

Negotiating Love Languages in Digital Romantic Relationships: A Phenomenological Study of Generation Z Couples in Yogyakarta

Meilinda Papuanita Uly*

Department of Communication, Universitas Amikom Yogyakarta,
Condong Catur, Depok, Sleman, Yogyakarta, 55283, Indonesia
meilindaully@students.amikom.ac.id

Devi Wening Astari

Department of Communication, Universitas Amikom Yogyakarta,
Condong Catur, Depok, Sleman, Yogyakarta, 55283, Indonesia
deviweningastari@amikom.ac.id

Abstract

Forming a romantic relationship at a young age is a complex process, requiring the search for personal meaning, emotional adjustment, and customized communication techniques. This research examines the dynamics of love language communication through social media and the socio-cultural aspects of expressing affection among Generation Z in Yogyakarta. The research employed a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological Moustakas perspective. Data were collected via in-depth interviews with four men and seven women, Gen Z, a total of 11 informants who were selected using snowball sampling methods. The results suggest that quality time and acts of service are the two most prevalent forms of love language, as they are seen as effective in creating emotional closeness and showcasing genuine care. This preference for limited physical touch in public spaces is consistent with Yogyakarta's cultural values, which emphasize politeness. Research suggests that platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram contribute to romantic expectations and the use of love language, though they are not the key players in relationship dynamics. Establishing open communication is crucial for reconciling disparities in love preferences and sustaining long-term relationships amidst cultural and technological advancements.

Keywords: Culture; Generation Z, Love Language, Romantic Relationship, Social Media

1. Introduction

Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is a generation that grew up amidst the rapid development of digital technology (Pujiono & Farida, 2022). Gen Z is familiar with the internet, social media, and instant communication, which shapes how they interact and communicate, including expressing emotions and affection. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z tends to be more open (Khobibah et al., 2023) in discussing personal issues, including romantic relationships, but still faces challenges in building deep emotional closeness (Nurlaila et al., 2024; Ridho, 2024; Zis et al., 2021). In Yogyakarta, known as a center of education and culture, Gen Z experiences a blend of traditional Javanese values, such as harmony and politeness, with the influence of digital modernization that influences their social interactions. As one of the top student cities (Yulianti, 2024), social interactions among young people take place within a diverse set of values, ranging from traditional norms upheld within families to the freedom of expression supported by urban life and academic communities (Jelita et al., 2025).

Gen Z is known as digital natives, whose daily activities are largely inextricably linked to social media. This intensity of use has implications for how Gen Z builds and expresses romantic relationships. In line with findings from Rameitasari's (2024) research, social media serves not only as a means of entertainment but also to convey affection, demonstrate standards for ideal partners, and even express love language in digital interactions (Rameitasari et al., 2025). Through TikTok, Gen Z is exposed to content that colors their perspective on romantic relationships. At the same time, WhatsApp is used for more private and in-depth conversations with partners (Ramadhan et al., 2024).

Romantic relationships are a form of social interaction involving emotional attachment, intimacy, and commitment between two individuals (Azzahra et al., 2024; Jelita et al., 2025; Lestari & Kusuma, 2019; Purnamasari, 2021; Zahra & Rakhmad, 2022). These relationships are crucial to human social development, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood, when individuals begin to explore their identities, emotional preferences, and communication patterns in building bonds with their partners. Baron & Byrne (2000) state that these relationships are generally characterized by physical intimacy, distinguishing them from close friendships. Furthermore, romantic relationships are voluntary and involve expressions of affection, such as attention and acceptance (Purnamasari, 2021).

Romantic relationships are changing with the advancement of technology and digitalization (Azzahra et al., 2024; Jelita et al., 2025;

Lestari & Kusuma, 2019; Purnamasari, 2021; Zahra & Rakhmad, 2022). While previously romantic relationships relied heavily on direct interaction and face-to-face communication, social media and digital technology now play a significant role in shaping relationship dynamics. Social media, instant messaging apps, and video-based platforms have transformed how individuals express and receive affection in their relationships. Unfortunately, not all romantic relationships are healthy and harmonious; some have become toxic. Examples include the acid attack on a female student in Yogyakarta (Putri, 2024), spousal abuse in Sleman (Kepolisian Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2024), illegal abortions and fetal abandonment in Sleman (Ibrahim, 2024), and a murder case in Bantul (Polres Bantul, 2025).

Romantic relationships for Gen Z are mediated by digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, which facilitate communication and shape relational expectations (Isaf, 2020). One emerging phenomenon is the TikTok trend “spill kelakuan cowo” (men’s behavior), which highlights men’s abusive communication styles towards their partners. These videos demonstrate how verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, and domination are often normalized in young people’s online conversations. These cases and phenomena demonstrate that in some situations, romantic relationships can develop into harmful relationships, where the affection that should be the foundation of a relationship is replaced by violence, control, and inequality.

