

When Anxiety Erodes Intimacy: A Phenomenological Portrait of Marital Distress in Generation Z

Ketika Kecemasan Mengikis Keintiman: Potret Fenomenologis Tekanan Pernikahan pada Generasi Z

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Abstract

The phenomenon of delayed marriage among Generation Z indicates a value shift driven by deep-seated anxiety regarding potential marital distress. Economic factors do not merely trigger this hesitation but are deeply rooted in childhood experiences under authoritarian and neglectful parenting, which shape a traumatic perception of long-term commitment. Using a phenomenological approach, this study aims to explore how Generation Z individuals with such parenting backgrounds perceive their anxiety toward marriage. Thematic analysis was conducted on data from in-depth interviews with three Generation Z subjects (two females and one male). The findings confirm that marriage anxiety is a psychological construction stemming from primary relational experiences within the nuclear family. Neglectful and authoritarian parenting significantly distorts the subject's cognitive schemas, causing marriage to be perceived as a "high-risk relationship" that threatens affective stability. These dynamics are mapped into three major themes reflecting components of marital quality: dyadic consensus (alignment in values and life decisions), dyadic satisfaction (happiness in the relationship), and dyadic cohesion (emotional bond and togetherness). This study concludes that for Generation Z survivors of dysfunctional parenting, delaying marriage serves as a defense mechanism against the repetition of past trauma.

Keyword : generation Z; marital distress; authoritarian parenting; neglectful parenting; marriage anxiety

Abstrak

Fenomena penundaan usia pernikahan pada Generasi Z mengindikasikan adanya pergeseran nilai yang didorong oleh kecemasan mendalam terhadap potensi marital distress. Keraguan ini tidak semata dipicu oleh faktor ekonomi, melainkan berakar kuat pada pengalaman masa kecil di bawah pola asuh authoritarian dan neglectful, yang membentuk persepsi traumatis terhadap komitmen jangka panjang. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana Generasi Z dengan latar belakang pengasuhan tersebut mempersepsikan kecemasan mereka terhadap pernikahan. Analisis tematik dilakukan terhadap data wawancara mendalam dari tiga subjek Generasi Z (2 perempuan dan 1 laki-laki). Hasil temuan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa kecemasan terhadap pernikahan merupakan konstruksi psikologis yang bersumber dari pengalaman relasional dalam keluarga inti. Pola asuh neglectful dan authoritarian mendistorsi skema kognitif subjek, sehingga pernikahan dipersepsikan sebagai relasi berisiko tinggi (high-risk relationship) yang mengancam stabilitas afektif. Dinamika ini terpetakan dalam tiga tema utama yang merefleksikan komponen kualitas pernikahan yaitu dyadic consensus (keselarasan dalam nilai dan Keputusan hidup), dyadic satisfaction (kepuasan dan kebahagiaan dalam hubungan), dan dyadic cohesion (ikatan emosional dan kebersamaan dalam hubungan). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa bagi Generasi Z penyintas pola asuh disfungsi, penundaan pernikahan adalah mekanisme pertahanan diri dari repetisi trauma di masa lalu.

Kata Kunci : generasi Z; marital distress; pola asuh otoriter; pola asuh neglectful; kecemasan pernikahan

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BACKGROUND

As time progresses, a portion of Generation Z - those born since 1997 who are now entering early adulthood (ages 18-29) - has begun to face various pivotal life decisions, including marriage. Although several studies indicate that Generation Z is starting to consider marriage, their perspectives on the institution show significant differences compared to previous generations. According to data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), approximately 1,220,900 children were married before the age of 18 in 2018 (BPS, 2025). Nevertheless, Generation Z generally tends to postpone marriage and wed later than previous generations (Grigoryeva & Khakimova, 2021). Statistical data support this shifting phenomenon. Based on records from BPS Indonesia (2021), the marriage rate in 2015 stood at 9.0 per 1,000 people; however, by 2022, this figure declined to 7,8 per 1,000. In addition to declining marriage rates, the age at first marriage is also increasing. BPS data shows that in 2020, the average age of marriage was 22.3 years for women and 25.5 years for men. Consistent with these findings, research by Bano et al., (2020) found that the average age for women marrying in Indonesia reached 23.42 years, indicating a trend toward marrying at a more mature age. Bano's perspective suggests that this delay occurs because an increasing number of individuals from Generation Z seek to achieve economic and career stability before entering marriage. They do not merely desire stable employment, but rather distinguished careers that offer personal fulfillment. For this generation, a career serves as a primary means of self-actualization and contributing to society. Furthermore, the digital era in which Generation Z was raised is defined by technology and information. Consequently, they have the capacity to learn and develop more rapidly; they possess the ability to access the internet and various online resources that offer extensive knowledge, and they are accustomed to leveraging technology for a wide range of purposes.

The research team conducted preliminary interviews with ten individuals from Generation Z to explore the psychological dynamics underlying this phenomenon. Seven out of the ten respondents expressed significant concerns regarding marriage. The primary anxieties identified are closely linked to the parenting styles they experienced, which play a substantial role in shaping their perspectives on long-term relationships. The quality of the parent-child relationship is instrumental in a child's social and emotional development, which ultimately influences their capacity to establish and maintain relationships in adulthood (Waters et al., 2019). Furthermore, adult attachment representations and the quality of romantic relationships are heavily influenced by childhood experiences. In connection with this, Xu et al., (2024) highlight that individuals who experience unhealthy parenting patterns often develop negative expectations regarding romantic relationships. Existing research on Generation Z's reluctance toward marriage has

predominantly focused on economic and sociocultural lenses; such as financial instability, shifting gender roles, and evolving societal norms; despite increasing scholarly attention to this issue. The psychological dimension, particularly how early parenting experiences shape marital anxiety in adulthood, remains underexplored. This gap is significant, as it overlooks the developmental and relational roots of marriage avoidance. Therefore, the present study employs a phenomenological approach to examine how parenting experiences contribute to the formation of marital anxiety among Generation Z individuals.

