

A Study on the Shift in Generation Z's Views on Marriage and Romance and Its Causes

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Abstract: In today's society, as "digital natives" of the digital age, Generation Z's attitudes toward romance and marriage, as well as their behavioral patterns, are undergoing profound shifts that distinguish them significantly from previous generations. Through semi-structured interviews with participants, this study systematically analyzes the core characteristics of Generation Z's views on romance and marriage, as well as the underlying social causes. Gen Z's attitudes toward marriage and romance are shifting from "institutionalization" to "individualization," manifested specifically in: the rational postponement of marriage decisions, the exploration and practice of intimate relationships, the diverse construction of dating and marriage models, and the high standards for partner selection. Drawing on insights from other studies, this paper analyzes the causes of this shift from four perspectives and, based on this analysis, proposes targeted recommendations and policy measures. This shift in attitudes toward marriage and romance is not only reshaping individual life trajectories but also presenting new challenges and considerations for future family structures, social development, and social policies.

Keywords: Generation Z; Attitudes toward Marriage and Romance; Generational Shifts; Intimate Relationships

1. Introduction

A significant portion of Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009) consists of students currently of college age in China. Having grown up during a period of rapid development in digital and intelligent technologies, their specific living environment and lifestyle have led them to develop unique ideologies, psychological traits, and behavioral patterns, which have had a

significant impact on the evolution of contemporary social and cultural dynamics [1]. They range in age from 2 to 29. The oldest among them have been entering the workforce for several years, becoming a new force in the professional world and consumer market; the youngest are still in primary and secondary school. Generation Z's shift in attitudes toward marriage and romance is revolutionary, and these changes are deeply rooted in their social-economic environment. Soaring housing prices worldwide, rising costs of education and healthcare, and the job instability brought about by the "gig economy" have placed immense economic pressure on Gen Z. They have witnessed firsthand the marital struggles their predecessors faced due to financial difficulties. As digital natives, Gen Z has access to the world's most cutting-edge ideas through the internet. As digital natives, Gen Z has access to the world's most cutting-edge ideas through the internet. They are more attuned to their own feelings than to external judgments. The constraints of social norms have weakened due to the decentralized nature of the internet. This empowers them to question and reject traditional relationship scripts, exploring personalized relationship models that better suit them.

2. Literature Review

Generation Z is a generation that is completely embedded in the internet. The concept of marriage and love of this group shows significant intergenerational differences. The Internet is the main force shaping the concept of marriage and love, it shows a profound change from "Institutionalization" to "Individuation". In the Chinese traditional book of rites, the Book of Rites, the Book of faint justice, it is said that "A man who has a fainting ceremony combines the good qualities of the two sexes. He ascends to the temple of the patriarch and descends to the descendants. Therefore, a gentleman attaches great importance to it." Obviously, in traditional

society, the marriage of man and woman contains important public value, which mainly plays the function of extending blood, maintaining survival and realizing family interests. "Each individual is born and grows in the shadow of his forefathers, and by the effort of perpetuating them gives eternal meaning to the ephemeral body." [2]. from above, in the past, marriage was regarded as the link between families, and family and institutional arrangement became the decisive factors of individual marriage. The traditional pursuit of marriage is gradually declining, people's marriage purpose is no longer simply to carry on the family line, the love consciousness of marriage is awakening, and the emotional function is increasingly strengthened [3]. With the rapid development of the Internet, the concept of marriage and love of Generation Z has undergone profound changes. Research in the early 21 st century has shown that love is a prerequisite for young men and women to get together, and love has been given the meaning of the relationship between the youth norms, emphasizing the responsibility of both sides, pay, respect, trust and so on [4]. In short, the concept of marriage and love is manifested in the alienation attitude towards the resistance or reinterpretation of traditional marriage and love in the social context of contemporary individual value priority, suggesting that young people seek new forms and definitions in marriage and love relations, it reflects the pursuit of individual independence and self-realization in postmodern society.

