

Sociosexual Orientation and Relationship Satisfaction Among College Students

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Abstract:

This qualitative investigation delves into the intricate interplay between sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction among a cohort of university students aged 18-25. Employing a phenomenological paradigm and leveraging a Semi-Structured Interview Method, this study conducts a rigorous examination using Braun and Clarke Thematic analysis to unearth nuanced themes. The research seeks to comprehend the Factors Contributing to Relationship Satisfaction, elucidate the Influence of Sociosexual Orientation on the Dynamics and Overall Satisfaction of college students' relationships, and scrutinise the challenges inherent in sustaining relationship contentment within the collegiate milieu. The findings underscore the profound impact of collegiate experiences on sociosexual orientation, catalysing processes of self-discovery, personal evolution, and adaptive coping mechanisms. Furthermore, emotional connectivity within relationships emerges as a pivotal factor fostering heightened receptivity to diverse experiences, aligning with established research on the significance of secure emotional bonds. The study reveals formidable challenges in preserving satisfaction during the college years, emphasising the pivotal role of effective communication and mutual understanding. Additionally, the exploration of varied perspectives on desires and relationship realities accentuates the dynamic nature of relationship satisfaction and underscores the profound influence of sociosexual orientation on behavioural patterns. This research contributes to the evolving body of knowledge in the field, shedding light on the intricate dynamics that shape and influence relationship satisfaction among college students at the master's and doctoral levels.

Keywords: Sociosexual Orientation, Relationship Satisfaction, College Students

Introduction

In the realm of human interpersonal relationships, the intricate interplay between individual sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction has garnered considerable attention from scholars and practitioners alike. Understanding the dynamics that shape individuals' romantic and sexual behaviours, as well as the subsequent impact on their relationship experiences, has the potential to shed light on the complexities of modern relationships. Simpson and Gangestad (1991) originally proposed the idea of sociosexual orientation. Restricted and unrestricted are the two basic classifications used to describe this

orientation, people with a strong inclination towards restricted sociosexuality tend to be less open to casual sexual encounters. They prioritise the presence of love, commitment, and emotional intimacy before engaging in sexual activities with their romantic partners. On the other hand, individuals with a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more inclined to engage in casual sex and are comfortable with the idea of having sex without the need for love, commitment, or emotional closeness. Relationship satisfaction captures an individual's general happiness and fulfilment in a romantic or interpersonal relationship. It involves evaluating the strength of the bond, considering behavioural, psychological, and emotional aspects. Lower satisfaction signifies discontent, while higher satisfaction indicates positive experiences. People with more restricted sociosexuality prioritise emotional connection before engaging in sex with romantic partners, being less inclined towards casual encounters. In contrast, those with more open sociosexuality are more comfortable with casual sex, without the need for love, commitment, or intimacy. In a 2012 study by Katz and Schneider, the focus was on the connection between college students' engagement in casual hook-up encounters and their attitudes toward sex and romantic relationships. The research involved 163 undergraduates surveyed at the beginning and end of their first year in college. The findings showed significant links between attitudes about sex and love relationships and participation in casual hook-ups. Interestingly, the study revealed that initial beliefs about the instrumental nature of sex predicted later engagement in hook-up encounters, a connection that persisted despite previous experiences. Additionally, engaging in hook-up encounters during the first college year correlated with increased sexual permissiveness and comfort with casual physical intimacy. Importantly, these associations held true for both genders, indicating that casual hook-up experiences have a more pronounced impact on attitudes toward sexual interactions than on perceptions of love relationships.

Adolescent growth is characterised by the establishment of romantic and sexual interests. Teenagers who have reached pubertal maturity begin to fantasise about emotional union with a partner and develop needs for sexual fulfilment Fisher (2014). The shift from adolescence to young adulthood, particularly during the college years, is a crucial period marked by academic and personal challenges. This phase involves not only academic and social transformations but also the significant journey of forming romantic connections. College students navigate changes in academics, social life, and identity, making it a pivotal time for personal development. This period is instrumental for exploring romantic relationships and sexuality, impacting emotional growth and overall well-being. Moreover, the sociosexual landscape in college varies widely, shaped by cultural norms, social pressures, and societal expectations.

In the realm of emotional and sexual satisfaction, Mark, K. study (2015) provides critical insights across diverse relationship contexts. By examining the experiences of a large and sexually diverse participant pool, the research illuminates that satisfaction is not confined to traditional relationship structures. It underscores that various relationship contexts, including casual sexual ones, contribute significantly to both sexual and emotional fulfilment. The study also unveils gender and sexual orientation differences, enriching our comprehension of the nuanced dynamics within these varied relationship landscapes. Extending this discourse, Hughes et al. (2005) investigation into friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) illuminates the complex interplay between rules governing such relationships, attitudes toward love, and the support derived from same-sex friends. This study acknowledges that while attitudes toward love may not directly shape FWBR rules, they intricately influence individuals' choices and the gains they derive from these non-traditional connections.

