

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Patterns of romantic relationships and dating among youth in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to assess objectively patterns of romantic relationships and dating among the youth in Sri Lanka. Using a structured, pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire, a field survey was conducted in a sample of 1,100 unmarried 15-24-year old youth in Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, and Hambantota districts in the latter part of 2019, selected from various vocational and training centres, tuition classes, and NGOs. Of the 1,100 persons contacted, 1,057 completed the questionnaire. In the sample, 89% admitted having had one or more romantic relationships. Some 19% and 10% of males and females respectively reported having three or more such relationships. The proportion of males and females who had been romantically engaged at the time of the survey was 83% and 86% respectively. The continuation of romantic relationships was higher among females compared to their male counterparts with around 62% of the females continuing their present relationships for more than 2 years as compared to 51% of males. Over 81% of the unmarried males having romantic relationships at the time of the survey, went out with their girlfriends while 85% of the unmarried females reported the same. This widespread prevalence of romantic relationships among youth could have both positive and negative effects on young people, so parents, educational authorities, and policymakers should neither over react to nor ignore this objective reality.

Keywords: Romantic relationships, dating, youth, Sri Lanka

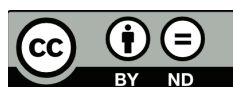
INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Organisation defines youth as those in the age group of 15-24 years, the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. In 2019, the youth represented approximately 16% of the global population,

or nearly 1.2 billion out of the total population of 7.5 billion (United Nations, 2019). The family has a tremendous influence on the early development of one's psychological and social behaviour that greatly shapes one's adult life. Children usually adapt to their parents' occupational and social backgrounds to build their own image in society. Furthermore, while growing into adulthood, they expand their intimate relationships with others, particularly during adolescence based on their existing family background. The secondary socialisation of an individual occurs with formal education through the school environment and peer groups and later, due to other close relationships they develop with employment, family, romance, and media. (Maryville University, 2021; Kumarasinghe, De Silva & Goonatilaka, 2021).

What is this entity called love? According to Fisher *et al.* (1990), it is one of the five basic emotions – joy, love, anger, sadness, and fear. As love is considered positive, today young men and women throughout the world generally consider love to be a prerequisite for courtship and marriage. The general opinion is that love is an emotional attachment one develops towards specifically identified objects or people. The physiological basis of love is “attraction to the opposite sex”. There is a tendency in society to recognise and appreciate different facets of love such as face-to-face interaction, attention seeking, shared emotions, and various other factors that make love the basis of a complex, intimate relationship. Adolescence is the stage in one's life where an individual usually commences love, dating, and sexual behaviour (Synnott, 2017).

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Dating is a competitive and “aim-inhibited form of association between the sexes”, in the period of romance which can happen at any time between puberty and mating. The concept of dating usually appears only when large numbers of youth who due to various reasons postpone their marriage (Lowrie, 1951). Until the late 90s, South Asian cultural norms promoted entering into nuptial bonds at an early age. For many years, the average age of entry into marriage in Sri Lanka was above 25 years and 28 years for women and men, respectively (De Silva *et al.*, 2010). The gap between puberty and marriage widened in the last century, increasing the role played by romance, dating, and sex before marriage, especially among youth.

Many young men and women in Sri Lanka are accustomed to meeting, falling in love, having sexual desires for one another, and either living together or getting married, whereas in the past, marriages were frequently arranged by parents. A large proportion of young people engage in a prolonged phase of education, including tuition, technical and vocational training, and higher education. In general, young people who engage in higher or technical education avoid marriage until they complete their studies. As described in previous research, although they postpone their marriage, most of them tend to engage in romantic relationships. As such, the objective of the study is twofold: 1) to assess the level of prevalence and duration of romantic relationships, and 2) to identify the socio-economic characteristics of never-married youth with romantic relationships in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Romantic relationships and dating among the youth are common throughout the world, irrespective of their religion, race, culture, or geographical location. A national survey conducted in Sri Lanka in 2008, revealed that 38.9% of the males and 28.8% of the females among the youth were currently engaged in romantic relationships (De Silva, 2008). Five years later, a national youth health survey conducted in Sri Lanka in 2012/13 reported that the mean age for starting a romantic relationship was 17.0 years for boys and 17.3 years for girls (Family Health Bureau, 2013). Thus, romantic relationships among Sri Lankan youth remain common. Further, a study conducted among a group of university undergraduates in Sri Lanka found that 52% of the respondents were engaged in romantic relationships (Gunawardena *et al.*, 2012).

