, hide real feelings, love, offered everything and still betrayed, did more than enough, pursue and keep giving love, give more to receive some love, emotional support, understanding, care, time, accept more demands, time and care, trust, loyalty, honesty, support, effort, care, Emotional availability and understanding, Respect, Sense of maturity, trust, open-mindedness, compassion</p>

Category 2	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Expectations	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>I feel disappointed whenever i am not able to see my partner-change as i hoped, or love me as i wanted, or hardly make any efforts for me and the relationship.</i>	7	10	14
<i>It's safe and better for me to play unbothered Infront of my partner for the little things that hurt me, because it never ends well</i>	12	7	12
<i>I have stopped sharing much about my real feelings, and thoughts, or mere opinions due to lack of understanding, and unresponsiveness?</i>	18	2	10
<i>It is much easier to share my daily hassles, or surface level concerns than sharing my inner experience, deeper emotions, and underlying feelings.</i>	11	3	17
<i>Based on previous failed attempts of sharing or expressing myself that ended up badly, I only share or express things that my partner can handle so my</i>	10	8	13

<i>relationship won't be impacted.</i>			
<i>The thoughts of setting emotional boundaries around hurt, disappointment, certain hard emotions, or personal triggers with my partner, makes/made me think, and feel like</i>	I can tell easily, tough but take space and share what's bothering, understanding responses, gives space and waits until ready, tries to listen, good at maintaining and keeping boundaries, it's easier to talk with boundaries, open about every topic	eventually understands	long endless discussions, misunderstandings, tiring conversations, demeaning conversations, self-doubts, gaslighting, it's weak, difficult, confused, I won't be lovable anymore, expectations won't be met if shared (shattering expectations), daunting task, hurt, not sharing personal feelings, I am not a good partner, Low of myself and feel like a burden, overwhelmed, difficult to open up, restricted, don't set emo. Boundaries, didn't think of it, I am a terrible person, Burdened and frustrated, he will not agree or reject it, didn't occur to set any boundaries because i loved her, questioning existence/ presence, wasn't worthy to communicate because never responded with care or understanding.
<i>What do i "at-least" hope/ hoped to get in return from my partner when i over-function or continuously give, in the relationship</i>	all or nothing (mutually), give and take, mutually invested (sometimes up and down is normal), give importance to things that matter to me, reciprocity, respect, mutually intention giving and receiving,		Mental peace, understanding, love, emotionally availability, same amount of efforts/ love, appreciate efforts, help/ support, empathy, attention, love, show importance, express like i matter, respect, reciprocity, appreciation, gratefulness, reciprocate similarly, emotional intimacy, meaningful intentional gestures, understand feelings, mutual investment, the same in return, expectation is disappointment waiting, efforts, time, trust, value, honesty, gratitude, listen and respond
<i>Things I wish I could change in my relationship, and in my partner towards me.</i>	Nothing	don't know	Involved in my life at deeper level, speak my real feelings, do not compromise my needs to save the relationship, if i didn't care so much, everything, something of the past in the rel., allow me in his inner personal space, understanding, maturity, giving some intentional time, not feeling less than my partner, show me off (social public acknowledgement), respect, life goals, liberal thoughts, take me seriously, prioritize me, change the casual attitude towards me, conflict handling, more connection emotionally, emotional availability, loyalty, possessiveness, long-distance, trust, efforts,

			value, commitment, take me seriously, being honest, showing affection
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Category 3	ADJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES		
Perception	Positive	Neutral	Conflictive
<i>Do you, or have you settled for less than you deserve in your relationship?</i>	19	2	10
<i>I often feel/felt not worthy, or unimportant to my partner because</i>	Don't feel like this; everyday gestures make me feel worthy; Respects and care about feelings/ work; felt heard/ values;	Long-distance	Partners emotional unavailability; feel invalidating after expressing things that are imp to me; lack of care/ love from partner; dismissed, doesn't hear/ understand; I feel not good as a partner; lack of understanding/ empathy; lack of communication; doesn't take care of my emotions/ vulnerabilities; ignored/ non-priority, misunderstandings; inconsiderate; disregard; it's all about his preferences (one-sided preferences); couldn't satisfy partners physical needs; Gaslighting/ manipulating behaviours; undervalued presence; Made felt inferior, undermined feelings/ expression of love

