

The Collision of Tradition and Modernity: An In-Depth Narrative Study on Marriage and Love Attitudes of Generation Z Youth

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Abstract: Faced with the multifaceted social challenges of declining marriage rates, rising divorce rates, and an aging population in China, the phenomena of late marriage and non-marriage have evolved from individual choices into structural societal issues. As a significant cohort of marriageable age, the attitudes of Generation Z towards romance and marriage have increasingly garnered extensive attention from sociological, demographic, and psychological disciplines. This study, through in-depth narrative research based on interviews with 12 members of Generation Z, combined with intergenerational comparisons, explores the contemporary attitudes of Generation Z towards marriage and romance amidst the collision of traditional and modern values. In response to these findings, this study innovatively proposes a “quadruple dialogue” intervention mechanism, encompassing intergenerational communication, intimate relationship education, policy adjustment, and media guidance, to provide feasible solutions for alleviating societal marriage anxiety. The research not only expands the theoretical perspectives of intergenerational marriage studies but also offers significant references for promoting the interaction between marriage and family systems and societal development.

Keywords: Generation Z; Attitudes towards marriage and romance; Tradition and modernity; Values and beliefs

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Marriage and family have always been a proposition of public concern, and are no exception in today's society; the harmonious relationship between marriage and family directly affects people's livelihood, happiness, and social stability. However, at present, China is facing multiple social challenges, such as the continuous decline in the marriage rate, the increasing divorce rate year by year, and the intensification of population aging. At this time, as the main force of the future marriage and love market, it is necessary and important to study the attitude and willingness of Generation Z.

As a native of the digital age, Gen Z's attitudes and behaviors are deeply influenced by new media and self-

consciousness awakening. The concept of marriage and love is not only a reflection of personal choice, but also a microcosm of social and cultural changes. In real social media and circle communication, it is shown that there is a phenomenon of marriage and love anxiety in this group, and the phenomenon of singleness is becoming more and more common among young people.

Based on the current research foundation, this study not only looks at the general view of marriage and love of Generation Z from a macro perspective, but also attaches more importance to the multiple cognitions and choices between different individuals, and tries to explore the development process of their thoughts that produce the current cognition, and conducts in-depth narrative research on 12 Gen Z respondents to gain an in-depth understanding of their different concepts between them and the traditional concept of marriage and love, and deeply decode their concepts of marriage and love, so as to reveal the thinking and psychology behind them.

1.2. Research status at home and abroad

Many international scholars have conducted relevant research on the current situation of marriage and love, and most of them are carried out from a macro perspective. Scholars from the department conducted a series of arguments and empirical analyses on a key indicator, and Braaten and Rosén developed the Marital Attitude Scale (MAS) to provide a measurement standard ^[1]. The marriage rate for a specific time period is analyzed from the perspective of the household saving rate ^[2]. Sociologists have correlated the trend of marriage and love with single living alone with social institutions, and focused on research from the perspectives of social system and social ecology, arguing that single living alone has evolved from individual choice to a global social trend, which is behind the combined effect of urbanization, individualism, and the improvement of the welfare system. At the same time, some scholars have analyzed the triple influence of sociosexuality, dark triad, and career focus from the perspective of singles, and explored the reasons for the increasing number of singles and celibates ^[3].

Compared with international countries such as Europe and the United States, China's research on marriage and love among young people started relatively late. The early results were mainly based on the description of the current situation and the analysis of group characteristics, or to explain the common phenomenon of "difficulty in marriage and love" in today's society from a social perspective ^[4], or to translate and revise the Marriage Attitude Scale (MAS), and to examine its reliability and validity in the context of Chinese society and culture ^[5].

In recent years, the research on young people's attitudes towards marriage and love has shown an upward trend, and has gradually shifted to the discussion of structural causes, and factor analysis has been carried out from the perspectives of media, intergenerational culture, economic pressure, and institutional constraints, and a series of results have been formed. Among them, empirical studies show that the differentiation of young people's views on marriage and love is affected by the interweaving of multiple factors: first, economic pressure has a huge impact, and there are practical problems such as the high cost of marriage and childbirth ^[6] and high employment pressure ^[7]. Second, institutional constraints affect the psychology of young people, and the expansion of household registration and education will have a certain impact on their planning ^[8]. Thirdly, intergenerational culture leads to contradictions, such as intergenerational imbalance ^[9], which in turn affects different intergenerational cognitions. Fourth, the external environment has become increasingly prominent, and the emergence of new media in the digital age has a two-way impact on young people's attitudes towards marriage and love ^[10].

