A narrative exploration of romantic experiences and ideal relationship standards among Filipino Gen Z

[1]Exequiel Josh Manalili & [2]Marie Chiela Malcampo

Abstract

Romantic love is hard to define, as it varies greatly due to factors like sex at birth, past experiences, and cultural background. These differences shape personal standards for an ideal partner, further influenced by generational shifts that impact how each generation views romance. This study addresses notable research gaps, including the limited exploration of romantic love in general and the lack of focus on Generation Z's unique experiences in forming romantic ideals. It also examines the tendency to focus mainly on social media and online dating, often overlooking other factors that influence Generation Z's views on love. The study gathered data from nine Filipino participants who belong to Generation Z and have experienced romantic relationships. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. It was found that Filipino Generation Z's romantic ideals are shaped by diverse influences, including media portrayals, cultural norms, and personal experiences. While personal growth and shared values are significant, the key discovery is that individual introspection and self-reflection play a central role in shaping romantic standards. This study suggests that counseling practices can be enhanced by integrating Adler's theory of subjective interpretation and Glasser's choice theory. Both frameworks emphasize the role of self-awareness and personal agency in decision-making, aligning with Generation Z's introspective approach to love. By understanding that Generation Z's romantic standards are not solely shaped by societal norms but by conscious self-reflection, counselors can better support clients in making relationship choices rooted in authenticity and personal values. This approach supports healthier relationship dynamics by fostering self-awareness and autonomy of Generation Z individuals wanting to pursue romantic relationships.

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About the authors:
[1]Corresponding author. Bachelor of Science–Master of Arts in Psychology and Counseling, Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Philippine Normal University-Manila, Philippines. Email: manalili.ejm@stud.pnu.edu.ph
[2]MAEd Guidance and Counseling, Associate Professor, Philippine Normal University-Manila, Philippines. Email: malcampo.mcc@pnu.edu.ph

1. Introduction

Love is a fundamental human experience that has been widely studied across different psychological theories (Rokach, 2024). The meaning and conceptualization of love vary across frameworks. Sternberg's triangular theory defines love as consisting of three components: passion, intimacy, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Meanwhile, Erikson's psychosocial theory describes love as a central concern in early adulthood, emerging during the conflict between intimacy and isolation. Despite these differences, love encompasses a broad range of emotional experiences, including familial bonds, friendships, and romantic relationships. In the context of romantic love, it is characterized by strong affection, attachment, and desire for a partner (Bode & Kushnick, 2021).

Various theories attempt to explain the essence and purpose of romantic relationships. Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1979) attachment theory, later extended to adult relationships by Hazan and Shaver (1987), suggests that romantic relationships function as attachments that provide emotional security, intimacy, and connection, fulfilling fundamental human needs. Other perspectives emphasize the evolutionary role of romantic relationships. Fisher et al. (2006) argue that love plays a key role in reproduction and mate selection, guiding human behavior toward forming and maintaining bonds that enhance reproductive success. These different theoretical perspectives influence how individuals perceive love and romantic relationships, shaping the standards or qualities they seek in a romantic partner (Buyukcan-Tetik, 2017).

One of the most recognized theories explaining partner selection is the filtering theory by Kerckhoff and Davis (1962). This theory outlines three levels of filtering potential partners. The first level considers sociodemographic factors such as proximity, education, social class, and religion. The second level focuses on attitudinal similarities that strengthen the relationship. The third level, complementarity, involves partners whose traits balance each other. However, contemporary research highlights the subjective nature of ideal partner preferences. Individual differences, including sex at birth, past experiences, and cultural background, influence how people define their ideal partner (Islam, 2021; Chesterman et al., 2021; Karandashev, 2015).

The individual differences also extend across generations, as societal shifts influence perspectives on love and relationships. Studies indicate that older generations, such as Baby Boomers, people who were born between 1946 to 1964 (Slepian et al., 2024), and Generation

X, people who were born between 1965 to 1980 tend to view love as grounded in practicality and tradition (Noordam, 2017). Millennials, people born between 1981 - 1996 (Wandhe, 2024), in contrast, have shown a shift in attitudes, with romantic relationships being perceived as less essential compared to previous generations. However, Generation Z, people born between 1997-2012 (Mahapatra et al., 2024), discussions on partner standards are less prominent. Existing research primarily associates this generation with social media and online dating, despite Millennials also engaging with these platforms. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that limiting the discussion of Generation Z's (shorter form of Generation Z) view on love and ideal standards to social media and online dating, similar to previous literature, overlooks the potential influence of other factors.

Despite these significant contributions, there are several research gaps in the study of romantic love and partner selection. Firstly, much of the existing research on romantic relationships predominantly focuses on Western populations, leaving a gap in understanding how romantic ideals are formed and influenced in non-Western cultures, such as in the Philippines or other Asian contexts. Additionally, while attachment theory and evolutionary perspectives provide valuable insights into partner selection, there is limited exploration of how newer factors, such as the increasing role of social media and digital platforms, shape romantic expectations and behaviors, particularly among younger generations like Generation Z. Moreover, much of the current literature fails to address the dynamic and evolving nature of romantic ideals as individuals navigate complex, multifaceted relationships over time.