A study conducted by Silva *et al.* (1997) among university undergraduates and youth from an underprivileged urban community in the Kandy town,

revealed that the status of romance among youth was somewhat moderate. They stated that 62.9% of community male youth were currently engaged in romantic relationships whereas 50.7% of community females, 49% of university females and 39.3% of university males mentioned the same. These results differ from the finding that 25% of romantically engaged unmarried female youth employees at Katunayake Free Trade Zone in 2001. It was also discovered that the key reasons for the initiation and continuation of such relationships were that the young female employees depend on their partners on becoming familiar with their new surroundings and that they seek a source of motivation and a sense of security in such a relationship (Hettiarachchy & Schensul, 2001). Surprisingly, a study carried out in 2010, in a group of school-going youth in the Badulla district revealed that 37.6% of the males and 14.7% of the females were romantically engaged (Rajapaksa-Hewageegana, 2010).

Nevertheless, only a few studies have so far investigated the dating patterns among the youth in Sri Lanka. It is revealed that, at the early stages of their romantic relationships, the majority of the youth use religious places as their meeting points or travel together by automobiles. Once the relationships mature, the visiting places may change to beaches, cinema halls, and finally to hotels/lodges, etc. (De Silva, 2008).

In 1901, the age of puberty was considered 14 years while that of marriage was 18 years. In 2000 they were 12 years (the age of puberty) and 26 years (the age of marriage). It was noticed that, within the last century, the gap between puberty and marriage among females had increased from 4 years to 14 years (De Silva, 2015). However, the age of marriage had reduced to 24 years in 2016 (from 26 years in 2000). Nevertheless, it is common for girls in Sri Lanka not to marry at the point of puberty and wait for it nearly a decade (Department of Census and Statistics, 2017). It is inferred that this increased gap between puberty and marriage too might have contributed to the increase in romantic relationships and dating among the unmarried youth.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in 3 districts of Sri Lanka, selected for convenience, namely Nuwara Eliya, Puttalam and Hambantota. These 3 districts were selected to represent the basic socio-demographic characteristics of Sri Lankan youth population, such as ethnicity, religion, level of education, occupation (of the parents), and social sector.

Sample design and data collection

Considering the specificity of the three districts, the three respective samples were selected separately. The minimum sample size required for each district was determined, using a standard sample size calculation formula for proportions considered valid in 2019. Thus, the sample size for a single district was estimated to be 245. Considering the non-response pattern observed at the pre-testing level, the sample size was increased by 10%. Thus, the minimum sample was estimated to be 270 never-married youth of 15-24 years from each district. However, due to the complex nature of the study questions, it was decided to have a number slightly higher than 1000.

It was assumed that the youth away from their respective households, responded more genuinely, reporting on their intimate romantic relationships. Therefore, in order to collect reliable information from the participants, the youth were selected from various vocational and training centres and tuition classes and through NGOs in the selected districts. In addition, the research team decided to adopt a pre-tested self-administered questionnaire, as a suitable survey technique. Thereby the eligible youth of the selected districts were identified. Thereafter, they were requested to meet the researchers for self-reporting in connection with the survey questionnaire. The ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of Child Fund International.

RESULTS

Altogether 1,100 unmarried youth of 15-24 years old, from the three districts were contacted in this survey. Of them, 1,057 respondents completed the questionnaire in an acceptable manner. Basic information about this sample is given in Table 1.

Characteristics of the youth respondents

Of the sample of 1,057 youth respondents, approximately 55% were female, and 49% were in the 15-19-year age category; of the sample 29% came from Hambantota, 33% from Nuwara Eliya and 38% from Puttalam District (Table 1). Their ethnic composition was 59% Sinhala, 18% Sri Lanka Tamil, and the rest were Moor and Indian Tamil.

As for their educational achievement, 43% had completed the GCE (O/L) Examination, 30% G.C.E. (A/L) Examination, 11% had completed either a professional or a technical education programme; 8%

were university undergraduates, and 3% degree or diploma holders (Table 1).

An investigation of their main activities indicated that: a large proportion of them, namely 48% were receiving technical or university education; another 14% engaged in school education; almost 12% employed, and another 19% were searching for employment. Thus, of the total number of youth who responded to the survey, approximately 31% i.e., 558 employed and unemployed persons were in the labour force; around 4% were engaged in self-employment and another 2% were three-wheel drivers (Table 1). Approximately 7% (73 respondents) were reported to be idling – neither in education nor the labour force.

