



## Digitalization of Expression of Love and Sexuality during Corona Virus Pandemic

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**Abstract:** With the lockdown situation due to Corona Virus pandemic, people are forced to stay at home. As a result, some are forced to stay away from their partners, while others are forced to spend full time with their partners. This has changed the needs of the people for how they express their love and practice sexuality. This paper brings out how digitalization and increasing use of technology have changed the ways people express their love and sexual desires. This paper highlights that something which is to be kept private and secret has gone online, giving new definition to the forms of intimacy.

**Index Terms** - love, sexual desires, online dating, boredom, Corona Virus

### I. INTRODUCTION

Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) has a great hit all around the world. It has not only affected the physical health of the public<sup>1</sup>, but also the economic health of various nations.<sup>2</sup> Research on this deadly virus is ongoing, and this research is not only to find a vaccine to cure this disease; but also to cover various other aspects, like how this virus has affected the life of migrant workers, health workers, about police and law and order personnel, media personnel, about businesses (both by size and by type of the industry), on various online platforms, childcare activities and work-from-home, about mental health, child labor and child abuse, domestic violence, and many others. These studies are conducted in various fields of literature like economics, sociology, gender studies, environmental studies, management, and many others, and off course health industry.<sup>3</sup> This paper is yet another research piece on corona virus, but is very different from earlier works. This paper is about sexuality and the changing modes of sexual expressions during this corona pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

The corona virus disease is a respiratory illness and the most effective solution for this is to maintain a distance of at least six feet from one another. It has spread all over the world, creating a pandemic situation. This corona pandemic has changed the life of people, and of the society as a whole. Being forced to stay at home and practicing physical distancing<sup>5</sup>, people have to compulsorily stay within close quarters with their family members and away from their friends, workplaces, and the wider community in general. As a result, the dynamics of the relationships, being it family relationships (with partners or other members in the family), distant partners, friendship ties, work colleagues and bosses, or other acquaintances, have undergone a huge change during this pandemic. Cases of marital conflict, domestic violence, and cases filed in law courts for divorce, abusive behavior of family members, pressure of work-from-home, balancing work-life dilemma for both men and women, all have made them realize that the bigger impact of this pandemic will be on individual's emotions, coming from social isolation, and not really physical distancing.<sup>6</sup> It seems that this physical distancing has created more of emotional distancing. In common terminology, this psychological behavior is aggregated into one term: *boredom* (Cipolla, 2020).

Boredom, as explained by Heidegger and further cited by Cipolla (2020), "... is a filling of [gap in] time, a situation that does not let it pass, does not allow it to go away, and that never makes it disappear from the mind. Boredom, for him, is a value in emptiness, living in the nothing that works for us, the boredom of one's being. It is destitution, dismay, astonishment." (P-229). Given that the pandemic situation has increased boredom among the people, this paper tries to answer how it changes erotic behavior of people. In general, how it changes the ways in which people express their love and affection, their sexual desires and excitement.

<sup>1</sup> Till date, more than 78 lakh people have been affected by this virus and more than 4.3 lakh have lost their lives; and the number is still increasing. (Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (accessed in June, 2020))

<sup>2</sup> Crash in stock market, negative oil prices, job losses, aviation industry downfall, flattening of economic growth curve, and many more, are few examples of how Covid-19 has affected the economic health of the nations. (Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225> (accessed in June, 2020)).

<sup>3</sup> By May 2020, literature published on corona virus has reached more than 23,000 papers and is doubling every 20 days. (Source: <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/05/scientists-are-drowning-covid-19-papers-can-new-tools-keep-them-afloat> (accessed in June, 2020))

<sup>4</sup> We will be using the terms "sexuality" and "sexual desires" interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> I am calling it "physical distancing", rather than the common terminology used "social distancing" because people can always be connected with each other socially, through internet and mobile phones. However, it's the physical distance between them that is important to be maintained.

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200601-how-is-covid-19-is-affecting-relationships> (accessed in June, 2020)

Understanding love and sexual desires is a complex phenomenon to study as it is related to human behavior and psychology. While romantic love serves a commitment related function, sexual desire is a more reproduction related function (Gonzaga, 2006). There are many studies conducted in developed countries to understand the sexual behavior, sexual desires, and sexual intercourse during the pandemic. Most of these studies find that the though the unsafe sex, number of sexual partners, and sexual interactions have declined during this corona pandemic, yet the frequency of sexual intercourse, and sexual desire have increased, leading to lower sexual satisfaction (Cocci et al., 2020; Yuksel and Ozgor, 2020; Li et al., 2020).

