
Understanding Love among Generation Z: A Qualitative Study of Romantic Meaning-Making

Johjen Mag-atas 

National University Philippines

Received 23-11-2025

Revised 21-12-2025

Accepted 25-12-2025

Published 29-12-2025



Copyright: ©2025 The Authors. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Abstract

This qualitative study explored how Generation Z university students constructed meanings of love and romantic relationships within contemporary social, cultural, and digital contexts. Guided by Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and social constructionism, the study examined how intimacy, passion, and commitment were understood, negotiated, and enacted in everyday relational experiences. Using a narrative research design, data were gathered from 28 Gen-Z students aged 18–24 enrolled in different colleges and universities in Bulacan, Philippines, through a structured essay questionnaire. Participants' written narratives were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, with deductive coding informed by the two guiding theories. Findings revealed that participants largely rejected idealized notions of love such as "love at first sight" and rigid destiny beliefs, instead framing love as a gradual, intentional, and experience-based process. Intimacy emerged as the most valued component of love, characterized by emotional safety, trust, and mutual understanding. Passion was acknowledged as an initial catalyst but was viewed as unstable if unaccompanied by intimacy and commitment. Commitment was frequently delayed or redefined, emphasizing everyday responsibility, effort, and ethical conduct rather than formal milestones alone. Participants' constructions of love were strongly shaped by Filipino cultural values, religious beliefs, family expectations, and digital media narratives, reflecting love as a socially constructed and morally negotiated experience. Love was also perceived as developmentally consequential, capable of fostering personal growth when balanced, or emotional decline when boundaries and self-respect were compromised. Overall, the study demonstrated that Gen-Z students conceptualized love not as a fixed ideal but as a dynamic relational practice situated at the intersection of personal agency, cultural tradition, and digital realities.

Keywords: Generation Z; Romantic Relationships; Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love; Social Constructionism; Filipino Youth

Introduction:

Love and romantic relationships have long been central to human experience. However, the ways in which love is understood, expressed, and practiced evolve over time as they are shaped by changing social norms, cultural contexts, and technological developments. For Generation Z individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012, romantic relationships are increasingly mediated by digital technologies such as social media platforms, dating applications, and online messaging systems (Appinio, 2023; Goldberg, 2022). These technologies have altered how young people initiate, negotiate, and sustain romantic connections, thereby reshaping contemporary meanings of love and intimacy (Talabi et al., 2025; Twamley, 2025).

This study examined how Gen-Z students conceptualize and experience love and romantic relationships within the context of the digital age. It was guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks. Social constructionism posits that meanings of love and relationships are not innate but are constructed through ongoing social interaction, cultural narratives, and shared experiences (Burr and Dick, 2017). Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love conceptualizes love as comprising three interrelated components: intimacy, passion, and commitment, which vary in strength and configuration across relationships (Sternberg, 1986). Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding how Gen-Z students form, negotiate, and interpret romantic relationships within their social and cultural environments.

Recent empirical studies have indicated that Gen-Z demonstrates distinct orientations toward romance compared to earlier generations. Research suggested that many Gen-Z individuals prioritize emotional connection, authenticity, and mutual understanding over traditional markers of commitment such as early marriage (Appinio, 2023; Blake, 2025). Studies also reported that economic uncertainty and personal development goals have contributed to delayed dating and marriage among young adults (Hall, 2025).

Moreover, prior research found that digitally mediated communication influences how Gen-Z builds trust, expresses intimacy, and manages relational boundaries (Goldberg, 2022; Talabi et al., 2025). Within the Philippine context, family expectations, religious values, and cultural norms continue to play a significant role in shaping young people's romantic beliefs and decisions (Masanda, 2021).

Despite these growing bodies of research, there remains limited qualitative evidence on how Gen-Z students themselves define love and make sense of intimacy, passion, and commitment using their own lived experiences and language. In particular, few studies have explicitly integrated Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love with social constructionism to explore how romantic meanings are co-constructed in everyday contexts. Additionally, Filipino Gen-Z perspectives remain underrepresented in the literature, despite the strong influence of culture and family in shaping relational values.

This study sought to examine the perspectives of Gen-Z students on love and romantic relationships, with particular attention to how their lived experiences reflect Sternberg's three components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. It further aimed to explore how social and cultural influences, including digital media, family expectations, and broader societal norms, shape Gen-Z students' understanding and interpretation of romance in contemporary contexts.

Review of Related Literature:

Previous studies indicated that Generation Z approaches romantic relationships differently from earlier generations. Research reported that Gen-Z individuals tend to be more cautious about dating and are less likely to enter romantic relationships at an early age (Twamley, 2025). Studies also showed that many prioritize self-development, emotional readiness, and psychological stability before committing to romantic partnerships (Appinio, 2023). A large-scale survey conducted by *Newsweek* revealed that nearly half of Gen-Z

respondents viewed traditional monogamy as outdated, reflecting shifting norms regarding exclusivity and commitment (Blake, 2025). These findings suggested that romantic relationships among Gen-Z are increasingly individualized and flexible, diverging from conventional models of romance.

Economic conditions were also found to influence Gen-Z's romantic behavior. Prior research noted that financial instability and economic uncertainty contributed to delayed dating, cohabitation, or marriage among young adults (Hall, 2025). Although digital technologies facilitated constant communication and accessibility, studies reported that they also introduced challenges such as miscommunication, emotional fatigue, and online jealousy (Goldberg, 2022). Furthermore, research consistently found that Gen-Z favored emotionally meaningful and value-driven relationships over those based primarily on physical attraction (Appinio, 2023).

Social constructionism posits that meanings, emotions, and social realities including love are constructed through social interaction, shared language, and cultural narratives (Burr & Dick, 2017). In contemporary society, digital media has become a powerful site where romantic meanings are produced and circulated. Studies showed that social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook shaped young people's perceptions of "ideal love," relationship expectations, and expressions of intimacy (Lessy & Dimiyati, 2025). These online representations influenced how Gen-Z conceptualized attraction, commitment, and relational success.

