

Dating Stress, Depression and Anxiety Symptoms: A Study among University Students in Uganda

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Abstract

Introduction: Worldwide, dating related stress and its impact on mental health among students has turned out to be of public health concern. However, research on this phenomenon in low- and middle-income countries (LAMIC) remains lacking. This study described the occurrence of dating-related stress and its association with psychological state aspects of depression and anxiety among students in a Ugandan University.

Methods: In this cross-sectional study using convenient sampling, 255 students from Bishop Stuart University were interviewed on their exposure to dating stress using psychological victimization scale (PVS), depression using Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and anxiety using Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7). Data were analyzed using Stata version 12.1 and correlations and associations were determined using multivariate logistic regression analysis.

Results: The prevalence rate of dating-related stress was at 88%. Specifically, students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than five times likely to suffer from depression compared to those who have never experienced dating related stress (OR=5.9; 95% CI=1.9, 13.3, $P \leq 0.001$). Students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than four times likely to suffer anxiety than those who have never experienced dating related stress (OR= 4.2; 95% CI=1.6, 11.1; $P=0.004$).

Conclusion: There is high dating related stress which subsequently impacts the psychological wellbeing of students in Universities. We recommend that dating related stress be given due attention and corrective action from institution officials and counselors to provide appropriate positive coping mechanisms like psycho-education and stress prevention programs.

Keywords: Stress • Depression • Anxiety • Dating • Students • Uganda

Abbreviations: ACHA-NCHA: American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment; BSU: Bishop Stuart University; CDC: Centre for Disease Control; CI: Confidence Interval; DRS: Dating Related Stress; DSM-IV: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; GAD: Generalized Anxiety Disorder; NGO: Non- Governmental Organization; OR: Odds Ratio; PHQ-9: Patient Health Questionnaire; UBOS: Uganda Bureau of Statistics; WHO: World Health Organization.

Introduction

Dating related stress is a widespread public health problem that is linked to numerous negative physical and psychological health outcomes. Even though the experiences of dating-related stress among University students tend to be under-reported in low- and middle-income countries (LAMIC), its detrimental consequences remain very high [1]. Previous studies on dating related-stress in LAMIC have attributed this lack of reporting by victims to the socio-cultural context of what people deem as acceptable or unacceptable in society [2]. Moreover, there are unbalanced power relations between victims and perpetrators [3].

Prior studies have found dating related stress to include but not limited to humiliating the partner, controlling what the partner can and cannot do, concealment of information from the partner, deliberately doing something to make the partner feel embarrassed, isolating the partner from friends and

family or even denying the victim access to money or other basic resources [4-6]. It was observed that these forms of dating stress were more prevalent among adolescents and young compared to the rest of the age groups [7]. It's not surprising therefore that the recent studies on dating victimization and perpetration have shown that youth dating related stress is prevalent in the United States, with rates ranging from 10-65% [8,9]. In a study conducted among college students on intimate partner violence (IPV), found that 20% of the students involved in a relationship reported dating related stress victimization within their current relationship [10]. Moreover, previous research has estimated that psychological aggression occurs in up to 80% of college student dating relationships, physical aggression in 20-37%, and sexual aggression in 15-25% [11]. Consequently, evidence-based research has continued to indicate a strong correlation between dating related stress and mental health aspects of depression, anxiety, suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, issues of self-esteem and poor social relationships [12,13]. The recent study on psychological abuse, mental health, and acceptance of

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dating violence among adolescents found a strong relationship between dating related stress and mental health aspects of depression and Anxiety [14]. In this study, the authors recommended that further studies should be conducted in this area. A few studies that have closely looked at dating related stress in Africa and Uganda in particular only looked at the occurrence of different forms of dating-related stress but did not closely examine its association with aspects of mental health disorders [4,15]. Owing to the paucity of research in the area of dating-related stress and its mental health impact on tertiary students, our study sought to profile the aspects of dating-related stress and its impact on mental health disorders. We hypothesized that 1) Dating related stress would be high among tertiary school students. 2) Dating related stress would be positively correlated with the mental health aspects of depression and anxiety.

