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**Forms and prevalence of physical abuse in dating relationships
among South Indian college-going students**

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Abstract

Context and relevance. Dating violence, characterized by abusive behaviors within romantic relationships, can occur among individuals of any age. However, little is known about adolescent dating violence in South India, making it an understudied area. The present study addresses this research gap by examining physical abuse in adolescent dating relationships. **Objective.** This explorative study aimed to explore the forms and prevalence of physical abuse among college-going adolescents in Bangalore, Karnataka, South India. **Methods and materials.** A total of 80 college-going adolescents ($M_{age}=16.68$ years, range: 16 to 18 years) were recruited using a purposive sampling method. Data were collected using a socio-demographic sheet and the Safe Dates- Physical Violence Victimization Scale. The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive analysis (frequencies and proportions). **Results.** It indicated that 63.7% ($N=51$) of college-going adolescents reported experiencing physical abuse by their partners. Among these, male adolescent students accounted for 55% ($N=28$) and female students 45% ($N=23$). The most common form of physical abuse reported by male adolescent students was "Threw something at me that hit me", and in contrast, female adolescent students reported "Slapped me" as the most common form of physical abuse experienced by their partner in the present study. **Conclusions.** This finding suggests the need for a multifaceted approach that involves psychoeducation programs, policy enforcement, and support for victims. This study also highlights the importance of the involvement of mental health professionals in colleges or universities for timely screening, diagnosis, and treatment.

Keywords: dating violence, physical abuse, adolescents, mental health, education institution

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Резюме

Контекст и актуальность. Насилие в романтических отношениях, характеризующееся абьюзивным поведением между партнерами, может возникать у людей любого возраста. Однако в Южной Индии подростковое насилие в период свиданий остается малоизученной проблемой. Настоящее исследование восполняет данный научный пробел, изучая физическое насилие в подростковых романтических отношениях. **Цель.** Данное исследование было направлено на изучение форм и распространенности физического насилия среди подростков, обучающихся в колледжах города Бангалор, штат Карнатака, Южная Индия. **Методы и материалы.** В исследовании приняли участие 80 подростков, обучающихся в колледжах (средний возраст = 16,68 лет; диапазон: 16—18 лет), отобранных методом целенаправленной выборки. Сбор данных осуществлялся с использованием социально-демографической анкеты и шкалы виктимизации физического насилия Safe Dates. Полученные данные были проанализированы с использованием описательной статистики (частоты и процентные соотношения). **Результаты.** Результаты показали, что 63,7% (N = 51) подростков, обучающихся в колледжах, сообщили о пережитом физическом насилии со стороны партнера. Среди них 55% (N = 28) составили юноши и 45% (N = 23) — девушки. Наиболее распространенной формой физического насилия, о которой сообщали юноши, было «бросал(а) в меня предмет, который попал в меня», тогда как девушки чаще всего отмечали форму насилия «дал(а) пощёчину». **Выводы.** Полученные данные указывают на необходимость многоаспектного подхода, включающего программы психологического образования, реализацию и контроль политики предотвращения насилия, а также поддержку жертв. В исследовании также подчеркивается важность участия специалистов в области психического здоровья в колледжах и университетах для своевременного скрининга, диагностики и оказания помощи.

Ключевые слова: насилие в романтических отношениях, физическое насилие, подростки, психическое здоровье, образовательные учреждения

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Introduction

Dating violence (DV) is regarded as a serious public health concern around the world and is characterised by recurrent patterns of abusive behaviors within intimate relationships, which may result in physical, emotional, or psychological harm to the individuals involved¹ (Lane, Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Shorey, Cornelius, Bell, 2008; Swart et al., 2002). Several types of DVs are expressed in various ways, impacting individuals from diverse age groups and backgrounds (Foshee et al., 2007; Smithers, 2019). The very first research on intimate partner violence in dating relationships was conducted by James Makepeace in 1981. He emphasised the importance of addressing violence within these types of relationships. Subsequent studies have indicated that physical violence is not exclusive to marital relationships but also occurs within the dating context. Physical abuse among college-going adolescents is a prevalent issue that affects individuals in dating relationships. It occurs when the offender intentionally or unintentionally causes the victim to experience physical pain or injury through aggression (Hsiu, Sun, 2003; McLeod et al., 2023; Knyazyan, Marabyan, 2023). Reportedly, only one-third of teens in abusive relationships ever disclose the abuse they experience². Hence, the current study focuses on physical abuse, which encompasses a range of behaviors, such as hitting, slapping, kicking, pushing, throwing objects, or any other form directed at a partner.