Within the Philippine context, cultural traditions and family expectations remained influential in shaping romantic beliefs and decisions. Masanda (2021) found that Filipino youth continued to be guided by values such as respect, faithfulness, emotional support, and familial approval when forming romantic relationships. These findings demonstrated that love is not merely a personal emotion but a socially constructed experience shaped by cultural norms, moral expectations, and shared values.

Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love conceptualizes love as comprising three interrelated components: intimacy, defined as emotional closeness and connectedness; passion, referring to physical and romantic attraction; and commitment, described as the conscious decision to maintain a relationship over time. Different combinations of these components produce varying forms of love, such as romantic love (intimacy and passion without commitment) and companionate love (intimacy and commitment without passion).

Recent empirical work continued to apply Sternberg's framework in examining contemporary romantic relationships. Braida (2023) reviewed the Triangular Love Scale and found that the model remained relevant in capturing young people's experiences of love. In a study conducted among Gen-Z participants Twamley (2025) reported that intimacy and passion were highly emphasized, while commitment was often postponed due to educational and career priorities. These findings suggested that although the fundamental components of love persist, their expression has adapted to modern social realities.

Digital communication has transformed how Gen-Z initiates, develops, and maintains romantic relationships. Previous research demonstrated that online platforms increased opportunities for connection but also introduced challenges related to trust, emotional vulnerability, and relational fatigue (Goldberg, 2022). Studies further indicated that social media often presented idealized portrayals of romance, which could create unrealistic expectations and pressure among young people (Appinio, 2023).

Frequent social media use among Gen-Z students significantly influenced communication patterns and relationship satisfaction (Appinio, 2023); Goldberg & Marciano, 2022; Lessy & Dimiyati, 2025). Similar patterns were observed among Filipino youth, where digital platforms facilitated expressions of affection but also raised concerns regarding privacy, trust, and emotional boundaries

(Masanda, 2017). These findings supported the view that digitally mediated

Family background and cultural upbringing continue to shape how Gen-Z defines and approaches love. Masanda (2021) reported that Filipino family values, religious beliefs, and communication practices significantly influenced young people's attitudes toward romantic relationships. Core values such as respect for elders, loyalty, emotional intimacy, and moral responsibility remained salient. Similarly, a qualitative study involving Filipino Gen-Z participants found that romantic ideals were shaped by the interaction of media exposure, cultural norms, and personal experiences (Manalili & Malcampo, 2025).

These findings suggested that while Gen-Z adopts modern dating practices, their understanding of love remains deeply connected to familial and cultural frameworks. This interplay between tradition and modernity illustrates how romantic meanings are continuously constructed and negotiated within specific social contexts.

Studies examining Gen-Z relationships indicated that Sternberg's three components of love remain present but are expressed in evolving ways. Research showed that Gen-Z places strong emphasis on emotional intimacy and open communication while exhibiting caution toward long-term commitment (Talabi et al., 2025). Passion was often expressed through digital forms of interaction, such as constant online communication and public displays of affection on social media. Commitment, however, was frequently delayed as young adults prioritized education, career development, and personal autonomy (Mengzhen et al., 2024).

These patterns reflected broader shifts in how Gen-Z balances relational attachment with independence. Romantic relationships were increasingly constructed around personal values, emotional well-being, and social identity rather than traditional timelines or expectations.

The reviewed literature demonstrated that Gen-Z's perspectives on love and romantic relationships

are shaped by the interaction of digital media, cultural values, economic conditions, and social expectations. Although intimacy, passion, and commitment remain central components of love, Gen-Z interprets and enacts these elements in ways that prioritize authenticity, emotional growth, and personal agency. Guided by social constructionism and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, the present study sought to deepen understanding of how Gen-Z students define, experience, and negotiate romantic relationships within contemporary social and cultural environments, particularly within the Philippine context.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study used a qualitative narrative research design to explore how Generation Z students understand and describe their experiences of love and romantic relationships. Narrative research was chosen because it allows individuals to tell personal stories that express their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs about love. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how social, cultural, and personal influences shape the romantic experiences of Gen-Z students.

Participants:

The participants of this study were 28 Generation Z university students in Bulacan. They were selected using purposive sampling using the inclusion criteria: (1) being a college student aged 18–24, and (2) having past or current experience in a romantic relationship. Participants came from various academic programs, genders, and relationship backgrounds to ensure diverse perspectives. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality.

Research Instrument:

The study used a structured essay questionnaire as the main data-gathering instrument. It consisted of five open-ended questions that invited participants to reflect on their personal experiences, beliefs,

and emotions regarding love and romantic relationships. The questions were designed by the researcher and validated by three experts in psychology and qualitative research to ensure content clarity and relevance. A pilot test was also conducted with three non-participant students to check readability and comprehension. Minor revisions were made before the final administration.

Data-Gathering Procedure:

The data were collected face-to-face where each participant received a printed copy of the essay questionnaire. Before answering, the researcher explained the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. After obtaining written informed consent, the participants were given 45–60 minutes to answer the questions in their own words. The researcher stayed with the participants to clarify questions if needed but avoided giving any leading comments. The completed questionnaires were collected immediately, placed in sealed envelopes, and stored securely.

Data Analysis:

The written narratives were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis followed the deductive approach where the coding was guided by Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love which includes *intimacy*, *passion*, and *commitment* and social constructionism, which emphasizes how love is shaped by cultural norms, social interaction, and shared meanings. After identifying major and minor themes, the researcher synthesized the results into thematic narratives supported by direct participant excerpts to preserve their voice and context.

