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Dating for College Students in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Dating for College Students in the San Francisco Bay Area

by

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A culminating capstone project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational
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Abstract

Dating is a widely practiced occupation by many individuals, especially the emerging adult, college student population. The primary objective of this research study was to develop a greater understanding of San Francisco (SF) Bay Area college students' perception, practice, and occupational impact of dating. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with seven college students living in the SF Bay Area. Three themes emerged: the dating process, internal and external factors that influence dating, and personal growth from dating experiences. The data revealed that the emerging adult, college student population values dating and believes it can significantly impact their own development. However, this population considers dating to be confusing because of its complexity. These findings highlight implications in which occupational therapists can support the needs of college students of this generation who wish to participate in the occupation of dating.

Keywords: college students, dating, emerging adulthood, mental health, occupational therapy, relationships, young adults

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Introduction

Dating is a dynamic occupation with many undefined components. Despite its complexity, dating is a common occupation that is practiced by a wide range of populations, specifically the young adult/college student population (Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). This population finds value in dating; they believe that regardless of relationship status, dating enhances happiness and life satisfaction (Love & Holder, 2016, p. 2,048). In addition, dating is relevant and prominent to their current life stage. Arnett (2004) coins this population as *emerging adulthood*; in this stage of life, late teens are transitioning into their twenties and are engaging in independent exploration such as in love and work (p. 3). Arnett concludes that in this generation of emerging adults, the college campus has become the setting for finding a partner (2004, p. 74). Arnett also mentions theorist Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Stage of Development, "Intimacy vs. Isolation" and how dating helps an individual shape their identity, explore and create intimate relationships, and determine future decisions. Although dating is deemed to be a significant and valuable occupation, there is a lack of occupational therapy (OT) research and literature on dating for the emerging adult population. Dating is dynamic and always changing per generation. The purpose of this study is to develop a greater understanding of how SF/Bay Area college students perceive and practice dating, along with how the occupation impacts them as occupational beings.

Background

As previously stated there is a lack of involvement, focus, and literature on *dating* within OT research. Most OT literature primarily focuses on aspects around dating, such as sexual activity and reproductive health. Only one occupational therapist/scientist, Sheama Krishnagiri, has contributed significant OT literature on dating amongst various populations.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Promotion for Adolescents

One demonstration of OT involvement within the realm of dating is sexual and reproductive health promotion for adolescents. In 2016, Gontijo, Sena e Vasconcelos, Monteiro, Facundes, Fátima Cordeiro Trajano, and Lima (2016) conducted a study to explore the influence of OT services on improving and retaining information on sexual and reproductive health promotion. A total of 58 students were involved, 24 male and 34 female, ages 13-17. The students were divided into six groups with an average of ten students per group. Within these groups, students participated in ten, 50 minute-long meetings from August 16 to October 20, 2012. Data was collected before, during, and after intervention through the use of audio recordings of the focus groups, questionnaires, and field diary notes created by the students. Knowledge regarding topics such as sex, STDs, puberty, contraception, gender, etc., were learned by the use of educational games. Overall, students enjoyed the methods and approach implemented by the OT. Not only did instruction and guidance of the OT facilitate learning and an improvement in knowledge, but OT intervention also increased student enjoyment, attention, interest, and engagement in their learning process on sexual and reproductive health information. The study demonstrates how OTs can be involved and have a positive effect on students attainment of sexual and reproductive health knowledge. However, the OT intervention was not

broad enough and did not discuss other aspects of dating/relationships, besides the sexual components concerning others and the self.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Education for Students with Developmental Disabilities

Occupational therapists are also involved in sexual and reproductive education for individuals with developmental disabilities. A study conducted by Krantz, Tolan, Pontarelli, and Cahill (2016) used qualitative research and semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of how OT practitioners could effectively support adolescents and young adults with developmental disabilities with issues related to sexuality. There were six participants, who were educators in Chicago high schools or therapeutic day schools that included students with developmental disabilities. The participants were snowball sampled and interviewed based on willingness and discussed sexuality pertaining to adolescent students. The interviewers found three common themes among the interviews: 1) sexuality is unique to each student (need to address strengths, weaknesses, attributes, and knowledge on the topic of sex), 2) teachers and parents do not know who is responsible for providing sexual education to the students, and 3) what is the potential role for OT? Results of the study highlight how there is an emerging role for sexual education in adolescents with developmental disabilities for OTs. Because of the specialized skills utilized to analyze individual context and needs, OT's have the ability to educate adolescents in the special needs population about sexual education specific to their abilities. Again, this example of need for OT intervention did not cover other aspects of dating/relationships besides the topic of sexuality.