To understand the sexual desires and behavior, in this study, we tried to conduct a similar study among young Indian men and women by randomly selecting them from two sources: one from an online social networking site and the other from an online dating app.<sup>7</sup> The profiles of these individuals were also to be studied in detail, as it could reveal many things about the person, like sociability, agreeableness, neuroticism and openness (Hughes et al., 2012; Ivcevic and Ambady, 2012). Given the lockdown situation, this survey was supposed to be conducted online only, like other studies. However, we soon realize that this type of online survey has various drawbacks. First, there are very high chances that the person, to whom we contact, may not be a real person, and are just fake ids created.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we cannot be sure to whom we are talking is a genuine person or not. Second, since the survey was in online mode, the physical reaction and voice controls of the person were not observed and recorded. Physical reaction to a question, the way the question is answered, and the tone of the answer could have revealed many things about their emotions (like sadness, happiness, disgust, and others), if the survey would have been conducted in an offline mode (Noroozi et al., 2018). Third, given that we are dealing with a sensitive issue of an individual's sexual behaviors, it may very well be possible that the person does not say the truth. Privacy is very crucial border which is not to be crossed (Cipolla, 2020). Fourth, these results could have applied only to the sample under study (probably limited and conveniently collected samples) and cannot be generalized. Given these caveats of this survey, in this paper, we will rely more on secondary data sources. However, we may discuss some of our findings from whatever little survey we could do online.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in this paper, we do a survey of literature wherein we try to understand how the expression of love and sexual desires has changed during this corona pandemic. Through this paper, we try to answer that physical distancing due to lockdown has opened up new dimensions for expressing love and to satisfy physical and sexual needs, and other erotic behaviors. When all the other activities are going online, do love and sexuality have taken their routes towards online modes? Is it really the case that something which is supposed to be private and secret, has really gone online? Are new forms of intimacy getting developed between couples? These are the issues which are usually less studied and are less discussed about in academic world. This short essay tries to answer these questions. We also highlight some of the pros and cons of these changing contours of the expression of love between couples. Most of the material and facts covered in this paper are taken from the literature (especially scholarly articles), review articles, newspaper reports, and media coverage and published interviews.<sup>10</sup> The next section outlines the ways in which expression of love and sexual desires have changed for individuals in different stages of their love lives. Section 3 discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

## II. UNDERSTANDING CHANGING CONTOURS OF EXPRESSION OF LOVE AND SEXUALITY

One of the biggest solutions to reduce the spread of corona virus disease is to have physical distancing, which was ensured through world-wide lockdown situation, announced at various time and spaces. However, this may increase loneliness, sadness and worry among the people (Brodeur et al. 2020). The level of anxiety, stress and depression, especially among the younger age group of 15-35 years has increased (Kazmi et al., 2020). Many people have come up with innovative ways of reducing their boredom like fitness activities, cooking, dancing, reading, gardening, playing online games, and many others (Aggarwal, 2020). The usage of online platforms for entertainment and for work-from-home purposes has soared.<sup>11</sup> This section particularly answers if people resort to online platforms to fulfill their sexual desires. This is explained through different sub-sections, going through various stages of an individual's love life.

- **Search for marital partners versus enjoying online dating**

During lockdown due to corona virus pandemic, many traditional set-ups of finding a right match for marriage have reduced or have completely disappeared. Online matrimonial websites have seen a surge in their new registrations and increasing activities of already registered users.<sup>12</sup> Given that it's a lockdown situation, and people are at home, some are idle and some have saved their travelling time, those who are in marriageable age bracket, are surfing various matrimonial websites. Some websites are also providing free of cost services or discounted services for arranging meetings amongst the prospective parties (like Shadi.com and Jeevansathi.com). Some couples have even arranged their weddings and have tied the knot online, changing the social norms of marriages.<sup>13</sup> Though useful and may be an interesting way of living life again with the virus, some people are just using these services to kill their boredom. One of the respondents in our survey mentioned that:

<sup>7</sup> The author prefers not to disclose the names of these sites.

<sup>8</sup> Online dating apps have many fake ids. For more details, refer to <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dating-apps-bots-and-fake-profiles-online-cbsn-documentary/> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> The initial survey for this study was conducted in the form on discussions, having unstructured and open-ended questions. However, we soon realize that doing online discussions and getting answers on such sensitive issues like sexual intercourse, masturbation, number and type of relationships, extra-marital relationships, and others is difficult to do online and to get precise answers. Though National Family Health Survey (NFHS), an Indian version of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), has sections on sexual behavior of ever married men and women; however, those surveys are done face-to-face, with trained interviewers, ensuring full privacy. Given that our survey was supposed to be conducted online, even after ensuring full confidentiality and privacy, respondents may not be willing to answer such questions.

<sup>10</sup> All these are openly available sources and wherever required, their web links are mentioned in the paper.