Two parenting styles central to this study are authoritarian and neglectful parenting. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by high levels of demand coupled with low responsiveness. This style prioritizes absolute obedience, where communication is predominantly one-way. Conversely, neglectful parenting - defined by Kim & Lee, (2025) as a style marked by a lack of attention and minimal involvement in a child's life - presents different challenges. Both parenting styles frequently result in difficulties maintaining romantic relationships and a decreased interest in developing intimacy with others (Raniyah et al., 2024). The impact of these parenting styles often culminates in a fear of marital distress or tension within a marriage. Miller (2021) state that marital distress involves dissatisfaction or disappointment within the marital relationship, which adversely affects an individual's life. According to (Oravec et al., (2020), this condition can lead to a decline in both relationship quality and the emotional well-being of the partners. Furthermore, a study by Fia (2020) suggests that marital distress manifests as a state of dissatisfaction and doubt in navigating a marital union, often linked to factors such as economic stability and individual mental health.

Generation Z exhibits an increased awareness of mental health issues and the detrimental impact of relationship conflict. This generation is notably more sensitive to a lack of well-being within relationships, which renders them more cautious regarding the inherent risks of marriage (Chen & Ha, 2023). Uncertainty concerning commitment, financial readiness, and high expectations for an 'ideal' marriage trigger significant anxiety (Amanda & Amanda, 2025). According to Kalin (2020), anxiety is characterized by persistent feelings of worry, fear, and a pervasive lack of comfort. Furthermore, (Leach & Butterworth, 2020) (2020) examines how social anxiety can impair an individual's self-esteem, which subsequently has implications for decision-making regarding marriage. This perspective aligns with Yunita (2020), who asserts that anxiety can significantly impact mental health and an individual's ultimate decision to wed.

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore in-depth how Generation Z individuals, particularly those raised under authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles, perceive and live through their anxiety regarding marital distress. A phenomenological approach was deliberately chosen over

other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory or narrative inquiry, as well as quantitative approaches, for several epistemological reasons. Unlike grounded theory, which aims to construct a theoretical framework from emerging patterns, phenomenology is uniquely suited to capturing the lived experience of a phenomenon as it is subjectively felt and interpreted by individuals. The depth of meaning, subtlety, and personal significance that people attach to their experiences of anxiety cannot be fully revealed by quantitative methods, even though they are useful for measuring prevalence and correlations. This is especially true when those experiences are deeply ingrained in early relational histories.

RESEARCH METHODS

Furthermore, phenomenology offers the best analytical lens since marital anxiety in Generation Z is a complex, meaning-laden psychological state affected by interpersonal and developmental settings rather than just a behavioral or quantifiable outcome. This method enables the researcher to set aside preconceived notions and pay close attention to how participants create and express the meaning of their marital worry, including non-verbal expressions observed during the data collection process, as an effort to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Building on this methodological rationale, this study aims to explore how Generation Z individuals, particularly those who grew up under authoritarian and neglectful parenting, experience and make sense of their anxiety around marriage. More specifically, it seeks to uncover the lived structures of meaning that shape how they perceive marital life, not as an abstract concept, but as something they actively worry about, anticipate, and interpret through the lens of their own relational histories.

What sets this study apart from prior work is threefold. First, it specifically centers Generation Z, a cohort whose relational landscape has been shaped by social media, shifting family structures, and heightened awareness of mental health. Despite this, they remain underexplored in the context of marital anxiety. Second, it brings together two parenting styles, authoritarian and neglectful, that have rarely been examined in tandem as joint predictors of marriage-related anxiety in early adulthood. Third, by deliberately choosing phenomenology over the quantitative designs that dominate this area of research, this study opens space for the kind of nuanced, experience-near understanding that surveys and scales simply cannot capture.

The implications of this work extend in two directions. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on how early relational experiences — particularly parenting dynamics — shape the psychological orientation of young adults toward intimate relationships. Practically, the findings are intended to inform the work of counselors, psychologists, and family educators who work with Generation Z clients navigating anxiety that is often misread as commitment

avoidance, when it is in fact something far more layered and historically rooted.

The research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, where participants are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The subjects consisted of three Generation Z individuals - defined as those born between 1997 and 2007 - who exhibit specific anxiety regarding marriage. This sample size is considered appropriate for phenomenological research, which prioritizes the depth of exploration into subjective experiences and meanings over the generalization of findings. Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles et al., (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data gathered from interviews and observations were reduced to verbatim transcripts and narrative descriptions, then displayed to identify relevant patterns and themes. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques and sources, achieved by comparing interview and observation results and incorporating perspectives from the three research subjects.

Tabel 1. Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Characteristic	MR (P1)	KY (P2)	OL (P3)
Initial	MR	KY	OL
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Date of Birth	June 2, 2003	May 6, 2007	May 6, 2007
Age	22 years old	18 years old	18 years old
Family Structure	Intact family (conflict-ridden)	Single-parent (mother)	Intact family (emotionally distant)
Parenting Style Experienced	Authoritarian	Neglectful	Neglectful
Relationship History	Not yet	In a relationship	In a relationship
Marriage Outlook	Cautious, fearful of repeating patterns	Independent, prefers child-free lifestyle	Desires security and family blessing
Primary Source of Anxiety	Trauma from parental conflict & violence	Economic instability & unstable family environment	Fear of replicating cold, uncommunicative parental relationship

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results provide a detailed account of the research findings derived from the data analysis process. For quantitative methods, this would typically commence with assumption testing followed by hypothesis testing. It is recommended that results be presented in tabular format accompanied by descriptive explanations. The analysis of this

study yielded three primary themes: 1) Dyadic Consensus (Alignment in Values and Life Decisions), 2) Dyadic Satisfaction (Gratification and Happiness within the Relationship), and 3) Dyadic Cohesion (Emotional Bonding and Togetherness within the Relationship).