3. Research Methods

The subjects of this paper are teenagers born from 1995 to 2009. The data collection work of this paper began in October 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted offline and online (Tencent Conference) , we selected 16 respondents by snowballing and online recruitment, focusing on the specific performance and causes of their marriage concept. The average interview time of each case was between 1 and 2 hours, and some cases were interviewed several times. The age of the respondents was concentrated between 17 and 29 years old, and the Internet age reached more than 8 years. Students, civil servants, teachers, self-employed and other types of occupation, most of them work and live in Shandong, Shanxi, Henan, Hebei and other provinces. Seven of the respondents were single, six were in a relationship, two were engaged and one was married. The ratio of men and women was equal, eight men and eight women. In order to ensure the difference and comparability, the study takes into account the gender, age, love status and other factors when selecting the sample. The interview has been recorded with my consent, and a pseudonym has been used to protect my privacy. All interview materials have been coded and analyzed step by step. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1. The numbers are F for female and M for male. The numbers after the letters are in the order of individual cases by gender, and the date of the interview is indicated by a bar.

Table 1. Basic Information about the Interviewees

Number	Name	Gender	Age	Education level	Relationship status	Occupation
F1-202510	Lan lan	Female	16	Currently in high school	Single	Student
F2-202511	Xiao Mei	Female	17	Currently in high school	Single	Student
F3-202510	A Fang	Female	17	dropped out of high school	Love	Self-employed individuals
F4-202512	Lin Lin	Female	22	Currently enrolled in undergraduate studies	Love	Student
F5-202510	Xiao Ying	Female	23	Currently enrolled in undergraduate studies	Single	Student
F6-202511	Ying Ying	Female	26	Undergraduate degree	Engagement	Seller
F7-202512	Xiao Li	Female	29	Master's degree graduate	Single	Teacher
F8-202511	Xue Xue	Female	20	Currently enrolled in undergraduate studies	Love	Student
M1-202510	Dong dong	Male	28	Master's degree graduate	Married	Civil servant
M2-202511	A long	Male	25	Currently pursuing a master's degree	Love	Student
M3-202512	Xiao Cheng	Male	24	Undergraduate degree	Single	Lawyer
M4-202510	Xiao Ping	Male	27	Graduate from the high school	Single	Clerk

M5-202512	A Qiang	Male	21	Graduate from the high school	Engagement	Self-employed individual
M6-202511	A Bin	Male	19	Graduated from junior high school	Love	Seller
M7-202510	Yang Yang	Male	18	Graduate from the high school	Single	Self-employed individual
M8-202512	Xiao Gan	Male	23	Undergraduate degree	Love	Teacher

4. Characteristics of Gen Z's Views on Marriage and Love under Low Fertility

4.1 Rational Delay in Marriage Decisions

The age of first marriage continues to be delayed, which reflects the rational adaptation and individual life strategy adjustment of Z generation under the change of macro social and economic structure. With the change of the concept of marriage and love in modern society, the traditional custom of ' blind marriage and dumb marriage ' gradually fades, and first love and then marriage has become the main mode of young people 's marriage and love behavior. At present, the economic cost of marriage for young people is high, which brings great economic pressure to individuals and families, and becomes an important factor restricting young people to enter marriage [5]. As the interviewee Xiao Li said : ' Now there is no intention to marry, graduate school when many students around the graduation are twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, not in love with the basic can not be married in one year, even if there are objects, but also very few in the graduation can be married, they can not feed, but also think about marriage ? In this society, late marriage is very common ' (F7-202512) Xiaoping also holds a similar view : ' Now the salary can feed yourself is very good, how to feed others ? How can you delay others with empty hands, even if you are married, it is also a variety of contradictions, not as comfortable as your own single. (M4-202510) It can be seen from this that personal behavior is usually not entirely out of personal will. In marriage decision-making, individuals will be affected by many factors, such as economic pressure, career barriers and mate selection difficulties, which will reduce the feasibility and availability of individuals entering marriage [6].

4.2 Exploratory Practices in Intimate Relationships Corresponding Author

The support function, connection ceremony and emotional output of kinship in traditional society have been greatly attenuated. Generation Z 's