Mate Selection in Indian-Americans

Sheama Krishnagiri (1996) conducted a qualitative research study that explored “mate selection” among 19-28 year old, single, Indian-Americans. Mate selection was determined to be the process of selecting another human companion by a means of different activities and relationship stages that evaluate compatibility (Krishnagiri, 1996, p. 195). The purpose of the study was to examine the difference in mate selection between heterosexual American-born Indians and Indian-American immigrants. Krishnagiri explored their preferred characteristics in a mate, the influence of context in mate selection, and gender differences. The study included three to four hour long observations at social gatherings (ie: dinners, dances) and 11, one hour long face to face interviews. Results indicate that choosing a partner is based on specific values and traits that the individual finds important such as if they will be a good husband or father, financially stable, or supportive of a family (Krishnagiri, 1996). In addition, Krishnagiri discovered that men and women typically have similar values but place different levels of significance on certain traits (e.g social status, age, intelligence, physical attractiveness, interests, attitudes, and personal attributes) (1996). Overall, the influence of the environment and other contextual factors such as future desires, maturity of the individual, and familial/cultural expectations can vary between cultures and societies in mate selection (Krishnagiri, 1996).

Mate Selection in Various Adult Populations

Krishnagiri (2014a) continued her research on mate selection by analyzing the activities done amongst potential partners in three different populations: typical adults, adults with physical disabilities, and older adults. She utilized a mixed methods approach by using surveys and interviews. Surveys were completed to document demographics, the length of time spent in

each dating stage, and typical activities individuals engaged in at each stage. To further interpret and explore the meaning of mate selection for each population, Krishnagiri followed up with participant interviews. Results indicate that all three populations are participating in similar activities but with modifications to meet the individual's personal contexts such as age and health condition. For example, the older adult population participated in the same activities as typical adults, but at a "slower pace, lower intensity...based on ability," due to their health condition and resiliency (Krishnagiri, 2014a, p. 46). Overall, Krishnagiri's key findings indicate that all three populations are willing to invest time and energy in dating, and that the purpose and meaning of the occupation of mate selection is dependent on the individual's stage of life (2014a).

Research Gaps

Krishnagiri contributed to occupational literature by supplying an in depth understanding of the occupation of mate selection for the adult population. Although her research is valuable, due to new external influences in dating (e.g. online dating, social media) and modern society's culture, dating should be further explored to understand the new trends of dating in the current young adult population.

Methods

Study Design

A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen for this study, since the phenomenon is deduced from participant experiences of which there are associated similarities (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). In this study, lived dating experiences were analyzed through semi-structured interviews, and interview questions were guided by the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) (*see Appendix A*) (Kielhofner, 1980, p. 573).

Participant Recruitment

The researchers utilized snowball sampling through university peers and family, advertisements through social media platforms and flyers (*see Appendix B*), and in-person recruitment from two four-year universities and two community colleges. Those interested in participating in an interview contacted researchers via a specific email designated for the study. There were a total of seven participants, 57% of the sample was male (n=4), and 43% was female (n=3). Table 1 summarizes participant demographics. Participants met the inclusion criteria for the study if they identified as: (1) single, (2) actively dating, (3) attending college in the SF Bay Area, and (4) are part of the emerging adulthood population (18-25 y/o). LGBTQ members are included in our study, thus including relationships considered homosexual. Participants were excluded if they have developmental disabilities, are in an exclusive relationship, married, are friends and family members of the researchers, choose not to date, and are not within the emerging adulthood population age range.

Data Collection

Researchers conducted hour long, semi-structured interviews in a comfortable and convenient setting of the participant's choice. Interviews were completed in person, video call, and over the phone. Demographic information was initially obtained prior to beginning each interview. Following this, researchers asked open ended questions influenced by MOHO to gain an understanding on participants' views such as their perception of dating, dating experiences, and values/traits of a successful relationship (*see Appendix A*) (Kielhofner, 1980, p. 573). Follow up questions were generated by the researchers during the interviews to provide participants with the opportunity to further reflect and elaborate on their answers. Responses from interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim from the respective researchers. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants and assigned for confidentiality purposes.