Method

Objectives:

- Examining the Factors Contributing to Relationship Satisfaction
- Understanding How Sociosexual Orientation Influences College Students' Relationship Dynamics and Overall Satisfaction
- Explore the relationship challenges in maintaining relationship satisfaction in college

Research design

The current study used a phenomenological qualitative approach with a Semi structured Interview method.

Sample and Technique

Sample population for this study included 7 participants (as the responses had achieved its saturation) between the age range of 18-25, year old living in bangalore, this age group was selected for the current study because during this time, individuals typically experience significant life transitions, such as leaving home for college, forming new relationships, and gaining independence.

Procedure

The participants were selected and then screened to fit the inclusion criteria The study used an interview method using a semi-structured questionnaire to collect data from the participants. Informed consent was obtained from the client. The participants' responses were recorded with the participants consent, and later transcribed and further analysed. Data was collected using telephonic interview and face to face depending on the client's preference.

Tools for the Study

- **Demographic Data sheet/Screening Sheet.** This questionnaire was created to gather basic demographic details as well as screen the participants to fit the inclusion criteria.
- **Semi-Structured Interview Questions.** The semi structured interview questions consist of a set of questions that aims to gather information regarding the concepts being explored in the study from the participants. The validity of the questions was ensured after having the questions reviewed by experts.
- **Qualitative Analysis** The study follows a thematic analysis for the analysis of the data, specifically the Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method, a reiterative process that consists of six steps: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of codes, (3) generation of themes, (4) review of themes, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) identification of exemplars (Mihas, 2023). First, the researcher became acquainted with the data by transcribing, reading, and rereading it. Once the researcher was familiar with the data, its major patterns, and so on, the researcher began developing initial codes and examined the themes repeatedly to determine whether the themes are important and to produce a thematic map. The final stage was to define and label the created themes, as well as analyse them.

Results and discussions

The results were encapsulated in 4 major themes and 13 sub themes that capture the nuances of the participants' experiences with regard to sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction among college students.



Fig.1. Thematic Map of themes and subthemes.

Influence of college experiences on sociosexual orientation

The college experience is a transformative period that extends beyond academia, profoundly impacting personal and romantic growth. In this theme, we delve into the intricate interplay between college experiences and sociosexual orientation, exploring how these moments shape individuals' approaches to romantic relationships. Through personal narratives and reflections, we unravel the multifaceted impact of college life on the development of sociosexual orientations. This theme unfolds as a narrative journey, capturing the essence of meeting partners, embracing emotional connections, and adopting adaptive coping strategies within the unique context of college relationships. Impact of college life on romantic relationships, the participants shared insights into how their college experiences affected their approach to romantic relationships. (“Well my previous relationship which was a casual one I met him in my college itself and I feel that had a good impact on me in a way that he motivated me to not be harsh with myself and be open to new experiences. If it wasn't for college I wouldn't have met him.”) The participant mentioned meeting their previous partner during college, highlighting the positive impact of this encounter. This connection motivated them to be more open to new experiences and self-compassion, emphasising the transformative power of college life on personal growth and relationship dynamics. This finding is in tune with the study conducted by Vrangalova et al. (2014), which indicated that college environments can provide opportunities for individuals to explore and develop their sociosexual orientations, fostering self-discovery and personal development.

Adaptation and Coping Strategies in College Relationships, also sheds light on the role of emotional intimacy and support in college relationships, Navigating the intricate landscape of college relationships requires a set of adaptive strategies. (“I've come to appreciate the emotional intimacy and support that comes with it..”) The participants expressed their appreciation for the emotional connection that college relationships can offer. This sentiment aligns with research by Laurenceau et al. (1998), which found that emotional intimacy and support are key factors in the success of romantic relationships, particularly during significant life transitions, such as the college years. Furthermore, the participants emphasis on open communication and task prioritisation reflects adaptive coping strategies in maintaining a healthy college

relationship. (“As I have mentioned it before open communication and quality time is the most important thing for me, what I personally like to do is that prioritising my tasks,”) This echoes the findings of Schneider (2013), who highlighted the importance of communication and time management skills in sustaining successful college relationships.