This study aims to explore not only the role of social media and online dating but also other perceived contributing factors, including personal and cultural narratives around romance and ideal romantic standards that shape experiences in formulating ideal standards. Furthermore, understanding the viewpoint of Generation Z about romantic relationship could help the field of counseling on how to create interventions for future possible cases of mental distress, since love and romantic relationships in general has a correlation with depression and can be a predictor for general well-being (Joosten et al., 2021; Mattingly et al., 2020). It also aims to introduce new ideas and influences into the existing literature, while also trying to explore new factors that haven't been talked about before.

To outline the main purpose of the study, the research questions are:

1. How do Filipino Generation Z individuals view and perceive romantic love?

2. How do Generation Z individuals negotiate societal expectations and norms in their development of ideal romantic standards?

3. What role do digital technologies and social media play in shaping the romantic ideals and expectations of Generation Z?

4. How do individual factors such as personal experience contribute to the formulation of Ideal standards for Generation Z?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Different Perspectives on Love and Partner Standards

Having a clear idea of what entails a romantic relationship, as well as what a person wants for a specific partner is essential as it provides regulation of the relationship. If an individual's ideal standards differ from their perception of their current relationship and partner, it can affect how they regulate and maintain the relationship (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). Knowing what a person specifically wants guides decision making in their interactions throughout their romantic journey. However, these standards are not fixed and may change over time based on different factors and considerations (Charlot et al., 2019; Chesterman, 2021).

From an evolutionary perspective, romantic relationships and partner standards have been shaped by biological factors aimed at promoting survival and reproduction. Since these relationships are viewed as mechanisms for procreation (Buss, 2018), individuals tend to prioritize partners they perceive as fertile, thereby increasing the likelihood of passing on their genes to future generations. Pincott (2008, as cited in Chapman, 2011) highlighted that body odor plays a significant role in attraction, as it reflects genetic compatibility. Researchers suggest that Major Histocompatibility Complex (MHC) genes influence the production of specific proteins that bind to odorants, which are then released through sweat glands. As a result, people may be subconsciously attracted to or repulsed by another's scent based on how different or similar their MHC genes are. Moreover, Buss (2018) also highlighted that the 'love' presently associate romantic relationships in, have evolved from their initial functions such as to display desirable traits for reproduction, demonstrate parenting potential, and provide sexual relationships. These ideas emphasize how romantic relationships and partners are seen in the lens of evolutionary and biological perspective; to enhance reproductive success. In contrast, contemporary views place greater emphasis on social, economic, and

psychological factors in partner selection. Today, the benefits of romantic relationships are often associated with emotional support, affection, and overall psychological well-being (Apostolou et al., 2023). While evolutionary influences remain relevant, modern perspectives prioritize emotional connection and individual preferences.

Cultural and social influences, as well as personal experiences, shape how people view romantic relationships and partner standards, which is also seen to the variation among generations. The generations are grouped according to their birth year cohorts and they have been used to analyze sociocultural trends. Baby Boomers are typically born between 1946–1964, Generation X between 1965–1980, Millennials or Generation Y from 1981–1996, and Generation Z from 1997- 2012. The boomers often viewed love as something that is not dependent on attractiveness and desirability, which is why their ideal standard revolves around the view of what a partner can provide for them (Noordam, 2017). This perspective can be attributed to the societal condition that boomers have grown up in, wherein romance is for marriage, which is for commitment and partnership rather than just purely attraction. Moreover, pragmatic considerations can be associated with the idea that boomers were born in the era of economic growth which are the effects after the world war (Łaski, 2019). On the other hand, Generation X emphasizes marriage as their means of romantic love. Survey data from Wang and Taylor (2011), revealed that Generation X's marriage rate is almost 7% higher compared to their successor, the Millennials (Common term for Generation Y). Mcguire (2015) highlighted the idea that Millennials are often labeled as the "Me generation" in regard to love, a term that was originally used with boomers but is now generally used to refer to the individualistic and often "narcissistic" ideals of the Millennials, making them possess a high standard and the unwillingness to compromise for a romantic partner. Regardless, they still possess their association of love with their high hopes for romantic and family life, but are often held back by their ideals, which is also supported by Barroso (2020). However, these ideas are limited to the United States, making the generalizability not applicable to other cultures and life circumstances. The study of Bulloch and Fabinyi (2009) uncovered a narrative from a participant in the Philippines who is also a Millennial. In choosing to develop a romantic relationship, there were a lot of factors that their participant considered, such as personality, family expectations, and the financial security brought by a potential partner, which highlights her inclination to pursue relationships with westerners, implying their perceived value because of economic capacity. However, when it comes to Generation Z, there is a limited number of

studies that explore their ideas of love and partner standards. While Generation Z is frequently associated with online dating and digital expressions of romance, there is a growing need to examine the broader structural factors influencing their romantic ideals. Advancements in education and technology may play a significant role in shaping romantic ideals by exposing individuals to diverse narratives about love and relationships. This exposure encourages a critical reassessment of traditional romantic definitions passed down by previous generations and perpetuated through legacy media. However, this overabundance of information, which can often be encountered even at a young age, might also contribute to confusion or inconsistency in how romantic ideals are formed. Being exposed to countless, and at times conflicting, portrayals of love and relationships may overwhelm individuals and lead to unrealistic expectations.