Trustworthiness of the Study:

To ensure the quality and credibility of the findings, the researcher followed the four criteria

of trustworthiness described by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, and peer debriefing. Selected participants reviewed the interpreted themes to confirm that their experiences were represented accurately.
- Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, setting, and procedures so that other researchers can assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.
- Dependability was achieved by keeping a clear audit trail, including documentation of data collection, coding procedures, and analytical decisions.
- Confirmability was maintained through researcher reflexivity and the inclusion of direct participant quotes to support interpretations. The researcher also kept reflective notes to minimize personal bias during data analysis.

Ethical Considerations:

The researcher complied with the Data Privacy Act of the Philippines and adhered to APA 7th edition guidelines for in-text citation and referencing. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures prior to their participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used and no personally identifiable information was included in the report. All collected data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, participants were debriefed to address any potential emotional discomfort and were encouraged to seek appropriate support if needed.

Results:

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Participants' Views on Love at First Sight (LAFS)

Deductive Code	Description	Theoretical Link	Meaning Units	Participant Quotes	Emergent Theme
Infatuation vs. Real Love	Participants interpret “love at first sight” as surface-level attraction or infatuation, not genuine love.	Sternberg’s Passion Component (without intimacy or commitment)	Most participants (P1–P27) describe it as temporary, fleeting, and lacking depth or emotional foundation.	“Love at first sight is not real love but just an attraction.” (P9) “I believe love at first sight is superficial in comparison to one that grows over time.” (P1)	Love at first sight as socially constructed infatuation
Socially Constructed Romantic Ideals	Participants note that “love at first sight” is a romanticized concept shaped by media and cultural narratives.	Social Constructionism (media and cultural narratives)	Participants refer to movies, dramas, and cultural beliefs as shaping this perception.	“It may look romantic in dramas but true love grows slowly with time and effort.” (P9) “This expression is usually found in romantic/fantasy movies.” (P13)	
Love Requires Time and Connection	Love is viewed as something that develops through knowing, understanding, and shared experiences.	Sternberg’s Intimacy and Commitment Components	Participants emphasize trust, understanding, patience, and emotional connection as the basis of real love.	“Real love takes time and grows through trust and experiences.” (P22) “Love grows over time through shared experiences and understanding.” (P25)	Authentic Love as a Gradual, Experience-Based Process
Authenticity and Depth of Love	Love at first sight lacks authenticity, maturity, and emotional depth compared to love that grows.		Participants view love at first sight as shallow and fleeting compared to love grounded in commitment and understanding.	“Love that grows over time is deeper and more meaningful.” (P9) “It’s just attraction masked as something	

				deeper.” (P24)	
Physical Attraction as a Starting Point	“Love at first sight” may begin as physical admiration, but it can evolve into love if nurtured.	Sternberg’s Passion evolving toward Intimacy	Some participants acknowledge attraction can start instantly and may develop if both parties engage emotionally.	“It can lead to a deeper feeling thus the love.” (P2) “Attraction is a stepping stone toward real love.” (P18)	Attraction as a Potential Entry Point to Love
Experience-Based Validation	Participants’ personal and observed experiences shape their belief or disbelief in love at first sight.	<i>Social Constructionism:</i> Knowledge through lived experience	Most participants deny experiencing it personally but acknowledge its portrayal or occurrence in others’ lives.	“I haven’t experienced it but I’ve seen it in movies.” (P26) “I witnessed it on my parents, and their love grew stronger.” (P18)	Beliefs About Love Formed Through Lived and Observed Experience

Table 1 shows that participants largely rejected love at first sight as genuine love, construing it instead as surface-level attraction or infatuation. Their accounts framed immediate attraction as fleeting and emotionally shallow, aligning with Sternberg’s passion component operating in isolation, without the presence of intimacy or commitment. Love, in this sense, was not perceived as instantaneous but as something that required relational depth.

Participants further attributed the idea of love at first sight to socially constructed romantic ideals, particularly those reinforced by media and cultural narratives. Through the lens of Social Constructionism, love at first sight was interpreted as a learned script shaped by films, dramas, and popular discourse rather than by lived relational realities

In contrast, participants emphasized that authentic love developed gradually through time, shared experiences, and emotional connection. This understanding reflected Sternberg’s intimacy and commitment components, where trust, understanding, and sustained interaction were viewed as prerequisites for meaningful love

While participants dismissed love at first sight as love itself, some acknowledged that physical attraction could function as an initial entry point. However, such attraction was considered valid only if it evolved toward emotional intimacy, reflecting Sternberg’s notion of passion potentially developing into intimacy through mutual effort and experience. Overall, participants’ beliefs about love were shaped by both lived and observed experiences, reinforcing a process-oriented and socially informed understanding of romantic relationships

Table 2 Thematic Analysis of Participants’ Views on Destiny and Personal Choice in Love

Deductive Code	Description	Theoretical Link	Meaning Units	Participant Quote	Emergent Theme
Soulmate/Destiny Belief	Affirms a single “meant-to-be”	Sternberg: Idealized	P1, P2, P6, P8, P10, P13,	“There is someone that is	Destiny-Oriented