Participant Information

The Generation Z participants in this study are currently in a crucial developmental stage - a period defined by the exploration of identity and values regarding love and marriage. The anxiety experienced by these participants does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it serves as a direct response to past family dynamics. Provided below is an overview of the participant identities (represented by initials) involved in this research:

1. MR

MR is a male participant currently transitioning from late adolescence to emerging adulthood. Based on the interview results, MR has a complex family background, particularly regarding his parents' relationship, which was characterized by conflict as well as verbal and physical violence. These experiences have shaped MR's cognitive and emotional frameworks concerning the concepts of romantic relationships and marriage. MR is described

"I am deeply afraid of that happening to me. I fear that I will repeat the same patterns with my partner." (P1, 140-141).

Furthermore, MR describes himself as an individual who finds it somewhat difficult to express affection directly. Instead, he prefers to demonstrate his feelings through concrete actions, such as giving gifts or fulfilling his partner's wishes. He also exhibits a reflective and cautious attitude toward the prospect of marriage.

2. KY

KY is a female teenager who is actively involved in various extracurricular activities, such as basketball, and resided with her mother and younger brother. Her family structure - which is no longer intact as her father does not live in the same household - has significantly shaped her perspectives on relationships, responsibility and the concept of marriage. KY maintains a modern outlook on adulthood and marriage. She expressed a strong desire to live independently, pursue a professional career, and even indicated a preference for a "child-free" lifestyle in the future. During her interview, she stated:

"From the beginning, I've had the idea that I don't want to have children. So we would both work and be

a wealthy couple on this Earth, conquering the world hahaha" (P2, 141-142).

Furthermore, KY revealed that her anxiety regarding marriage is partially driven by a fear of economic instability and her past experiences within an unstable family environment. Despite these concerns, she reported that she does not feel direct pressure from her parents regarding her choice of partner or the economic status of a potential partner. Instead, she prioritizes the freedom to determine her own life path.

3. OL

OL is a female teenager. During the interview, she described her family as relatively functional yet lacking in emotional intimacy. Having been in romantic relationships previously, she admitted to experiencing anxiety towards the concept of marriage due to a fear of replicating her parents' relationship patterns, which she perceives as cold and characterized by minimal communication. She explained that after the dissolution of her previous relationship, she required approximately one year to recover and "become herself again" before feeling courageous enough to enter a new relationship.

"Because, you know, it was for... I felt like it was to bring myself back. To really, you know, truly become myself again." (P3, 140-141).

Furthermore, OL noted that familial blessing is of supreme importance to her, even outweighing other concerns such as infidelity or a partner's past. She emphasized that the approval of her family remains a critical factor in her decision-making process regarding a long term commitment.

"Because, yeah, that might be the worst thing - not discussing it from the beginning... but other than that, perhaps [the worst case] would be if it turns out we don't have the blessing, even though the relationship has lasted a long time." (P3, 142-143).

The personal identity descriptions of the research participants indicate that while all three individuals come from diverse family backgrounds and relational experiences, they share a common thread: anxiety regarding marriage and long-term relationships. This anxiety is deeply rooted in their past family dynamics and their ongoing search for self-identity. Specifically, MR's perspectives are primarily driven by past traumas and internal reflection; KY's outlook is shaped by idealism and personal autonomy; whereas OL's views stem from emotional needs and a search for relational security.

This study identified several core themes and sub-themes that characterize the psychological landscape of the participants:

Theme 1: Dyadic Consensus (Alignment in Values and Life Decisions)

Based on the concept of Dyadic Consensus as proposed by Spanier (1976), marital distress can be understood through the degree of alignment between partners regarding fundamental values and pivotal decision-making within a marriage. This includes aspects such as financial management, the division of roles, and problem-solving strategies. Within these dimensions, the findings revealed that the subjects exhibit significant anxiety toward two primary indicators: economic hardship and divergent perspectives in problem solving.

1. Anxiety Regarding the Inability to Fulfill Family Economic Needs

Participants demonstrated intense anxiety regarding their potential inability to fulfill the role of primary breadwinner within a marriage. This fear is not merely anticipatory of the future; it is also deeply rooted in past experiences within their families of origin. The participants expressed the following:

“So, it’s like I’m afraid I won’t be able to provide for the family - what do you call it - when you live as a family, right? We have to think about our partners too.” (P1, 160-161).

The experience of witnessing his father’s struggles in distributing financial support among four children has reinforced MR’s belief that entering marriage without financial readiness will inevitably lead to hardship. Meanwhile, for KY, economic anxiety is more directed toward housing insecurity and the risk of being dependent on her partner’s family. KY stated:

“I am thinking more about housing, because I often find myself imagining what might happen if we were to still live with our in-laws.”

“Because at that time, I was just out walking and I saw baby stuff... Why is it all so expensive?” (P2, 162-163).

The experience of receiving unfavorable treatment from her father’s extended family has intensified KY’s anxiety regarding the future of marriage, ultimately fostering a reluctance to have children. Furthermore, participant OL also exhibits exceptionally high levels of economic anxiety, which she explicitly self-assessed at an 85% anxiety level:

“Emm... I think eighty-five?”

“It’s just that, you know, for sure [he has to be] established at least on the same level [as me].” (P3, 160-161).