Previous studies investigating dating violence among the student community globally have reported physical violence rates ranging from 9% to 57% (Amar, Gennaro, 2005; Jeries-Loulou, 2022; O'Leary et al., 2008). According to a conducted review, it was found that 26% to 46% of American adolescents experienced physical violence (Hickman, Jaycox, Aronoff, 2004). Another study from Spain reported that 40% of adolescents had engaged in physically aggressive behaviors against their partners (Mouradian, 2000). However, in India, physical violence among students was reported to be 39% in a study carried out in Pune (Sellers, Bromley, 1996). In a previous study conducted in Bangalore among university students, Anand et al. (2022) reported that 13,5% of female students reported experiencing physical violence in a dating relationship (Siddaiah, Danpalnayak, Ningaraj, 2021). The variation in the prevalence highlights the specific context of dating violence prevalence within the local population and emphasises the need for more investigation into forms of physical violence (Peterman, Bleck, Palermo, 2015).

Population-based research has consistently established a connection between various forms of dating violence and a broad spectrum of detrimental health consequences. These effects encompass diverse areas, including physical complaint (Jerjes-Loulou, 2022), emotional distress (Callahan, Tolman, Saunders, 2003), substance addiction (Coker et al., 2000), depression and anxiety (Harned, 2001), and posttraumatic stress disorder (Callahan, Tolman, Saunders, 2003). Recent studies have not only unveiled new outcomes but also deepened our comprehension of the impact of dating violence. Notably, there is a robust correlation between dating violence and suicidality, establishing dating violence as a risk factor for marital violence later in life (Malik, Sorenson, Aneshensel, 1997). Additionally, dating violence has been associated with adverse educational outcomes, negatively influencing future opportunities and academic performance (Park et al., 2006; Swart et al., 2002).

¹ *Dating violence prevention*. (2019). Youth.gov. URL: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/teen-dating-violence/prevention> (viewed 20.07.2024).

Prevalence of teen dating violence. (2019). Youth.gov. URL: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/prevalence-teen-dating-violence> (viewed 20.07.2024).

² O'Keefe, M. (2005). *Teen Dating Violence: A Review of Risk Factors and Prevention Efforts*. VAWnet. URL: https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/AR_TeenDatingViolence.pdf (viewed 20.07.2024).

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The severity of dating violence and its impact on society today highlight the need to identify its prevalence, forms, and contributing factors. Since the adolescence period is marked as a crucial stage for the initiation of romantic relationships and a notable research gap concerning adolescent experiences in this area exists, it is essential to delve into this topic further, especially in the South India context, as this problem is not limited to only Western nations. The present study addresses this gap by conducting a cross-sectional descriptive investigation examining the prevalence and forms of dating violence, particularly physical abuse, among college-going adolescents in Bangalore, Karnataka, South India. The outcome of this study may, in turn, provide insight into the planning of effective preventive programs for students at universities/education institutions.

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Materials and methods

Objective. The study aims to investigate the prevalence and forms of physical abuse among college-going adolescent students.

Study Design and Sampling. The present study adopts a cross-sectional descriptive research design and employs a survey approach to gather information on physical abuse among adolescent college-going students in Bangalore, Karnataka, South India. In this regard, 80 participants, including male and female adolescent students, were recruited using a purposive sampling method. The inclusion criteria included students who had a dating relationship of at least one year, who fell within the age range of 16 to 18 years, who had enrolled in pre-university or graduation courses in Bangalore city, and who were willing to provide informed assent for participation in this research study. The exclusion criteria included students who were unable to participate in the informed assent process, who had not enrolled in regular courses, who did not belong to the age group of 16 to 18 years, and who were not in a dating relationship for at least one year.

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Measures and Procedure. Study participants who fulfilled the criteria to take part in the study were given a sociodemographic sheet and the Safe-Dates Physical Victimization scale developed by Foshee et al., (1998). The sociodemographic sheet elicited participants' information, such as gender, age, geographical location, education stream, and type of scholar. The Safe-Dates Physical Violence Victimization Scale was used to measure participants' experience of being victimized by physical violence in the context of a dating relationship. This scale consisted of 16 items with a four-point Likert scale: never, 1 to 3 times, 4 to 9 times, and 10 or more times. Responses were analysed by summing the scores of all the items and dividing them by the number of items. A high score is indicative of greater abuse. Internal consistency of this scale has been reported as 0,91.

Data Analysis. The collected data were analysed utilising the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21. First, the prevalence of physical abuse among adolescent students was calculated using descriptive analysis (frequency and proportions). Subsequently, the most prevalent forms were identified by examining the means and standard deviations.