Youth exposure to romance

Responding to the question ‘Altogether how many romantic relationships have you had in your life?’, 89% has had one or more romantic relationships. Some 19% of males and 10% of females respectively reported they have had three or more romantic relationships. Over 83% of the males and 86% of the females reported that they were currently engaged in such relationships (Table 2). There was no noteworthy difference in the prevalence of romantic relationships by age. However, in the younger age cohort, a marginally higher proportion of males reported having romantic relationships compared to their female counterparts. This pattern was reversed in the 20-24 age group with females reporting a higher prevalence.

The current prevalence of romantic relationships among the unmarried youth in the three districts was examined and the results are reported in Figure 1. The highest proportion amounting to 90% of males in the Nuwara Eliya District reported that they were currently having romantic relationships, while the lowest proportion of males (70%) was observed in Hambantota. As high as 91% of females in Puttalam were involved in romantic relationships compared to 84% of females in Nuwara Eliya at the time of the survey. The survey results indicated that the prevalence of romantic relationships was higher among females compared to their male counterparts in both Puttalam and Hambantota districts, while Nuwara Eliya demonstrated the opposite.

The prevalence of romantic relationship at present among the unmarried youth by ethnicity were examined. As high as 91% of the Indian Tamil youth reported having love partners while the lowest proportion was reported among the Moor community (83%) (Figure 2). Most of the Indian Tamil males (95%) reported that they

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of youth respondents of 15-24 years

Variable	Percentage	Number
Living arrangement of respondent	91.2	964
With parents		
Away from parents	8.8	93
District of Residence		
Puttalam	38.5	407
Nuwara-eliya	32.6	345
Hambantota	28.9	305
Ethnicity		
Sinhala	58.8	621
Sri Lanka Tamil	17.9	189
Indian Tamil	10.2	108
Moor	12.8	136
Other	0.3	3
Religion		
Buddhist	49.6	524
Hindu	20.2	213
Muslim	12.8	136
Christian	17.1	181
Other	0.3	3
Respondent's main activity		
Full time student (School)	14.2	150
Full time student (Technical/University)/ etc.	48.3	511
Employed (Govt./Private)	5.5	58
Self-employed (Three wheel)	2.0	21
Self-employed (Other)	4.4	46
Searching employment	18.7	198
No engagement	6.9	73
Highest education attained		
Primary (1 -5 years)	0.6	6
Secondary (6 - 10 years)	4.5	48
Passed G. C. E. (O. L)	43.2	457
Passed G. C. E. (A .L)	30.4	321
Professional/technical	10.8	114
Undergraduate	7.7	81
Diploma/Degree	2.8	30
Total	100.0	1057

Table 2: Presently having romantic relationships by age and sex

Present love affair	Age in group					
	15-19 years		20-24 years		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	84.1	83.2	82.0	88.4	83.3	86.3
No	15.9	16.8	18.0	11.6	16.7	13.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	283	232	189	353	472	585

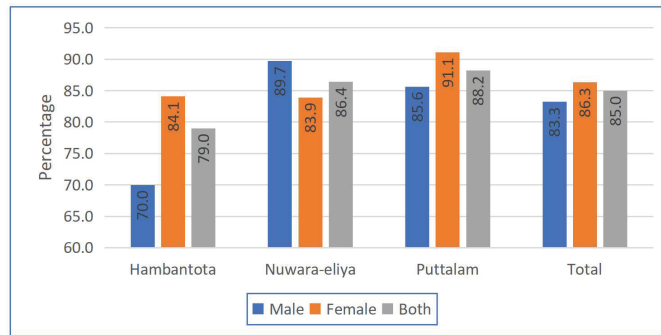


Figure 1: Proportion of youth presently having a romantic relationship by district and gender

were having romantic relationships, while only 79% of the Sinhalese male youth reported the same. Although the prevalence of romantic relationships was reported the lowest among the Sinhala males, their female counterparts reported the highest prevalence among the female youth of all ethnicities. Except for the Sinhala youth, a higher prevalence of romantic relationship among the male youth was observed compared to their female counterparts in all other ethnic groups (Figure 2).

