



Love and Marriage in the Eyes of Gen Z: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract

Love and marriage are two interconnected concepts which serve as pillars of society. However, marriage rates are declining, and the perception of love changes with the newer generations. This study aims to explore the perception of love among Gen Zers in Sri Lanka and to understand the implications of these perceptions on marriage. A total of 11 participants who belong to Generation Z (age 18-26) were included in this study. Focus group and in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit the views on the related topic elements. This data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify the common themes presented within the data. Five main themes were constructed to explain the key ideas presented by the participants. Namely: Views on love, Relationship expectations and breakups, Views on marriage, marriage rates, and Role of culture. The results emerged showed that love is a crucial factor in marriage, especially in the newer generations because it has become a primary motivator towards marriage in contrast to past generations where marriage was considered a social obligation. However, the perception towards love has changed in the new generations, resulting in a decrease in marriage rates. This research offers valuable insights into the evolving concepts of love and marriage in newer generations, emphasising the need for further exploration to understand its broader implications to the society.

Keywords: Perception of Love; Gen Z; Marriage Rates; Cultural Influence

Introduction

Love has been a deeply ingrained idea from the beginning of humankind, yet it remains an abstract concept with no universally accepted definition. From Plato's ideologies of eros and philia, and Freud's explanations of sexuality to more recent theories like triangular theory, love has been researched extensively, which showcases its significance to human experience (Berscheid, 2010; Sternberg, 1986). Despite immense research, the concept of love seems to be immeasurable and elusive. One plausible explanation is that the perceptions and the definitions of love constantly change with other outside factors, such as the era, context, and individual interpretations (Sternberg et al., 2006). Love is also a primary motivator for marriage, and marriage rates have declined over the past century. However, the popularity of cohabitation out of wedlock has steadily increased over time (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). In the United States, marriage rates have declined from 70% to 50% from 1967 to 2018 and the trend continues to decline at a much faster rate (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). This decline in marriage rates requires a careful study, as the marriage forms the foundation of the family—the fundamental unit of society responsible for nurturing the next generation (Coontz, 2005). Research widely indicates that the marriage remains the most effective institution for raising healthy children, underscoring the challenge of replicating its unique benefits for

child well-being in similar institutions as well as other benefits of marriage from the individual level to the more societal level (Ribar, 2015).

Amid various factors driving the decline of the marital rates—such as shifting attitudes toward marriage, technological advancements, financial pressures, evolving personal priorities, and increasing reluctance toward long-term commitment—this study aims to explore how the change in the perception of love with generations may impact marriage rates. This is especially significant in the Sri Lankan context, where traditional marriage carries profound cultural importance (Ubeseera & Jiaojiang, 2010).

Sternberg (1986) presents his triangular theory of love, classifying love into three interrelated components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. This framework helps understand the diverse dynamics of love and has been employed in similar research to investigate divorce rates and gender differences (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Yoo & Joo, 2022). Intimacy encompasses feelings of closeness that foster warmth in the relationship, passion involves arousal and desire, and commitment signifies the decision to love someone and sustain that love over the long term (Sumter et al., 2013). This study uses the triangular theory of love as a theoretical framework to understand Gen Z's perceptions of love and their implications for marriage by addressing the question, "How does the Gen Z population perceive love, and what are its possible implications for the concept of marriage?"

Research objectives

- 1) To explore the perceptions of love in the Gen Z population.
- 2) To discuss the possible implications of these perceptions on marriage.

Method

Design

The study employs an interpretative qualitative approach, utilising Sternberg's (1986) triangular

theory of love as a theoretical framework while allowing subjective experiences to shape the findings more phenomenally. This dual approach aims to explore Gen Z's perceptions of love and the implications of these perceptions for the concept of marriage. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis was then conducted to analyse and interpret the data, revealing key themes and insights.

Participants

The study utilised purposive sampling to recruit participants, focusing on individuals who could provide relevant insights into the perceptions of love and marriage among Gen Z. Six male and three female participants joined two gender-specific focus group discussions. Additionally, one male and one female participant were recruited for individual interviews to gather more in-depth and personalised data. This resulted in a total of 11 participants, comprising seven males and four females. All participants were young adults from Gen Z, aged 18 to 26, residing in Colombo.