Research Methodology

The study utilized cross-sectional and analytical design to interview students from Bishop Stuart University in Mbarara Municipality. Mbarara is located approximately 260 kilometers from Kampala capital city in southwestern Uganda. Quantitative (face to face interviews) data collection methods were used to allow the researcher to generate empirical evidence. Quantitative data obtained were tabulated into simple frequency tables and percentages. The data collected from interviews were used to provide explanations of findings from the quantitative analysis to generate information on victims' coping strategies.

In this study, students from Bishop Stuart University were selected. Bishop Stuart University is one of the few private universities chartered by the government of Uganda with programs ranging from Bachelors of laws, business, nursing, Psychology, Agriculture, secretarial studies and public health including postgraduate programs with an approximate enrollment of 5,000 students. In this study, we recruited students from both undergraduate and postgraduate programs who consented to participate in the study. The convenience sampling design was used to select respondents.

Ethical clearance: Ethical approval was obtained from the Bishop Stuart University Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written consent for participation in the study after an explanation about its objectives, confidentiality, and ethical consideration, and assurance concerning the voluntary nature of participation.

Measures

In this study, participants demographic information that was gathered included age, gender, marital status, religion and area of residence.

Depression

Depression was assessed using PHQ-9. The PHQ-9 consists of nine questions based on the DSM-IV criteria for a major depressive episode. Each

of the questions asks participants to select the frequency of the depressive symptoms that they experienced during the past 2 weeks. Scores for each of the 9 items range from 0=not at all to 3=nearly every day. This tool was tested among college students in China and was found to be having an internal consistency and test-retest reliability of 0.854 and 0.873 respectively [16]. Nakku et al. found out that the PHQ-9 was noted to have good psychometric properties (sensitivity=0.74).

Anxiety

Anxiety was assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7). GAD-7 consists of 7-items measuring current (within the past 2 weeks) symptoms of anxiety. Each question of the 7 items is answered using a 0–3 scale, where 0=did not apply to me at all, and 3=applied to me nearly every day. The range of possible scores for the scale is 0–21, with 0 points indicating no anxiety and 21 points indicating severe anxiety. The reliability and validity of this instrument were tested among a population of students and it had an excellent internal consistency at Cronbach α of 0.92 and test-retest reliability of 0.83 [17].

Data management and analysis

The collected data was cleaned and coded. It was then entered into Epidata version 3.1 to ease management and after it was exported to STATA version 12 for data analysis. Bivariate statistical analysis was used to explore the frequency distributions of respondents' demographic characteristics concerning dating related stress and the multivariate level of analyses.

Multivariate analysis was carried out to assess the odds of having different mental health aspects about dating related stress. Logistic regression analysis was used to control for possible confounding effects of independent variables on each other to find the independent associations.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

Our results indicated that 60 (42.6%) of our male respondents in the age group 18 to 24 years had experienced dating related stress, and 81 (57.4%) female respondents in the age category 18-24 years had experienced dating related stress. The results also reveal that 30 (44.8%) male respondents who were single had experienced dating related stress, with 37 (55.2%) female respondents who were single experiencing dating related stress. Furthermore, 68 (50.8%) male respondents reported that they were Protestants who experienced dating related stress. Besides, 64 (47.4%) male respondents who were staying in hostels experienced dating related stress and 71 (52.6%) female respondents who were staying in hostels reported experiencing dating related stress (Table 1).

Table 1: Association between demographic characteristics and dating related stress.

Demographic variables	With DRS			Without DRS			
	Males	Females	χ^2 (P-value)	Males	Females	χ^2 (P-value)	
	n (%)	n (%)		n (%)	n (%)		
Age	18-24	60 (42.6)	81 (57.4)	8.505	07 (43.7)	09 (56.3)	1.505
	25-29	34 (57.6)	25 (42.4)	-0.075	08 (57.1)	06 (42.9)	-0.471
	30-34	08 (72.7)	03 (27.3)		00 (0.00)	00 (0.00)	