2. New characteristics of the marriage and love attitudes of Generation Z youth

2.1. An overview of the interviewees

This study selected a total of 12 young adults from Generation Z with an age range of 22 to 30 years; the gender composition consists of 6 females and 6 males. All participants have at least a high school education, among whom, 2 are pursuing undergraduate degrees, 2 are pursuing master's degrees, and 3 have already obtained master's degrees. The interviewees include individuals from first-tier cities, second-tier cities, and some third-tier cities. One participant is from Xinjiang and belongs to an ethnic minority group, while another is currently residing in the United Kingdom. The sample demonstrates good diversity. This study exclusively selected unmarried individuals to explore the core perspectives of Generation Z regarding marital and romantic choices. Among the interviewees, 3 are currently in romantic relationships, 3 are single and have never been in a relationship, and 6 are single but have had one or more romantic relationships. The sample covers a relatively broad spectrum, ensuring scientific validity and diversity.

2.2. Marriage attitude focus

2.2.1. Marriage choice: Rational marriage and love view

First, in terms of understanding the essence of marriage, most people believe that “marriage” is not necessary for life, and that marriage is a kind of spice for life, mainly for the sake of emotional value, and to express understanding, respect, or support for marriage forms such as non-marriage, celibacy, and dink.

Almost all of them disagree with the idea that everyone should get married, either because they think it is too “love-minded” (A5), or they use their own examples to refute it, pointing out that marriage does not have to be just right to meet the right one, and it should not be forced if it is not suitable (A3, A6). Some of the interviewees also analyzed their personal interests and happiness index, saying that not marrying as a way of life is sometimes a more suitable choice, “When it comes to marriage, I am more afraid and confused, although there is occasionally a trace of yearning, but reason tells me that the current choice of not marrying is more suitable for me” (A10). Some of them have made it clear that they are not getting married (A11, A12).

Second, Gen Z is particularly cautious when it comes to preparing for marriage choices. In the elaboration of pre-marital preparations, all the interviewees mentioned many factors to consider when getting married, focusing on multiple factors such as economic, psychological, and family.

Almost all of the respondents defined marriage not only as a product of “love,” but also analyzed and described it more from the perspective of complexity. Although different people have their own different ways of dealing with it, they all present a multi-dimensional consideration of marital relationships and married life. Among them, men are mostly anxious about the economy, “I think although the freedom of marriage is everyone’s right, and it is understandable for two people to love each other and want to be together, but I think I can’t be too impulsive to get married, after all, there are many practical factors to consider.” “And you definitely have to think about the economic pressure, it will be troublesome if you don’t think about it clearly” (A1). Plus, women not only consider the economy, but also more about the protection of their own rights and interests, “I guess I have to do a good job of planning and planning before entering the stage of marriage” (A5), emphasizing that on the basis of ensuring their own safety and interests to consider the details of marriage, “I still say the same thing about marriage, to ensure their own safety and interests before making a decision, really now women’s safety is too difficult to guarantee, I am really scared every time I see domestic violence, sometimes people are very good at pretending” (A6).

2.2.2. Relationships: Self-actualization is generally valued and emotional values are emphasized

First, in terms of marriage or the choice of love partners, Generation Z mostly takes material conditions as the premise, and attaches more importance to spiritual fit and “tacit understanding” when getting along, emphasizing the emotional value in the process of getting along.

When mentioning one’s own criteria for choosing a mate, “spiritual fit” and “consistent three views” are mentioned very often, while the material needs are basically presented as relatively specific prerequisites such as being consistent with one’s economic strength (A1, A3, A5, A6), whether the job is stable (A4, A5, A8), and whether there is the ability to buy a house (A6, A7, A9). When talking about the ideal marriage, more than two of them mentioned personal space and personal social needs, no matter when “if my marriage is to be very close to my husband’s friends, relatives, or even frequent contact, I will really be more depressed, and I feel that women are often labeled at this time, I am very afraid of this state” (A6). Most people yearn for the ideal marriage has “harmony,” “comfortable,” and other words that emphasize spiritual feelings, it is not just a matter of economic abundance. At the same time, many people think that “it is better to be lacking than to be indiscriminate” and pay more attention to the quality of the relationship.

Second, in the comparison between singleness and love, the evaluation criteria of Generation Z are mostly from the perspective of their own happiness and sense of gain, and generally show the importance of self-realization and self-satisfaction.

Most of the people who are single and have no emotional experience say that they live in a state of relative balance in the single state, believing that “being single does not bring anything called ‘inconvenience’” (A8), but means that the state of being single is relatively free, “you can do whatever you want, and you don’t have to think too much about the feelings of others” (A7), but on the contrary, love or marriage will bring some contradictions and troubles. Even so, when the interviews were about future marriage and love planning, the interviewees were basically in a relatively positive attitude, and their yearning for marriage and love relationships was still higher than 5 points (10-point scale), and some of them also scored 7–8 points (A8, A3).