Results

The results in terms of sociodemographic, the sample was relatively balanced by gender, with 57,5% male and 42,5% female participants. In terms of the participants' state of origin, an equal distribution was observed, with 50% from Karnataka and 50% from outside Karnataka. The majority of participants were enrolled in Arts (45%), followed by Science (43,75%) and Commerce (11,25%). Of these, 66,25% were day scholars and 33,75% resided in the hostel (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the study population (N = 80)

Demographic Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	46	57,5
Female	34	42,5
State		
Karnataka	40	50
Outside Karnataka	40	50
Education Stream		
Arts	36	45
Commerce	9	11,25
Science	35	43,75
Scholar Type		
Day Scholar	53	66,25
Hostelite	27	33,75

Table 2 presents the prevalence of physical abuse among the study participants. A significant portion (56,2%, N = 45) of college-going adolescent students reported experiencing physical victimisation in a dating relationship, with incidents occurring between 1 and 3 times. A total of 7,5%

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(N=6) experienced more frequent physical victimisation, occurring 3 or more times, and only a significant portion, 36,2% (N = 29), reported no instances of physical victimisation.

Table 2

Prevalence of physical abuse among college-going adolescent students (N = 80)

Physical Victimization Levels	N	%
No Physical Victimization	29	36,2
Victimization occurred 1 to 3 times	45	56,2
Victimization occurred 3 or more times	6	7,5

According to the gender difference in physical abuse (see Table 3), more than one-third of the male participants (N = 18, 35,3%) reported no history of physical victimisation, compared to only 21,5% (N = 11) of the female participants. However, a substantial proportion of both genders reported experiencing concerning physical victimisation, and the incidence was greater for males (54,8%, N = 28) than for females (45,1%, N = 23). The distribution of victimisation occurrences, spanning from 1 to 3 times and 3 or more times, exhibits a comparable pattern between male and female participants.

Table 3

Prevalence of physical abuse among college-going adolescent students

Physical Victimization Levels	Male (N)	%	Female (N)	%
No Physical Victimization	18	35,3	11	21,5
Victimization occurred 1 to 3 times	25	49,0	20	39,2
Victimization occurred 3 or more times	3	5,8	3	5,8

Table 4 presents a comprehensive overview of the reported forms of physical abuse among both male and female adolescent students. The reported common form of physical abuse experienced by male students spans a spectrum, including less severe acts such as scratching and biting, as well as more forceful actions such as pushing, grabbing, shoving, and having objects thrown. Notably, the most prevalent form reported by male students was "Threw something at me that hit me," followed by "Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me," "Bent my fingers," and "Scratched me."

Similarly, female students reported experiencing a range of physical abuse, encompassing less severe acts such as physically twisting arms and kicking, as well as more severe actions, including slapping, bending fingers, and having objects thrown. The most prevalent form reported by female students was "Slapped me," followed by "Threw something at me that hit me," "Bent my fingers," and "Kicked me."

While the reported forms of physical abuse are concerning, it is important to note that neither male nor female participants reported experiencing the most severe acts. These include abuse such as "Tried to choke me", "Assaulted me with a knife or gun", or "Burned me".

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Table 4

Forms of physical abuse as reported by female and male adolescent students (N = 80)

Physical Abuse Items	Female		Male	
	Total	Mean	Total	Mean
Scratched me	3	0,09	6	0,13
Slapped me	13	0,38	4	0,09
Physically twisted my arm	5	0,15	3	0,07
Slammed me or held me against a wall	0	0,00	0	0,00
Kicked me	5	0,15	3	0,07
Bent my fingers	6	0,18	7	0,15
Bit me	3	0,09	5	0,11
Tried to choke me	0	0,00	0	0,00
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me	4	0,12	8	0,17
Dumped me out of a car	0	0,00	0	0,00
Threw something at me that hit me	6	0,18	13	0,28
Burned me	0	0,00	0	0,00
Hit me with a fist	3	0,09	2	0,04
Hit me with something hard besides a fist	0	0,00	0	0,00
Beat me up	0	0,00	0	0,00
Assaulted me with a knife or gun	0	0,00	0	0,00

Discussion

Our study on physical victimisation among college-going adolescent students in a metropolitan city, Bangalore, Karnataka, South India, revealed that adolescent dating violence is very common among college students with notable patterns and variations in the experiences of dating-related victimisation.

