A cross-sectional study to assess the pre-marital sexual practices among Panjab University students, Chandigarh, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: In India, premarital partnerships whether involving sex or not are widely unacceptable. Various studies in India have reported heightened premarital sexual activities among youngsters. Objective: The objective of the study was to assess the involvement of youth in premarital sexual practices studying at Panjab University. Methods: The cross-sectional study was conducted at Panjab University situated in Chandigarh, India between February and August 2020. Purposive sampling was used to recruit students. Data was collected using a pre-tested, semi-structured, self-administered questionnaire. The nature of the data was quantitative and was analyzed through SPSS version 20. Results: A total of 211 (female/male: 51.7%/48.3%, mean age: 22.5 years) respondents were enrolled. Prevalence of premarital sex was 68.7% with an average age of sexual debut 18.5 years. 62.1% of respondents were practicing unprotected sex. 91% of respondents were involved in vaginal sex, 61.4% in oral sex, 29% in online sex, and 19.3% in anal sex. 66.8% of respondents were involved in the habit of masturbation. In students having a positive premarital sexual background, 78.2% of respondents had sexting, 38.8% had friends with benefits, 33.9% had one-night stands, 4.8% had a threesome and 2.3% had gay sex. Out of all the respondents involved in premarital sexual practices, 86.9% were satisfied with sexual life. Conclusion: There is a need to empower the younger population involved in risky sexual behavior by accelerating their sexual and reproductive rights education to propagate safe sexual behavior in premarital sexual practices.

Keywords: Influence, premarital sexual practices, students, unprotected sex

Introduction

The ‘Sex’ topic is taboo for discussion in India’s traditional communities in any age group regardless of their educational status. In conservative culture, pre-marital sex (PMS) is strictly forbidden in both genders and those who are indulging are secretly engaged in these acts. However, a comprehensive understanding of PMS behavior in India is relatively scarce, as sexuality remains a sensitive issue. According to statistics, the reported rate of the students who are involved in PMS practices in different regions of India ranges from 8-15%.

According to WHO, “Sexual health is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.”

In India, the prevalence of PMS practices in Tamil Nadu was 35%, in Puducherry it was 31%, in Andhra Pradesh it was 23% and in Pune, it was 16-18%. Rapid economic development, urbanization, widespread media attention, porn videos, X-rated
products, drug abuse, sexually active peers, family dysfunction are considered to be risk factors for the initiation of early sexual activity among young people.\(^1\) Younger people are engaging in premarital sexual behavior at an alarming rate, but they are mostly unprotected.\(^1\) It is high time for physicians and society to acknowledge that premarital sexual practice is a reality. When dealing with such difficulties, they must be compassionate and nonjudgmental. Separate units/desks may be established to handle adolescent sexual health inquiries. The physicians should have a counsellor in place for such budding adults. the physicians may be accompanied by an intern of similar age as an adolescent to ease them in being free and frank. Within this context, our study aimed to assess the pre-marital sexual practices among Panjab University students.

### Methodology

The cross-sectional study was designed to assess the premarital sexual practices among Panjab University students situated in Union Territory Chandigarh, India. The data was collected through quantitative data collection instruments. For this purpose, the sample size obtained was 400 initially but it was constricted to 211 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020. The study was approved by institutional ethics committee.

A purposive sampling technique was employed. The study was conducted on the both North and South campus of the University from February 2020 to August 2020. The data collection was done online through a digital platform in the form of Google forms. The distribution of the forms was independent of genders. Informed consent was taken from the participants.

Initially, a pilot study (offline) was performed on 20 students of the University. After analyzing the results, a modified pro forma was prepared. The students were introduced to the main objectives of the study and reassured that personal information would be kept confidential.

The collected quantitative data were entered into a computer and analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. During the process of analysis, frequencies and percentages of different variables were determined.

### Results

The total number of participants in this study was 211. Out of which 109 were female, 102 were male and nobody was transgender. Participants were divided into three age categories, most of them in the 21-25 age groups, with a total of 165 (56.9%). A total of 145 (68.7%) respondents was involved in coitus, of which 69 (63.3%) were females and 76 (74.5%) were males. The mean age at sexual debut was 18.5 years. Ninety (62.1%) respondents had coitus without condoms, of which 44 (63.8%) were females and 46 (60.5%) were males. The reasons they specified behind it were: did not have condoms which account for 51 (56.7%) respondents, enjoying it in 47 (52.2%) and forced in 04 (4.4%) respondents. Respondents were involved in various sexual activities like vaginal sex, oral sex, online sex, and anal sex [Table 1]. One hundred forty-one (66.8%) respondents were involved in masturbation, of which 42 (38.5%) were female respondents and 99 (97%) were male respondents. Most of the respondents were often masturbating once a week while the least number of respondents was masturbating more than once a day, further details are illustrated in [Table 2].