2.2 Social and Personal Factors Shaping Romantic Preferences

Several studies indicate that biological sex differences affect perceptions of love. For instance, Sprecher (2002) revealed that Chinese men view love with an idea of storge love, developing from care and nurturance, which suggests that men may see love as something that grows over time through shared experiences. This reflects a more gradual approach to romantic relationships, something that undergoes a process. In contrast, women in the same study were more likely to perceive love as rooted in destiny and fate, reflecting the idea that romantic connections are predetermined rather than constructed. Davies (2001), on the other hand, found that women view love conservatively and practically, meaning they may approach relationships with a sense of caution, evaluating different factors when choosing a partner. Which can infer that women may weigh different elements, particularly practical ones, when considering love. In contrast, men associate it with idealism and social desirability, indicating that they may romanticize love or view it as something that can be influenced heavily by societal ideals and expectations. These differing perspectives, shaped in part by biological sex, can indirectly inform an individual's ideal standards in a romantic partner. Since sex affects how love is perceived, and perception of love dictates what individuals seek or expect in a partner, the way how men and women view love can contribute to their formation of ideal standards for a partner.

In addition to biological and psychological factors, personal experiences also shape romantic expectations. Chesterman (2021) found that negative relationship experiences, such

as heartbreak or betrayal, can significantly impact how individuals evaluate future partners. When people experience heartbreak or disappointment in a relationship, they may become more cautious and they may adjust their expectations, leading them to develop a deeper understanding of what they value in a relationship. This may explain why older adults, with more experience in love and romantic relationships have exhibited higher levels of passion and intimacy than younger adults (Sumter et al., 2013). Since older adults have been around longer, there is a high change that they have encountered more relationship challenges, wherein they developed a stronger appreciation for what they value in a relationship. Their understanding of intimacy may be more refined, as they have likely navigated different relationship dynamics in the past.

Social factors, including media portrayal and cultural norms, also play a crucial role in shaping an individual's view of love. Media, in particular, reinforces unrealistic beliefs and expectations about romantic relationships, which can influence partner standards by making individuals assess their relationships based on unattainable ideals. Additionally, media fosters gender stereotypes and objectifies idealized notions of partners and relationships (Santoniccolo et al., 2023), further shaping how individuals perceive love and what they should expect from their romantic partners (Ray, 2022). Wood (2013) supports this, finding that such portrayals contribute to narrow and stereotypical romantic ideals that many unconsciously internalize. Beyond traditional media, the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has further intensified the dissemination of idealized romantic portrayals. Influencers and celebrities now publicly curate and display aspects of their romantic lives, shaping audience perceptions of love and relationships. Research has shown that increased social media use can be associated with decreased relationship satisfaction, particularly due to the curated and often unrealistic content that users consume (Bouffard et al., 2022). These portrayals can also contribute to emotional detachment, as individuals begin to prioritize physical attractiveness and surface-level traits over deeper emotional connection. This is not surprising given findings that link social media exposure to increased insecurity and jealousy in romantic relationships (Çulfa et al., 2024).

While these dynamics are widely observed across global contexts, similar patterns are emerging in the Philippines, where social media penetration is among the highest in the world and influencer culture plays a significant role in shaping youth behavior. Although most local studies focus on how Filipino Generation Z consumers are influenced by online personalities

in terms of purchasing behavior (Agbayani et al., 2023; Castillo et al., 2022), these findings still reflect the extent of influencer impact on their decision-making, which may extend into personal and relational domains as well. These portrayals in social media then contribute to the formulation of ideal romantic standards, thinking that men should and women should adhere to these simplified representations of them in popular media. Additionally, cultural norms also play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of love; Rokach (2023) highlights that while love is a universal experience, its interpretation and expression vary across cultures. Although all humans experience love, the way they define, communicate, and prioritize it depends on their cultural background. Some cultures display love explicitly, while others do so implicitly, highlighted by a cross-cultural study from de Munck et al. (2011), which underscores the cultural specificity of love perception, emphasizing how cultural contexts influence individuals' understanding and expression of romantic love. This suggests that what is considered a "normal" or "ideal" way of expressing love in one culture may not be the same in another. These differences between cultures can shape an individual's expectations in a relationship and influence how relationship standards are formed. In the Philippines, romantic love is traditionally expressed through *panliligaw*, or courtship—a culturally rooted practice deeply influenced by Filipino norms and values (Pasion et al., 2023). It is the act of Courtship which often involves emphasis on family involvement and the long term process of gaining a woman's hand for a relationship. Unlike casual dating in many Western societies, *panliligaw* emphasizes respect, patience, family involvement, and a long-term commitment to earning a woman's affection. It typically involves formal visits, gift-giving, and seeking parental approval. While forms of courtship exist across various cultures, the customs and values that accompany *panliligaw* makes it uniquely Filipino. However, this traditional practice has been increasingly challenged, as Filipino Generation Z appears to place less importance on it (Fernandez, 2021). Furthermore, the same study highlights a shift in attitudes toward commitment, with many individuals expressing a reduced willingness to compromise for a partner. Due to the ease of finding alternative romantic partners, there is a growing tendency toward complacency in relationships, where replacing a partner is often seen as effortless rather than requiring effort toward resolution and compromise.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study aims to investigate the love experiences of Filipino Generation Z individuals. In achieving this objective, a qualitative design was employed. Specifically, the chosen methodology for the study is narrative inquiry, as it is primarily concerned with exploring the experiences and stories of people's lives and how they make meaning out of them (Parks, 2023), specifically when developing ideal standards for a romantic partner. The use of this approach proved effective in capturing the holistic meaning making of the participants in their stories, enabling the capture of turning points, emotional shifts, and nuances in participants' narratives. In line with what Parks (2023) describes as an analysis of narratives, the participants' stories were collected using interviews and systematically examined to identify recurring patterns within the stories. The analysis allowed the development of broader insights into how individuals construct and articulate how they formulate their ideals in romantic relationships.