Data Analysis

Researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to examine key patterns and themes found in the data. Researchers followed the necessary steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing oneself with the data by reading data multiple times, (2) develop initial codes, (3) re-evaluation of codes in relation of emergent themes, (4) name and describe themes, (5) conduct a themes review, and (6) develop a consensus of the data. An inductive bottom up approach for initial coding was taken to avoid fitting data into pre-existing codes. Rather, researchers allowed the analysis to be data-driven to form codes. Furthermore, coding was conducted and reviewed by all researchers to reach a consensus. Sub themes were incorporated to give more structure and description to a particular complex theme. Researchers were guided by their capstone advisor, Dr. Karen McCarthy, OTD, OTR/L, who is

knowledgeable in qualitative research and assisted in the quality of the researcher's interview techniques, coding process, coding consensus of three interviews, and interpretation of all parts of thematic analysis. In summary, as the sub themes and themes emerged, the researchers reviewed the excerpts thoroughly and defined all codes to identify an overarching meaning for dating for college students. Recurring patterns and themes were collectively organized using the qualitative software *Dedoose*.

Rigor

To enhance accuracy of coding interpretations, member checking was a process completed during thematic analysis to allow for researchers to confirm any questions or inferences to avoid false assumptions. Researchers organized multiple meetings prior to interviewing, in order to gain insight on their own personal values, expectations, and biases in dating to reduce bias and avoid leading questions when interviewing. In addition, this method prepared researchers to be respectful and mindful when discussing participants' personal beliefs and experiences that differ from their own. Nine participants were recruited; however, data saturation was reached after seven interviews, therefore, two interviews were omitted, since researchers no longer heard or collected novel information (Patton, 2002).

Results

Three common themes were discussed by all participants: the dating process and unspoken rules of dating, internal and external factors that motivate an individual to date, and their personal growth from their dating experiences. A majority of participants believe dating is mainly influenced from their family and friends, cultural beliefs, environments, and societal pressures and expectations.

Table 1 Participant Demographic Table

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age, yr	Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Religion	Type of College
Bethany	20	F	Filipino	Lesbian	Catholic	4-year university
Sweet Cheeks	20	M	Filipino	Straight	No affiliation	4-year university
Mr. President	19	M	African American/Indian	Straight	Muslim	4-year university
J.M.	22	F	Filipino	Straight	Catholic	Community college
Ezmi	19	F	Filipino	Demisexual	Christian	4-year university
Andre	25	M	Samoan	Straight	Christian	Community college
Pizza Boy	23	M	Caucasian	Straight	Jewish	Community college

Theme 1: Doing Dating

How are people *doing* dating? When choosing a partner suited to fit their needs, the participants mentioned different mediums/methods of dating, potential phases of dating, and the “do’s and don’ts” of dating. Participants elaborated on all of these concepts when reflecting on their experiences during the dating process.

Sub-theme 1: Traditional & modern dating. Participants acknowledged there are traditional and modern ways to date. When undergoing the dating process, participants recognize the way they choose to date may be influenced by factors such as their values (e.g. family), culture (e.g. religion), or preferences (e.g. convenience).

Traditional dating is a process in dating that was practiced by older generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X. From the point of view of the participants, this kind of dating occurs at a slower pace and can be closely monitored, require chaperones or parental permission, and undergo the process of courting. *Ezmi* explains:

...my parents are very traditional and they're very much like niche and you have to do courting like the old school thing where just like you have to ask permission with the parents before you can start dating. You cannot be alone together ever. It's always like group dates or like if you are alone there's a chaperone somewhere, like hiding away watching you guys...

Modern dating was formed by combining technological components such as social media, online dating apps, and texting, along with aspects of traditional dating. This form of dating also includes numerous, non-sequential stages that one may experience before entering into a defined relationship with another individual. *Bethany* explains her perception of modern dating:

Now I want to do traditional things like the talking phase where you're texting or sliding in the DMs. Just getting to know that person. Maybe take them out on a date and maybe there's another date. I want to go through those motions with someone. Personally, I've never gone through those motions yet... hopefully. But like, so far my dating experiences - I become friends with the girl then we realize we're more than friends. Then we make it

official. Then we start doing the romantic things...I want to do it in a more traditional sense. So that's definitely something a lot of people like me can identify with. I'm shifting more toward a "traditional" way of dating...