Time of initiation of present love affair

The youth presently engaged in romantic relationships were questioned about the time of initiation of the relationship. Of the male youth almost 50% indicated that their present romantic relationships were initiated within the previous 2 years, i.e., 2018 and 2019 (Table 3). The corresponding figure for the females was only 38%. Another 38% of the males indicated that their present romantic relationships were initiated during 2016-2017, while among the females, over 46% initiated

during the same period. From these figures, it is surmised that the female youth tend to maintain their romantic relationships for longer periods compared to their male counterparts. For instance, 16% of females still maintain their present romantic relationships, which were initiated before 2016. However, among the males, it was only 13%.

Among the males of the 15-19 years cohort almost 54% initiated their present romantic relationships during the period 2018-2019, while among their female counterparts, it was only 46%. Among the youth of the 20-24-year age category, the corresponding values were lower than those of their younger cohort. Many males and females in the advanced age group had an opportunity to start their romantic relationships at the ages of 15-19 and maintain them for a longer period compared to their younger cohort. It is important to note that over 21% of females in the 20-24-year age category maintained their romantic relationships, which had been initiated before 2016. However, among the males the corresponding figure was 17% only (Table 3).

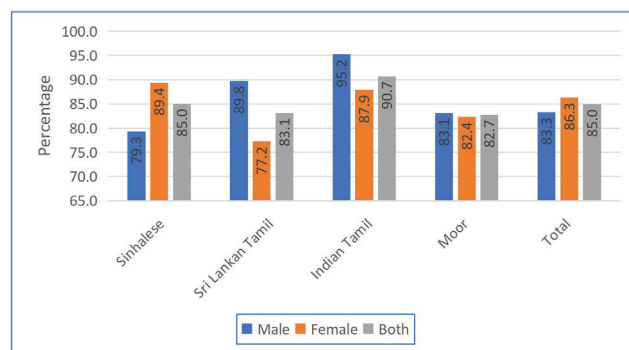


Figure 2: Proportion of youth presently having a romantic relationship by ethnicity and gender

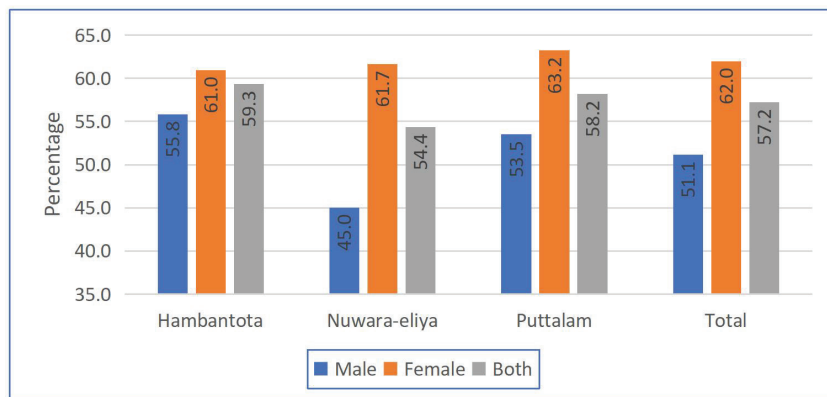
Table 3: Initiation of romantic relationships by age and gender

Year	Age in group					
	15-19 years		20-24 years		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	%	%	%	%	%	%
2018-19	53.8	46.1	41.3	33.0	48.9	38.0
2016-17	35.7	46.6	41.9	45.8	38.2	46.1
Before 2016	10.5	7.3	16.8	21.2	13.0	15.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	238	193	155	312	393	505

Of the total number of youths who were having romantic relationships, only 57% were able to maintain their relationship for more than two years (last block of Fig. 3). Among the male youth only 51% maintained the present romantic relationships for more than two years, while the corresponding figure for females stood at 62%. The gender variation was clearly visible among all three districts – a higher proportion of females maintained their romantic relationships for a longer period than their male counterparts. Among the females, the corresponding figure was 61-63% in each district, while the male figures were significantly lower (Figure 3). The highest gender disparity was noticed in Nuwara Eliya, where the maintenance period of their romantic relationships was

longer among females (63.2%) than that among males (45%).

The proportions of the youth who maintained the present romantic relationships for more than two years are classified by ethnicity and presented in Figure 4. The male and female respondents from the Moor community were more persistent in their romantic relationships compared to the other ethnic groups. For instance, 68% of Moor males sustained their romantic relationships for more than two years, whereas it was 48% among the Sinhalese and 57% among the Indian Tamils. It was also reported that, among the Moor females, 77% maintained their romantic relationships for more than two years.

