

## Research report--Wang Yaxuan

### **Title of research**

Investigation of Lithers among University Students: A Qualitative Exploratory Study

### **Background and significance**

#### *Introduction*

As a person approaches adulthood, intimacy in a romantic relationship is viewed as one of the most critical developmental tasks (Conger et al., 2000). Therefore, during this time, a lack of ability to commit to and maintain an intimate relationship is believed to not only hinder development but also adversely affect well-being throughout life (Rauer et al., 2013). Despite the significance, a report from Harvard shows that large number of young people struggle with developing healthy romantic relationships, and the growing trend of young adults avoiding getting into a romantic relationship is suggested to be caused by many factors such as their lack of confidence in navigating long-term relationships and uncertainty about whether their current partner is “the one” (Weissbourd et al., 2017; Paras, 2020). Since people’s life experiences vary, many people are finding the traditional romantic orientations unable to describe their situations. Therefore, more terms have been proposed to cater to the complexities of romantic orientations and help people achieve deeper self-understanding. Under such influence, the term “lithromantic”, which has become increasingly popular on the internet, is typically described as a kind of romantic orientation that allows you to “be attracted to people, but do not want that attraction reciprocated” (Decker, 2015, p.35). Therefore, lithromantic orientation is also often classified as part of the “aromantic spectrum” identities, which encompass a great variety of identities and generally refer to the lack of romantic attraction to people (Elgie, 2020). Yet, since “lithromantic” is a relatively new term, there is still a limited consensus about its definition.

Currently, the most relevant research is from Liu, Liu and Shen (2018), which suggests lithers (people who identify their romantic orientation as lithromantic) have three major distinct characteristics. First, when lithers have a crush, they will try to get closer to their crush; second, lithers often indulge in their world of unrequited love and do not value the result; third, they tend to idealize their crush and view him/her as irreplaceable (Liu et al., 2018). Even though lithers may desire to love and be loved, when they commit to a romantic relationship, lithers are often characterized by their rejection of physical contact, and their uncontrollable psychological repulsion towards emotional intimacy (Liu et al., 2018). In addition, confession from their crush may lead to magnification of their crush’s shortcomings (Liu et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important for lithers to have their personal space in a relationship, as they can get

very uncomfortable when others become too close with them.

### *Impacts of being lithromantic*

As a result, the majority of lithers often keep their romantic relationship ambiguous. Liu et al. (2018)'s research shows among the 211 randomly selected people who participated in their survey, more than half believed lithers have difficulty in having romantic relationship. When a relationship is likely to be established soon, lithers, due to their psychological difficulties, may suddenly stop responding to their dates' messages, and start to be aloof to their crush. Such a drastic shift of attitude leads to inextricable difficulties in forming a stable romantic relationship. Therefore, lithers often remain single for a long time (Liu et al., 2018).

In fact, many lithers have confessed they suffer a lot from their "unique" approach of dealing with intimate relationships, as they cannot help but repeat the cycle of being attracted to someone yet pushing their crush away once their feelings are reciprocated (Liu et al., 2018). Since the difficulties encountered by lithers are often hard to explain and shared by a small group of people, many people think lithers are just playing with others' feelings (Liu et al., 2018). However, it is incorrect to simply quote lithers as playboys or playgirls, as many lithers are unable to control their inner feeling of disgust towards the person they will have a romantic relationship with (Liu et al., 2018). Therefore, to help lithers understand this phenomenon in a deeper way, more research is needed to explore the factors that may contribute to lithromantic romantic orientation.

### *Research aim*

Thus, this research aims to explore the possible factors associated with lithromantic romantic orientation through conducting qualitative interviews with lithers among university students in Hong Kong to gain more insight into this topic.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted with full-time university students who are currently studying in the 8 UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong. All participants needed to be at least 18 years old to be eligible to participate.

### *Procedure*

A screening questionnaire was first distributed to search for eligible participants for interviews. Purposive sampling was undertaken after the questionnaire result was collected, whereby participants already identify themselves as lithers, or participants who, after knowing the concept of lithromantic (by doing the questionnaire), believe they have exhibited characteristics of lithromantic in their past relationship experiences, were invited for one-to-one in-depth interviews. It was initially planned that two rounds of interviews would be conducted. However, due to the limited research time, only the first round of interviews was conducted.