In contrast to MR and KY, whose perspectives are predominantly influenced by the trauma of their families of origin, OL tends to exhibit a control

mechanism through meticulous planning and partner selection based on economic stability. This approach serves as a form of coping to manage her underlying anxiety.

2. Anxiety Regarding the Division of Household Roles

Anxiety concerning the division of household roles emerged most prominently in participant KY. She expressed a profound fear regarding the potential imbalance of roles in childcare and domestic responsibilities:

“If we have children, taking care of the kids.”

“I’m afraid that, for example, it might turn out that one person is working harder, while the other is just taking it easy.” (P2, 161-162).

This anxiety is directly rooted in childhood experiences where the participant’s parents struggled with the division of roles due to conflict between work demands and childcare. Such situations created an unstable relational experience, leading KY to perceive the division of roles as a potential source of latent conflict within a marriage. These findings indicate that role disharmony in the family of origin shapes a fear of future elation injustice, which represents an underdeveloped aspect of dyadic consensus.

3. Anxiety Regarding Divergent Perspectives and Relational Conflict

All three participants also exhibited anxiety regarding divergent perspectives, viewing them as potential sources of prolonged conflict. For MR, differences of opinion are perceived as a primary trigger for toxic relationship dynamics:

“Differences of opinion will lead to prolonged conflict... It could turn into a toxic relationship.” (P1, 163-164).

MR demonstrates a fear of emotionally imbalanced relationships resulting from one party constantly yielding or compromising. In contrast, for KY, anxiety regarding conflict is heavily influenced by her parents’ communication patterns, specifically their use of the silent treatment:

“It was scary... They wouldn’t speak to each other for several days.” (P2, 163-164).

“Yeah, but I didn’t understand how - all of a sudden - they were just fine again.” (P2, 163-164).

This communication pattern, which lacks conflict resolution, is rooted in a neglectful parenting style, in which KY’s mother tended to be emotionally cold, provided minimal validation, and frequently ignored the child’s emotional needs.

“My mom, since a long time ago... maybe she just never really clicked with me.”

“Everything I do is always considered wrong...”

This dynamic has led KY to develop a fear of unresolved conflict and emotional rejection within marital relationships. Meanwhile, for OL, relational conflict is reflected in her past romantic experiences, which were characterized by jealousy, excessive demands, and shifting relational patterns:

“He was furious... He felt like he wasn’t being prioritized.”

“He started making demands for things that, in my opinion, were completely unnecessary.”

This experience demonstrates that divergent perspectives are perceived as a threat to psychological freedom and personal boundaries, thereby intensifying anxiety toward long-term relationships.

Theme 2: Dyadic Satisfaction (Satisfaction and Happiness within the Relationship)

According to Spanier (1976), Dyadic Satisfaction refers to the overall level of satisfaction and happiness experienced by partners within a relationship. In this study, all three participants indicated that the fear of relational dissatisfaction, concerns regarding commitment and loyalty, and a lack of attentiveness from a partner serve as a primary source of anxiety in their interpretation of marriage.

1. Anxiety Regarding Commitment and Loyalty

The fear of infidelity emerged as the most dominant form of anxiety for participants MR and KY. MR experiences intense anxiety stemming from past experiences of betrayal in previous relationships. These experiences have formed a relational trauma that leads MR to interpret marriage as a union highly vulnerable to failures in commitment. MR stated that infidelity is intolerable and serves as a primary factor in his hesitation toward marriage. Similar findings emerged with KY, who demonstrated a strong rejection of infidelity. KY perceives infidelity as a serious threat to marriage, influenced by exposure to news regarding infidelity and experiences within her immediate social environment. Her intense emotional reaction to the issue of infidelity suggests that uncertainty regarding a partner’s loyalty is perceived as a primary source of fear in building a marital relationship.

2. Fear of Relational Dissatisfaction

Relational dissatisfaction is most clearly observed in OL’s past experiences. A relationship characterized by manipulation, excessive demands, and the

erosion of self-identity caused OL to experience high levels of psychological distress. Following the dissolution of the relationship, OL experienced significant self-recovery, indicating that the previous union was the primary source of her emotional dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, KY also displays anxiety regarding relational dissatisfaction, which is influenced by external factors, such as a partner’s career changes that could potentially disrupt relational stability. This suggests that for the participants, relationship satisfaction is heavily contingent upon both emotional and situational security.

3. Anxiety Regarding a Partner’s Lack of Attentiveness

Anxiety concerning a lack of attentiveness serves as a common thread connecting relational experiences with family upbringing patterns. MR demonstrates a high need for attention as compensation for an authoritarian parenting style characterized by minimal affection. Partner attentiveness is perceived as an essential factor that determines the sustainability of his commitment to marriage. For KY, this anxiety is heavily influenced by the experience of emotional neglect from her mother, who prioritized her younger sibling. This experience formed a profound need for affection in romantic relationships, as well as a fear of experiencing abandonment again after marriage. Meanwhile, OL exhibits a more reflective anxiety - specifically, the fear of repeating her parents’ communication patterns, which lacked expressions of affection. Furthermore, the experience of having a partner who provided attention only out of obligation has reinforced her fear of emotionally cold relationships.

Theme 3: Dyadic Cohesion (Emotional Bonding and Togetherness in the Relationship)

Among the three participants, this aspect emerges as a source of anxiety related to the need for emotional attachment, the possibility of diminishing togetherness and the fear of replicating the cold attachment patterns observed in their families of origin.