**Figure 3:** Maintenance of romantic relationship for more than two years by district, ethnicity and gender

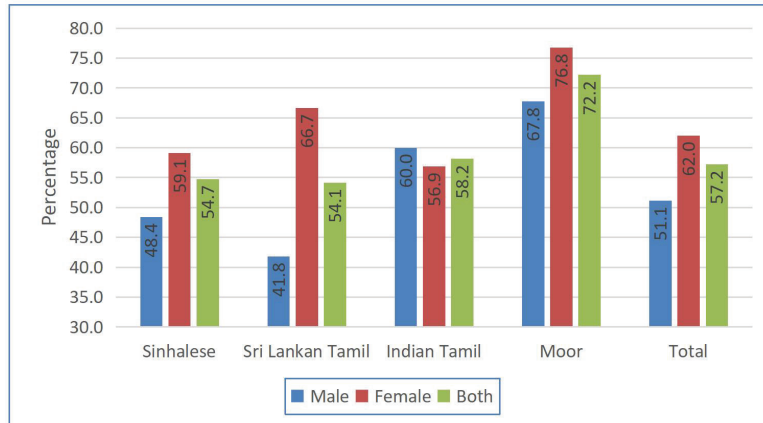


Figure 4: Proportion of youth maintaining present romantic relationship for more than two years by ethnicity and gender

The proportion of unmarried youth who reported presently having a romantic relationship did not differ by gender ($\chi^2=1.9166$, $df=1$, $p=0.16$) or age (15–19-year vs 20-24-year age groups) ($\chi^2=1.2638$, $df=1$, $p=0.26$).

Pattern of dating

Over 81% of unmarried males in the 15-24 age category who are presently having romantic relationships reported being inclined to go out with their girlfriends. However, 85% of the unmarried females in the same age group went out with their boyfriends (Table 4). Approximately, 75% of the males and over 83% of the females in the 15–19-year category interacted as lovers during their

outings. When the 20-24 unmarried group is considered, 91% and 85% of males and females respectively tended to go out with their lover. As results revealed, along with the advancement of age, the outgoing proportion in both male and female groups increased substantially. However, the increase is more evident among the males than the females.

The older youth (20-24-year group) are more likely than younger youth (15-19-year group) to date a boy/girlfriend ($\chi^2=11.51$, $df=1$, $p=0.001$). However, the proportion of the unmarried youth who reported presently dating their boyfriend/girlfriend did not differ by gender ($\chi^2=1.7998$, $df=1$, $p=0.17$).

Table 4: Proportion of youth who engage in dating with boy/girlfriend by age and gender*

Dating	Age in group					
	15-19 years		20-24 years		Total (15-24 years)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	74.8	83.4	91.0	85.3	81.2	84.6
No	25.2	16.6	9.0	14.7	18.8	15.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	238	193	155	312	393	505

*Note: Out of surveyed youth who are presently having a love affair (N=898)

DISCUSSION

Along with the significant change observed in the socio-economic environment of Sri Lanka, one may observe a rapid rise in the prevalence of romantic relationships among the youth compared to previous studies. Although there are no accurately comparable research findings from the past, there are a few studies available for such comparison. A national study published by the Plan Sri Lanka reported a comparatively low prevalence of ongoing romantic relationships compared to the present study (De Silva, 2008). According to the Plan Sri Lanka study, the prevalence of romantic relationships among males was only 38.9% compared to the 83.3% discovered in the present study (Table 5). Similarly, the prevalence of romantic relationships among females increased from 28.8% to 86.3% over the same period. Have these figures really increased from 2008 to 2019? Or is it due to methodological differences in data collection procedures adopted by the studies? These questions are answered in Table 5. The study by Silva *et al.* (1997) and the present study were conducted using self-administered questionnaires whereas De Silva (2008) and the National Youth Survey in 2013 were conducted using interviewer-administered questionnaires (Family Health Bureau, 2013). Therefore, the low prevalence in the 2008 and the 2012-13 studies, and the 1997 study and the present study could be so due to the variation in data collection methods in general. The respondents provide positive and culturally desirable answers to interviewer-administered questionnaires unlike those to self-administered questionnaires. What is perceived as socially undesirable behaviours are likely to be under-

reported in interviewer-administered surveys unlike self-administered ones (Bowling, 2005). Nevertheless, the National Youth Health Survey reported that the mean age for starting a romantic relationship was 17.0 years for boys and 17.3 years for girls (Family Health Bureau, 2013). This finding is consistent with the higher prevalence of romantic relationships among the youth observed in the current study.