Perceptions regarding anal/oral sex among respondents showed that 134 (63.5%) respondents thought that it was acceptable behavior, 43 (20.4%) respondents personally found it unacceptable but they would not mind if others were involved in such activities and 04 (1.8%) respondents thought that oral was acceptable but not anal and those who thought it should be banned.

While having coitus with someone, 99 (46.9%) respondents believed that love was very important, 40 (19%) respondents thought that it was somewhat important while only 09 (4.3%) respondents believed that love was unimportant. One hundred thirty-six (64.5%) respondents would reveal the correct number of sexual partners they had to their partners followed by 06 (2.8%) respondents would tell a higher number of partners than they had while 56 (26.5%) respondents did not give any comment on it. Among all the respondents, 66 (31.3%) respondents had no partner, 60 (28.4%) had only one partner, 62 (29.4%) had 2-5 sexual partners and 11 (5.2%) had more than 10 sexual partners. When respondents were asked about

### Table 1. Distribution of respondents involved in different sexual activities

| No. [n=145] | % No. | Female [n=69] | Male [n=76] |
|-------------|-------|---------------|-------------|
| Vaginal sex | 132   | 91.0%         | 66          | 56.0%        |
| Oral sex    | 89    | 61.4%         | 40          | 64.5%        |
| Online sex  | 42    | 29.0%         | 09          | 33.3%        |
| Anal sex    | 28    | 19.3%         | 09          | 25.0%        |

### Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to frequency to masturbate

| No. [n=141] | % No. | Female [n=42] | Male [n=99] |
|-------------|-------|---------------|-------------|
| Every few months | 25    | 17.7%         | 17          | 40.5%        |
| Once a month  | 22    | 15.6%         | 06          | 14.3%        |
| Once a week   | 39    | 27.7%         | 10          | 23.8%        |
| Few times a week | 37    | 26.2%         | 05          | 11.9%        |
| Twice a month  | 12    | 8.5%          | 03          | 7.1%         |
| More than once a day | 03    | 2.1%          | -           | 03.0%        |
| Others        | 03    | 2.1%          | 01          | 2.4%         |
| Total         | 141   | 100.0%        | 42          | 100.0%       |
what they had done sexually, most of the respondents did sexting followed by making friends with benefits, one-night stand and gay sex [Figure 1]. The adjectives that best describe the attitude of respondents towards coitus were adventurous for 103 (48.8%) respondents, self-confidence for 66 (31.3%), kinky for 50 (23.7%), and uncomfortable for 10 (4.7%).

To keep themselves sexually stimulated, respondents had viewed pornography online, watched x/xs/xxx rated movies, received nude pictures of someone, taking nude pictures of themselves, etc. [Figure 2]. The longest duration respondents had gone without coitus since coming to university was for a few months which accounts for 73 (50.3%) respondents followed by a few years for 35 (24.1%). Two hundred three (96.2%) respondents had shaved/waxed their pubic area, of which 105 (96.3%) were females and 98 (96.1%) were males. The main reasons for having coitus were falling in love which accounted for 149 (70.6%), willing to do it in 141 (66.6%), peer pressure/alcohol/drugs in 16 (7.6%) and for money in 02 (0.9%). When respondents were asked about their satisfaction with sexual life, most respondents were satisfied [Table 3]. About 144 (68.2%) respondents would discuss with their partners to get satisfied, 57 (27%) would watch pornography, 47 (22.3%) would go online and 06 (2.8%) would read erotic books.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents according to their satisfaction with sexual life