	partner; destiny guides union.	passion and commitment expectations	P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P22, P25, P27, P28 see a destined partner, often tied to faith, family models, or “red string” narratives.	destined to be with you until your hair turns to gray.” (P6)	Love Scripts
Religious & Cultural Formation	Religion/culture (Catholic/Christian beliefs, Filipino norms) shape soulmate beliefs and patience/hope.	Social Constructionism: Love meanings shaped by religious doctrine, family narratives, and media scripts	P2, P3, P6, P7, P11, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P22, P27 link beliefs to faith, family exemplars, Filipino ideals.	“My belief is influenced by my faith in God’s plan... the right person will come at the right time.” (P22)	
Media/Mythic Narratives	Movies, dramas, Wattpad, “red string/invisible string” tropes inform expectations.		P1, P2, P7, P9, P13, P20, P25, P28 cite media/myths shaping hope or skepticism.	“The ‘Red String Story’... made me treasure the idea of being in a relationship.” (P1)	
Choice & Commitment over Destiny	Rejects single destiny; love is built through daily choices, effort, and commitment.	Sternberg: Commitment as a maintained decision; intimacy through shared effort Social Constructionism: Knowledge	P3, P4, P9, P11, P12, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24, P26 emphasize autonomy, compatibility, timing, work; many explicitly deny “only one” person.	“Love is a choice we keep making, not some fate written in the stars.” (P24)	Choice-Centered and Pragmatic Love
Skepticism/Multi-Potential Partners	Rejects “only one”; multiple compatible partners possible; timing and growth matter.	formed through lived and observed experience	P3, P9, P12, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24, P26 argue many potential matches; destiny	“There can be many people you’re compatible with... it depends on timing, choices,	

			unnecessary.	and effort.” (P19)	
Caution from Lived Experience	Personal/observed hardship (insincere partners, single parenting, failed unions) produces pragmatic stances.		P4, P20, P23, P24 highlight caution, self-protection, non-romanticized choices.	“Relationship should not be forced... whatever happens you must not lose yourself.” (P23)	
Hybrid Model: Fate Starts, Choice Sustains	Fate may bring people together; staying requires choice/effort.	Sternberg: Passion initiates; intimacy and commitment sustain Social Constructionism: Blended cultural	P1, P2, P5, P7, P9, P11, P21, P22, P25, P28 describe a mix “meet by fate, stay by choice.”	“Fate... brings you the person... but it is a personal choice to remain and be with that person until the end.” (P2)	Hybrid Fate–Choice Model of Love
Compatibility & Relational Work	Partners are not “assigned”; relationships are built on compatibility, shared values, and effort.	scripts and personal meaning-making	P3, P12, P19, P21, P26 stress compatibility, growth, timing; relationships are “built not destined.”	“Relationships work because of compatibility and commitment, not fate.” (P12)	
Non-Romantic ‘Destined’ Bonds / Valid Singleness	“Destined one” can be a friend/family; or singleness is a valid life path/gift.	Social Constructionism: Multiple culturally valid love scripts Sternberg: Companionate and non-romantic love forms	P7 widens “love” to family/friends; P27 allows a “gift of singleness.” P8 allows “destined” in friendships.	“Not all relationships require a partner... love can be in many forms such as family and friends.” (P7)	Expanded Love Scripts Beyond Romance

It can be seen in Table 2 that participants’ beliefs about having a destined partner spanned a continuum between fate and personal agency, revealing no singular or absolute stance. While a majority expressed belief in destiny, many simultaneously emphasized that love endured

through deliberate choice and effort. This pattern reflected an integrative position where fate introduced relational possibilities, but free will sustained them, aligning with Social Constructionism and hybrid fate choice models.

Even among those who affirmed destiny, participants consistently foregrounded commitment, effort, and compatibility as essential to maintaining relationships. Love was thus framed less as a predetermined outcome and more as a built and maintained process, corresponding with Sternberg’s commitment and intimacy components, which highlighted love as an ongoing decision rather than a passive experience.

Beliefs about destiny were further shaped by cultural, religious, and media influences. Participants referenced Filipino cultural norms, Catholic teachings, family models, and romantic media as key sources informing their views. Through Social Constructionism and religious socialization, destiny emerged as a socially learned belief rather than a purely personal conviction.

A smaller group of participants challenged romantic determinism altogether, affirming singlehood as a valid and fulfilling life path. This perspective reflected a shifting self-concept consistent with Social Identity Theory, where personal meaning and fulfillment were not exclusively tied to romantic partnership.

Finally, destiny belief was understood to carry psychological and moral value, fostering patience, hope, and emotional reassurance. Often expressed through spiritual or symbolic metaphors, destiny functioned less as a literal claim and more as a regulatory belief that provided optimism and moral orientation. Overall, participants’ views illustrated a socially constructed yet agentic understanding of love, balancing inherited romantic ideals with intentional relational responsibility.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Participants’ Views on Courtship, Intimacy, and Marriage

Deductive Code	Description	Theoretical Link	Meaning Units	Participant Quote	Emergent Theme
Courtship as Foundation	Courtship is a deliberate phase for knowing values, fit, and expectations.	Sternberg: Development of intimacy and commitment Social Constructionism: Culturally defined	P1–P9, P11–P16, P18–P26, P28 stress courtship as screening/learning stage.	“Courtship... is getting to know each other, identifying strengths, weaknesses and perspectives.” (P7)	Courtship as a Qualitative and Ongoing Relational Process
Duration rejects Strength	Length of courtship does not guarantee durability.	expectations of “proper” relational progression	P1–P3, P6–P9, P11, P14, P16–P22, P24–P26, P28 reject “longer = stronger.”	“Long courtship doesn’t equate to stronger relationships.” (P7)	
Courtship as Ongoing Practice	Courtship continues into the relationship (continuous effort).		P14, P20, P21 imply courting after “yes” shows consistency.	“There is a misconception that courtship ends... it will end only	