individualized practice of intimate relationships is indirectly affecting the fertility trend by reconstructing the value coordinates of marriage and love [7]. This group no longer binds love, marriage and fertility as a linear life trajectory, but uses non-commitment forms such as ' dating software ', ' short-term relationships ', and ' open relationships ' as carriers. The intimate interaction is regarded as a ' self-understanding ' practice field - by exploring needs and clarifying boundaries in the relationship, the growth of the ' self-subject ' is completed ; the interviewee Xue Xue said : ' Of course, falling in love is to meet a better self. In the process of getting along, I can see myself, what are the vulnerabilities and needs. (F8-202511) individuals are more inclined to consider long-term commitment after completing self-exploration, and this model of ' first cognitive self-selection relationship ' objectively delays the time of marriage and fertility. In the social background of low fertility, it reflects the alienation of Z generation from the traditional family concept and the logic of population reproduction. Intimate relationship is the desire of human beings for emotional needs. The pursuit of emotion is only in line with the standard of ' beauty ', which is healthy and sustainable development, and also a necessary condition to promote the harmonious operation of society.' Marriage is not necessarily the ultimate goal for individuals; happiness can be achieved without marriage. I am a non-marriage advocate. I can date, but marriage frightens me.' (F4-202512) This value reconstruction is directly reflected in fertility decisions-when marriage is no longer a necessary stage in life, childbearing, as an extension of traditional family functions, is naturally re-evaluated within the framework of personal development, ultimately forming the realistic picture of continuously declining fertility rates [8].

4.3 Diversified Construction of Marriage and Love Models

The unique social and economic environment faced by the Z generation constitutes the realistic basis for the diversification of their marriage and childbearing choices. The popularization of

higher education not only prolongs the cycle of knowledge acquisition, but also strengthens the individual's rational judgment ability of life planning. The flow risk of the labor market and the weakening of the traditional family economic security function have formed an objective restriction on marriage and fertility. In the wave of global information, non-traditional marriage and childbearing models (such as non-marriage, dink, and agreement marriage) are widely disseminated through the Internet, gradually fading the "abnormal" label and becoming the independent choice of youth groups after weighing economic pressure, personal development and emotional needs. People do not necessarily take marriage as the ultimate goal. Without marriage, happiness can also be gained. I am an unmarriedist. I can fall in love, and marriage will make me feel scared. (F4-202512) This value reconstruction is directly reflected in fertility decision-making. When marriage is no longer a necessary stage of life, fertility as an extension of traditional family functions, its necessity is naturally re-evaluated in the personal development coordinate system, and finally a realistic picture of declining fertility rate is formed.

4.4 High Standardization of Partner Selection

As the aborigines of digital technology, Generation Z has formed a high sensitivity to efficiency and rationality in the growth environment of high-speed social mobility and deep penetration of the Internet. This trait is projected into the field of marriage and love, which is manifested in the 'multi-dimensional value coordinates' of the mate selection standard, which not only requires the balance between material security and emotional resonance, but also pursues the resonance between facial attractiveness and spiritual fit. Marriage may be the most important choice in life. If you choose the right one, honor and disgrace together, you will be exhausted and in a dilemma [9]. When the real relationship is difficult to meet this 'perfect match' imagination, the youth group is easy to fall into the dilemma of mate selection, forming a cognitive bias of 'ideal partner scarcity'. Now I have a high demand for partners, even if some people say they are not so demanding, in fact, they are all duplicitous. In this era of rapid development of Internet short videos, people are becoming more and more critical of the choice of partners. (F1-202510)

This kind of cognitive bias directly affects fertility decision-making: young people who have been hovering in the marriage market for a long time often delay the marriage conclusion time, and even actively choose not to get married and infertile, which ultimately leads to the intergenerational break between fertility behavior and marriage and fertility intention.

5. Analysis of the Reasons for the Change in Marriage and Love Concepts of Generation Z under Low Fertility

5.1 Risk Aversion under Socioeconomic Pressure

In the context of today's society, in the face of high education costs, employment pressure and material foundation requirements (such as housing prices), Generation Z generally regards marriage behavior as a 'high-risk project' that requires high capital to start. It is this highly rational assessment of marriage behavior that provides a key social exchange perspective for us to understand the current declining fertility rate. Marriage has become an option after weighing the pros and cons, ignoring the family value and social contribution of marriage and childbearing behavior [10]. The general delay of marriage age caused by "getting married first" directly compresses women's fertility window and family planning cycle. Even after starting a business, high housing and education costs and high anxiety about the stability of marriage inhibit women's reproductive behavior. In the face of the choice of "whether to give birth" and "how many to give birth," many couples are essentially carrying out a severe family resource planning: whether fertility will shake the "foundation" of the current family, or not to give children enough protection in an uncertain future. In recent years, China has been continuously exploring solutions suitable for its national conditions, such as relaxing family planning restrictions, increasing the number of days of parental leave, increasing the amount of maternity subsidies, and increasing investment in preschool education institutions [11]. However, it has little impact on the Z generation.