| Satisfaction with sex life                  | No. | %  | Female [n=69] | Male [n=76] |
|--------------------------------------------|-----|----|---------------|-------------|
| Total                                      | 145 | 100.0 | 69 | 76 | 100.0 |
| Yes                                        | 126 | 86.9 | 59 | 67 | 88.2 |
| No                                         | 19  | 13.1 | 10 | 9  | 11.8 |
| if yes, n=126, n=59                         |     |      |    |    |      |
| Very satisfied                             | 53  | 42.1 | 32 | 21 | 31.3 |
| Moderately satisfied                       | 48  | 38.1 | 20 | 28 | 41.8 |
| Average Satisfied                          | 24  | 19.0 | 07 | 17 | 25.4 |
| Below average                              | 01  | 0.8  | -  | 01 | 1.5  |
| Total                                      | 126 | 100.0 | 59 | 67 | 100.0 |
| if no, why n=19, n=10                      |     |      |    |    |      |
| Rarely sexually stimulated                 | 09  | 47.4 | 05 | 04 | 44.4 |
| Does not care for my orgasm                | 08  | 42.1 | 05 | 03 | 33.3 |
| Gets turned off swiftly                     | 04  | 21.0 | 02 | 02 | 22.2 |
| Forces sex though not ready                | 01  | 5.3  | 01 | 10 | -    |

Figure 1: Things respondents had done sexually [N = 211]

Figure 2: Things respondents would do to keep themselves sexually stimulated [N = 211]

Discussion

The prevalence of premarital sexual practices among study participants was 68.7% with the mean age of 18.5 years at first sexual intercourse. When this was compared to the similar study conducted by Mukherjee et al[9] in Tamil Nadu, the prevalence of premarital sexual practices was found almost half which was 35.6% with an average age of 21 years (SD = 2.68) at first sexual intercourse. Also, the prevalence of unprotected sex in this study was 62.1%. In our study, 62.1% of respondents had practiced unsafe/unprotected sex ( intercourse without a condom) which was very similar to the study conducted by Sharma et al[10] in Chandigarh (2021) and also to the study conducted by Chihuurumanya et al[7] in Nigeria (2016), it was reported that 29.6% of respondents had unprotected sex which was very low in comparison to our study. In the current study, the prevalence of participants involved in different sexual activities like the oral, anal and online sexual experience was 61.4%, 19.3% and 29%, respectively. When this was compared to the same study conducted by Mukherjee et al[8] in Tamil Nadu, the prevalence was found i.e., 9.1%, 4.5% and 4.9%, respectively, which was very low in comparison. It was found, in the current study that 66.8% of the respondents were involved in the habit of masturbation. Out of which, 97% were male respondents and 38.5% were female respondents which conclude that the number of men engaged in masturbation is almost three times that of the women. When it was again compared to the same study conducted by Mukherjee et al[9] in Tamil Nadu, the results reported were the same i.e., the number of male respondents involved in masturbation was about three times more than those of female respondents. When the number of sexual partners respondents had in their lifetime were analysed it was found that 31.3% of respondents had only one partner in their life time while 40.3% respondents had two or more than two partners in their lifetime. When these results were compared with the study conducted by Tololu et al[11] in Southeast Ethiopia, it was found quite higher i.e., 44.8% of respondents had only one partner in their lifetime while 54.2% respondents had two or more than two partners in their lifetime. In the analysis of this
study, it was found that out of all the respondents the reasons for having sex with someone, 70.6% were in love, 66.8% were having a desire to do it, 7.6% had it under pressure and 1.4% were forced to do it. When it was compared to a similar study conducted by Chihurumnanya et al. in Nigeria it was found that 43.5% had sex due to love, 15.7% were having sexual desire, 18.5% had it under pressure and 6.5% were forced to do it.

**Conclusion**

The prevalence of premarital sexual practices among Panjab University students was very high in comparison to national and regional studies. More than half of the respondents were practicing unprotected sex. This reflected the risky sexual behaviors of students; therefore, it is concluded that the critical importance of safe sex behavior and appropriate sex education among youth can no longer be ignored. To handle adolescent sexual health queries, separate units/desks may be developed. The government and healthcare institutions must pay close attention that people follow safe sex behavior, and physicians must be followed by a counsellor for such developing individuals in specific facilities.

**Limitations**

The nature of the topic was sensitive so this might have under-estimated the true prevalence of premarital sex. Also, the study design was cross-sectional; it was difficult to establish a temporal relationship. The study results cannot be generalized to the whole youth population as the target population was situated in the premises of only one University. Due to the nationwide lockdown for the containment of COVID-19, the sample size of the study was constricted.

**Declaration of participant consent**

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate participant consent forms. In the form the participant(s) has/have given his/her/their consent for his/her/their images and other clinical information to be reported in the journal. The participants understand that their names and initials will not be published and due efforts will be made to conceal their identity, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

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**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

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