Materials

The researcher utilised a semi-structured questionnaire comprising 11 main questions to collect data. This questionnaire was developed by the researcher and tested through mock interviews to ensure its applicability and validity. The first three questions aimed to elicit participants' perceptions of love, specifically relating to the three elements of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. The following two questions explored how Gen Z perceives generational differences in views on love. The final set of questions examined the role of marriage in contemporary society, mainly its association with love and declining marriage rates. An updated version of the questionnaire was employed later in one-on-one interviews to gather additional in-depth insights on key themes identified during the initial analysis.

Procedure

A participant recruitment form was distributed on social media as a Google Form to enlist volunteers for the study. Interested respondents were contacted for interviews, and the study's Information Sheet was sent via email and WhatsApp. The researcher then scheduled focus groups for all participants at convenient times and locations. Upon arrival, participants were debriefed about the study and consented by signing consent forms. The focus groups were conducted by the researcher and recorded using a voice recorder. All audio recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed alongside the recordings to familiarise the researcher with data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying common thought patterns among participants. Initially, data was coded, codes were grouped and refined based on the relevance and objectives. Initial themes were developed by combining codes to represent patterns in the data. The questionnaire was subsequently refined based on these themes, leading to two additional individual interviews for further in-depth insights and data saturation was achieved during this. Similar to the focus groups, these interviews were transcribed and coded, with all codes further refined into a cohesive set of themes to explain the findings.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1 – Views on Love

Definitions on Love

Common keywords such as feeling, sharing, and trust emerged from all the participants, "When you think of what love is in general, you just think of it as a feeling, something you feel towards someone or something...". Similar to previous studies, there was no standard definition due to the subjectivity of the concept of love (Sternberg et al., 2006). All participants acknowledged the value of love to their lives in their own words, "Like basically love gives meaning to life..." Overall, love as a concept is perceived with utmost importance by Gen Zers.

Triangular theory of love

Most participants considered intimacy and passion to be more important than commitment. "Our generation is very dating culture forward, so it is like no, there is less focus on I guess commitment..." This low priority on commitment in the newer generations is reflected in decreasing marital rates (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Another possible explanation could be that the focus on commitment is less emphasized in the data due to the participants being young adults who tend to show higher scores on passion and intimacy than any other age group (Sumter et al., 2013). However, a gender difference was observed in terms of the value given to each factor in the triangular theory. The majority of the female participants stated intimacy as the most important component that leads to passion and commitment, "Intimacy would probably be the most important thing in the sense it would also be like kind of the stepping stone, like the actually like the foundation for commitment and passion", whereas most of the male participants stated passion as an important factor to initiate love relationships, "Like now if we look at my affair it was first passion and intimacy. Mainly passion". Adding on to this trend, a female participant mentions a story about one of her male friends who was more willing to have sexual relationships solely focused on passion than other components of love.

Sumter et al. (2013), show a similar trend but proceed to state that this difference should not be exaggerated due to differences seen within genders sometimes being bigger than differences across genders. However, the repetition of this trend in the current study could hint a possible gender difference in the perception of love in terms of the triangular theory.

Generational Differences

The possibility of experiencing love outside of marriage in the newer generations is a possible reason for the drastic drop-in marriage rates according to the participants which is a similar result to past studies like Smock & Schwartz (2020). Male participants believed that the mental fortitude to endure problems in life has reduced in the new generation which can result in higher divorce rates (Fincham & Beach, 2010). This gender difference in perception can be due to various reasons, but one plausible explanation is the popular notion that traditional love and marriage were oppressive towards women which can lead to overemphasis on negative elements and the disregard of positive elements of traditional love and marriage. This observation can be further connected to men rejecting committed relationships and marriages because of the disadvantages they encounter in the present society compared to the past (Gygax, 2021). All in all, marriage is portrayed negatively by these views despite having gender differences.