				after marriage.” (P14)	
Marriage as Commitment/Seal	Marriage symbolizes legal/religious commitment and shared future.	Sternberg: Commitment as a maintained decision Social	P2, P4, P7, P9–P13, P15–P18, P20–P22, P27–P28 highlight its binding role.	“Marriage is a seal to both legal and religious perspective.” (P7)	Marriage as Institutionalized but Conditional Commitment
Marriage ≠ Proof of “True Love”	Marriage is important but not a guarantee of fidelity or depth.	Constructionism: Marriage as a socially constructed institution with plural meanings	P1–P3, P8–P9, P11, P18–P21, P24–P26 note divorces, cheating, empty contracts.	“Marriage... does not guarantee true love.” (P8)	
Marriage Optional / Contextual	Some do not prioritise marriage (e.g., legal limits, personal stance).		P19 (same-sex lens), P21 (doesn’t want marriage), P25 (legal but not necessary).	“True love goes beyond marriage... it isn’t the only or ultimate proof.” (P19)	
Legal/Structural Meanings of Marriage	Marriage as legal protection, stability; desire for divorce access.	Commitment + social institutions.	P3 (calls for divorce), P7 (legal defense), P25 (law vs love).	“People should have access to divorce... end a marriage legally.” (P3)	
Intimacy as Bond-Strengthener	Intimacy (emotional/physical) deepens closeness and trust.	Sternberg: Intimacy and passion Social Constructionism: Norms governing sexuality and moral agency	P2–P3, P6–P9, P12, P14–P16, P18–P22, P24–P28 link intimacy to connection.	“Intimacy builds the connection... while marriage is the lifelong commitment.” (P21)	Intimacy as a Bond-Strengthening Practice Governed by Choice and Values
Premarital Intimacy as Personal Choice	Acceptance of sexual intimacy before marriage when consensual, respectful, safe.		P1–P2, P3 (for others), P5–P9, P18–P22, P24–P26, P28 allow with boundaries.	“It’s okay... as long as both have mutual agreement... love, respect and responsibility.” (P22)	
Abstinence / Preference to			P1 (personal),	“Never	

Wait Until Marriage	abstain due to faith, values, or meaning of sacredness.		P3 (personal), P4 (earlier stance), P12, P15–P17, P23, P27.	engage in sexual intimacy before marriage... it is something sacred.” (P17)	
Accountability Ethic in Intimacy	Emphasis on boundaries, safe sex, responsibility for consequences.		P2–P3, P6–P9, P11, P18–P22, P24–P26 stress consent and responsibility.	“If a child is conceived then both must take full responsibility .” (P25)	
Filipino Cultural/Religious Norms	Family, faith, and tradition shape expectations for courting, marriage, sex.	Social Constructionism: Institutional and cultural narratives shaping relational meaning	P4, P6, P10, P12, P14–P17, P22–P23, P27–P28 reference God, church, family honor.	“Marriage... making God as their witness.” (P4)	Cultural and Religious Scripts Structuring Relationship Stages

It can be gleaned in Table 3 that participants consistently framed courtship as a deliberate and qualitative relational phase, emphasizing its role in assessing compatibility, values, and intentions rather than merely fulfilling a temporal requirement. Courtship was interpreted as a process through which intimacy and commitment gradually developed, aligning with Sternberg’s triangular theory, while also reflecting socially constructed expectations regarding proper relational progression.

Courtship was further understood as an ongoing practice rather than a finite stage, extending even after formal commitment. This perspective suggested that sustained courting functioned as a continuous affirmation of seriousness and care, reinforcing intimacy and commitment over time.

Marriage was commonly viewed as an institutionalized marker of commitment, carrying legal, religious, and cultural weight. In line with Sternberg’s commitment component, marriage symbolized a maintained decision to build a shared future. However, participants clearly

distinguished marriage from proof of “true love,” noting that formal union did not guarantee fidelity, depth, or relational success. For some, marriage was contextual or optional, shaped by personal stance, legal constraints, or alternative relational frameworks, underscoring its socially constructed and plural meanings.

Intimacy emerged as a bond-strengthening practice, encompassing emotional and physical closeness that deepened trust and connection. Participants’ views on premarital intimacy varied, ranging from abstinence grounded in faith and sacredness to acceptance based on mutual consent and responsibility. Across positions, intimacy was framed as an ethical practice governed by boundaries, accountability, and respect, reflecting both Sternberg’s intimacy–passion components and culturally informed moral norms.

Overall, participants’ perspectives revealed that courtship, marriage, and intimacy were shaped by Filipino cultural and religious scripts, which structured expectations while allowing individual agency. These relational stages were understood not as fixed guarantees of love but as negotiated

processes balancing social norms, personal values, and intentional commitment.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis of Participants’ Views on the Effects of Love on Personal Development

Deductive Code	Description	Theoretical Link	Meaning Units	Participant Quote	Emergent Theme
Love-as-Positive Growth	Being in love inspires improvements in habits, empathy, responsibility, and self-care.	Sternberg: Balance vs. imbalance among intimacy, passion, and commitment Social Constructionism: Social definitions of	P2, P4–P6, P8, P10–P13, P14–P17, P18–P22, P24–P26, P28 cite increased patience, motivation, maturity, discipline, and pro-social behavior.	“Being in love helped me grow... I became more mature, disciplined and open to growth.” (P12)	Love as a Catalyst for Growth or Decline
Love-as-Risk / Negative Drift	Love may distract, reduce autonomy, or trigger dependence, jealousy, and value slippage.	“healthy” and “toxic” relationships	P1, P2, P6–P9, P11, P14, P16–P19, P21, P22, P25–P26 report lost focus, lowered self-worth, or toxic patterns if the relationship is unhealthy.	“I witnessed a friend change... she lost the confidence and will to study she once had.” (P7)	
Quality-Dependent Effects	Impact depends on relationship quality (supportive vs. toxic) and partner influence.		P3, P6, P8–P9, P16–P21, P26, P28 stress context: same “love” can build or break depending on dynamics.	“Some may inspire you to be the best... some may drag you down and make you lose yourself.” (P19)	
Self-Love & Boundaries First	Growth is sustainable when self-respect, limits, and autonomy are kept.	Sternberg: Mature commitment in authentic intimacy Social Constructionism:	P1–P3, P7–P9, P11, P16–P17, P19–P22, P24, P26–P28 emphasize self-love, limits, consent, privacy, and avoiding people-pleasing.	“Love should be expressed with care and boundary... set healthy boundaries.” (P11)	Authentic Growth Grounded in Self-Boundaries
Becoming	Personal	Learned norms	P3, P8–P9, P14–	“People change	