	35-39	04 (50.0)	04 (50.0)		01 (100.0)	00 (0.00)	
	≥ 40	04 (80.0)	01 (20.0)		00 (0.00)	00 (0.00)	
Marital status	Single	68 (50.8)	66 (49.2)	0.738	12 (50.0)	12 (50.0)	1.636
	Married	11 (52.4)	10 (47.6)	-0.864	01 (33.3)	02 (66.7)	-0.651
	Cohabiting	30 (44.8)	37 (55.2)		01 (100.00)	00 (0.00)	
	separated	01 (50.0)	01 (50.0)		02 (66.7)	01 (33.3)	
Religion	Protestant	58 (48.3)	62 (51.7)	2.544	09 (60.0)	06 (40.0)	1.636
	Catholic	35 (50.7)	34 (49.3)	-0.637	04 (40.0)	06 (60.0)	-0.651
	Moslem	09 (60.0)	06 (40.0)		02 (66.7)	01 (33.3)	
	Pentecost	07 (46.7)	08 (53.3)		01 (33.3)	02 (66.7)	
	SDA	01 (20.0)	04 (80.0)		00 (0.00)	00 (0.00)	
Residence	Hostel	64 (47.4)	71 (52.6)	15.256	10 (47.6)	11 (52.4)	0.416
	Home	44 (62.0)	27 (38.0)	0.000	06 (60.0)	04 (40.0)	-0.519
	Boy/girlfriend's place	02 (11.1)	16 (88.9)		00 (0.00)	00 (0.00)	

Correlation is significant at, *p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001, DRS Dating Related Stress

Prevalence of dating stress

Our findings show that, 56 (21.96%) of the respondents had been insulted or made to feel bad about themselves; the table further shows that 14 (5.49%) of the respondents had been belittled or humiliated in front of other

people. A total of 25 (9.8%) of the respondents also indicated that they were intimidated or scared on purpose. Of all the respondents, 40 (15.69%) acknowledged that they were threatened to be hurt or someone they cared about (Table 2).

Table 2: The occurrence of different aspects of dating-related stress in the last 12 months.

How often in the past 12 months has your partner done the following	Frequency (%)			
	Never	Once or twice	A few (3-5) times	More than 5 times
Tried to keep you from seeing your friends	170 (66.67)	52 (20.39)	21 (8.24)	12 (4.71)
Tried to restrict contact with your family of birth	249 (97.65)	06 (2.35)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Insisted on knowing where you are at all times	90 (35.29)	64 (25.10)	45 (17.65)	56 (21.96)
Ignored you and treated you indifferently	151 (59.22)	69 (27.06)	27 (10.59)	08 (3.14)
Gets angry if you speak with another man/woman	90 (35.29)	56 (21.96)	64 (25.10)	45 (17.65)
Is often suspicious that you are unfaithful	75 (29.41)	71 (27.84)	62 (24.31)	47 (18.43)
Expected you to ask his/her permission before seeking health care for yourself	237 (92.94)	14 (5.49)	1 (0.39)	3 (1.18)
Insulted you or made you feel bad about yourself	199 (78.04)	48 (18.82)	4 (1.57)	4 (1.57)
Belittled you/humiliated you in front of other people	241 (94.51)	13 (5.10)	1 (0.39)	0 (0.00)
Did things to scare or intimidate you on purpose (by the way he/she looks at you, yelling and smashing things)	230 (90.20)	20 (7.84)	5 (1.96)	0 (0.00)

Threatened to hurt you or someone you care about	215 (84.31)	32 (12.55)	7 (2.75)	1 (0.39)
Slapped you or threw something at you that could hurt you	244 (95.69)	11 (4.31)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Pushed you or shoved or pulls your hair	243 (95.29)	10 (3.92)	1 (0.39)	1 (0.39)
Hits you with his/her fist or with some object that could hurt you	252 (98.82)	2 (0.78)	1 (0.39)	0 (0.00)
Kicked you, dragged you or beat you up	249 (97.65)	6 (2.35)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Threatened to use or used a gun, knife or other weapons against you	252 (98.82)	3 (1.18)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Physically forced to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to	184 (72.16)	49 (19.22)	17 (6.67)	5 (1.96)
Choked or burned you on purpose	254 (99.61)	1 (0.39)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Denied you money or other material things to hurt you	186 (72.94)	59 (23.14)	5 (1.96)	5 (1.96)
Had sexual intercourse with him/her because you were afraid of what he/she might do to you	194 (76.08)	31 (12.16)	20 (7.84)	10 (3.92)
Forced you to do something sexually that you found degrading or humiliating	173 (67.84)	42 (16.47)	27 (10.59)	13 (5.10)
Refused to have sex with you to hurt you	154 (60.39)	52 (20.39)	26 (10.20)	23 (9.02)