The first round of interviews was audio-recorded, and the length of each interview ranged from one to two hours. The interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face based on interviewees' preferences. At the beginning of each interview, interviewees were asked to provide their own understanding of lithromantic. When it was not clear that the interviewees' descriptions of lithromantic conform to the generally held views, more explanations were provided from the researcher to secure a common understanding.

For the interviews, interviewees were asked to detailedly narrate (i) their past relationship experiences (ii) how they deal with romantic relationships and intimate relationships in general and why they did it in that way (to explore individual factors like personal belief and living habit) (iii) whether or not their surroundings played a role during the process (to explore contextual factors like parents' level of involvement and school teacher's attitude) (iiii) what factors they think may have caused them to deal with romantic relationships in the way they did. While the order of questions may be different depending on the interview progress, questions of the last topic (topic iiiii) were asked at the end when the researcher believed all topics related to lithromantic and ecological information had been explored in sufficient depth. By doing this, the researcher could help interviewees reflect upon all the details of their past experiences first by themselves, which should allow interviewees to answer questions of the last topic with more ease.

## **Results**

743 questionnaire responses were collected. However, since many of the responses are incomplete, only 382 responses are considered valid. The sample was predominately female and Asian (63%). The average age of participants was 20.8 years old, and they had an average of 2.6 past romantic relationships. As mentioned earlier, lithromantic falls on the aromantic spectrum. However, among participants who thought they might be or were a lither (n=161), only 5% (n=8) identified themselves as having only aromantic orientation, while 9% (n=14) thought they not only had aromantic orientation but other romantic orientations as well. This suggests that many participants might not understand the definition of aromantic well, or might not identify themselves only as aromantic people. Rather, many people's aromantic identities could be conditional or atypical to social expectations, as their experiences might not be fully described by aromantic alone.

Furthermore, before reading the brief introduction of lithromantic, 48% of participants knew nothing about this term beforehand. While 46% of participants had some knowledge of this term, only 6% knew the term a lot. After the definition of lithromantic was introduced, only 9% of participants who thought they exhibited no characteristic of lithromantic before began to identify themselves as potential lithers or were sure they were lithers, and the percentage of people who identified themselves as (potential) lithers after knowing the definition of lithromantic increased with the extent to which they thought they exhibited characteristics of lithromantic in the past (a little: 27%, a moderate amount: 67%, a lot: 89%, a great deal: 85%). However, most of these participants were still unsure whether they were lithers, so the number

of participants choosing the option “maybe” (n=131) was four times greater than those who chose “yes” (n=30).

To avoid expectancy effect, participants were not informed of the definition of lithromantic first but were first asked to rate the extent to which they conformed to statements that were in fact some characteristics of lithromantic. While people who later identified themselves as lithers or thought they might be lithers exhibited more characteristics of lithromantic than those that did not identify themselves as lithers, the difference is often quite small, and there is a great number of participants who identified themselves as (potential) lithers but also exhibited characteristics that contradicted those of lithromantic. Such result suggests that participants’ understanding of lithromantic might be largely ambiguous or even incorrect. It may also imply that some people, instead of being an absolute lither, might only partially exhibit the characteristics to a varying extent.

<b>How much do you know about lithromantic</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Cumulative percentage</b>
Not at all	183	47.9	47.9
Only a little	84	22.0	69.9
To some extent	92	24.1	94
Rather much	19	5.0	99
Very much	4	1.0	100.0
Total	382	100.0	

		<b>After knowing the definition of lithromantic, do you identify yourself as a lither?</b>			<b>Total</b>
		<b>Maybe</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
<b>After reading the brief introduction of lithromantic, how much do you think you have exhibited characteristics of lithromantic in the past?</b>	Not at all 0.09	7	3	93	103
	A little 27	31	2	91	124
	A moderate amount 67%	56	6	30	92
	A lot 89%	34	10	5	49
	A great deal 85%	3	9	2	14
Total	131	30	221	382	