Although each participant has a preferential way to date, all stated they have either wanted to or have engaged in each form of dating.

Sub-theme 2: Phases of dating. The participants each discussed different dating phases. The dating phases are non-sequential steps individuals experience to determine the level of seriousness prior to entering a defined relationship. Not every individual will experience every stage entirely or even at all; in fact, some find themselves stagnant in a phase. The phases discussed amongst the participants include the talking phase, the friends to more phase, and the labeling the relationship phase.

The talking phase takes place when two individuals are getting to know each other and familiarizing themselves with the other person's personality traits, characteristics, and interests. This phase usually takes place after initially meeting the individual in person or online. For some, the talking phase does not have to be exclusive - meaning that 'talking' can occur simultaneously with multiple individuals. On the other hand, this phase can also be considered more exclusive and can be vital to expressing values. *Ezmi* discusses her personal experiences in the talking phase:

...I think it's really cool to be able to like get to know someone, and like, figure... find out things more than just superficial things...like, what are your opinions on like the world? And like, your values and things like that. Also of course superficial things are fine. Like, who doesn't love to go get sushi or go on a cute date or something. But I think the really important moments are just like having like real talk...

The friends to more phase happens after two individuals, who already have a definite friendship, naturally grows and becomes more intimate. *J.M.* describes how starting as friends with your potential partner has its benefits:

...someone who is like your best friend plus you like plus your partner. I feel like it's such a big plus. That's why I've always like think to myself like try to be friends with someone first and then start dating because it's kinda like I want to build that, that relationship where it's kinda like we could still, I could go to the person for a good laugh when I had a bad day or like go to them when it's just like I don't want to be at home right now come pick me up kinda thing.

The labeling the relationship phase happens when two individuals come to a consensus of the type of relationship they want to enter. In this phase, the two may determine where they stand in their relationship such as if they are only 'talking' or if they want to become exclusive. This can take place anytime in the dating phases, and without this stage, there can be confusion about which stage of dating they are in with their potential partner. *Bethany* emphasizes the importance of the labeling the relationship phase:

...I think in this day and age, it is hard to tell when you like someone. I've definitely run into situations where I think I'm talking to someone or that I'm basically dating someone. But they think that we're still talking. It's because we don't have those come conversations. Going forward I want to have more of those conversations...I think that we don't know when the talking stops and the dating starts. You know?

Sub-theme 3: “Secret hidden rulebook.” Participants noted an existence of unspoken rules in dating, also referred to as the secret hidden rulebook. The secret hidden rule book consists of general, unspoken expectations of a partner that are typically based on gender

roles and are demonstrated in traditional dating, pop culture, social media, and overall society.

J.M. shares her thoughts on the secret hidden rulebook:

I feel like there are certain expectations on, you know, all the genders of like a boyfriend should do this or a girlfriend should do that. And then there's social media and everything...That's why I feel like communication is really important because they shouldn't have these kind of expectations or assumptions of someone in a relationship like I feel like you should like because people have different values and even though like I do believe there is this like secret hidden rule book that I feel like everyone has this idea on. I feel like it's a good start out.

Bethany also acknowledges the secret hidden rulebook and describes how these high expectations can create unrealistic romantic platforms in a relationship:

Let's be real, at 20 I'm not going to be able to have the funds for a romantic candlelit dinner in another country. I'm sorry, I'm a college student and I have loans to pay off. I'm studying for my finals, I don't have time. But in a more positive way, I think that it does give us that sort of giddy feeling. Like I'm sure our parents felt when it was still the old school type of love, which I still think is pretty cool. But I still think it makes us feel human that people post things about their relationships. I see a lot of things where it's like, 'Finally got to travel with my significant other!' Then there is this cute little vlog about how they went to freakin' Bora Bora! I'm like, 'That's something I want to do with my significant other one day.'...But it has to be realistic. I don't want to see some Google Images type of s***. You know what I mean? You see that on Twitter and Instagram where people say, 'Relationship goals!' Candlelight dinners and... That's not real!

All individuals recognize that the secret hidden rulebook exists and these expectations are assumed by many when dating. Because of this, individuals find confusion on how to date, since dating is overall subjective with no clear definition or guidelines. There is a clear gap amongst participants in understanding how dating should be performed.

Theme 2: What's Love Got To Do With It?