2.2.3. Marriage anxiety: Unmarried people are generally anxious, but the causes of anxiety are diverse

First, some Gen Z young people are anxious due to economic pressure and social responsibility, and most of them think that marriage “will have a lot of pressure to deal with the relationship between the two families in addition to facing daily expenses” (A1), and their behavior is mostly manifested in delaying marriage and constantly accumulating capital in economic and social aspects, resulting in “getting married at the right time” has become a false proposition that will be postponed indefinitely, “because economic problems are not solved, there will never be a ‘suitable’ time” (A2).

Second, some Generation Z young people are anxious because of the unknown of married life, and are afraid of all kinds of conflicts that will arise after marriage, such as men’s various life pressures (A1, A3), work coordination (A3), etc., and women’s domestic violence (A3, A4), rights and interests protection (A4, A5), etc., and this leads to confusion and fear, and most of them have to “get married after completing the construction in the psychological aspect” (A4, A5) and are prone to the phenomenon of “fear of marriage” that constantly delays marriage.

Third, some Generation Z young people are anxious because they have no way or time to develop marriage and love relationships, and have a more positive outlook on marriage and love, but most of them delay their

actions because of their limited social circle (A7, A8), too much time occupied by work (A9), and reluctance to get out of the single state (A8), and finally fall into a state of “yearning but ‘lazy’” (A7).

3. Analysis of the influencing factors behind the generational differences in marriage and love attitudes

3.1. Changes in the economic situation have led to increased economic pressures

When exploring the issue of intergenerational marriage, the compound impact of economic pressure and the cost of living is undoubtedly a more central issue. It is not difficult to find that the situation faced by Generation X and Generation Z when considering marriage is quite different, and the economic pressure and related costs of Generation X when considering marriage are not as good as those of Generation Z today. Taking housing as an example, the price of housing during the Generation X period was relatively reasonable, about 1,500 yuan per square meter, and most wage earners were expected to achieve their goal of buying a house through hard work. However, during the Gen Z period, house prices climbed sharply, reaching about 50,000 yuan per square meter, an increase of more than 30 times. The cost of living after marriage also shows a more obvious upward trend, the cost of living covers diet, travel, education, medical care, and other areas of life, taking children's daily necessities—baby milk powder as an example, the price has risen from 50 yuan per can to 300 yuan per can, an increase of six times, these phenomena are not an exception, but universal. In the course of the interview, more than 5 respondents also showed obvious economic considerations, and said that the cost of marriage is very different from the era of Generation X.

Looking back at Generation X, their average annual wage growth rate has remained at a relatively high level of 10–15%, which can meet people's pursuit and improvement of quality of life to a certain extent. However, in Gen Z, the average annual wage growth rate has fallen significantly to 5–6%, well below the current level of inflation, a change that reveals a large gap between the rate of income growth and the rate of rising cost of living, which in turn has led to a serious imbalance between income and spending. In the face of such financial pressures, it can be extremely difficult for many young people to accumulate sufficient financial resources to cope with the various expenses that come with marriage.

In the face of this reality, some young people of Generation Z choose to postpone their marriage or take a more cautious attitude towards marriage in order to achieve a more solid economic premise before marriage. Although the concept of marriage and love is still relatively positive, most Generation Z young people have a longer preparation time for marriage, so compared with Generation X, it is manifested as “delaying the intention to get married.” At this time, from the perspective of social changes, it is easy to have some misunderstandings and stereotypes when defining the attitude of Generation Z towards marriage and love.

3.2. Educational competition and involution culture catalyze the opportunity cost growth of women's marriage and love

With the continuous popularization of education and the general improvement of knowledge level, the relationship between educational competition and the opportunity cost of women's marriage and love has gradually been mentioned in the new era, and it has shown different characteristics among different generations, affecting the formation of different marriage and love attitudes.

In 1990, for example, the gross enrolment rate of universities was only 3.4%, and the priority of women's career choices under the influence of education level was lower than that of marriage, and marriage was regarded

as one of the most important choices for women.

4. Conclusion

The stereotyping of Generation Z's attitudes towards marriage and romance primarily stems from cognitive biases. In the era of self-media, the characteristics of information dissemination amplify the "anti-marriage" label. Algorithm-driven traffic mechanisms focus on extreme cases, thereby magnifying anti-marriage viewpoints. Simultaneously, conflicts arising during periods of social transition lead to intergenerational misunderstandings. The rational approach to marriage and romance pursued by Generation Z is often simplistically interpreted as "rebellion" through traditional perspectives, while their reasonable planning for marriage is easily misconstrued as "refusal to take responsibility." These cognitive biases collectively construct the stereotype that "Generation Z rejects marriage," which obscures their fundamental modern perspective on marriage and romance—pursuing quality over quantity and valuing substance over form.

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Disclosure statement

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