5.2 Self-Construction under Individualism

The deep motivation of the transfer of the concept of marriage and love in the Z generation is derived from the active construction of self under the individualized trend of thought. In

traditional society, individual marriage and employment are largely regulated and controlled by external systems such as family, clan and unit. However, with the deepening of modernity, individuals are freed from these traditional constraints and thrown into a situation where they must make decisions independently and take responsibility. For Generation Z, 'becoming yourself' is no longer a philosophical slogan, but an urgent 'ontological project' that runs through the growth process. Under the grand narrative of individualization, the individual puts the construction, investment and improvement of 'self' at the center of life. Individuals can choose to build a 'strong relationship' with stable and lasting deep emotions, or choose to build a 'weak relationship' that supports each other and can be separated from each other at any time in a specific scenario [12]. Marriage, like career choice and lifestyle, is included in the framework of the ultimate 'self-issue' of 'how do I spend my life' for consideration, negotiation and choice. This change profoundly reveals a self-centered and highly reflective life strategy adopted by contemporary youth in dealing with a highly uncertain social environment.

5.3 Collapse of Traditional Norms and Diversified Life Paths

As modernization and economic globalization deepen, traditional value systems face multiple impacts, and social concepts gradually transform towards pluralism and individualism [13]. With the fading halo of traditional, singular norms, life choices that were once stigmatized or marginalized, such as singlehood, DINK (Dual Income, No Kids) families, cohabitation without marriage, and diverse gender relationships, have gained unprecedented legitimacy. The key to this "lies in the shift of judgment criteria from external social recognition to internal individual experience. Whether a life path is "no longer depends on whether it conforms to a predetermined social template, but on whether it brings fulfillment, happiness, and self-realization to those who practice it. The visibility of diverse lifestyles on social media further reinforces this perception: everyone has the right to choose and define their own "Great life"

5.4 Transformation of Modern Marriage Functions and Expectations of "Partners"

The understanding of marriage among

Generation Z is undergoing a profound transformation from an "institutionalized alliance" to an "actuarial partnership". The core of this shift lies in the significant weakening of the traditional functional value of marriage, while its attribute as a "partner" serving individual happiness and development is unprecedentedly highlighted. A stable housing environment is the foundation for establishing a family. Partners of Generation Z are more inclined to divide labor flexibly based on realistic circumstances. Whoever is better at cooking takes more responsibility in the kitchen; whoever has more flexible time takes on more tasks of picking up and dropping off children; whoever earns a higher salary may become the main economic pillar of the family for a period. This division of labor is entirely based on pragmatism and efficiency principles, similar to how tasks are allocated among members based on their expertise in a partnership to maximize team (family) interests. Generation Z expects their partners to be "soul partners"-not only able to live together but also to grow together, share common interests, and engage in deep communication. The quality of the relationship is directly measured by the standard of "Am I becoming a better version of myself when I am with this person?" Individuals no longer enter marriage solely for temporary happiness, but rather based on the value or benefit to their family or lineage, and for the purpose of their own self-improvement [14].

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on research findings, this paper proposes the following countermeasures and suggestions to guide multiple stakeholders in positively influencing Gen Z's views on marriage and relationships, and to promote the construction of a healthy marriage and relationship ecosystem. First, greater emphasis should be placed on enhancing practical social skills. Encourage young people to formulate personal marriage and relationship growth plans, and integrate new media social interactions as an organic supplement to their real-world social systems. Establish an "integration of virtual and real" emotional cultivation mechanism, enhancing empathy through virtual scenario simulations and deepening emotional cognition in real-world interactions [15]. Second, enhance young people's media literacy and critical thinking skills. Young people should strengthen

their ability to identify the logical pitfalls of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, cultivate critical thinking, and advocate for rational decision-making based on individual needs. Third, relevant government departments should strengthen social support and policy guarantees. Promote the transition of young people from virtual social interaction to real-world interaction, and through policy advocacy and media cooperation, disseminate egalitarian and healthy marriage and relationship cultures..

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