Based on the questionnaire responses, 24 university students were invited to participate in the following one-to-one interviews. Among them, 6 participants discovered that their characteristics did not fit those of lithromantic during the interviews. However, it should be noticed that from the interviews, many participants had mixed experiences, meaning that while some of their past romantic experiences catered to the characteristics of lithromantic, some did not fit into such characteristics. Thus, some participants believed themselves to be “conditional” lithers, as they would

only exhibit the relevant characteristics, or stop desiring for reciprocation from their crush under certain circumstances. Most often, the decisive factor is who makes the first move in the relationship, or who likes the other person first (sometimes the two things overlap). For example, P21 (participant 21) mentioned “If I were to take the initiative to pursue someone, and if later we were together, I will enjoy having body contact with him. But if the other person pursues me first, and then we get together, I will quickly lose interest, and body contact will also make me very uncomfortable”. When asking about the possible reason behind, she compared the pursuit of love as hunting: “if you harvest an animal successfully, you will gain a sense of satisfaction, which will not be available if someone pursues you”. Nevertheless, P9’s case is the total opposite. According to her experience, if she pursued someone first, the decision of getting into a relationship would be in the other person’s hand, and it was only after the person had evaluated her that he began to develop interests to her, instead of having such feelings the moment he met her. Since such difference in feeling could lead to unbalanced status in a relationship and generate more problems later, she believed it was important for other people to pursue her first.

Despite the various reasons that triggered them to manifest this romantic orientation, the lithromantic characteristics discovered in the participants included feeling nervous and anxious when their crush got close to them, worrying about being abandoned by their partner, losing interest in their crush when they were romantically reciprocated by their crush, wanting to be love but did not want to be in a relationship, feeling uncomfortable entering a romantic relationship, and fantasizing about being intimate with their crush but found it uncomfortable when such intimacy was actually returned (“Lithromantic”, n.d.). However, since the participants exhibited varying degree of lithromantic characteristics, not all the characteristics were present on each “lither”.

When asking the role of environments on their attitudes towards romantic relationships, parents, friends, teachers, schools and living environment of different participants could have varying degrees of influences on them depending on their life experiences. However, no matter if the participants take others’ opinions seriously or not, or thought the bigger environment had a great impact on them or not, most of them thought the final decision lay in their hands, and other people’s comments were only subsidiary, even though the environment might still influence them emotionally.

Nevertheless, although most participants believed the autonomy of being in a romantic relationship lied in their own hands, when they were asked to reflect upon the factors that might have contributed to the lithromantic orientation, several key themes emerged accordingly, and most of them were situational factors instead of individual factors. This indicates that the environment had influenced them in a profound but subtle way that most participants were not aware that they had been already significantly impacted.

### *Family*

14 out of the 18 participants believed family played a crucial role in contributing to their lithromantic orientation, and such influences were mostly negative. It is

noticeable that parents of most of these participants had undesirable marital relationships, leading to their children (the participants)'s insecurities in being in intimate relationships. As P8 (participant 8) mentioned

My dad cheated on my mom when she was pregnant. Although she did not divorce him, they were separated ever since. My mom left us, so I have lived with my dad. My brother and I have met several of his girlfriends, and a part of my dad's mobile phone album is even dedicated to storing him and his girlfriends' intimate photos. It really has a big impact on me, as I feel that if I would get married or have a baby in the future, my husband will definitely cheat on me. I am so afraid that such things can happen to me, so I feel as long as we (my crush and I) are apart, the relationship can remain pure, and no one will get hurt.

Besides the observation of undesirable parental relations, some participants like P10 also complained that their parents held a hostile attitude towards their development of romantic relationships: "They (my parents) just don't want me to be in a relationship or they don't even want me to have male friends actually. I think they're just worried that I might get betrayed or that I don't focus on my career and studies because I'm a relationship". Another participant (P12) also mentioned that her mother was usually very critical of her and would criticize her constantly at home, which caused her to develop the tendency of being overly critical of herself and her partner, thus consequently contributed to her lithromantic orientation.

### *Education*

Additionally, education was identified as a key factor contributing to the formation of lithromantic orientation. Several participants felt the lack of sex education from parents, schools and the society made them lack the necessary knowledge to love someone and accept love from someone else. Thus, when they were placed in situations that required them to respond to a complex affective interaction such as dating, they would be bewildered and overwhelmed. One student stressed that the lack of clear guidance from parents had made her unable to accept being romantically reciprocated: "When I was young, I didn't receive enough care and love from my parents, and they failed to provide an exemplar for me to follow. Therefore, I don't know what is the correct way of responding to this kind of instinctive emotion" (P2). Similarly, another student mentioned that Asian parents were often avoidant of discussing sex-related topics with them, and her teachers seldom interfered in students' personal lives (P21). "Since my teachers would just let it (our romantic relationships) run its course, it's easy for the relationship to develop into a less healthy state". In addition, most students mentioned besides the introduction of sexual organs in their biology class, no additional sex education was provided at their schools to help them gain more insight into the relevant matters.