Emotional connection in relationships

The theme delves into the intricacies of this emotional connection: openness to experience, highlights the transformative impact of emotional connection on an individual's willingness to explore new opportunities and experiences. The participants shared their personal journey of becoming more open to experiences, noting that this change had positively influenced various aspects of their life. (“the major change that I have seen in myself is that I am open to experiences and in general exploring my options”) This change in openness to experience is consistent with the findings of a study by Fraley and Shaver (2000), which suggested that secure emotional connections in relationships can lead to increased personal growth and the development of a more open and adaptive approach to life. Transition and self-discovery, emphasises the profound self-discovery and personal growth that can result from emotional connections within relationships. The participants mentioned their ongoing transition and how it has led to a deeper understanding of themselves (“Well for me currently there is a transition there are a lot of aspects about myself that I was not aware about so I think because of this transition I am able to get to know myself better so I will be able to inculcate these small things about myself in my daily life also. ...”) This resonates with research by Aron and Aron (1997), who explored the concept of self-expansion within close relationships, suggesting that individuals in emotionally connected relationships are more likely to discover previously unknown aspects of themselves and experience personal growth. Furthermore, the participants realisation of the importance of self-focus for the well-being of their partner (“It made me realise how important it is to focus on myself in order to provide for my partner.”) aligns with study by Arriaga & Agnew (2001), which suggests that when individuals in a relationship feel supported and valued, they are more likely to engage in self-improvement efforts, benefiting not only themselves but also their partners. The participant's commitment to staying present in the moment and building a positive relationship with themselves, (“I am just trying to stay in the present moment and not forcing myself into getting into relationships and I am just going with the flow.”) echoes the principles of mindfulness and self-compassion, which are associated with better emotional well-being in relationships, as found in a study by Neff and Beretvas (2013) which suggests that individuals who demonstrated self-compassion exhibited more positive relationship behaviours compared to those lacking self-compassion, it was also noted that, self-compassion emerged as a more influential predictor of positive relationship behaviour when compared to both trait self-esteem (SE) and attachment style.

Obstacles and hurdles in relationship

This theme explores the various obstacles and challenges that individuals face within relationships: Maintaining relationship satisfaction in college, underscores the unique challenges that arise during college life, characterised by personal growth and transitions. The participants emphasised the importance of being understood and effective communication in navigating relationships during this phase. This aligns with findings from the study by Bodenmann et al. (2010), which emphasised that clear communication and mutual understanding are crucial for maintaining relationship satisfaction, particularly in high-stress situations like college.

Maintaining Long-Term Committed Relationships, brings attention to the complexities of balancing personal independence and identity within committed relationships.

(“Well definitely even when you are in a casual or committed relationship you would have to face certain challenges like from my perspective a person who is in a committed relationship may have issues related to maintaining personal independence and there’s this constant battle in their minds that they should not lose themselves or their identity in the relationship.”)

This struggle to maintain a sense of self while deeply investing in a partnership is a common challenge. Research by Arriagna & Agnew (2001) suggests that maintaining individuality within a committed relationship is essential for long-term satisfaction, and this balance often requires negotiation and effort from both partners. Different Sociosexual Orientations in Long-Term Relationships, highlights the potential conflicts that can arise when individuals with differing sociosexual orientations are involved in long-term relationships. The participants expressed the difficulty in maintaining boundaries and respecting differences in orientation (“Yes definitely, they tend to forget the line that distinguishes them from each other. To them, to me, I become more careful while at the same time tend to forget what it truly means to respect others.”) This is consistent with research by Mark and Janssen (2011), who found that discrepancies in sociosexual orientations can lead to relationship dissatisfaction, requiring open communication and understanding to overcome such challenges. Challenges of Casual Relationships in College, delves into the intricacies of maintaining boundaries and communication in casual relationships. The participants acknowledges the complexity of navigating these relationships, emphasising the need for mutual respect and effective communication. (“For me mostly currently as I am in a casual relationship so for me the major challenge is to to how to navigate them because you know, I am not really great with boundaries and like thing get tricky sometimes, because at the end of the day there's another person involved and even we need to respect them and like whatever it is and also communicate.”). These findings resonate with studies on casual relationships, Lehmler et al., 2011, which highlights the importance of clear communication and boundaries to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. Impact of External Factors on Relationship Satisfaction, recognizes the influence of external factors such as cultural background and family dynamics on relationships (“Yeah, definitely. Like, I think I would say like just I think families do like the cultural background and like family and stuff like that definitely. influence because at the end of the day, we are all part of, you know, our own cultures”). Research by Kluwer et al. (2010) supports this observation, suggesting that external factors, including cultural norms and family values, can affect relationship dynamics and satisfaction.