3.2 Participants of the Study

The study utilized purposive sampling to recruit 9 participants, a suitable number for a narrative study, while also considering literature on intimacy and romantic standards addressing similar topics. Eight of the participants are biologically women and one of them is a biological man. The age range of the individuals were 19 to 24 years, who have experienced being in a romantic relationship defined by: voluntary affectionate interaction between two people, a mutual understanding of the nature of the relationship, and a shared expression of affection and intimacy between each other.

3.3 Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

Prior to the collection of data, the researchers submitted a comprehensive data gathering protocol to the University Research Ethics Board. This protocol outlined the ethical considerations and procedures across the pre-data, intra-data, and post-data collection phases to ensure participant safety, data confidentiality, and methodological integrity. Approval was obtained before proceeding with the study. The initial phase of data collection entailed the administration of a demographic questionnaire aimed at determining background information from the participants such as age and sex assigned at birth. Following this, a semi-structured

interview, developed by the researcher and validated by experts, comprising eight predetermined items, was conducted. Supplementary follow-up questions were employed when necessary to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences. Participants received an informed consent form and a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, potential risks, and benefits, emphasizing the significance of their life experiences for the research endeavor. The duration of data collection ranged from 30 to 50 minutes, depending on the length of participants' responses. Interviews were conducted in an online setting via Google Meet, with prior consent sought for audio recording, which was then used during the transcription process to facilitate a thorough analysis. The sample originally consisted of ten (10) participants, with one (1) used for pilot testing and nine (9) for the actual study.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading each transcript multiple times, allowing immersion in the participants' stories and initial observations. Following this, initial codes were generated by systematically identifying significant features across the entire dataset. These codes were then collated and organized into potential themes based on patterns and shared meanings within the narratives. In line with the narrative inquiry framework, the stories were analyzed holistically, with close attention to the context and meaning-making processes before generating themes. This ensured that the thematic development remained grounded in the participants' actual narratives. The themes and subthemes were reviewed and agreed upon by both researchers. Member checking was also conducted, allowing participants to confirm that the generated themes accurately reflected their experiences. This process ensured that the narrative essence of the participants' stories was preserved and authentically represented in the final themes.

3.5 Research Ethics

The study ensured its compliance with ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent, assuring the confidentiality of the data, and ensuring that the participants have understood the purpose of the study in its entirety. Transparency and honesty were also upheld during the analysis of the data, informing participants of the interpreted results.

Furthermore, both the data-gathering procedure and the completion of the research received clearance from the Philippine Normal University's Research Management Office under REC Code 2024-203. The study has successfully met all preliminary ethical requirements, including the submission of the research proposal in the prescribed format, informed consent, and appropriate data collection tools. As of the issuance date, approval to proceed with the validation of data gathering instruments, followed by the data collection, organization, and write-up phases of the research project, was granted on July 15, 2024.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 View and Perception of Love and Romantic Relationships

Table 1 below presents key themes drawn from the personal narratives of Filipino Generation Z participants regarding the nature of love, emotional depth, and distinguishing features from other forms of relationships. These findings provide insight into the factors shaping their understanding of romantic relationships.

Table 1

Core themes and subthemes of the participants' perception of romance and romantic relationships

Core Themes	Subthemes
Profound Emotional Connection	Feelings of Intimacy
	Emotional Calmness
	Feelings of Vulnerability and authenticity
	Special Expressions of Affection and Thoughtfulness
	Beyond Surface-Level Emotions
Complex and Personal Construct	Meaning Emerges from Personal Encounters
	Include Both Positive and Challenging Emotions
Personal Growth	Growth-Fostering Open Communication
	Personal Growth Through Self-Reflection

Profound Emotional Connection. The theme reflects the deep emotional bonds described in the various narratives. It includes feelings of intimacy, special care & attention, and feelings that go beyond just surface-level emotions.

One of the most interesting and recurring patterns in the participants' responses is the emphasis on emotional calmness in their description of love. While the common description

of love is characterized by feelings of euphoria and excitement, both Zoe (20) and C (23) expressed that their experiences of love lean more into calmness and tranquility, offering a contrast to common romantic ideals.

Zoe, quoting a verse from the Bible, have shared their outlook that love is supposed to make an individual feel relaxed because they feel safe. Although "butterfly feelings" can be completely normal and present in a relationship, Zoe expressed the idea that it should not be the main basis of recognizing love. Since the feeling of 'butterflies in your stomach' or the Filipinos' construct of romantic excitement or "kilig" (Maningo, 2024), can also indicate that the person is nervous.

> *"Love is kind, love is gentle. Love is supposed to make you feel safe. I also believed in what other people say- that you shouldn't feel nervous or anxious when you see the person you love because you're supposed to feel safe with that person..."*
> -Mx. Zoe, 20

Mx. C has also expressed that calmness and peace are key characteristics of love, a notion shaped by their personal experiences. C recounted their family dynamics, where constant shouting and conflict between their parents created a chaotic and tense environment. This experience made C realize that the romantic relationships they engage in should not embody the same dynamic that they had experienced. For C, love must embody calmness and tranquility, in contrast to the emotional unrest they witnessed growing up, shaping their belief that love and romantic relationships are characterized by tranquility.