Furthermore, another student argued that the society was not helping young people to deal with their romantic feelings towards others but rather regarded such discussion as a social taboo (P17).

The majority of people in the society are still quite avoidant about the topic instead of actively providing you with guidance or disseminating the relevant knowledge. But our bodies secrete hormones normally, so we can naturally fall in love with others. However, if people haven't learned how to love, for example, loving their friends or family members, then when they need to deal with romantic feelings, they will have to explore by themselves, and such exploration may therefore lead people to have this kind of romantic orientation.

### *Past relationship experiences*

During the interviews, it was found that not all participants exhibited characteristics of lithromantic from the beginning, as some participants only began to exhibit the characteristics after they had been through some failed past romantic experiences. Therefore, such experience was considered to be another crucial factor. For example, a participant mentioned that he used to treat his first love as "the only person that matters". However, after he was ghosted by his first partner for no reason, he "has been frantically examining his faults", and his attitudes towards romantic relationships had changed greatly. "I was quite direct about my feelings before. But after that, I become highly sensitive to rejection, and developed low expectations about receiving responses from my crush...I feel that if I demand responses from the other person, I will become weak...so now I just want to keep the relationships ambiguous, and I am super terrified about getting into a relationship, as I don't think I can handle it well" (P16).

Similarly, another participant (P13) also mentioned that after the experience of putting herself at an inferior position and pursuing someone with a full heart but receiving no positive responses for years, her perception of love was twisted in an unhealthy way, and she had developed a strong desire to pursue love in its purest form, which made her unable to maintain interests in someone for long, as few people could meet her ideal standards.

### *Social environment*

A few students also mentioned that the surrounding social environment could exert certain influences on how they view and treat romantic relationships. For example, one participant mentioned the reason why he was so pessimistic about marriage was largely because he had seen all the married couples around him, and none of them was in a harmonious relationship (P16). Another participant also mentioned when she observed a lot of people around her started to do one thing during a certain period such as dating, she would often be naturally influenced by the trend, and her desire of finding a partner would become stronger. Even though she knew she was not prepared to be in a relationship, she still wanted to rush into one, which consequently influenced her judgement and caused her to become more anxious (P21).

### *Self-perception*

While situational factors are quite dominant, individual factors like self-perception is also suggested to have an impact. Nevertheless, according to the

participants, such individual factors are under the influence of situational factors such as past relationship experiences and parental styles. As one participant suggested: “I have a quite low self-esteem...I just want to keep an ambiguous relationship with him, just looking at him from a distance already satisfy me, so it’s ok that he doesn’t respond to my feelings” (P13). However, instead of regarding such a self-perception as an innate attribute of her, she believed her parents’ constant disapproval of her had let her to become a person like this. Similarly, another participant also mentioned that her low self-perception could have led to her romantic orientation. When asking about the reason, she reflected that it might be because she was bullied by her schoolmates before, so now she tended to be very insecure about herself, her body image, and her abilities, and she would be constantly worrying about whether she could live up to the standards of other people, which led her to become even more avoidant of establishing official romantic relationships with others (P2).

## **Conclusion**

Lithromantic, as an under-investigated romantic orientation, has attracted more and more attention. While previous research has made an attempt to summarize the characteristics of lithromantic, little is known about the possible factors contributing to this orientation. In this research, several factors are proposed according to interviewees’ responses, and situational factors like family, education, past romantic relationships, and social environment are quite dominant. While individual factor like self-perception also plays a role, it is either directly or indirectly caused by the situational factors, which further reinforces the influence of environment on a person’s development of romantic orientation. While the current research has attempted to discover the possible reasons behind lithromantic, more research is needed to refine the current findings, so that the phenomenon of lithromantic can be better understood, and corresponding methods can be better proposed to help lithers overcome their difficulties in forming intimate relationship.

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