Because of differing perceptions, values, and personal goals, participants expressed there is often confusion in dating. If this is the case, what motivates people to continue dating, if it can be so confusing? Participants explained how attraction and clicking, various environmental contexts, and personal values are factors that have influenced their motivation to date. In addition, there are other factors that influence motivation and participation in dating besides the common assumption of finding love. Other factors include: fulfilling personal pleasures, finding a partner, or experiencing a sense of companionship.

Sub-theme 1: Looking for and what finds you. Participants revealed that there are essential qualities they are looking for in a partner that largely influence their dating preferences. These factors are very logical, may be strict, and are valuable qualities an individual essentially wants in a partner overall. An individual may consider these characteristics as values in a successful dating partner, and one may not proceed in a phase of dating if they do not exhibit those qualities. *Mr. President* shares qualities and values he finds important in a partner and relationship:

I think communication and honesty and trustworthiness are probably the most three biggest things in my opinion that make the relationship successful... This is my personal take, dating is kind of like, there aren't really strings attached because if you don't like a

person you could easily walk away and you can just call it off and end. Where as if you were to actually marry somebody, your committing to another person's values, meaning that you have to be able to compromise when things don't go the same way as you've really believed they were going to go...so in terms of qualities, I definitely look for trust and honesty because you have to trust your partner and your partner has to trust you. And you both have to be honest with each other and communication is super important because...if people don't communicate what they are feeling then that like feeling kind of builds up and eventually gets to a point where it's just like really bad and things just fall apart because they didn't communicate the right way or when they communicated, the other person didn't listen. And so not being able to communicate and compromise is definitely something that breaks a relationship.

Despite these strong preferences, individuals also choose to be with someone based on feeling a strong connection. Participants explained this feeling as being attracted to someone unexpectedly, also known by modern society as “clicking”, or having an attraction to “what finds you.” *Andre* describes his own experience with clicking at one of his previous jobs:

...there was this thing, a ‘no dating at work’ rule. And there was like, this girl. We were totally feeling each other. We saw each other outside of work, but in the building we like tried to dumb down our relationship. It was weird...It’s like we had this connection. We clicked in a weird way. It’s not like we liked all of the same things either...but that didn’t matter cause hanging with her was easy.

College students shared these two counter ideas when dating. Although they may have a list of specific values and characteristics in a partner they are looking for, they are also willing to

look past their preferences. Participants choose to embrace “what finds them” if the physical and/or emotional connection with the other person is too strong to ignore.

Sub-theme 2: College culture. Participants discussed the change in environment as one of the biggest influences in their dating experiences. The term environment was expressed in multiple ways. The first is physical, regarding on/off campus living and different types of colleges such as community colleges and four-year universities. Participants explained each of these physical environments have a strong impact on the beliefs of dating and the way dating is carried out. *Ezmi* discusses her experiences between living in dorms her freshman year of college compared to living in an off campus apartment her sophomore year:

...I think [it] definitely gives you more freedom...I think in comparison to the dorm, especially because my hallmates were super nosy. It's a little bit more like it's better cause like I'm friends with my roommates so then I feel more comfortable about it. It's not super awkward where I'm like, okay, come, come, come, come on, let's go to the hall. I don't want them to see you. And if caught my suitemates were so nosy. Like if anyone brought home a boy the entire hall knew about it...I also think that like having an apartment makes me feel more comfortable because it's like they're coming onto my territory basically. I think that's really important because it just makes me feel more safe ...

Pizza Boy explains his experiences comparing his time in a four-year university in Colorado versus a community college in the SF Bay Area:

...I guess [with SF Bay Area Community College], the vibe I get mostly is, I mean you would typically meet a girl, you know, academically like through a class...Like the only girls I ever dated from [SF Bay Area Community College] I met in class, which is

probably a bad thing cause then if it doesn't work out...versus [Four-Year University in CO]. It's such a large school...I sit with my friends but I would never, almost, never see the same people in classes every day...at [Four-Year University in CO] it's also much more that, that college mentality of getting drunk and hooking up to. If you go to like a house party or that party, it's not really, there's not a lot of dating in that sense. You don't meet too many girls or guys with boyfriends or girlfriends respectively because people, I guess are more distracted about squeezing more and more people, having fun.