> *"It's not the typical 'butterflies in my stomach' feeling; I don't believe in that. For me, it's more on the calm side. I feel calmer when I'm in a romantic relationship."*
> -Mx. C, 23

Another aspect of love, aside from the secured and relaxed environment characterized above, is the emphasis on feeling of vulnerability- the idea that they can be their true self when they are with their significant other, and not being afraid to show their flaws and imperfections.

> *"I don't need to be conscious about how I act- because I'm a people pleaser, which is why when I feel romantic love, it's like I don't feel pressured to please my partner."*
> -Mx. C, 23

Complex and Personal Construct. The theme explores how participants see romantic love as a complex and individualized experience. Charlie (22) has expressed that their experiences in romantic relationships in the past have made them realize that love can vary from person to person, especially in how individuals express it. This realization made them acknowledge the idea that love is a personal construct, and it is up to the people in the relationship how they would express their feelings to their romantic partner in the way that both partners understand.

> *"For me, if I were to define it, it's more of a personal experience. It depends on the two people involved and how they define it or how they would convey to each other what love truly means to them."*
>
> -Mx. Charlie, 22

Charlie (22) has expressed that their experiences in romantic relationships in the past have made them realize that love can vary from person to person, especially in how individuals express it. This realization made them acknowledge the idea that love is a personal construct, and it is up to the people in the relationship how they would express their feelings to their romantic partner in the way that both partners understand. Charlie's reflection on their past experiences, along with the belief that love is a personal construct, led to Charlie's acknowledgement that love is not just characterized by happiness and positive emotions in general. Charlie also shared their narrative about a previous relationship wherein they felt uneasy with their partner. However, Charlie did not view these negative emotions as entirely negative, since the sense of uneasiness was rooted in the idea of caring genuinely for their partner.

> *"I think it's not always what they describe as very euphoric. Based on my experience, it's not always euphoric. Sometimes, it comes in the form of worry, anger, or sadness. Sometimes, negative emotions we feel are rooted in the idea that we only feel that way because we worry about someone. For instance, we feel sad because we're worried about that person…"*
>
> -Mx. Charlie, 22

Personal Growth. This theme focuses on how romantic relationships contribute to self-development. The stories highlight the importance of personal growth before entering a relationship, especially the skill of communicating effectively. Mx. Charlie (22) has expressed

that the subjective nature of people can create conflicts in the relationship, hence, developing skills in communicating is an integral part in every relationship. Furthermore, upon Charlie's observation from previous relationships, they have concluded the notion that there is no such thing as automatic in romantic relationships. Hence, constant open communication plays a pivotal role in developing a relationship.

> *"So for me, my understanding of romantic love shifted. I realized that communication is the most important thing. Even though it sounds cliché, it's really essential. You really need to communicate what's okay and what's not okay for you, since we're all different when it comes to our perceptions."*
> -Mx. Charlie, 22

Moreover, there is also a recognition that personal growth can result from self-reflection on past relationship experiences, implying that they view personal growth as both contributing to and emerging from romantic relationships. This perspective aligns with existing literature, such as Erol and Orth (2017), which suggests that individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to experience healthy and satisfying romantic relationships, highlighting the reciprocal link between a well-developed sense of self and relational stability. Similarly, Jain (2022) found that trust and a deep understanding of intimacy positively correlate with romantic relationship satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that emotional maturity and personal insight often gained through previous experiences play a vital role in building healthy relationships. The narratives emphasized that personal growth is both shaped by romantic relationships and actively emerges within them, highlighting a dynamic, reciprocal process between individual development and experiences.

Jae (20) have looked back to their previous experiences with romantic relationships and expressed the idea that those occurrences have helped them to realize themselves more. In sharing their story about a first love, who was also a past partner, Jae realized that these experiences were crucial in developing self-awareness about their own capabilities and limitations when in love. Although disclosing that it is both a positive and negative experience, Jae acknowledges that most of it was essential in developing a sense of the self and current notions about love.

> *"But then, with him (past relationship), I realized the things that I can do for the person I love, and also the things I thought I should or shouldn't be doing for them."*

"Having someone who supported me unconditionally during difficult times showed me what it means to love someone; showing unwavering support, empathy, and understanding. It made me see that love isn't just about being there for each other during happy moments but also staying through tough times, never leaving one's side..."

-Mx. Jae, 20

4.2 Negotiation of Societal Expectations and Norms in development of Ideal Romantic Standards

Table 2 highlights the influence of cultural values, traditional beliefs, and modern shifts in the development of romantic standards. The themes emphasize the ways they balance external pressures with personal preferences in defining ideal partnerships.

Table 2

Core themes and subthemes on negotiations of societal expectations in romantic standards

Core Themes	Subthemes
Critiquing Traditional Norms	Progressive Views on Gender Roles
	Challenging traditional expectations of relationship
Adapting to Social Environment	Changing Perceptions Based on Context
Conforming to Social Expectations	Societal Expectation of what a relationship should be
	Family's influence of traditional norms

Critiquing Traditional Norms. The theme examines how the participants have questioned and redefined traditional relationship norms. They advocate for progressive views on gender roles and actively challenge conventional expectations, reshaping their understanding of relationships.

Jae (20) shared their experience of growing up with both parents working, which led them to realize early on that traditional gender roles, such as the expectation for women to be housewives or to stay at home to care for the family, were challenged and dismissed.

"There should be no idea that only the man works while the woman stays at home. I actually grew up in a family where both my parents worked, so I never had the notion that women should just stay at home."