The substantial incidence of physical victimisation uncovered in our research is a matter of significant concern. Our findings in this study indicate that dating-related violence is notably common, with a prevalence of 63,7%. The majority of participants, constituting 56,2%, reported experiencing physical victimisation between 1 and 3 times, while 7,5% acknowledged more frequent occurrences occurring 3 or more times. These results resonate with those of international studies, such as those conducted in Taiwan, which found that 66% of students experienced at least one form of dating violence (Hird, 2000). However, compared to other studies in India and globally, the prevalence reported in our study appears to be notably greater. Studies in India (Amar, Gennaro, 2005; Jeries-Loulou, 2022) and elsewhere, such as in Spain and Hong Kong (Mouradian, 2000; Chan et al., 2008), reported lower rates of dating-related physical aggression.

The observed gender disparity in our study, with male students reporting higher prevalence rates of concerning physical abuse than their female counterparts, is consistent with established research on the intricate dynamics of intimate relationship violence (Flisher et al., 2007; Hird, 2000; Straus, 2004; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). Surprisingly, our findings also align with recent research, where

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female students reported committing more mild and physical abuse than male students did (Villegas et al., 2020).

The identified forms of physical abuse reported by both male and female adolescent students in our study align with the existing literature on dating violence, emphasising the range and complexity of behaviors within dating relationships (Foshee et al., 2007; Murray, Azzinaro, 2019; Mouradian, 2000). Scratching, biting, pushing, grabbing, shoving, and throwing objects are consistent with the documented repertoire of behaviors associated with dating violence.

The unexpectedly high prevalence of reported physical abuse among males may be attributed to several contributing factors. Primarily, societal norms prescribing male dominance often result in underreporting of abuse by males, driven by fear of facing stigma or challenges to their masculinity (Meneghel, Portella, 2017; Aborisade, 2023). However, the observed disparity suggests that additional influences are in play. Factors such as heightened awareness and support for male victims, evolving attitudes towards victimisation irrespective of gender, and improved reporting mechanisms could collectively foster a greater willingness among males to disclose instances of abuse (Siddaiah, Danpalnayak, Ningaraj, 2021).

The emergence of female-perpetrated physical abuse in relationships can be understood within the context of generational shifts and changing societal dynamics. While traditional gender roles may constrain females from expressing themselves physically, contemporary shifts have challenged these constraints, granting females greater autonomy and agency in their interactions (DeSalvo, 2023). As a result, some females may engage in physical aggression as a means of asserting power or defending themselves within relationships (Iwemjiwe, Okojie, 2016; Bair-Merritt et al., 2010). This behavior may also be influenced by a history of victimisation and trauma, substance abuse, and a history of violence across relationships and situations (DeSalvo, 2023).

Although the research conducted in Western countries has advanced our understanding of the nature and consequences of dating-related physical violence, dating violence is a rarely discussed social and health problem in India. Hence, the findings of the present research highlight the urgency of addressing and understanding the multifaceted nature of dating-related physical victimisation in the college-going adolescent population in India. Further research and targeted interventions are warranted to delve more deeply into the underlying factors contributing to the high prevalence rates and gender disparities identified in our study.

Conclusions

The present research, which focused on adolescent college students in Bangalore, Karnataka, South India, revealed a startling 63,7% prevalence rate of dating-related physical victimisation. Furthermore, compared to female students, male students reported greater prevalence rates. The physical abuse behaviors that have been found, such as biting, pushing, shoving, grabbing, and throwing objects, are consistent with the variety of behaviors that have been reported in the literature on dating violence. To address this high incidence and gender discrepancies among adolescents attending college in urban settings, immediate action, including specific interventions and awareness programs in educational institutions, is needed. This study also highlights the importance of the involvement of mental health professionals in colleges or universities for timely screening, diagnosis, and treatment.

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Future Research

It should explore socio-cultural and psychological factors contributing to high dating-related physical victimization rates among college students in Bangalore. Examining the impact of traditional gender roles, societal norms, mental health, substance abuse, and prior trauma on victimization and perpetration behaviors is crucial. Longitudinal studies and qualitative research capturing personal narratives can provide deeper insights. Collaborating with international researchers to compare findings across cultural contexts can enhance targeted interventions. These efforts will help develop effective prevention strategies tailored to the unique needs of this population, promoting healthier relationships and reducing violence.

Limitations. Using only the Safe Dates Physical Violence Victimization Scale may not fully capture the complexity of physical abuse, and participants' responses could have been influenced by social desirability or fear of judgment. Contextual factors such as family environment or peer influence were not examined. Additionally, the findings are limited to adolescents aged 16—18 years in Bangalore and may not generalize to other regions or age groups.

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