APPENDIX G- QUESTIONNAIRES

1. Gottman's Self-test Questionnaire- 4 horsemen

SELF-TEST (THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE)

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
1. At times, during an argument, I think it is best just not to respond at all.	_____	_____
2. During an argument I keep thinking of ways to retaliate.	_____	_____
3. During a hot argument I think, "It doesn't matter what you say" and I stop listening.	_____	_____
4. During arguments, it is important to me to point out inaccuracies or explain my position.	_____	_____
5. I don't get credit for all the positive things I do in our relationship.	_____	_____
6. When my partner is upset, I think "I don't have to take this kind of treatment."	_____	_____
7. When I see a glaring fault in my partner I can't recall my partner's positive qualities	_____	_____
8. I hate it when things in our discussions stop being rational.	_____	_____
9. My partner can be pretty stubborn, arrogant and smug at times	_____	_____
10. I let things build up for a long time before I complain. I don't complain until I feel very hurt.	_____	_____
11. I often feel a sense of righteous indignation when my partner is complaining.	_____	_____
12. I only bring up problems if I know I'm right and want my partner to accept my point of view.	_____	_____
13. I point out patterns and analyze my partner's personality as part of my complaints.	_____	_____
14. I think that it is best to withdraw to calm down, avoid a big fight and not get my feelings hurt.	_____	_____
15. I withdraw when my partner's emotions seem out of control.	_____	_____
16. In a disagreement, I think it's important to determine who is at fault.	_____	_____
17. In a discussion, I make general points instead of being specific about one situation or action.	_____	_____
18. In arguments I may be emotional, sarcastic, or call my partner names. Later, I regret this.	_____	_____
19. It's hard for me to see my partner's point of view when I don't agree.	_____	_____
20. When complaining to or about my partner, I use phrases like "you always" or "you never".	_____	_____
21. My partner is too touchy and gets his/her feelings hurt too easily.	_____	_____
22. To avoid blame, I have to explain why and how the problem arose	_____	_____
23. When my partner complains I feel like I just want to get away from there.	_____	_____
24. When my partner complains, I have to control myself to keep from saying what I really feel.	_____	_____
25. When my partner complains, I realize that I also have complaints that need to be heard.	_____	_____
26. In arguments, sometimes my response is to sigh, or roll my eyes.	_____	_____

SCORE: Circle any numbers you said "yes" to.	Your total
Criticism: 4 10 12 13 16 17 20	
Contempt: 2 7 9 18 19 21 26	
Defensiveness: 2 3 4 5 11 21 22 25	
Stonewalling: 1 3 6 8 14 15 23 24	

2. Commitment Questionnaire- adopted from Gottman's research on couples

COMMITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

For each of the following items answer the degree to which you agree or disagree with each item using the following numbering system:

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Strongly Disagree | 3. Neither Agree nor Disagree | 4. Agree |
| 2. Disagree | | 5. Strongly Agree |

- I feel confident that my partner will stay in this relationship even if we are in a rough patch.
- When I am feeling bad, my partner is willing to meet my needs.
- During a fight, my partner does not threaten to leave me.
- I am committed to this relationship.
- I consider my relationship rock solid.
- I would refuse to have sex with a person other than my partner.
- I will sometimes make major sacrifices for my partner even if it goes against what I need.
- I make sure that my partner feels loved by me.
- When my partner is sick, I think it is very important that I take care of him or her.
- When I compromise with my partner, I don't feel controlled and manipulated.
- Being a team is sometimes more important to me than my own needs
- I feel that my partner's financial security is in part my responsibility.
- If my partner were in emotional trouble, I would be there 100%.
- After an argument, I am not thinking that I could be happier with someone else.
- During a fight, I do not threaten to leave my partner.
- I am not waiting for someone better to come along.
- We are not usually engaged in a power struggle.
- I want to stay with my partner forever.
- No matter what's going on, I never fantasize about divorce or separation.
- No matter how bad things get I never long for the days when I was single.
- I never envy my friends who are single.
- I never fantasize about what life would be like being someone else's partner.
- I love it when my partner and I dream about our future together.
- I love thinking about my partner and I growing old together
- My worst nightmare is my partner dying before me.
- I feel loved by my partner.

Based on the work of Dr John and Dr Julie Gottman



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SENARIGHT

CHANGE THE WAY YOU LOVE

**Only few questions that were in alignment with the research aims, and objected are adapted from this questionnaire*