The second environment expressed was social environment. Social environment is the “presence of, relationships with, and expectations of persons, groups, or populations with whom clients have contact” (AOTA, 2014, p. S28). *Sweet Cheeks* shares multiple examples of social influence that impact dating beliefs and behaviors such as social media, pop culture, and relationships with friends:

If you look on Twitter, movies, TV shows, but specifically Twitter, there's a perception of what's right and wrong in dating. [For example], there's a “dating culture” on social media. It's basically kind of like propaganda, you know?...It's not only men that feed into their own stereotype or women that feed into their own stereotype...I guess social media just provides a more efficient way of doing that.

Although social media and pop culture are highly present in the lives of college students, participants believe their personal relationships have a greater impact in their dating behaviors and values. *Sweet Cheeks* continues:

Something I've realized, comparing college to high school, college has brought me around peers my own gender. And looking back, it's very interesting how that experience affected my perception on dating or just having another partner. Definitely now that I'm

around more dudes, I almost call it ‘foolish lapses’ of me just doing stupid s***. And just saying stupid s***. Definitely the fact that in college you’re around more peers and people typically like you...For example, if you hang out with a bunch of dudes that are kind of like feeding into the whole ‘ladies man’ stereotype, that might kind of rub strongly on you...

Participants believe their peers put pressure on the way they should date or what they should value when dating, specifically because of their stage in life. Oftentimes, participants expressed difficulty between balancing the societal expectations of a young adult in college and their own dating desires. *Sweet Cheeks* concludes:

Oh, because when you're young, especially people our age, the common advice is to enjoy the world...We are told to enjoy the world while we can still do it. These are considered our prime years or whatever. And sometimes that involves testing the waters multiple times with very large expectations. I find value in that. I can respect that. I don't think it's a wrong point of view. It's just a point of view that's not for me. Why that's not a commonly shared one? People like to have fun. That's kind of a simple and plain answer.

Participants stated they chose to follow common dating standards, beliefs, and traditions because of the social pressures experienced in their environments and by their peers (Christiansen, 1999). Following these expectations validated participants to believe they were dating within the college social norms.

Sub-theme 3: To date or not to date? Participants expressed their own personal desires in dating. These aspirations serve as the overall motivational influence in their decisions when choosing the type of partner they are looking for, as well as when to search for a partner.

Participants explained these goals may also serve as a reason why individuals are not motivated to date at the moment.

Bethany stated that she is motivated to date because she wants to feel more intimate levels of empathy and understanding from someone outside of her family:

For me personally, it's to find some common ground with someone. I think there's definitely a lot of chaos in the world. There's so many people that hate on you for being certain things and for identifying a certain way. Finding someone who understands you and empathizes with you and who feels for you and with you is something I'm looking for. And honestly, kind of fill that sort of emptiness that I feel when I deal with emotions on a day-to-day basis, you know? I feel like that's something that most young adults from 18 to 25 go through because they want to feel loved and accepted in a way that isn't like a family, like your blood related so you have to love them. You know what I mean? They want to find, again, something more than companionship and something more intimate especially in today's world with everything that's going on in America. Some common ground and something to feel almost like home.

Andre, on the other hand, addressed his motivation to date is mainly based on how he believes there is a “deadline” for which he has to have a life partner:

...I like to plan things out in advance...I've always told myself like I should be like, when I'm around 25, 26, I should be settling down building toward, you know, building with that potential partner and hopefully having like, having a family by like 30...

Though each participant noted their personal motivations for dating, most participants stated they are more focused on themselves at this period in their lives. *Pizza Boy* states he is

currently unmotivated to date, since it is not a pressing priority compared to his other responsibilities such as working or school but is still valuable and important to participate in:

How important [is dating] at this point in my life, I guess it's not a huge importance... I have that thought in the back of my head that I'm alone forever, and that's something that scares me...I think being alone would probably be my greatest fear, I think dating is quite important, but at the same time I haven't, other than recently before that, had gone on a date in six months or so, just because it was never something I've put effort in... so in my life, I guess it's, it definitely has its importance, but it's, you know, I have other things on my plate I need to focus on. So if dating does happen I kind of leave it more to chance.

Theme 3: Lessons from Love

Participants believe they have learned valuable lessons in life and love about dating and who they are as an occupational being. Lessons relate to: 1) who you are - such as identity, values, beliefs, and preferences, and 2) moving forward as a dater- such as perspectives, values, and beliefs that differ from their own and societal attitudes and expectations.