Theme 2 – Relationship expectations and breakups

Physical appearance

Participants showed less focus on physical appearance than other qualities of a potential partner. Only one participant explicitly mentioned the importance of physical appearance whereas the reoccurring theme was the consideration of appearance in the initial stages of a relationship but regarded as less important later. Male participants considered the physical aspects of love such as sexual satisfaction to be requirements in their relationships, “And from their side normally sex, love like the physical love and those things like staying together for a long time...”, whereas female participants did not mention it as a requirement in their relationships. Recent marriage studies show that passion was more emphasized by males, than females who regarded intimacy as more important to maintain long-term relationships (Yoo & Joo, 2022). Therefore, males tend to be more passion-oriented than females who are intimacy-oriented in

love as well as in maintaining long-term relationships such as marriage.

Stability

For long-term relationships including marriages, the participants expected their prospective partner to be in a stable position in terms of finances and career, “...if I am looking for somebody who I am deciding to like to spend the rest of my life with, I would expect them to be stable just as they should expect me to be stable as well”. This is continuous throughout the generations, but the main difference mentioned by the participants was that in the past, males had to be financially stable because men functioned as providers. However, in the present society, both parties expect their partners to be stable and to be able to support each other. “... you should also be able to take care of each other if something happens to the other person...”.

Breakups

Participants mentioned the increased likelihood of breakups within relationships compared to the past. One of the main reasons for this is the possibility of falling out of love which was believed to be something that can happen without a specific reason. “... imagine you are living with this person every single day... There is a chance you will like; yeah, lose every feeling you have for them which is just sad...”. Even though participants believed that this could happen with the perfect balance of the triangular elements, their answers implied the loss of interest that is related to the passion and intimacy elements of the triangle.

Theme 3 – Views on Marriage

Attitudes towards Marriage

Participants stated that marriage is a choice contrary to older generations who viewed it as a social obligation and a compulsory stage of life. “Well, for me, first of all, I think as opposed to how we have been like, raised for me, marriage is a choice. Like you

do not have to get married if you don't want to get married...".

Moreover, children are a crucial element in marriage, but male participants' answers tend to solidify the notion that marriage is solely for that reason. Females tend to view marriage as more of a celebration of love and a commitment filled with understanding, trust, loyalty, and other related qualities that can lead to life satisfaction apart from being an institute for childcare.

Participants often mentioned how their generation wants to live hedonistic lifestyles with multiple partners rather than marriage., "More than one person...the world is going in a direction like saying that enjoy everything you can type of thinking, so people try to enjoy as much as possible..", however despite these negative attitudes towards marriage, the majority of the participants expressed their desire to get married to the person they loved one day if it were to happen, but were unwilling to get married for the sake of external pressures or out of obligation. This desire for marriage was more commonly mentioned by female participants which is supported by Manning et al. (2019), in their study to determine the marital expectations of millennials.

Relationship between love and marriage

With reduced societal pressure, love's role in marriage has increased. However, this does not mean Gen Zers marry solely for love; they consider many factors before marrying, unlike the forced or spontaneous marriages of the previous generations. Male participants were more open to marriage without love. According to the majority of participants, men in Sri Lanka often have realistic views of love, while women have idealised notions of perfect marriages, influenced by parental glorification.

Divorce

Participants view divorce as an extremely possible and acceptable thing to go through. However, they expressed their concerns about getting a divorce in

a country like Sri Lanka and the backlash associated with it. "So, in Sri Lankan cultures, what I have noticed is if you get married, you cannot get a divorce because all the relatives will be like, oh my God, those two got divorced..."

Moreover, participants accepted the possibility of breakups and divorces to be a normal phenomenon which is a major difference compared to older generations. Participants' religious beliefs and societal pressures have controlled the divorce rates and abusive marriages are maintained due to these factors. The possibility of divorce itself has affected the view on marriage of Gen Zers leading to avoidance of marriage and fear of commitment (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Therefore, divorce is a highly likely event to occur compared to previous generations even with the societal backlash against it.

Theme 4 – Marriage rates

Education and Awareness

The increase in education among the new generations has resulted in the increased awareness about the hardships and the responsibilities of marriage which make individuals reluctant to marry. "They understand 'ah when I get married and have a child, I will have to bear the responsibility' and the money you make should be spent for this." Therefore, it seems possible that the improvement in educational standards and awareness can affect marital rates negatively.