The National Youth Survey conducted in 2012-2013 reveals similar percentages of youth having romantic relationships as reported by De Silva (2008) and Family Health Bureau (2013). The highest value is reported among the category of 20-24 years old male youth, namely 35.4%. It is followed by 33.6% for the 15-19 years old male group and 33.5% for the 15-19 years old female group. The least value is reported by a 20-24 year-old female youth. However, a significant rise in romantic relationships has been observed in the previous 5 years as the present study reveals much higher values (Table 5). As stated above, the method of data collection is supposed to have played a significant role in regard to the difference observed in the values.

A study conducted in the late nineties by Silva *et al.* (1997) among the youth in Kandy, specifically university undergraduate students, and the youth from underprivileged urban communities reveals a different picture. They state that close to two-thirds (62.9%) of the community of male youth had romantic relationships at the time of the study. It is followed by the values presented by the community females as 50.7%, the university females 49%, and the university males,

Table 5: Proportion of Sri Lankan youth reporting romantic relationships in different studies

	1997 ^a		2008 ^{**}		2012-13 ^{***}		Present study	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Yes	62.9	50.7	38.9	28.8	35.4	34	83.3	86.3
No	37.1	49.3	61.1	71.2	64.6	66	16.7	13.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	151	152	1115	1048	3707	4411	472	585

Notes: ^aThe age of study group was 17 to 28 years.

In the 1997 and the 2019 surveys, a self-administered approach was used. However, the 2008 and the 2012/13 surveys used a face-to-face interview approach. If the youth were requested to complete a questionnaire by themselves (self-completion), which contains questions about their romantic relationships, more reliable information about love relationships can be obtained presumably compared to that obtained through face-face interviews. On the other hand, the results reported can be interpreted as evidence for an actual increase in romantic relationships among youth over this period, due to changes in demographics, youth culture and the impact of media

Source: ^aSilva et al (1997); ^{**}-De Silva (2008); ^{***}Family Health Bureau (2013)

39.3%. Table 5 only illustrates that the urban community sample of young people was 17-28 years old and that the sample of university undergraduates was 23-28 years old. Interestingly, the advanced age of the study population in the university sample accompanied by freedom in the university does not show a correspondingly higher percentage of romantic relationships. Therefore, the total difference observed cannot be attributed to advanced age alone, as the present study shows the prevalence of romantic relationships among both gender groups more than the 1997 study by Silva *et al.*

In contrast to the study by Silva *et al.* (1997), a study conducted among a group of unmarried female youth employees at the Katunayake Free Trade Zone in 2001 revealed that only 25% of them had romantic relationships with a boyfriend. Although this study was conducted two decades back, young female workers in the free trade zone were considered more independent and enjoyed freedom in relationships in contrast with the majority of the Sri Lankan female youth. Therefore, we can assume that the prevalence of romantic relationships could be much lower in the general youth population in the early years of the last decade. Interestingly, this study further enumerates that romantic relationships, help these young female employees to gain knowledge of their new surroundings, keep motivated and initiate feelings of security (Hettiarachchy & Schensul, 2001).

A study carried out among the school-going youth in the Badulla District reveals that 37.6% (n=196) of the male youth had a romantic relationship whereas only 14.7% of female counterparts revealed the same (n=221). Thus, a relatively low percentage was reported in comparison to the other similar studies, since the study group was composed of only the younger category of youth of age group of 17-19 years (Rajapaksa-Hewageegana, 2010).

With the exception of Sinhala youth, among all other ethnic groups, male youth reported having a higher prevalence of romantic partnerships compared to their female counterparts (Figure 4). What can account for the reported higher prevalence of romantic relationships among young Sinhalese women compared to their male counterparts? In romantic relationships, it is customary among Sinhalese populations for the male partner to be older than the female counterpart. A relationship between an older woman and a younger man was seen as “problematic” by the community. Therefore, some of these young women may be dating an older man, which could explain why there are more young women in romantic relationships than young men (The Sunday Morning, 2019).