Sub-theme 1: Who you are. All participants stressed the importance to stay true to one's own identity in order to have increased personal satisfaction and a successful relationship. In further observance, the participants each discussed about different, individual elements of identity that they found important when dating another partner.

Mr. President described how his acquired new role as school president changed his identity, directly affecting his occupation of dating.

I was still in community college, and I became president. And all my life I was seeking popularity because I never had that popularity feeling. And I don't know why, but [it's]

something I've always wanted. And so when I became president, like, my whole life changed. People knew me. I really did become a popular 'quote on quote'...just having my face on bus stops and posters and on magazines and literally everywhere just made me very noticeable. And that feeling was definitely amazing. But I also learned a lot from it. And I think that during that time I gradually did not like this person that I started dating because I started changing as a person. And I think a lot of me changing was because I became more popular. I guess the standards that I had to uphold to, or that I felt like I had to uphold to, definitely changed me as a person.

Bethany discussed how her culture, religion, and sexual orientation make up her identity.

She further expressed the importance of a potential partner understanding these concepts.

Understanding culture and how someone identifies is really important. Growing up, I'm first-generation Filipino-American. My parents are very traditional so having someone who understands that I understand another language and that my parents are bilingual is a really big thing. With that, Filipinos and a lot of Asians and people of color have really big families. That also ties with the understanding that family comes first. That's really important to me. Culture and family are very important. How I identify is really big. Even though I'm gay, I'm also very Catholic. Even though I'm a person of color, that doesn't mean I'm super into liberal policy. I definitely stray towards a more conservative side. So having someone who understands my complex identities is really important because I am very set on how I identify. I just need someone who understands that. It's not just black and white for me. I'm very much a gray area.

Bethany continues by describing how her personal experiences with mental health influence her search for someone that can accept and empathize with her.

Having someone who understands my mental health is very important. I grew up with a lot of depression. I've had suicide attempts. I've gone through it all. When I'm sad it's not just to be sad. I'm sad because I have mental health problems and I need to cope with them the way I learned to cope with them in healthy ways. Sometimes that means I don't talk to my significant other for 24 hours or I don't leave my room for a few hours and I need to just like rest myself. So having someone who empathizes with me and can care for me in that capacity.

Overall dating performance and life satisfaction can be strongly influenced by an individual's intrinsic factors that make up one's identity such as culture, religion, sexual orientation, and mental health.

Sub-theme 2: Moving forward as a dater. Participants explained they learned lessons about themselves and others from both positive and negative dating experiences. Participants believe the most important lessons are to establish self love before dating others, as well as acknowledge and accept that every individual, including themselves, is developing and changing as they grow older. *Ezmi* reflects on her own experience, where she came to the realization that finding a partner would not help fill a emotional void in her life:

I think a lot of it was because I was a very shy person growing up and very insecure...so especially like I want to say freshman and sophomore year I was still very much trying to figure out who I was...and I'm trying to be happy and I just, I had a misconstrued idea of like, oh, like if I have a boyfriend I'll be happy. And then like, it'll make me like fit in and not really realizing that it was internal things I had to deal with and also just that the right people won't care about that kind of thing.

Ezmi continues and shares how dating does not compensate for one's own personal qualms. She believes it is the responsibility of the individual to address these qualms and to not expect a dating partner to resolve them:

...I think what's important...is if you are going to like start a relationship with someone that you are at least at an okay place enough where you can be dating...I think about like 14 year old me who thought like, oh, but if you get in a relationship, this will make everything better...[it's] kind of like you need to be in an okay place, like you are not obligated to be like completely okay dating another person. But if you have the perception that like this other person will fix your problems, like no please do not date. They will not fix your problems.

As mentioned by all participants, establishing self love, accepting change, and being accountable for their own wellbeing are important lessons in life and love. Applying these lessons can improve future dating experiences by helping individuals find a partner that fits their needs, accepts them for who they are, and who they are becoming.

Discussion

After analyzing the data and the three common themes (the dating process, internal and external factors that influence dating, and individual growth from dating experiences), the participants' interviews indicated that the occupation of dating is subjective and personal. Participants identified that their perceptions on dating and the way they practice the occupation is mainly influenced by family, friends, cultural beliefs, environments, and societal expectations. Many participants explained their dating experiences can impact their current and developing identities, supporting multiple theories that discuss identity formation, such as that of Arnett and Christiansen. Arnett's (2004) theory explains how dating experiences can influence emerging adults' formation of identity and exploration of intimate relationships. On the other hand, Christiansen (1999) states that identity is a formed group of "definitions" influenced by our roles, relationships, and values, and that we achieve our identity through a "cause-and effect" process. Overall, dating is significant and highly valued by this population, and its contribution to their development as occupational beings enhances their sense of individuality of who they are being and becoming.