Technological advancement

Participants believed that the technological development significantly impacts marital rates. One participant noted that humans form cohabitations like marriage to increase survival chances, as marriage traditionally facilitated meeting basic needs through labour division. The male and female roles combined efforts for survival and reproduction. However, technological advancements have made basic needs more accessible, reducing dependency on marriage. This shift contributes to the increase in

single young adults.

“It is very easy right we can go to a shop and buy food, but it is not that easy earlier. So, because of that independency has increased a lot so if there is no dependency, there IS no point in a marriage.”

Increased exposure to divorce rates and negative views on marriage via social media have also influenced people to be detached from marriage (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

“These different opinions on of marriage and now, they have a platform they get to share it. And these opinions can influence other ways of marriage, which can lead us to think like twice when we were to get married”

Priorities beyond marriage

Participants believe that in early generations, people viewed marriage as one of the main goals of life, but now people tend to focus more on themselves and their careers than marrying and starting a family. Because of that people tend to allocate their finances for the personal fulfilment rather than a marriage due to the high cost and uncertainty that comes along with it. Marriage is viewed as something that has more disadvantages than advantages; thereby, making it a less important factor in achieving personal goals.

Theme 5 – Role of Culture

Western culture

One of the key realisations that emerged from data is that the Gen Z discussed in Dimock (2019), in the United States does not reflect the Gen Z population in Sri Lanka. “I may technically belong To GenZ, but I was raised more, so I think in a millennial kind of mindset

Some participants are still willing to marry just to relieve the societal and familial pressure they would face otherwise. “...but we still love our parents so in a way we like to become strong and make them happy

while us also being happy.”

Participants further stated the difficulties in selecting a cohabitation method like living together due to the societal pressure which forces them to get married to live with the person they love. Most participants preferred the Western cultural views on love due to the freedom associated with it contrary to Sri Lankan views of stigma and discrimination.

Differences in different areas of the country

The perceptions and views on love and marriage further differ in different areas within Sri Lanka itself. Individuals in rural parts of the country tend to showcase more traditional views compared to the Colombo population as mentioned by the participants. This can be due to the high technological and infrastructural development in Colombo that supports globalisation which results in a change in perceptions (Upali Pannilage, 2016). Participants mentioned that Sri Lankan Gen Zers in rural areas tend to get into commitment-heavy relationships rather than personal fulfilment.

Religion and caste

Religion has a direct impact on the views about love and marriage on Gen Zers in Sri Lanka. Marriage is advocated by most of the religions in Sri Lanka, creating a social pressure to get married (Lee & Ono, 2012). However, with the rise of concepts like atheism, Gen Zers are more willing to move away from religion for the sake of freedom

Participants believed that Sri Lankans are still considering castes and social status before marrying but further stated that this was more crucial in previous generations. “Now when a girl and a boy get together, they do not ask for the caste, they do not care”.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of love within the Gen Z population in Sri Lanka and examine the implications of these perceptions on

marriage. The findings indicate a negative trend in marital rates similar to the previous research, suggesting that future marriages may be limited. A significant factor contributing to this trend is the evolving understanding of love adopted by the new generation, influenced by various factors such as western cultural norms, technological advancements, and educational shifts. The results reveal that love now plays a more central role in marriage for Gen Zers, who view marriage as an institution primarily for personal fulfilment rather than a mere social obligation. Consequently, the absence of love may render marriage an unappealing option for cohabitation due to its disadvantages in the present contexts. While this dynamic shift presents both advantages and disadvantages, understanding these changes is crucial for preparing for future societal developments. It is important to note that this study focused on a small segment of the Gen Z population in Sri Lanka, and the subjective nature of the topic may have influenced the responses. Additionally, the researcher's gender may have affected the willingness of female participants to discuss sensitive topics, which reflects a culturally specific limitation. Given the limited existing research on love and marriage within the Sri Lankan context, this study serves as a valuable contribution to the field. It provides a foundation for future research to explore love in a more holistic manner, incorporating cultural and context-specific elements. Furthermore, the insights gained from this research can inform various practical applications, including predicting future social structures, enhancing the quality of cohabiting institutions to support healthy generations, and raising awareness among older adults about the upbringing of younger generations. The findings may also be beneficial in contexts such as marital therapy, where understanding the perceptions of love can improve relational dynamics

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