Additionally, our results revealed that 11 (4.31%) of the respondents had been slapped or thrown with something that could have hurt them at least once or twice. 12 (4.71%) respondents reported that they were pushed or shoved and 3 (1.18%) respondents reported that they had been hit with a fist or some object. 6 (2.35%) reported being kicked, dragged or beaten up and only 3 (1.18%) of the respondents had been threatened with a gun, knife or any other weapon. Only 1 (0.39%) respondent reported being choked or burned on purpose.

We found that, 71 (27.84%) of the respondents had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will. 61 (23.92%) of the respondents were forced to have sexual intercourse and they were afraid of what their intimate partner might do. 82 (32.16%) respondents who had been forced to have sexual intercourse found this degrading or humiliating (Table 2). To obtain the overall prevalence, the frequencies of never, once or twice, a few (3-5) times and many (more than 5 times), for respondents who had ever and never experienced any form of dating-related stress in the past twelve months were obtained. 31 (12%) had never experienced dating stress, 24 (9%) experienced dating stress once or twice, 55 (22%) experienced dating stress a few times and 145 (57%) experienced dating stress more than 5 times

The overall prevalence rate of dating-related stress was 88% (reported at least one episode of stress related to dating. Results are presented in Table 2).

Association between dating related stress and mental health aspects

We found that students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than five times more likely to suffer depression compared to those who have never experienced dating related stress (OR=5.1; 95%CI 1.9 13.3; P=0.001). Our findings further revealed that students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than four times more likely to suffer anxiety than those who have never experienced dating related stress (OR=4.2; 95%CI 1.6 11.1; P=0.004). Students who were married were more than four times more likely to suffer depression compared to those who were single (OR= 4.4; 95%CI 0.6 35.4; P =0.161). Our results showed that students who were residing at home were 0.9 and 0.7 times more likely to suffer depression and anxiety respectively than those who were residing in hostels (OR=0.9; 95%CI 0.3 2.6; P=0.774 and OR=0.7; 95%CI 0.2 1.9; P=0.463) (Table 3).

Table 3: Odds ratios for logistic regression between dating related stress and mental health aspects of depression and anxiety.

Variables	Depression			Anxiety		
	OR	95%CI	P-value	OR	95%CI	P-value
Age	–		0.948	1.1	[0.7, 1.7]	0.708
Gender	Males		RC			RC
	Females	0.7	[0.3, 1.7]	0.413	0.9	[0.4, 2.0]
Marital status	Single		RC			RC
	Married	4.4	[0.6, 35.4]	0.161	2.9	[0.4, 22.4]

	Cohabiting	4.1	[0.8, 20.9]	0.089	2.4	[0.5, 11.5]	0.264
	separated	NA			1.7	[0.1, 29.4]	0.719
	Protestant	RC			RC		
	Catholic	0.9	[0.4, 2.4]	0.938	0.8	[0.3, 1.9]	0.606
Religion	Moslem	1.2	[0.2, 6.4]	0.855	0.3	[0.1, 1.3]	0.124
	Pentecost	0.7	[0.1, 2.9]	0.592	0.6	[0.1, 2.5]	0.463
	SDA	NA			NA		
	Hostel	RC			RC		
	Home	0.9	[0.3, 2.6]	0.774	0.7	[0.2, 1.9]	0.463
Residence	Boy/girlfriend's place	NA			NA		
	Dating stress	5.1	[1.9, 13.3]	0.001	4.2	[1.6, 11.1]	0.004

NA: Not Applicable, OR: Odds Ratio, RC: Reference Category, Correlation is significant at, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Prevalence of dating stress

Our results revealed that the prevalence of dating-related stress among University students was 88%. This could be due to acculturation and globalization which have led to the loss of moral fiber in the society, and the affective nature of students to respond to stressors and hormonal changes. Similarly, the prevalence of dating-related stress in this study was in line with what was reported by who found a prevalence of 71% among students in Ethiopia [18]. Also, a study conducted in Saudi Arabia among medical students found out that the prevalence of dating-related stress among students at Jizan University was 71.9% [19].