-Mx. Jae, 20

JG (24), on the other hand, reflected on their life experiences and shared that, while there are many gender norms and societal expectations placed on women in relationships, they found these expectations limiting. JG believes that women are just as capable as men in all aspects. Furthermore, JG reflected on how their upbringing shaped this mindset, particularly being the eldest sibling, which produced the idea to stand on their own and challenge traditional gender roles.

> *"Societal influences like how, 'if you're a woman, your partner should be older than you', or the idea that 'men should always have a provider mindset', or that 'your husband should know how to do everything' because you're just expected to stay in place- it's like, can't you be capable too?"*
> -Mx. JG, 24

The act of negating traditional gender roles and conforming to societal expectations of how men and women should behave in relationships reflects a broader sense of open-mindedness often associated with Generation Z, who tend to value equality and personal autonomy (Wandhe, 2024). Rather than adhering to prescribed norms, they emphasized the importance of individual choice in defining their ideal romantic partner. This is a surprising take, given that Filipinos uphold the cultural value of hiya, which is associated with feelings of embarrassment and shame (Dela Llarte, 2024). Hiya often prompts individuals to seek social approval and acceptance from the group (Esquibel, 2005), leading many to reject beliefs or behaviors that contrast with prevailing norms and expectations. The willingness of some participants to challenge these ingrained expectations suggests a shift to a more self-directed values, negating the face of social and cultural pressure.

Adapting to Social Environment. The theme explores how participants adjust their views on romantic relationships based on their environment. Their perceptions shift according to various contexts and influences they experience.

James (19) shared the experience of growing up as the child of pastors, which made navigating romantic relationships challenging in the early stages, as the only guide they had was the Bible, reflecting the religious environment they were raised in. However, after observing various relationship dynamics, James quickly adapted to new models. While certain elements of love from the Bible still influence their perspective, James now selectively adopts

aspects that align with their personal views, and exposure to different relationships has broadened their understanding of societal norms and expectations.

> *"-And of course, friends also have an influence. When I see them with partners, it seems like love isn't as strict as I thought. Just because you start with an expectation of what love is doesn't mean it has to stay that way and it is how it should always be."*
> -Mx. James, 19

Conforming to Social Expectations. The theme addresses the narratives of participants with their romantic ideals and societal and familial expectations. They acknowledge the influence of societal norms on their perceptions of ideal relationships and recognize the impact of family traditions on their views.

> *"Because that's the conventional relationship: there's a boy, there's a girl, and then gender roles come into play. The boy is like this, and the girl is like that. Even in a sapphic relationship, I found myself expecting my partner to take on the 'boy' role while I'd be the 'girl' in the relationship."*
> -Mx. C, 23
>
> *"Societal norms still have an influence, especially the thought of 'What will my parents say if this person is my partner?' That's something I've been considering before forming a romantic relationship with someone..."*
> -Mx. A, 21

The narratives under this theme reflect a sense of conformity that underscores the collectivist nature of Filipino culture. However, when compared with the first theme, *Critiquing Traditional Norms*, it becomes evident that participants did not necessarily conform due to broader societal expectations, but more specifically because of familial and parental influences. This suggests that family expectations may be a key driver of conformity in romantic standards. In contrast, the narratives within the *Critiquing Traditional Norms* theme often came from participants whose families were more open to gender equality and flexible roles. As a result, the absence of restrictive familial expectations allowed these individuals greater freedom to challenge traditional norms.

4.3 Role of Digital Technologies and Social Media in Shaping Romantic Ideals

Table 3 below presents how online interactions, dating apps, and social trends contribute to their views on love and relationships. The findings demonstrate the impact of digital exposure on their standards and expectations in romantic connections.

Table 3

Core themes and subthemes on the role of digital technologies in shaping romantic ideals

Core Themes	Subthemes
Access to Diverse Perspectives	Forming Idealized Expectations from social media
	Learning various Relationship viewpoint
Discovery of Relationship Values	Re-evaluating Relationship Preferences
	Enhancing Critical and Analytical Thinking Skills

Access to Diverse Perspectives. The theme explores how technological advancements contribute to diverse perspectives which shape the views on romantic relationships. Digital technologies give access to new perspectives, which contributes to learning different relationship dynamics. Moreover, it also leads to the discovery of relationship values, wherein participants have highlighted how spending time on digital platforms made them re-evaluate their preferences.

Jae (20) shared their experience as an avid social media user, explaining how constant exposure to various content shaped an idealized version of a partner—one that is often unrealistic and unattainable.

> *"Maybe it's about idealization and comparison. Social media often shows the*
> *idealized version of relationships, the romantic gestures displayed there. It's like*
> *the constant exposure, being chronically online makes our expectations about*
> *love and relationships unrealistic."*
> -Mx. Jae, 20

James (19) on the other hand, highlighted their experience in learning through social media. They said that there were no relationship models for them to look up to during his childhood- and social media content became their primary way to learn more about romantic relationships.

> *"During my formative years, my father worked overseas as an OFW. Because of*
> *his absence, I rarely witnessed what love between two people truly looked like*

through my own parents. In many ways, social media filled that void for me — it
became the space where I formed my ideas of love and relationships."
-Mx. James, 19

Discovery of Relationship Values. This theme reflects how participants developed a deeper understanding of what they seek in romantic relationships through personal reflection and exposure to various relationship narratives, particularly online. Their experiences led to a more critical and discerning approach toward romantic ideals, allowing them to reassess previous beliefs and refine their expectations based on both personal experiences and broader cultural influences.