Diverse perspective and concepts

The theme explores the complex interplay between individual desires and the dynamics of relationships during the college years. Within this theme, several sub-themes shed light on specific aspects of this phenomenon, Shift in relationship satisfaction, is exemplified by the participants reflection on their past preference for no-strings-attached, casual relationships. This shift in relationship preference highlights the fluid nature of desires and relationship realities in college. (“Back when I was more into casual relationships, I was content with the no-strings-attached setup.”). Research by Mark and Janssen (2011) suggests that relationship satisfaction can indeed change over time, influenced by various factors, including personal growth and evolving priorities. Sociosexual orientation impact on relationship behaviour, underscores the influence of sociosexual orientation on relationship preferences and behaviours. participants' acknowledgment of a desire to strike a balance between casual experiences and

committed relationships reflects the multidimensional nature of sociosexual orientation. (“I can see a mix of both in my future goals. I'll likely seek a balance, enjoying casual experiences and cherishing bonds that committed relationships bring.”). This finding resonates with the research of Simpson and Gangestad (1991), who proposed that sociosexual orientation exists on a continuum, allowing for individual variation in relationship preferences. Influence of sociosexual orientation on relationship behaviour, introduces the concept of being a more submissive type in relationships, where one prioritises giving over taking. This perspective is indicative of the impact of sociosexual orientation on the power dynamics and behaviour within relationships (“I think I'm a very submissive type of person, who, when it comes to love and desire, chooses to give more rather than take.”) Research by Mark and Janssen (2011) and Buss and Schmitt (1993) suggests that individual differences in sociosexual orientation can shape the dynamics of relationship interactions and desires for giving and receiving within a relationship. Influence of sociosexual orientation on desire for security, highlights the participants' nuanced approach to desire, seeking both casual encounters and security in relationships. (“I wouldn't say I am completely oriented towards Casual relationships but when I do need an honest and genuine relationship, I tend to look a lot at things that give me more security and assurance.”) This aligns with the concept of sociosexuality impacting individuals' desires for both short-term and long-term relationships, as discussed in studies by Simpson and Gangestad (1991) and Regan (1998) where their work suggests that sociosexuality exists on a continuum, allowing for variability in individuals' tendencies toward short-term, casual encounters or more committed, long-term relationships.

Conclusion

This research examines interplay between sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction, the findings underscore the profound impact of collegiate experiences on sociosexual orientation, catalysing processes of self-discovery, personal evolution, and adaptive coping mechanisms. This aligns seamlessly with the broader objective of discerning factors contributing to relationship satisfaction, establishing the transformative nature of college experiences as a critical determinant. Additionally, emotional connectivity within relationships emerged as a pivotal factor fostering heightened receptivity to diverse experiences, aligning with established research on the significance of secure emotional bonds. The nuanced insights provided by the thematic analysis contributed significantly to understanding the intricate relationship between sociosexual orientation and emotional connections among college students, addressing the second objective of our study. The study uncovered significant challenges in maintaining relationship satisfaction during college, emphasising the pivotal role of effective communication and mutual understanding. These findings resonate with recurring themes among participants, highlighting the critical importance of these elements in successfully navigating relationships within the collegiate context. Notably, participants shared experiences of delicately negotiating the balance between personal independence and nurturing a committed partnership, requiring the navigation of boundaries and the preservation of individual goals within a collaborative relationship framework. Additionally, the research illuminated the challenge of managing diverse sociosexual orientations, underscoring the need for open communication, understanding, and mutual respect between partners. It also addressed the complexities of maintaining satisfaction and clarity in casual relationships, emphasising the necessity of effective communication to ensure mutual understanding and satisfaction. In essence, the study offers valuable insights into the complex realities individuals face in college relationships, stressing the significance of effective communication and mutual understanding in overcoming these challenges and preserving

relationship satisfaction. The investigation into varied perspectives on desires and relationship realities within the study brought to light the intricate and dynamic nature of relationship satisfaction. This exploration underscored the profound influence that sociosexual orientation exerts on behavioural patterns within relationships. The findings intricately connect with both research objectives, offering valuable insights into the diverse perspectives that significantly impact relationship satisfaction. Participants shared a spectrum of desires and perceptions about relationship dynamics, highlighting the individualised nature of satisfaction criteria. This diversity emphasised that relationship satisfaction is not a one-size-fits-all concept but is deeply influenced by personal desires and expectations. Moreover, the study delved into the complex interplay between sociosexual orientation and overall relationship dynamics, revealing how individuals navigate and express their desires within the context of their unique sociosexual orientations. The research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors that shape relationship satisfaction, emphasising the importance of recognizing and accommodating diverse perspectives within the intricate landscape of interpersonal connections.

Limitations

While this study contributes valuable insights into the intricate interplay between sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction among college students, it is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations that may impact the generalizability and depth of analysis. The study's sample size, although comprehensive within the college student demographic, may constrain the extrapolation of findings to a broader population. The participants' experiences and viewpoints, while rich and diverse within the college context, may not fully represent the complexity of sociosexual orientations and relationship dynamics across different age groups or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the research captures a snapshot of sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction at a particular moment in time, potentially limiting its ability to account for the dynamic nature of these constructs over an extended period. The study predominantly focuses on the perspectives of college students, potentially overlooking the insights that could be gained from considering the viewpoints of their partners. Future research endeavours in this area could benefit from incorporating the experiences and perspectives of both partners, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between sociosexual orientation and relationship satisfaction.

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