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://yourstory.com/2020/04/coronavirus-ott-online-gaming-surge-lockdown-box-office-media/> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Source: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2020/apr/25/lockdown-gives-a-boost-to-indias-online-matrimony-websites-as-usage-surges-2135057.html> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://yourstory.com/weekender/virtual-weddings-celebration-shaadi-coronavirus> (accessed in June, 2020)

*“My parents were after my life to get married, but I am not mentally prepared for it. Under their pressure, I created my profile on JS [Jeevansathi.com]. Surprisingly, it is a good time pass, better than Aisle [a dating app]!!! It's a pleasure to talk to random girls and to discuss about each other's pasts. It even helps me in forgetting my ex...!!!”*

Many people actually get reminded about their past relationships during this boredom of lockdown and are tempted to text their ex and to make out with them.<sup>14</sup> These matrimonial websites have become a way by which individuals kill their time, and probably kill the desire to go back to their ex, by looking at photographs and doing online chatting with prospective matches. Not only this, online dating sites have also seen a flood in their new registrations during the pandemic. OkCupid has reported a 10 percent increase worldwide in new matches, while Bumble has an 84 percent increase in voice calls and video chats in the month of March, leading to an increase in cyber affairs.<sup>15</sup>

- **Innovation in expressing love to fiancé**

Not only the people who are starting their search for their right partners, people whose marriages were cancelled or postponed, are exploring innovative options of dating their fiancé, like organizing online lunches, dinners, coffee time, and virtual tours. Online dating via various platforms like Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, have made the couples to come closer virtually.<sup>16</sup> However, some couples face difficulties which are difficult to overcome in traditional Indian households. One of the respondents explained the problem as follows:

*“We [the respondent and her fiancé] met in an arranged marriage setup and got engaged. Our wedding was in May, which got cancelled due to lockdown. I chat with him over Whatsapp. But, given my family setup, I can't do anything more. I can't talk to him endlessly, can't dress up for him, and can't do video calling...!!! It's now been almost two months that I have seen him.”*

While another respondent, explaining her affection for her fiancé responded,

*“I really miss to be with him, his love, his loving gestures, his hugs... I can't ask for a sexting or phone sex to him. I don't want him to judge me, but I really miss him... I have to watch porn and do masturbating to relieve myself.”*

An estimate shows that during the corona virus pandemic, sales of sex toys have increased tremendously.<sup>17</sup> To satisfy their emotional and physical needs, people resort to masturbating, pornography and solipsism. Masturbating, which was earlier considered to be a sinful activity, has now become the need of the hour, and has actually increased during the lockdown (Cipolla, 2020). In fact, a study has argued that masturbating can actually be a good way to cope up with stress and anxiety caused by being away from your loved ones during the lockdown situation.<sup>18</sup> Porn viewing has also increased many folds during lockdown. It is again used as a way to reduce loneliness and anxiety. As per a study, Pornhub, the world's largest pornography website, has reported large increase in its traffic during the lockdown period.<sup>19</sup>

- **Marital relationships, domestic violence, extra marital affairs and divorce rates**

Marital relationships are always tricky to handle. Something which is beautiful and fun in the beginning dies out over a period of time. Given the lockdown situation, couples are stuck in their homes, spending more time together, within the confined four walls of the house, sharing responsibilities (of not only work-from-home, but also of work-for-home), away from social support from friends, relatives, and the community in general. Though for some people, it is an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with their partners, both emotionally and physically, on the other hand, it is giving some others a realization that this is not what they wanted.

With the office work, daily routine jobs, busy life, managing finances, many couples may not be able to think about their sex lives. Lockdown period has given them an opportunity to reconnect with their partners and increase their “sexual currency”.<sup>20</sup> It is the time when they nourish their desires and fill in their long-term monogamous relationship with some excitement by doing fun activities together.<sup>21</sup> It may even give an opportunity for separated couples to come closer to each other and in helping them out in worst situations of lockdown, thus improving their relationships.<sup>22</sup>

However, on the other hand, there are cases, where the relationships between partners have undergone on a negative track. Domestic abuse and domestic violence have increased worldwide, which is now being referred to as “intimate terrorism” to reflect the plight of women within a household (Taub, 2020). Reduced job opportunities, confinement into small spaces, balancing work-from-home and domestic duties (without any external help), and managing financial crises are some of the reasons cited for increasing cases of domestic