Similar to Krishnagiri's (1996) findings in mate selection, participants revealed that there are essential qualities they are looking for in a partner that largely influence their dating preferences. However, significant differences in the occupation of dating between the adult and college student populations were found when compared to Krishnagiri's (1996, 2014a) findings. For example, Krishnagiri established that there are sequential stages of dating within the process of mate selection (2014a). In the occupation of dating for college students, our participants explain that the process of dating is non-sequential and can take place in any order. Another difference between findings was the large influence of social media and use of online dating apps

for the college student population. This is especially significant to today's college student generation since all of the participants acknowledged its large impact on current dating trends and beliefs. Lastly, compared to Krishnagiri's 1996 and 2014a findings, the college student population acknowledged the presence and use of "unspoken rules," indicating why there is confusion in dating for their population. Overall, while Krishnagiri's findings from 1996 and 2014a are valuable and significant, the data is primarily relevant for those specific populations during that time period in comparison to college students of this generation.

Limitations

Small sample size and limited ethnic/cultural diversity affect the validity of this study. Generalizability to different college populations, such as those in different cities, states, or countries, would be limited due to cultural and geographical differences. Information and data collected in this study would also lose validity in future generations due to the complexity of the occupation and influence of changing contexts.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

As occupational therapists, the overarching goal of OT intervention is to promote and facilitate a higher quality of life for all individuals. As indicated by the findings, dating is a significant occupation amongst the college student/emerging adult population, and their dating experiences can positively or negatively affect them in all aspects of life. With this, the study's findings can provide occupational therapists with evidence-based research on how to support and understand the college student/emerging adult population with the occupation of dating as a whole, or with other skills needed to participate in the occupation. However, it is necessary to continue studying dating, since it changes per culture and generation. Overall, since this study adds to the limited OT literature on dating, it can provide validity and encouragement for an OT role in the dating realm and enhance therapists' understanding of the value of dating.

Conclusions

Social culture will continue to change throughout subsequent generations. Therefore, the dynamics of dating will continue to change with evolving culture. Occupational therapists and other service providers who wish to work in this area with the college student/emerging adult population are required to stay up-to-date with current societal culture and trends to help support those generations with the occupation of dating. The research findings of this study also contribute to OT literature by providing an understanding of dating as an occupation and by opening the opportunity to future exploratory research on different aspects of dating.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What does dating mean to you?
2. Can you describe one memorable experience from your past dating life?
3. How important is dating for you?
4. What motivates you to continue dating?
5. What do you think made your past relationships unsuccessful?
6. What makes a relationship successful?
7. How has your past dating experiences shaped who you are?
8. How has dating affected your life as a college student?
9. What have you learned from your past dating experiences?
10. Could you describe the type of person you would never want for a dating partner?
11. How has dating affected your social life?
12. As an occupational therapy student, occupations are recognized as the everyday activities individual's participate in, such as self care, work, school, etc. In general, how can dating be something negative or positive for a person's routine or occupations?
13. Thinking about your past dating life, how did it impacting you in terms of your daily routine and occupations?
14. What is your advice to a college student who is thinking of dating?
15. Could dating enhance your life satisfaction, well-being, or happiness?
16. How has our modern society/social media shaped your perception of dating?
17. Could you name as many qualities necessary to have a successful relationship?
18. Thinking about those answers you stated, could you name the most important quality you need to have to be successful in dating?

19. Do you believe an individual who wants to date needs to have a strong self-love/self-esteem? Why or why not?
20. At this point in your life, are you looking for a serious relationship to eventually marry, casual dating and meeting new people, hookups/friends with benefits or other? Please explain.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer



**Dominican University of CA
Occupational Therapy Program**



We invite you to contribute to the future and knowledge base of...

Dating for College Students

...for the field of occupational therapy!

Contact us to schedule an interview session with one of our 4 team members

All participants will be submitted into a raffle to win a \$20 Amazon gift card

For more information, please contact us at:
datingresearchforDUC@gmail.com

Or join our FB group: Dating Research For DUC