<p>‘Better’ Always Proof of True Love</p>	<p>improvement may result from desire to please or external pressure; not always genuine.</p>	<p>around boundaries and selfhood</p>	<p>P17, P18–P21, P24, P26–P28 caution that “improvement” can be performative or temporary.</p>	<p>just to impress their partner... true love inspires genuine growth that lasts.” (P26)</p>	
<p>Responsible Expression of Love</p>	<p>Ethical enactment of love: respect, honesty, empathy, reciprocity; align with both partners’ love languages.</p>	<p>Sternberg: Commitment as sustained, value- driven action Social Constructionism: Culturally informed norms of appropriate love expression</p>	<p>P2–P3, P6–P9, P11–P13, P15, P19–P23, P25– P26 propose responsibility, trust, accountability, and value- consistent affection.</p>	<p>“Express love through respect, honesty... choices that don’t hurt yourself or the other.” (P15)</p>	<p>Responsible Love as Ethical Practice</p>
<p>Value Realignment & Meaning- Making</p>	<p>Love prompts reassessment of priorities (time, money, health, study/work).</p>	<p>love expression</p>	<p>P1, P4–P6, P10– P14, P18–P22, P24–P25 report better time management, healthier routines, financial prudence, or study focus—when love is supportive.</p>	<p>“Love gave me new character... I learned to communicate and be thoughtful.” (P20)</p>	

Table 4 presents the results that love influenced personal growth in ways that were contingent on relational balance and context, aligning with Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love. Participants’ accounts suggested that growth was most evident when intimacy, passion, and commitment were relatively balanced, allowing love to function as a stabilizing and motivating force. In contrast, relationships characterized by disproportionate passion or commitment, without sufficient intimacy or self-boundaries, were associated with emotional dependency and stagnation, reflecting Sternberg’s assertion that imbalance among love components may undermine relational health.

From a social constructionist perspective, participants’ emphasis on self-boundaries, responsible expression of love, and ethical conduct reflected socially learned norms about what constitutes “healthy” versus “toxic” love. These norms were shaped by cultural expectations, observed relationship models, and shared moral frameworks, influencing how participants evaluated personal change as either authentic or performative. Together, the findings illustrate that personal growth in love was not inherent to romantic involvement itself but was co-constructed through relational dynamics and socially mediated meanings of responsibility, self-respect, and care.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis of Participants’ Views on Challenges, Sexual Ethics, and Culture in Relationships

Deductive Code	Description	Theoretical Link	Meaning Units (Condensed Responses)	Participant Quote	Emergent Theme
Adversity as Relationship Test	Challenges can strengthen bonds when faced jointly; weaken ties when met with pride, avoidance, or poor communication.	Sternberg: Commitment enacted in adversity; Intimacy via problem-solving	Most participants (P1–P3, P4, P6–P9, P11–P13, P15, P17–P22, P24–P28) say hardship is a make-or-break filter.	“Hardships strengthen love... but if pride or lack of communication take over it can weaken their love.” (P9)	Relational Resilience Through Shared Coping
Practical Framing (Economy/Planning)	Sex and fertility choices are framed through economic/life-planning lenses (avoid early/unplanned pregnancy).	Social Constructionism: socio-economic constraints	Participants link safe sex to finances and readiness (P7–P8, P10, P18–P21, P25).	“Especially in this economy... safe sex prevents unwanted pregnancies.” (P7)	
Sex as Intimacy or Risk	Sexual activity can deepen closeness but also creates risks if consent, health, readiness, and fidelity are absent.	Sternberg: Passion supporting Intimacy; Responsible Passion; Mature Intimacy	Many endorse sex as bonding when responsible (P6–P9, P12, P18–P22, P24–P26, P28); several prefer abstinence/“sex after marriage” (P1 personal, P14, P16, P17, P23, P27).	“Sex also binds the relationship ... but safe sex is very important.” (P6)	Sexual intimacy is meaningful when governed by ethics, consent, and responsibility.
Safe Sex Norm	Condoms/contraception and STI prevention are marks of care and foresight.	Social Constructionism: Public health norms shaping intimacy	Strong support for “safe sex” as respect/responsibility (P1–P3, P4–P9, P11–P13, P15, P18–P22, P25–P26, P28).	“Safe sex shows responsibility and respect for each other’s health and future.” (P9)	
Boundaries & Consent Ethic	Emphasis on mutual consent, readiness, and accountability in sexual and non-sexual behaviors.		Participants call for consent, respect, and responsibility regardless of	“Sex can deepen intimacy but it needs discipline	

			stance on premarital sex (P7–P9, P19–P22, P24–P26, P28).	and respect.” (P12)	
Cultural/Religious Value Alignment	Cultural scripts (faith, family roles, “marriage-before-sex”) guide expectations; mismatch triggers conflict.	Sternberg: Commitment shaped by roles; Commitment-first sequencing Social	Many note value clashes as stressors (P3–P4, P7, P10, P11–P14, P16–P17, P19–P22, P24, P26–P28).	“Different cultural values... when they don’t align the relationship will have a crack.” (P4)	Cultural and faith-based values structure moral expectations around intimacy
Abstinence/Wait-Until-Marriage Position	Personal/faith-based choice to defer sex until marriage; sees sex as sacred.	Constructionism: Cultural norms and scripts organizing roles and expectations	Affirmed by P1 (personal), P14, P16–P17, P23, P27; some add “if chosen, know responsibilities” (P27).	“As much as possible never engage in sexual activity... it is something sacred.” (P17)	and commitment.
Early, Age-Appropriate Sex Education	Teach body safety, consent, STIs, contraception early (childhood fundamentals → detailed in high school).	<i>Social Constructionism</i> : institutionalized learning; reshaping taboos	Majority favor early education (P1–P4, P5–P9, P11–P13, P15, P16–P22, P23, P25, P27–P28).	“Before puberty, we have to be educated enough... prevention is better than cure.” (P13)	Sex education fosters informed agency and responsible relational choices.