With the increase in the prevalence of romantic relationships, changes in the pattern of marriage have also become evident. Caldwell (2005) explored a shift in the pattern of marriage in Sri Lanka. It is stated that the shift from an arranged marriage to a love marriage ensued from the newly found freedom for youth including unchaperoned outings permitted for female youth. It is further described that arranged marriages were a feasible option where a specific group of society was restricted to a specific industry or occupation such as farming. However, such an environment is now extinct and with more attention paid to education and job opportunities leading to a comfortable living status, marriages with romantic relationships have been largely replaced arranged marriages.

In addition to the above-mentioned shift in the pattern of marriage, the median age at first marriage among women has increased from 23.4 years to 23.7 years over the period 2012-2016 (De Silva, 2016; Department of Census and Statistics, 2017). Further, the married women’s proportion has decreased in both the 15-19 year and 20-24-year age groups significantly, 10.6% to 6.1% and 43.2% to 39.6%, respectively. Therefore, it can be assumed that more youth used to be in the courting stage in 2016 rather than in a marital union compared to 2012. Many other factors, including higher education commitments, changing social environments, and empowerment of women have contributed to this increase in the age of marriage. Further, the lower labour force participation rate of women (30%) and their higher rate of unemployment must also be factored into the analysis. The high rate of unemployment among unmarried adolescents (18.7%) suggests that their entry into the labour force is quite recent and the avenues for absorption of their labour into the economy are still inadequate (Table 1). These factors, therefore, interact with an increase in romantic relationships among the youth in Sri Lanka.

Widger (2015) in his book on Suicide in Sri Lanka pointed out that the increased use of mobile phones and social media especially Facebook has greatly expanded opportunities for young people to initiate and sustain romantic relationships. This could be a possible factor in the shift observed from arranged marriages to marriages based on romantic relationships in contemporary Sri Lanka (Widger, 2015). Therefore, in-depth causative analytical studies are needed to explore the underlying causes for increases in the prevalence of romantic relationships among youth in Sri Lanka.

The number, as well as the nature of romantic relationships, have its own consequences. It is reported

around the globe that romance-related issues are the commonest reasons for youth checking into counselling services (Price *et al.*, 2016). Many researchers have stated that romantic relationships have a significant impact on mental health as well as psychological development in the early stages of youth. Furthermore, many researchers have found that younger youths who have love affairs have increased their stress levels, features of depression and anxiety compared to those who are not in a romantic relationship (Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.*, 2006). Dating among the youth too has similar implications to romantic relationships. It is mentioned in psychology literature that early and multiple partner dating behaviour significantly increases poor academic performance and unemployment as well as poor psycho-social well-being (Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.*, 2006). Romantic relationships and dating in universities significantly affect the personal life, professional life, and career development of the undergraduates and even hinder the completion of the degree programmes that they are registered for (Sirisena, 2018).

It is a well-known fact that love related issues often lead to suicide attempts by youth or adolescents. There are many factors that lead to this type of outcome which includes issues related to interpersonal violence, breakup, and distrust. Disappointment and frustration caused by romantic relationships are the leading causes of suicide among both male and female youth in Sri Lanka. Of the total suicide cases among the 17–25-year age group reported in 2019, 37.3% of males and 30.1% of the females are reported to have had disappointment and frustration caused by a romantic relationship (Sri Lanka Police, 2019). Widger (2015) argues that the “romance-precipitated suicide” in Sri Lanka may be better understood as “suicide of coercion”. Suicides reported in this context are often considered acts of violence particularly (not always) perpetrated by men upon women (Widger, 2015). A study conducted in Australia on the adolescents with attempted suicide records presented to the Department of Emergency revealed that 3 out of 4 such attempts had direct association with romantic relationship issues. However, this study included not only romantic relationships but also other types of relationships such as those with friends and family members (Price *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, one cannot deny the short-term and long-term impacts of romance on the lives of youths. Studies have reported that the magnitude of the adverse effects sustained from romantic relationships is evident at the age of 14 years and with increasing age, the condition of emotional instability may gradually decrease (Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