1. Anxiety Regarding the Frequency of Shared Activities

Participant MR demonstrates a very high level of anxiety concerning the frequency of shared activities. He interprets togetherness as a primary sign of affection; consequently, minor changes in daily interactions are perceived as emotional threats. MR even correlates a decrease in communication frequency with the assumption that he has committed a mistake. This is evident from his statement:

"If a friend suddenly stops talking to me... I immediately thought, 'What did I do wrong?' It consumes my mind to the point where I can hardly sleep." (P1, 166)

This anxiety indicates a high sensitivity toward changes in emotional closeness, which may disrupt the sense of security in future marital relationships. In contrast to MR, OL demonstrates flexibility regarding shared activities. For her, the intensity of togetherness is not an issue as long as there is clear communication. Nevertheless, she emphasizes that the regulation of frequency must involve a mutual agreement to ensure it does not compromise the feeling of being valued within the relationship.

The subject elaborates on the future division of time regarding her partner's friends, "It depends on the frequency... If it's just every now and then, it's not a problem." (P3, 167).

2. Anxiety Regarding Quality Time

KY exhibits the greatest level of anxiety within this indicator. She imagines that a child-free marriage might lead partners to focus excessively on their respective careers, thereby diminishing quality time. This potential void in shared activities is perceived as a threat to emotional attachment:

"If we don't have children... I don't know what would keep us together... maybe we'd just get more absorbed in our own work." (P2, 167).

This concern indicates that KY views the quality of togetherness as an essential element in forming emotional closeness between partners. Consequently, its absence has the potential to trigger relational instability. OL also considers quality time as a vital aspect that influences the sense of closeness and emotional intimacy. She acknowledges a slight anxiety regarding the possibility of these moments diminishing:

"It is very important to me... I'm somewhat anxious, but not to an extreme degree" (P3, 167).

"So, umm... yeah... it's just scary if that were to happen... like, I really don't want us to become... the type who are dominantly silent..." "Like... because of what I said earlier, because my dad isn't that type; for example, the cold type, somewhat stiff - not exactly stiff... but I mean, he's a man of few words, doesn't like to talk, and he's insensitive... and on top of that, like I said, he doesn't like going out." (P3, 168-169).

Meanwhile for MR, quality time serves as his primary love language. Shared activities, including simple conversations, are considered essential evidence of affection:

"I'm more about just wanting to talk... Essentially, doing the same thing together." (P1, 169).

In conclusion, all participants perceive quality time as a core element of a satisfying relationship with varying levels of anxiety.

3. Emotional Involvement as a Source of Relational Fear

Emotional involvement emerges as the most meaningful indicator among the three participants. Primarily because it is deeply rooted in their experiences of parental upbringing.

MR – Sensitivity Toward the Withdrawal of Affection

"If the love or affection starts to fade... I will definitely be worried." (P1, 170)

KY – Fear of Replicating Emotional Neglect

"And besides... It was always my younger sibling who was truly listened to."

"Mom rarely showed any expression." (P2, 169-170)

OL – Desire to Avoid Cold Communication Patterns within the Family

"I'm just scared if that were to happen... where they are dominantly silent."

"Like you-you me-me... It's just not for me" (P3, 170-171)

Theme 4: Affectional Expression (Expressions of Love and Affection in the Relationship)

Among the three participants, this aspect emerges as a vital indicator in their interpretation of a secure and satisfying relationship. However, past experiences within their families of origin - specifically authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles - have shaped a profound anxiety regarding the potential loss of affection, as well as the possible emergence of domestic violence.

1. Fear of Domestic Violence Participant 1-MR

"I am afraid of repeating the same things to my partner.."

"My father did those things to my mother... I am terrified that it might happen within me as well." (P1, 171-172)

Participant 2-KY

"It feels like all men are the same, that they all like to hit."

"I can't be hit." (P2, 170-171)

2. Anxiety Regarding the Diminishing Initiative of Affection

Participant 1-MR

“I feel like I’m not being cared for if it’s like that.”
 “Important. It is very important.” (P1, 170-171)

Participant 2 - KY

“In my opinion, it’s important... I tend to overthink a lot if there’s a sudden change.”

“I worry... it might be disruptive.” (P2, 173-174)

Participant 3 - OL

“A partner might forgive, but in reality, they still hold a grudge...”

“So... their expression of affection diminishes as a result.”

3. Anxiety Regarding the Lack of Emotional Openness

Participant 2 – KY

“It’s very important... If someone is angry but stays silent... It’s going to explode eventually.” (P2, 176)

Participant 3 - OL

“It’s more like a Cold War... where no one speaks.”

“A minute of debate, followed by the silent treatment.” (P3, 174-175)

Table 2. Thema 1 Dyadic Consensus (Alignment of values and shared life decisions)

Sub-Thema 1.1 Anxiety over economic insufficiency	
MR (P1)	Fears being unable to provide for a future family; this anxiety is rooted in childhood exposure to financial conflict between his parents.
KY (P2)	Deeply worried about concrete costs of marriage (childcare, housing, in- laws obligations); notably high perceived anxiety.
OL (P3)	Self-reported economic anxiety at approximately 85%; views the financial demands of married life as overwhelming and difficult to meet.
Sub-Thema 1.2 Anxiety over household role division	
MR (P1)	Not explicitly identified
KY (P2)	Fears imbalance in domestic responsibilities (one partner bears disproportionate workload); pattern observed in her parents.
OL (P3)	Not explicitly identified
Sub-Thema 1.3 Anxiety over divergent views and relational conflict	
MR (P1)	Believes that unresolved differences can escalate into prolonged, toxic conflict; fears that disagreements within a marriage may mirror the destructive patterns he witnessed growing up.
KY (P2)	Her parents' use of silent treatment for days at a time left a lasting negative impression; she fears that the same avoidant conflict style could surface in her own marriage.
OL (P3)	Has experienced unreasonable demands from a previous partner, which reinforced her fear that relational conflict in marriage could become prolonged and emotionally draining.