Furthermore, our findings agree with those of a study conducted in the USA (57%), who found out that 57% of the students within their sample experienced dating related stress [20]. Also, a study conducted in Australia found that the prevalence of dating-related stress among students was 53% [21]. The high number of students who had experienced psychological abuse in the current study matched the findings of a study conducted in Russia among university students which revealed that 61.6% of the students taking part in the study reported being survivors of psychological abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner [22].

However, the results from our study are higher than those of a study conducted among students in Canada which showed that 30% of the students had experienced dating related stress [23]. Furthermore, 41.9% of students in Malaysia had experienced dating related stress, and 10.8% of students in Kenya and 21.6% of students in Ethiopia experienced dating related stress [24,25]. Another study conducted in Ethiopia revealed that 32.6% of the students experienced dating related stress [26].

Also, the prevalence of dating-related stress in this study was higher when compared with studies in France (25.7%), Norway (22.9%), and Iceland (22.5%) [27-29]. The lower prevalence rate in these studies could be due to a variety of reasons, which include the settings, in which this study was conducted.

The results of this study revealed that students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than five times likely to suffer depression compared to those who have never experienced dating related stress, and

the findings further revealed that students who had ever experienced dating related stress were more than four times more likely to suffer anxiety than those who have never experienced dating related stress. This is because the stressful situation may break the social ties which might result in a relationship difficult leading to frustration and hopelessness. The findings of this study are in line with another research study that found that dating related stress perpetration may be related to adverse mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, as well as poor anger management [30]. Furthermore, in a study anxiety found that dating related stress emerges as a significant predictor of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation [24].

Besides, a study on dating related stress found that depression is reported as the most common mental health effect among survivors of dating-related stress [12]. Similarly, the current study concurs with that conducted among students in the UK which found that those who experienced dating related stress were 3.3 times more likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety [31]. More so, a study conducted in Finland found that students who reported dating related stress were associated with a 2.8-fold increased risk of experiencing symptoms of social withdraw, anxiety and depression [32]. This was enhanced by report from a health worker who said that "some students sort of withdraw, become isolated and don't want to have anything to do with the rest of the world and feel so hurt that they can't even imagine having a positive human relationship again, even with friends and family" (Social worker).

Furthermore, the current findings are in agreement with those of a study conducted among students in the USA which found out that those who experienced dating related stress were more likely to experience emotional distress than those who did not [33]. Additionally, a study found that students who experienced dating related stress were likely to have higher levels of depression and anxiety compared to those who did not experience dating stress [34].

Also, the findings from this study concur with a study conducted in Uganda which found that dating related stress reduces a person's quality of life and self-confidence by exposing her/him to emotional distress [3]. Furthermore, a study found that students who experienced dating related stress were more likely to report depression, anxiety, and fear [35]. The results of the current study were consistent with those of other studies which found that dating related stress was associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety [36].

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributed to existing research on dating stress and mental health aspects in several ways. First, the study identified the prevalence of dating-related stress among University students (88%). Victims who experienced greater relationship distress were likely to be depressed and anxious. We hope that these results will help provide some insight into what was already known about how victims of dating-related stress in Universities cope up with the stress.

Authors' Contributions

TM participated in the conception and design of the study, collected the data, performed the data analyses, interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. HEA participated in the conception and design of the study, supervised data collection, helped in the analysis and revision of the manuscript; MK Participated in the design of the study and revision of the manuscript, all authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical clearance: This study was cleared by Bishop Stuart University Research Ethics committee (BSU-REC).

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