<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/life/why-you-want-to-text-your-ex-right-now/12154564> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.instyle.com/lifestyle/cyber-affairs-are-rise-during-coronavirus-lockdowns> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-zoom-date-single-life-during-a-pandemic> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/04/26/sex-toys-are-buzzing-with-social-distancing-from-covid-19-coronavirus/#3859a7be28e6> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.india.com/lifestyle/coronavirus-pandemic-health-officials-suggest-masturbating-can-be-good-for-you-during-this-outbreak-3984538/> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://theconversation.com/porn-use-is-up-thanks-to-the-pandemic-134972> (accessed in June, 2020). For more details, refer to Mestre-Bach, G., Blycker, G. R., & Potenza, M. N. (2020). Pornography use in the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*

<sup>20</sup> “sexual currency” can be anything, other than sex, that one does with his/her partner to boost their sexual relationships and sexual desires

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/10/sexual-healing-using-lockdown-to-ignite-desire> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/keep-connected/2020/apr/23/lockdown-made-me-realise-whats-important-meet-the-families-reconnecting-remotely> (accessed in June, 2020)

violence (Tewari and Pandey, 2020). India's National Commission for Women (NCW) has registered a significant increase in the number of complaints filed for domestic violence in the month of April, compared to the month of March.<sup>23</sup>

The lockdown situation has even resulted in some couples to resort to court for ending their relationships. As per a matrimonial lawyer, some of the couples, who are married for over ten years, are waiting for the courts to reopen to file for divorce. Some of these lawyers get around ten calls per day for such cases.<sup>24</sup> Though some of these cases are related to inability of couples to reside together, balancing their work lives from homes; some other cases are related to infidelity. And majority of such infidelity cases happen through online sexting and cybersex.<sup>25</sup>

Though online platforms have provided the couples with innovative ways of expressing their love and sexual desires, online sexting and cybersex have negative effects as well, which is reflected by increasing online extra marital affairs during the corona virus lockdown period. The world's first extra marital dating app, Gleeden has more than one million users in India alone. A report says that this app has witnessed a 166 percent increase in the number of users in the months of March and April, compared to the months of January and February. Majority of these new users come from big metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Kolkata. These are usually young educated professionals, looking to curb down their boredom through virtual romance during lockdown.<sup>26</sup> Though it may not be a good sign for marital relationships in India, yet it provides a platform to women to find affection and comfort when they are stuck in unwanted relationship and do not have physical shoulders of their friends, colleagues, and neighbors, during this pandemic to cry on and to resolve their issues.

### III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper presents the extent to which the dimensions of love relationships have changed during the corona virus pandemic. Though expression of love is always crucial to strengthen the bond of togetherness between two people in a relationship, this was hit by physical distancing and the on-and-off lockdowns. Digital platforms provided couples with new opportunities for celebrating their love online, and continue with their commitments in innovative ways, thus increasing web eroticism. Secured video calling, sex chats, cyber affairs, and cybersex, have allowed people to be with each other virtually and to satisfy their physical and sexual desires, even when they are distant apart due to lockdowns, what is called *widespread solipsism*. This was summarized by Cipolla (2020) in his several reasons for why digital eroticism has skyrocketed. These are: accessibility, free of charge, prosthetic, free from time and space, anonymity, availability, satisfying, safe, pleasurable, personal sovereignty, and do-it-yourself obsession. These online platforms have also increasingly become a source for reducing anxiety, stress and boredom during the lockdowns, especially for singles and long-lived married couples.

It is both the need to find love and affection as well as the need to reduce stress and boredom that has changed the ways in which people used to express their love and practice sexuality. Though it has increased virtual adultery, infidelity and extra-marital affairs, yet it is the cheapest, the simplest, easily available and self-propelled, technologically driven way to satisfy sexual desires. Since it seems that the corona virus will stay with us for a long period of time, digitalization of expression of love and sexuality can take different forms altogether once the lockdown is lifted completely, and people try to get back to their normal routine lives. It has and will create new definitions of intimacy. Whether it will create a debate between modernity, culture and morality; and whether it will lead to social devaluation of human sexuality is hard to answer right now. However, it is clear that there is a digital revolution for satisfying the need and to gain pleasure, irrespective of whether it is related to non-sexual issues or related to love and sexual desires. And all this is because of the ever-increasing fear of corona virus pandemic.

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<sup>23</sup> Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/locked-abusers-india-domestic-violence-surge-200415092014621.html> (accessed in June, 2020)

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<sup>25</sup> Source: <https://www.instyle.com/lifestyle/cyber-affairs-are-rise-during-coronavirus-lockdowns> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Source: <https://www.indulgexpress.com/gadgets/2020/may/11/extramarital-dating-app-gleeden-crosses-one-million-users-in-india-24868.html#:~:text=Extramarital%20dating%20app%2C%20Gleeden%2C%20crosses%20one%20million%20users%20in%20India,-Ana%20M&text=Gleeden%2C%20the%20world's%20first%20discreet,group%20of%2034%2D49%20years.> (accessed in June, 2020).

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