Table 3. Thema 2 Dyadic Satisfaction — Happiness and fulfillment within the relationship

Sub-Thema 2.1 Anxiety over commitment and fidelity	
MR (P1)	Carries unresolved trauma from a past betrayal, which has made infidelity his single greatest fear in marriage. He remains hypervigilant about a partner's loyalty and describes this as his primary reason for hesitating to commit.
KY (P2)	Has developed a firm, non-negotiable rejection of infidelity, shaped largely by her social environment where unfaithfulness was normalized. She is unwilling to enter a marriage she perceives as emotionally unsafe.
OL (P3)	Not explicitly identified
Sub-Thema 2.2 Fear of relational dissatisfaction	
MR (P1)	Not explicitly identified
KY (P2)	Worries that unexpected changes, such as a partner shifting careers; could undermine the relational stability she needs to feel satisfied and secure within a marriage.
OL (P3)	A past partner's manipulation and excessive demands gradually eroded her sense of self; she fears that the same dynamic in marriage could compromise both her identity and her overall contentment.
Sub-Thema 2.3 Anxiety over a partner's lack of attentiveness	
MR (P1)	Has an intense need for a partner's attention, which he views as a direct expression of love. This need appears to function as a compensatory response to the emotional unavailability of his authoritarian upbringing.

KY (P2)	Carries a deep-seated fear of abandonment, rooted in feeling sidelined by her parents in favor of a sibling. She worries this fear of being overlooked will resurface in marriage if a partner becomes inattentive.
OL (P3)	Fears replicating her parents' emotionally cold and unresponsive dynamic; strongly desires a partner who is warm, present, and emotionally available in everyday life.

Table 4. Thema 3 Dyadic Cohesion — Emotional togetherness and shared engagement in the relationship

Sub-Thema 3.1 Anxiety over the frequency of shared activities

MR (P1)	Highly sensitive to any reduction in contact or shared activity; when a close friend suddenly stops initiating interaction, he immediately questions what he may have done wrong and finds it difficult to sleep
KY (P2)	Not explicitly identified
OL (P3)	Values mutual agreement on the frequency of shared activities rather than having one partner dictate the terms. She wants togetherness to feel voluntary and balanced, not obligatory or one-sided.

Sub-Thema 3.2 Anxiety over quality time together

MR (P1)	Longs for simple, meaningful moments with a future spouse; talking, doing everyday things side by side. He fears that without intentional connection, a marriage can easily drift into emotional emptiness.
KY (P2)	Worries that a child-free lifestyle combined with demanding careers could leave a marriage without any meaningful relational "glue," causing partners to become emotionally distant strangers over time.
OL (P3)	Fears becoming as emotionally withdrawn as her father, who rarely engaged in conversation at home. She is determined to build a marriage defined by active communication and genuine presence.

Sub-Thema 3.3 Emotional involvement as a source of relational fear

MR (P1)	<i>"If the love or affection starts to fade, I will definitely be worried."</i> His deep emotional investment in a relationship makes him acutely vulnerable to any perceived loss of warmth or closeness.
KY (P2)	Growing up with a mother who rarely expressed emotion and parents who consistently prioritized her sibling left her with an internalized fear that emotional investment will inevitably lead to being overlooked or dismissed.
OL (P3)	Describes her parents' relationship as a persistent "cold war" a household where silence replaced communication. She is deeply afraid of recreating this emotional distance in her own future marriage.

Table 5. Thema 4 Affectional Expression - Demonstrations of love and emotional affection within the relationship

Sub-Thema 4.1 Fear of domestic violence

MR (P1)	<i>"My father did those things to my mother and I am terrified that it might be inside me too."</i> He fears that witnessing paternal violence may have conditioned him to become a perpetrator, despite his conscious rejection of it.
KY (P2)	<i>"It feels like all men are the same. I cannot be hit."</i> Her generalized distrust of men as potential abusers stems from repeated exposure to violence in her social environment rather than direct family experience.
OL (P3)	Not explicitly identified

Sub-Thema 4.2 Anxiety over diminishing affection

MR (P1)	<i>"Not being cared for is deeply painful to me. It matters enormously."</i> He requires consistent, active expressions of care from a partner and views any reduction in affection as a significant relational warning sign.
KY (P2)	<i>"I start overthinking the moment there is a sudden shift in how my partner acts."</i> Even minor changes in a partner's affective behavior trigger immediate worry, suggesting a heightened sensitivity to perceived emotional withdrawal.
OL (P3)	Experienced a partner who claimed to forgive but continued to harbor resentment, causing affection to erode gradually over time. She fears this slow emotional withdrawal could quietly hollow out a marriage from within.

Sub-Thema 4.3 Anxiety over a partner's emotional non-disclosure

MR (P1)	Not explicitly identified
KY (P2)	<i>"They get angry but say nothing; and eventually, it all explodes."</i> She fears being in a relationship where a partner suppresses their emotions rather than addressing them openly, leaving conflict to fester beneath the surface.
OL (P3)	<i>"One minute of argument; and then days of silence."</i> Having been subjected to prolonged silent treatment by a previous partner, she is acutely afraid of this pattern recurring within marriage.