Digital media also enables the exchange of concepts regarding love languages among Gen Z. The concept of love languages, introduced by Gary Chapman (1992), encompasses five primary forms: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, physical touch, and quality time. In the digital context, these expressions have transformed quite rapidly. For example, words of affirmation can be expressed through text messages or emojis, while quality time is possible via video calls (Suriyah & Septiarly, 2016). Previous research has shown that Gen Z tends to use social media to build intimacy, which can create tensions such as unrealistic relationship idealization (Taber et al., 2023). Healthy relationships contribute to increased psychological well-being and emotional satisfaction, while unhealthy relationships can lead to anxiety, psychological stress, depression, and even romantic violence (Husin Agil & Khadijah, 2025). Conflict in romantic relationships can be explained through the Relational Dialectics Theory by Leslie Baxter & Montgomery (1996) (Morissan, 2013; Muniruddin, 2019; Ruliana & Lestari, 2019), which describes interpersonal relationships as a tug-of-war between conflicting needs, such as closeness and freedom, openness and privacy,

and stability and change. This theory seeks to understand the dynamics and various challenges in a relationship, both in romantic and marital relationships. Thus, it can provide a framework for understanding tensions in romantic relationships, where relationships are seen as a process of negotiation between dialectics such as connectedness-separateness, certainty-uncertainty, and openness-closedness (Fox et al., 2014; Nashrulloh, 2019). In Gen Z romantic relationships, digitalization amplifies dialectics such as social media promoting openness through public posts and fostering closeness due to privacy concerns (Putra et al., 2024; Rubinsky et al., 2022). As Yi Wen (2024) explains in *Love in the Digital Age*, digital technology is a key mediator in romantic relationships, providing a space for fast, instant, and interactive interactions (Wen, 2024). This confirms that digitalization has expanded how humans communicate and introduced new dimensions to the expression of affection (Azzahra et al., 2024; Lestari & Kusuma, 2019).

Although studies such as Azzahra et al. (2024) have explored love languages among young Indonesians, empirical research focusing on the phenomenological context of Yogyakarta with its blend of local and digital cultures remains limited. This gap is crucial because Yogyakarta represents an urban environment where traditional norms meet global trends, potentially creating unique dynamics in negotiating love languages (Surijah & Kirana, 2020). Previous research, such as that conducted by Bahtiar et al. (2023), emphasizes the role of interpersonal communication in adapting love languages to achieve relational harmony. However, the study focused more on marriage than pre-marital romantic relationships among Gen Z. Similarly, Jelita et al. (2025) found that understanding love languages increases emotional satisfaction, but less discussed digital influence in a specific cultural context, such as Yogyakarta. Thus, this study aims to explore Gen Z couples in Yogyakarta negotiating love languages in their romantic relationships in the digital era. With the research question *How do Gen Z couples in Yogyakarta interpret and apply love languages through digital media with socio-cultural factors in the dynamics?* Thus, this study can contribute by exploring the lived experiences of Gen Z, revealing how technology and social norms shape the negotiation of love languages.

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, specifically the transcendental phenomenology variant of Moustakas (2011), which emphasizes bracketing the researcher's preconceptions to focus on the essence of participants' subjective experiences (Cresswell &

Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 2011). This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the deeper meaning of love languages in romantic relationships, where individual experiences of the phenomenon are unique and contextual (Surijah et al., 2021). Thus, this method allows for understanding how Gen Z in Yogyakarta experiences and negotiates love languages amidst digital and cultural influences.

The object of the study was the dynamics of love languages in Gen Z romantic relationships. At the same time, the subjects were four couples (eight informants) and three additional informants, a total of eleven informants, with gender diversity selected: four men and seven women. The use of a small sample size in this study adhered to the principle of data saturation in phenomenology, where interviews were stopped after recurring themes emerged after the ninth participant (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Informants were selected via WhatsApp through snowball sampling. The sample was selected through purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) experiencing love language negotiation in their relationship, (2) having been in a romantic relationship for at least two years, (3) residing in Yogyakarta for at least two years, (4) being a student or worker, (5) having a self-reported love language preference, and (6) being aged 18-25.

Data were collected through interviews, literature reviews, and documentation such as screenshots of digital interactions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone with the informants' consent. All interviews were recorded with the informants' permission to ensure data accuracy, lasting approximately 1 to 2 hours. This study adhered to ethical principles by obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality by referring to informants by their initials. Furthermore, literature reviews were used to strengthen the analysis by referring to previous research, books, and relevant academic journals on love language, romantic relationships, and interpersonal communication in the Gen Z context. The data analysis process was conducted using the principles of Moustakas' phenomenology.

The first step was the epoche stage, where researchers recorded and set aside personal prejudices about love languages and digital relationships to focus on the raw data. The second step was phenomenological reduction, where transcripts were reread to identify significant statements from each participant, without passing judgment. The third step was clustering into themes, which grouped statements into emergent themes such as digital mediation and cultural influences. Next, a textural description was conducted, describing "what" the participants experienced, such as how video calls perceived quality time. The next step was structural description,

which explained “how” the experience occurred. The final step was synthesis of essence, which involved creating an essential description of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sinfield et al., 2023).