Charlie's (22) experience centers on the standards and expectations shaped by their time on online dating platforms. They expressed that there is a constant emphasis on selecting partners based primarily on appearance, a notion that it is from online dating platforms that encourages people to choose based on physical attractiveness, influencing the decision to swipe right or left. Charlie acknowledged that they initially adopted this perspective in their own partner selection. However, through a journey of self-reflection, Charlie changed this notion into a more positive understanding, realizing that looks should not be the sole basis for ideal standards in a partner.

"What I can say is there's this emphasis that 'your partner has to look attractive.'
It's like you shouldn't date someone who doesn't look good. There's so much
focus on looks because that's the first thing you notice about a person. You don't
immediately know their interests or who they really are; you judge them based on
their appearance."
-Mx. Charlie, 22

Narratives from Zoe (20) and JG (24) also highlight a loss of interest in online dating, as it does not align with their perception of what romantic relationships should be. Both expressed a clear disapproval of the hookup culture commonly associated with these platforms, emphasizing the absence of genuine connection. In recounting their experiences, they used euphemistic language to refer to hookup culture, which may reflect an attempt to avoid direct confrontation with socially sensitive topics, exemplifying the cultural inclination to avoid shame in social contexts of Filipinos.

"I tried online dating before, but it didn't last. Like, the next day I just uninstalled it and deleted my account. Especially knowing that the people on online dating apps are only looking for something unserious and just for fun."

-Mx. Zoe, 20

"My view of those dating apps, like Tinder, just became worse. Some people have said they met their current partners there. But most of the time, the people there are kind of trashy. These days, it feels like they're looking for something else, something a bit dirty. It's just not for me, because I'm not into chatting with people like that who are after, you know what I mean?"

-Mx. JG, 24

Most participants also expressed that despite being constantly exposed to unrealistic portrayals of relationships that shape their ideal standards for a romantic partner, they still value critical thinking. They assess the content and ideas presented to determine whether they are appropriate or simply unrealistic notions from digital technologies. Jennie (22) shared her narrative about social media and its significant role in shaping her ideal romantic standards. However, despite spending a lot of time online, Jennie emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, recognizing that one should not blindly follow or adopt the notions and standards presented on digital platforms.

"But even so, analytical thinking is still involved. Of course, I analyze first whether what I see on social media applies to me. For example, I see people on social media post how their boyfriends or girlfriends are the ones who always pay on dates. I think about it, like, 'Really? Should it always be the boyfriend or girlfriend paying"

-Mx. Jennie, 22

4.4 Contribution of Individual Factors in the Formulation of Ideal Standards

Table 4 below explores the narratives of Filipino Generation Z on how past relationships, family dynamics, and self-reflection shape their partner preferences. The table underscores the significance of individual experiences in defining what they seek in romantic relationships.

Table 4

Core themes and subthemes on the contribution of personal experiences in forming romantic standards

Core Themes	Subthemes
Access to Diverse Perspectives	Embracing Positive Family Models
	Avoiding Negative Family Patterns
	Resisting Familial Expectations
Discovery of Relationship Values	Valuing Emotional Safety and Support
	Using Self-Worth as a continuous Standard
	Wanting Compatibility and Mutual Growth

Awareness of Preferences from Family Experiences. The theme reflects how participants' romantic preferences are shaped by their observations of family dynamics. Some embraced positive relationship models they witnessed within their families, while others consciously avoided repeating negative patterns. Additionally, a few participants expressed a desire to resist familial expectations in their ideals for their romantic partner.

James (19) and Jennie (22) shared their experiences in embracing their positive experiences in family relationships and modeling them into their ideal romantic standards. James has said that witnessing her parents together made them realize the meaning of love. Jennie has also shared the same narrative, emphasizing how important it is for them to see how her father loves her mother, and vice versa.

> *"Now that I'm living with my parents again, I find that they're helping shape my understanding of what love should look like in a relationship — even though I already have a partner. It made me realize, 'Ah, so this is how love is meant to be'"*
> -Mx. James, 19
> *"I can see how Dada (Dad) loves Mama, and vice versa, how Mama loves Dada."*
> -Mx. Jennie, 22

Mx. C's narrative also emphasized the influence of family experiences, but in contrast to the earlier accounts, their experience reflected a more adverse dynamic. Instead of drawing from positive models, they used the negative patterns within their family to identify what they did not want in a partner. Their story highlights that, despite having a difficult familial background, C was able to use those experiences constructively, to recognize the standards and relationship dynamics they would prefer to avoid.

"My parents were always fighting. It reached a point where every time I left the house, I'd worry that by the time I came back, I might not have parents anymore because they might've killed each other. That's how intense it was. So I think I can't handle a chaotic relationship—the kind where I'd always be worrying. That's why my definition of romantic love is calm…"
-Mx. C, 22

Development of components for a Fulfilling Relationship. The theme highlights how romantic relationships are shaped by individual factors, such as family and friends. Many participants emphasized that the expectations and models they observe from those around them have significantly influenced their perception of what constitutes a fulfilling relationship, contributing to the development of their ideal standards. They prioritize compatibility, mutual respect, recognize the importance of self-worth in choosing partners, and underscore the necessity of emotional support.