However, some argue that positive outcomes could also result from an increase in romantic relationships

among youth. Modern socio-cultural changes have resulted in a weakened relationship between parents and the youth. Some researchers believe that the affection provided by romantic relationships might fill the void left by weakening family bonds. In addition, the such romantic relationships may inhibit youth from rebellion and anti-social behaviour in general. However, the increase in youth sexual interaction without taking appropriate protective measures (safe sex) can enhance the risk of teen pregnancy and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (Casey & Mccarthy, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many social distancing practices and regulations worldwide. In Sri Lanka too, the youth experienced months of complete lockdown with stay-at-home orders. This has resulted in a new normal for maintaining romantic relationships by means of dating. With very limited opportunities to continue physical dating, more and more people including youth have been exploring the possibilities of online dating. However, dating online carries risks which is evident more to newcomers to online dating such as youth. This has even led to a Provincial Health Minister in Canada to appeal to people to “to think twice before meeting up on an online date”. However, the youth around the world had little choice as coffee shops, restaurants, gyms, public transport, cinemas and parks were all closed. These shutdowns and cancellations signal temporary but indefinite postponement of the traditional dating practices. Even if people were able to date eluding the barriers, physical distancing discourages intimate conversation. Therefore, “dating” is either cancelled or rescheduled to a later date by many. Though dating sites are not a mainstream players in dating behaviour in Sri Lanka, in many western countries dating on online platforms is well-known. In the United States, online dating sites like Grindr and Tinder are often considered to be the “primary facilitators” of the dating practices leading to sexual interactions. These sites are using the present COVID-19 pandemic to discourage in-person meetings. They have improvised a mechanism to cater to clients by organising opportunities to meet online or asking their users to continue online dating through video-conferencing technology like Zoom, Netflix viewing parties, and FaceTime dinner dates. These online dating sites have observed increased usage such as Hinge and Tinder reporting a 10-20% increase in mid-March 2020 as cited by Hoi and Chyu (2020). However, the sustainability of this procedure observed in an increase in online dating patterns is questionable. Further, online dating sites are still not popular in countries like Sri Lanka compared to the United States. However, ZOOM, Google Meet, and Skype have become popular in Sri Lanka during the lockdown due to COVID-19 and many

who use these platforms for dating online, cannot be ruled out (Adaderana, 2020). OkCupid (2020) reported that they observed roughly 15 million new conversations among OkCupid daters in March 2020 (daters who have not spoken previously). Some argue that despite the increase in online dating, physically going out was not significantly reduced. In other words, they state that there would not be a significant reduction in physical dating despite the COVID 19 pandemic. The OkCupid's Global Communications Manager argued that 88% of the respondents around the world on OkCupid were still dating physically and in the United States, it was as high as 92% (Silva, 2020).

What will be the long-term impact of COVID-19 pandemic on dating behaviour? Interestingly, some behavioural experts argue that the trend which was observed in HIV/ AIDS epidemic would provide a clue. They state that, despite knowing the risk of unprotected sex, youth represent 50% of new cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) identified in the United States where the total number of cases continues to rise. They argue "If we didn't see behavioural changes at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic or reduction in STD rates now, would we see differences for COVID-19?" However, it might be too early to predict the long-term impact of COVID -19 on dating behaviours (Silva, 2020).

LIMITATIONS IN THE SURVEY

A large proportion of the unmarried youth was well-educated in our study sample, i.e., 94.9% passed G.C.E O/L or higher. This could be due to the method of recruitment of youth for the study as they were selected from various vocational and training centres and tuition classes and through NGOs in the selected districts, using a convenient sampling technique. This could have resulted in an underrepresentation of poorly educated youth who might be at home or in irregular workplaces.

CONCLUSION

A significant proportion, i.e., around 85% of the Sri Lankan youth are engaged in romantic relationships with an increasing trend over the years. However, the observed increase could also be a results of studies using different data collection tools as research with the self-administered method, including the current study, showed a higher prevalence than studies using interviewer-administered technique. Nevertheless, a majority of youth reported not only romantic relationships, but also dating behaviours. Teenagers' increased involvement in dating and romantic relationships could have both positive

and negative effects on their academic performance. Relevant authorities and parents should be sensitised to how to prevent any negative consequences. Otherwise, they could increase the frequency of instances of early school abandonment, despair, suicide, material abuse, offenses, and conflicts with parents and other senior citizens. The positive outcomes from such an increase in romantic relationships might include a higher number of youths experiencing affection which was lacking from their parents and elders. The major implication of this situation is that more focused behavioural interventions need to be developed for unmarried youth especially for girls to improve their life skills, negotiation skills, and prevention of unwanted pregnancies and STDs. Nevertheless, further studies are required to synthesise the new knowledge of the real impact of the increase in romantic relationships among the youth in Sri Lanka.

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