Table 5 presents the findings that challenges functioned as tests of relational commitment, with relationships strengthening when partners demonstrated shared responsibility and problem-solving, reflecting Sternberg’s concept of commitment as an active, sustaining choice. Sexual intimacy was interpreted as meaningful when passion supported emotional closeness and responsibility, aligning with Sternberg’s notions of mature intimacy and responsible passion, while weak commitment heightened relational risk. Participants’ emphasis on consent, safe sex, and readiness further reflected socially constructed norms of ethical intimacy shaped by public health discourse and cultural expectations. Cultural and religious values structured commitment-first and

marriage-oriented relationship sequencing, illustrating how social constructionist scripts and roles shape how intimacy, passion, and commitment are organized and evaluated within relationships.

Discussion:

The findings of this study demonstrated that Generation Z students constructed love as an intentional and contextually shaped experience rather than as a purely emotional or predetermined state. This orientation supported earlier research indicating that Gen-Z approaches romantic relationships cautiously, prioritizing emotional readiness, authenticity, and personal development before commitment (Appinio, 2023; Twamley,

2025). Unlike traditional romantic ideals that emphasize destiny or permanence, participants framed love as a conscious choice sustained through effort and responsibility, aligning with Blake's (2025) observation that Gen-Z increasingly rejects rigid romantic norms.

The results affirmed the continued relevance of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, while also extending it. Intimacy, passion, and commitment were consistently evident but were not experienced as linear stages. Intimacy emerged as the dominant component, echoing findings that Gen-Z values emotional closeness and communication over physical attraction (Appinio, 2023; Talabi et al., 2025). Passion was acknowledged as powerful yet unstable, reinforcing Twamley's (2025) claim that passion remains significant but cautiously managed among young adults. Commitment was frequently delayed or redefined, supporting research linking postponed long-term commitment to economic uncertainty and developmental priorities (Hall, 2025; Mengzhen et al., 2024). However, this study extended prior findings by showing that delayed commitment did not reflect avoidance but rather a reconfiguration of responsibility outside institutional timelines.

From a social constructionist perspective, the findings illustrated how meanings of love were co-constructed through family values, cultural expectations, peer norms, and digital narratives. This supported Burr and Dick's (2017) assertion that romantic meanings are socially produced rather than universal. In the Philippine context, participants' narratives reflected enduring cultural values such as respect for family, faithfulness, and moral accountability, corroborating Masanda's (2021) findings. However, participants did not merely reproduce traditional norms; instead, they selectively negotiated them alongside contemporary digital practices, highlighting a hybrid relational model shaped by both tradition and modernity.

Digital media played a dual role in participants' romantic lives. Consistent with Goldberg (2022) and Lessy and Dimiyati (2025), social media

facilitated connection while intensifying comparison, insecurity, and trust issues. Idealized representations of romance influenced expectations, often generating pressure to perform relational success (Appinio, 2023). Filipino Gen-Z students navigated these pressures by grounding their romantic decisions in culturally informed values, extending earlier findings on digital intimacy within collectivist contexts (Masanda, 2017; Manalili & Malcampo, 2025).

Participants' emphasis on adversity as a test of love aligned with research suggesting that Gen-Z views relationships as spaces for mutual growth rather than constant emotional gratification (Talabi et al., 2025). However, participants also articulated clear boundaries, recognizing that unresolved conflict and emotional neglect undermined relational well-being. This nuanced understanding challenged romanticized assumptions that love alone sustains relationships.

Finally, love was framed as both relational and developmental. While participants acknowledged love's capacity to promote maturity and self-improvement, they resisted narratives that equated self-sacrifice with devotion. This finding complicated earlier assumptions that change within relationships necessarily signifies authentic love, reinforcing Goldberg's (2022) argument that relational quality determines whether love nurtures or constrains personal growth.

Overall, this study contributed context-rich qualitative insights into how Filipino Gen-Z students define and experience love. By integrating Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and social constructionism, the findings demonstrated that love among Gen-Z is dynamically constructed at the intersection of personal agency, cultural values, and digital realities. Love emerged not as a fixed ideal but as a morally negotiated, socially situated, and developmentally significant experience.

Conclusion:

This qualitative study examined how Generation Z students constructed meanings of love and romantic relationships within contemporary

social, cultural, and digital contexts. Guided by Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and social constructionism, the findings demonstrated that Gen-Z participants did not perceive love as a sudden or purely emotional experience but as a deliberate, evolving process shaped by reflection, experience, and social influence. Love was consistently framed as something that develops over time through emotional understanding, ethical responsibility, and sustained commitment rather than instant attraction or idealized destiny.

Across participants' narratives, intimacy, passion, and commitment remained central components of love; however, these were interpreted flexibly rather than rigidly. Passion was often associated with initial attraction, intimacy with emotional safety and understanding, and commitment with conscious choice and perseverance. Importantly, commitment was not equated with formal markers such as marriage alone but with everyday actions, accountability, and mutual effort. This interpretation reflected a shift away from traditional romantic scripts toward more pragmatic, experience-based constructions of love.

The findings also revealed that Gen-Z students negotiated love within a tension between traditional cultural values and modern relational realities. Family expectations, religion, and cultural norms continued to influence romantic beliefs, yet participants actively reinterpreted these influences in light of personal autonomy, emotional well-being, and social change. Digital media further shaped how relationships were initiated, maintained, and evaluated, reinforcing both opportunities for connection and challenges related to trust, comparison, and emotional boundaries.