"Upon reflecting on my past experience, I have realized that just loving each other is not enough, although it's a fundamental element, aspects like compatibility, mutual respect, communication, and shared values are also essential for a relationship to work."
-Mx. Jae, 20

"I had a deep reflection and learned in a harsh way that I didn't respect myself because I was allowing myself to be hurt. I allowed myself to be taken advantage of, which shouldn't happen. These shaped my current experience. My past experiences shaped how I view an ideal partner now—I should find someone worthy who can see my self-worth, that I'm not just only a 'woman' for them..."
-Mx. Zoe, 20

This study examined how Filipino Generation Z individuals perceive romantic love and form their ideal partner standards. Through personal narratives, the participants revealed that love is understood as a profound emotional connection characterized by calmness, safety, and mutual care, contrasting with the often glamorized notions of euphoria and constant excitement. Major thematic areas reflect the depth and diversity of the Filipino Generation Z's romantic perspectives. Love was described as a deeply emotional yet personal experience, one that fosters intimacy, vulnerability, and personal growth through both connection and self-reflection. Many participants emphasized emotional calmness as a marker of genuine love, describing it as a space where one feels secure and seen.

Ideal partner standards were shaped through a critical engagement with traditional norms, revealing a tendency among participants to question, negotiate, and, at times, redefine established expectations. While some actively challenged conventional notions of femininity, masculinity, and romantic relationships, others chose to align with familial expectations, influenced by the collectivist values deeply embedded in Filipino culture. The participants' narratives reflected a constant tension between progressive ideals and the enduring influence of family, suggesting that although societal norms play a role, the most immediate and significant pressures often originate within the home. Additionally, exposure to diverse relationship dynamics in various social environments further shaped the participants' evolving views on romantic relationships, demonstrating how context-specific experiences continuously inform and reshape personal standards over time.

Finally, the role of digital technologies and individual life experiences emerged as critical factors in shaping romantic ideals. Social media and online platforms provided access to diverse narratives that sometimes perpetuated unrealistic standards, yet participants demonstrated discernment in critically evaluating these portrayals. Personal experiences within family settings likewise played a decisive role; positive familial models served as templates for ideal relationships, while negative experiences guided participants toward identifying what they wished to avoid. These findings underscore the dynamic, multifaceted process by which young Filipinos formulate romantic ideals, influenced by emotional needs, personal growth, cultural norms, digital media, and family dynamics.

5. Conclusion

The participants' stories revealed that their understanding of romantic love is shaped by deep emotional experiences, personal meaning-making, and reflections on intimacy, commitment, and connection—closely aligned with Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. Participants identified romantic love as distinct from other forms of affection, often describing it as something "special" and more intimate. Shared values also emerged as an important standard when choosing a partner, reflecting the idea in Kerckhoff and Davis' (1962) filtering theory, though little support was found for the theory's notion of complementarity. While many challenged traditional masculine and feminine roles and societal expectations, others conformed due to familial values rooted in Filipino collectivist culture. In comparing these

narratives, it became clear that the openness or rigidity of a participant's family played a key role in how freely they could shape their own romantic standards.

Social media and digital content also played a part in shaping participants' ideals. While some initially absorbed idealized portrayals of love, many came to question and re-evaluate whether these expectations truly reflected their own beliefs. This process of reflection led several participants to adjust their standards based on what they found to be realistic, healthy, and more aligned with their lived experiences. Family background remained a strong influence in how participants formed their relationship ideals. Some drew inspiration from positive examples at home, while others identified what to avoid based on difficult or unhealthy dynamics they had witnessed. These reflections support Bandura's social learning theory, showing how observation shapes behavior and preferences.

This study highlights how Filipino Gen Z value introspection and self-reflection in shaping their perceptions of romantic love. While various social and familial influences affect their standards, individuals ultimately retain the power to decide how these factors shape their views. Love and romantic relationships present a paradox: they can serve as sources of emotional support or triggers for mental health struggles. This duality underscores the importance of self-awareness, as it empowers individuals to navigate relationships with clarity about what is healthy, realistic, and aligned with their personal values. Consistent with theories of well-being, participants' experiences — both positive and difficult became opportunities for growth, helping them refine their ideals and recognize what they truly seek in a partner.

The insights from this study offer meaningful contributions to counseling practice, particularly in helping young individuals navigate romantic concerns. Alfred Adler's concept of subjective interpretation is especially relevant, as it reflects how participants formed their romantic ideals based on personal experiences, shaped but not wholly defined by social and familial contexts. Similarly, William Glasser's choice theory highlights that while individuals share basic needs, such as love and belonging, but they pursue these needs in diverse ways. This framework allows counselors to guide clients in recognizing that their relationship decisions can be rooted in personal needs and values, rather than shaped solely by societal expectations or peer influence. The findings also affirm prior research on how romantic relationships can be both emotionally challenging and supportive, depending on one's perception and experience. This highlights the importance of critical reflection not only for individuals but also within institutions. Educators may consider integrating discussions on

digital influence and emotional well-being in their curriculum to help students reflect on the realities of modern relationships. Parents, in turn, can foster open communication at home, allowing their children to develop balanced views on love, intimacy, and social expectations. For Gen Z themselves, the study underscores the value of self-awareness in forming relationship standards that are personally meaningful. Lastly, future research may build on these insights by examining how digital influences and familial contexts shape relationship values over time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Philippine Normal University's Research Management Office.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot to paraphrase thoughts and check for any grammatical errors. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

ORCID

Exequiel Josh Manalili - https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5596-7082
Marie Chiela Malcampo – https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7300-7842

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