Table 6. Summary: Key Patterns in Similarities and Differences

Shared Patterns Across Participants	Differentiating Patterns Between Participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic anxiety (1.1) was present across all three participants as a tangible obstacle to marriage, though the intensity and underlying cause differed from person to person. Fear of conflict and divergent views (1.3) was a common concern, informed by each participant's observation of or direct experience with destructive conflict in their family of origin. Need for a partner's attentiveness (2.3) was notably high across all participants functioning as a compensatory response to the affective deprivation experienced under both authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles. Quality time together (3.2) was consistently viewed as an essential condition for maintaining relational cohesion after marriage, not merely a preference. Fear of fading emotional closeness (3.3) was shared by all three, rooted in early experiences of emotional unavailability within their respective families of origin. Anxiety over diminishing affection (4.2) appeared across all participants as a shared indicator of relational decline — closely tied to childhood experiences of emotional insufficiency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household role division (1.2) was unique to KY (P2), shaped by direct observation of her parents' unequal domestic arrangement; a concern absent from both other participants' narratives. Perspectives on domestic violence (4.1) were diametrically opposed: P1 fears becoming a perpetrator (through identification with a violent father), while P2 fears becoming a victim (shaped by her social environment). P3 expressed no related concern. Emotional non-disclosure anxiety (4.3) emerged only in P2 and P3, not in P1 potentially reflecting the different relational consequences of authoritarian parenting (P1) versus neglectful parenting (P2 and P3). Commitment and fidelity concerns (2.1) were prominent in P1 and P2 but absent in P3, suggesting that exposure to infidelity whether personal or environmental is a key differentiating factor. Gender appears to play a meaningful role: P1 (male) is more preoccupied with his capacity as a provider and his potential to cause harm, while P2 and P3 (female) are more focused on protecting their emotional safety and relational quality within marriage.

Exposure to dysfunctional parenting, whether authoritarian (P1) or neglectful (P2 and P3), can be identified as the common cause of the marital anxiety reported by all three subjects. Although insecure attachment patterns are ultimately produced by both parenting approaches, each person will experience them differently. P1 exhibits traits more typical of an anxious-preoccupied attachment style, which is characterized by an increased need for intimacy, assurance, and approval. In contrast, P2 and P3 have a tendency toward a fearful-avoidant style, which means they both crave connection and are afraid of the vulnerability it requires. Despite these variations, the most noticeable commonality is a strong yearning for love, care, and emotional unity in marriage—basically, a wish to make up for what was lacking as a child. The biggest difference, however, is how each participant views gender roles, power, and safety in a close relationship: P1 struggles with the fear of doing harm, whereas P2 and P3 struggle with the fear of being harmed. This dichotomy reflects broader social narratives about masculinity and femininity in the context of marriage as well as individual relational histories.

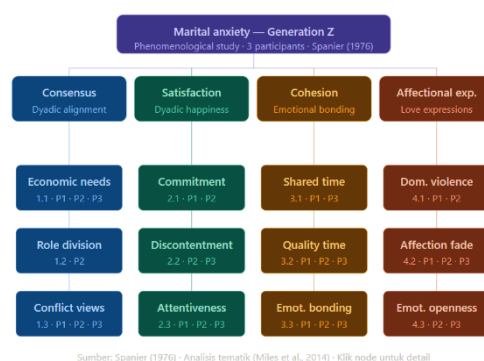


Figure 1. Nvivo Coding Structure- Thematic Node Tree Marital Anxiety in Generation Z

Based on the figure above, the 4 main themes (nodes) according to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976):
 Theme 1: Dyadic Consensus - 3 sub-node, 15 referensi
 Theme 2: Dyadic Satisfaction - 3 sub-node, 13 referensi
 Theme 3: Dyadic Cohesion - 3 sub-node, 12 referensi
 Theme 4: Affectional Expression - 3 sub-node, 12 referensi

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that the fear of marriage among the three participants is primarily related to the dynamics of marital distress as outlined by Spanier (1976) which encompasses four dimensions: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfactions, dyadic cohesion, and affectional expression. These various forms of anxiety do not exist in isolation; rather, they are deeply influenced by family-of-origin experiences and the parenting style encountered since childhood.

This findings is consistent with family psychology models emphasizing intergenerational transmission, which is the tendency for children to carry relational patterns, schemas, and fears from their original family into their adult relationships (Poffenberger et al., 2025; Sawyer et al., 2025). Participants raised under authoritarian and neglectful parenting style exhibited intense anxiety regarding conflict, instability, and relational violence. This aligns the family psychology literature indicating that harsh and unresponsive caregiving increases the risk of developing negative beliefs towards intimate relationships, such as the fear of being undervalued, abandoned, or victimized (Grigoryeva & Khakimova, 2021; Purba, Kastanya, Tju, et al., 2025). In the cases of MR and KY, direct experiences of physical violence led them to perceive marriage as an inherently unsafe space. This corroborates findings suggesting that exposure to parental violence can heighten expectancy bias, where individuals anticipate a recurrence of such violence in their adult relationships (Purba, Kastanya, Monika, et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). Meanwhile, participant OL, who grew up in an environment characterized by a deficit of communication and affection, demonstrated significant apprehension towards cold and emotionally distant relations (Permana et al., 2021; Sawyer et al., 2025). Overall, the findings suggest that Generation Z's fears of marriage are rooted more in family relational memories, rather than simply individual preferences or the influence of popular culture.

Furthermore, all participants exhibit anxiety patterns consistent with the characteristics of anxious attachment and fearful-avoidant attachment. In participants MR and KY, a high sensitivity to changes in the partner's behavior was observed. All participants displayed indicators of excessive worry regarding the possibility of betrayal or loss of affection, fear of conflict due to the dread of abandonment or being unloved, and difficulty trusting the stability of long-term relationships. According to Kim & Lee (2025) inconsistent, harsh, or unresponsive parenting experiences can produce internal working models that perceive relationships as insecure. This is clearly visible in the cases of the participants. MR experienced the trauma of violence, resulting in a fear of becoming a perpetrator and a fear of losing control in a relationship. The second participant, KY, experienced a neglectful parenting style, resulting in a strong need for openness due to a fear of being ignored. The third participant, OL, came from a family with minimal affection, leading to a fear of cold and less intimate relationships. The combination of these participants reflects attachment

patterns that influence how individuals assess risk in marriage. These findings reinforce the theory that attachment history is a strong predictor of anxiety in adult relationships (Fadesti, 2025; Sagone et al., 2023).