Overall, the study showed that love among Gen-Z students was not rejected nor romanticized uncritically; rather, it was redefined as a relational practice grounded in self-awareness, mutual respect, and resilience. These findings contributed to a nuanced understanding of contemporary love that moves beyond binary notions of fate versus choice and highlights love as a socially

constructed, morally negotiated, and developmentally significant experience.

Implications of the Study:

Theoretical Implications

The findings reinforced the continued relevance of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love while demonstrating its adaptability within modern relational contexts. Although intimacy, passion, and commitment remained foundational, their meanings were not static; instead, they were reshaped by generational experiences, cultural expectations, and digital environments. This study supported the argument that Sternberg's model benefits from being applied flexibly rather than prescriptively, particularly when examining younger generations.

From a social constructionist perspective, the results illustrated how love is co-constructed through discourse, cultural narratives, family values, and media representations. The diversity of participants' views underscored that romantic meanings are not universal but negotiated within specific social contexts. This integration of theory highlighted the value of combining psychological and sociocultural frameworks when examining intimate relationships.

Practical Implications

The findings hold implications for educators, counselors, and mental health practitioners working with Gen-Z populations. Relationship education programs may benefit from moving beyond idealized portrayals of romance and instead emphasizing emotional literacy, boundary-setting, communication skills, and ethical decision-making. Discussions of love should acknowledge both its growth-enhancing potential and its risks when relationships become unbalanced or emotionally harmful.

The strong support for responsible intimacy and sex education suggests the importance of age-appropriate, values-sensitive educational initiatives that address consent, respect, health, and accountability. Rather than framing intimacy solely in moral absolutes, programs should

encourage informed choice and mutual responsibility while respecting cultural and religious diversity.

For families, the findings suggest that open communication rather than rigid enforcement of norms plays a crucial role in guiding young people's romantic decisions. Parents and guardians remain influential, but their impact is most effective when aligned with dialogue, trust, and understanding of contemporary realities.

Cultural and Societal Implications

Within the Philippine context, the study highlighted how Gen-Z students balanced respect for tradition with modern relational autonomy. This balance suggests a broader cultural shift in which young people do not abandon cultural values but reinterpret them in ways that prioritize emotional well-being and personal agency. Policymakers and institutions concerned with youth development may consider these findings when designing programs related to family life, sexuality education, and mental health support.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies may build on these findings by examining Gen-Z romantic experiences across different regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, or religious affiliations to capture greater diversity. Longitudinal research may also explore how Gen-Z's constructions of love evolve over time as individuals transition into later adulthood, marriage, or long-term partnerships. Additionally, comparative studies involving other generations may further clarify how romantic meanings shift across historical and cultural moments.

References:

1. Appinio. (2023). *How is Gen Z dating? Redefining relationships and love.* <https://www.appinio.com/en/blog/insights/gen-z-dating-us>
2. Blake, S. (2025, May 4). Nearly half of Gen Z says monogamy is outdated. *Newsweek.* <https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-half->

- [gen-z-says-monogamy-outdated-study-2078097](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10092-0)
3. Braida, N., Matta, E. & Paccagnella, L. Loving in Consensual Non-Monogamies: Challenging the Validity of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale. *Sexuality & Culture* 27, 1828–1847 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10092-0>
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper et al. (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). APA.
5. Burr, V., & Dick, P. (2017). *Social constructionism.* In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of critical social psychology.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51018-1_4
6. Hall, L. (2025). *Why Gen Z is saying no to romance—and what it means for us all.* <https://firstthings.org/why-gen-z-is-saying-no-to-romance-and-what-it-means-for-us-all/>
7. Goldberg, S., Yeshua-Katz, D., & Marciano, A. (2022). Online construction of romantic relationships on social media. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 39(6), 1839-1862. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211067814> (Original work published 2022)
8. Lessy, P. B., & Dimyati, D. (2025). *Perception of romance relationship standards of Generation Z on TikTok.* *e-Proceedings of Management*, 12(6), 8190–8198.
9. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* SAGE Publications.
10. Manalili, E. J., & Malcampo, M. C. (2025). A narrative exploration of romantic experiences and ideal relationship standards among Filipino Gen Z. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(2), 126-155. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353199>
11. Maracina, C. (2024, December 5). *Blending tradition and technology: Gen*

- Z's new approach to old-fashioned dating.* Medium. <https://charlottemaracina.medium.com/ble-nding-tradition-and-technology-gen-zs-new-approach-to-old-fashioned-dating-310983a2e5bc>
12. Masanda, A. B. (2021). The contemporary Filipino family life: Toward a comprehensive family-oriented counseling program. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 5(1), 16–22. <https://doi.org/10.26855/jhass.2021.01.003>
13. Masanda, A. B. (2017). Coming-out and Romantic Relationship among Female Bisexual Adolescent: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. (2017). *Progress in Asian Social Psychology*, 11(1), 57–68.
14. Mengzhen, L., Berezina, E. & Benjamin, J. Insights into Young Adults' Views on Long-term and Short-term Romantic Relationships in the United Kingdom. *Sexuality & Culture* 28, 1407–1423 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10183-y>
15. Mishra, V., & Yadav, S. (2025). The Role of Commitment and Digital Intimacy in Shaping Relationship Satisfaction Among Generation Z Romantic Relationships. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(1).
16. Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review*, 93(2), 119–135.
17. Talabi, M., et al. (2025). The role of commitment and digital intimacy in shaping relationship satisfaction among Generation Z romantic relationships. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(2), 2700–2709.
18. Twamley, K. (2025, August 14). *Comment: Generation Z: Love in crisis*. UCL News. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2025/aug/comment-generation-z-love-crisis>