The dyadic consensus dimension emerged as the primary source of anxiety for the participants, particularly concerning economic instability, the division of roles, and differences of opinion. Participants MR and KY expressed deep-seated anxiety regarding their ability to fulfill familial needs. These concerns are rooted in childhood experiences within families characterized by economic hardship and role conflict. Literature suggests that childhood experiences involving financial pressure can create prolonged economic anxiety, which significantly impacts an individual's readiness to enter long-term commitments such as marriage (Ajra et al., 2025; Bano et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, participant OL emphasized the importance of economic balance within a partnership to prevent conflict. This perspective aligns with egalitarian marriage theory, which identifies equality as a key predictor of relational health (McErlean, 2025; Robinson et al., 2025). Furthermore, the unresolved conflicts and differences of opinion witnessed by all three subjects while growing up in their respective families have led them to perceive domestic conflict as a threat. Previous research indicates that younger generations raised in high-conflict households tend to develop conflict avoidance patterns and experience higher levels of commitment-related anxiety (Kalamsari & Ginanjar, 2023).

The dyadic satisfaction dimension is prominent through the subjects' fears of betrayal, lack of attention, and relationship dissatisfaction. Subject MR, for instance, carries relational trauma resulting from past infidelity. According to Fung, Hong et al. (2023) experiences of relationship betrayal can induce hypervigilance and heightened sensitivity toward signs of rejection in subsequent relationships. For subjects KY and OL, the fear regarding a partner's lack of attention is rooted in neglectful parenting patterns, where they seldom received emotional validation from their parents. This finding aligns with research indicating that individuals with experiences of emotional neglect possess a greater need for affection from their partners and are more vulnerable to relational dissatisfaction if these needs remain unmet (Halmos, et al., 2022; Purba, Kastanya, & Mahardika, Agustine, 2025).

Regarding Dyadic Cohesion and vulnerability to the Loss of emotional intimacy, all three subjects emphasized the importance of emotional closeness, quality time, and shared activities with a partner as the foundation of relational integrity. Their concerns regarding the diminishing of emotional intimacy reflect a high need for emotional availability, which research identifies as a critical predictor of long-term relationship health (Hoang et al., 2022; Olson, et al., 2020). Subject KY, having witnessed poor communication patterns within their family, demonstrated high anxiety toward emotional disconnection in marriage. This aligns with research stating that children from families with minimal communication often develop a heightened sensitivity to

emotional withdrawal (Harris et al., 2024; Mirza et al., 2022; Yanti, Entin et al., 2022).

The discussion of the analysis results for this research continues with Affectional Expression and anxiety regarding violence and the absence of expressions of love. This aspect reveals that all three subjects carry deep-seated concerns regarding the reduction of affection, a lack of emotional openness, and the potential for domestic violence. Subjects MR and KY demonstrated a specific fear of domestic violence rooted in their personal experiences with parental physical abuse. This is consistent with research indicating that childhood exposure to violence can increase fear of aggression in adult relationships (Li et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2025; Robinson et al., 2025). Subject OY, who received minimal verbal affection at home, expressed anxiety regarding the potential loss of expressions of love in marriage. Individuals who rarely receive expressions of affection in childhood tend to develop affection deprivation sensitivity, characterized by high anxiety when signs of a partner's affection diminish (Lestari & Huwae, 2023; Matud et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2024).

Overall, authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles serve as the root of various forms of anxiety related to marital distress among the three subjects. Childhood experiences involving violence, emotional neglect, familial economic instability, and parental conflict have shaped their perception of marriage as a risk-prone institution. All four dimensions of dyadic adjustment, consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression consistently exhibit manifestations of anxiety across the subjects, despite nuances in their individual experiences. Consequently, the relational anxiety experienced by the subjects can be understood as a form of inherited relational trauma rather than a mere individual response.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study underscore that the existential anxiety of Generation Z toward the institution of marriage is not merely an individual phenomenon, but rather a psychological construct stemming from primary relational experiences within the family. The findings indicate that neglectful and authoritarian parenting styles significantly distort the subjects' cognitive schemas, leading them to perceive marriage as a high-risk relationship characterized by conflict and emotional insecurity. The dynamics of marital distress within this generation are identified as a threat to affective stability and identity integrity, rooted in childhood relational trauma — including exposure to violence and a lack of supportive communication within the family. Theoretically, this phenomenon manifests as insecure attachment patterns that influence individual projections when building intimate relationships during the emerging adulthood phase, as reflected across all four dimensions of dyadic adjustment: consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression

In light of these findings, several practical and scholarly implications are proposed. This study recommends the importance of preventive approaches and psychological interventions that focus on understanding attachment history and healing relational wounds prior to marriage. Premarital counseling programs, intimate relationship psychoeducation, and trauma- and attachment-based interventions are highly relevant in assisting Generation Z individuals to build more secure, healthy, and adaptive relationships. Furthermore, these findings emphasize the need to increase awareness among parents and educators regarding the long-term impact of parenting styles on a child's relational readiness in adulthood. This study acknowledges its limitations, including its small sample size and singular cultural context, which restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore suggested to involve a broader number of participants and explore the dynamics of marital distress within different cultural contexts and family structures, in order to enrich a more comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's intimate relationships.

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