To ensure the validity of the data in this study, several validation techniques were used, namely source triangulation, member checking, and audit trails (Creswell, 2016). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various informants to determine the consistency of answers and linking them to findings from the literature review, resulting in more objective and in-depth research results. Member checking was conducted by asking informants to review their interviews to ensure the researcher’s interpretations aligned with the intended experience. Furthermore, the study employed an audit trail, which systematically recorded the entire data collection and analysis process for transparency and traceability.

The stages of this research are shown in Figure 1, which illustrates a comprehensive research flowchart. The study is divided into six phases: problem identification, literature review, method selection, field data collection, data analysis in accordance with the phenomenological stages of Moustakas, data validation, and finally, conclusions regarding the essence of the love language of Generation Z in Yogyakarta.



Figure 1. Research flowchart

3. Results

The couples who served as informants were active students studying at Yogyakarta State University, Atma Jaya University, Sanata Dharma University, Guna Bangsa Health College, and Amikom University, while several others were employed. Interviews revealed that social media plays a varied role in shaping expectations about love languages.

3.1. Digital Media in the Expression of Love Language

Seven of the 11 informants admitted that social media played a role in their romantic lives. Each informant had their own interpretation of the

role of digital media. Some acknowledged that exposure to content on social media, such as TikTok or Instagram, contributes to forming expectations and idealizations of relationships.

Data from these informants reveal the influence of social media on the expression and expectations of love languages, detailed in a list of informants including identities such as CU, FH, L, I, GS, NS, D, R, Y, Z, and N.

Table 1 compares findings by category, comparing informants' dominant love languages, acts of affection, media use, and the influence on idealization and selection of love languages in relationships. This table summarizes data from informants such as CU, with a dominant love language of quality time, and media used is WhatsApp; meanwhile, L, with physical touch, media used is Instagram & TikTok, and others, showing how social media often presents idealized standards such as giving gifts or consistent compliments, which are then adopted into genuine relationships.

Table 1. Comparison based on categories between respondents

Informant	Dominant Love Language	Media Used	Meaning/Reason for Selection
CU	Acts of Service	WhatsApp	Influences expectations and idealization of love language in her relationship
FH	Quality Time	Unspecific	Romantic relationships were more determined by the daily personal dynamics than by the standards presented by social media
L	Physical Touch	Instagram & TikTok	TikTok and Instagram provide direct share buttons, while WhatsApp still requires users to copy links first
I	Physical Touch	Instagram & TikTok	Although social media presented various representations of love languages, this did not necessarily change how he built relationships
GS	Quality Time	Instagram	As a reference in relationships, hoping her partners will imitate the same
NS	Quality Time	Unspecific	Romantic relationships were more determined by the daily personal dynamics than by the standards presented by social media

Informant	Dominant Love Language	Media Used	Meaning/Reason for Selection
D	Receiving Gifts	Unspecific	Social media often displays standards or idealized images of love expressions
R	Receiving Gifts	Unspecific	Social media often displays standards or idealized images of love expressions
Y	Quality Time & Acts of Service	Unspecific	Although social media presented various representations of love languages, this did not necessarily change how they built relationships
Z	Quality Time, Acts of Service, Physical Touch	Unspecific	Romantic relationships were more determined by the daily personal dynamics than by the standards presented by social media
N	Words of Affirmation	Instagram & TikTok	Helped her realize the importance of love languages in maintaining relationships

Informant CU highlighted how posts about love languages on social media can shape idealized images of expected affection. She mentioned that simple things, such as a partner opening the car door or going to the mall, emerged as expectation forms after she was exposed to content on social media.

“Social media has an influence, in my opinion, because when I read or see someone’s post about how love language works in a relationship, for example, helping open a mall door or a car door, it influences my expectations and idealization of love language in my relationship.” (Interview with CU, a student at Guna Bangsa Health College, Yogyakarta, March 12, 2025, at 9:00 a.m. WIB)

Informants I, D, and R expressed a similar sentiment. According to both, social media often displays standards or idealized images of love expressions, such as giving flowers on birthdays or consistently giving compliments. Repeated exposure to content expressing love leads them to form certain perceptions of the ideal way to show affection. Over time, forms of expression initially seen only on TikTok or Instagram are adapted into relationships as part of their love language. Meanwhile, informan GS is more actively using Instagram as a reference in relationships, sending videos of men being more expressive in responding to their partners’ stories, hoping their partners will imitate the same. Conversely, platforms like WhatsApp have become more personal spaces, where love language is

expressed through text messages, using various emojis. This shows that social media acts as a reference source and becomes a medium for implementing affection in Gen Z's romantic relationships.

Informants FH, NS, and Z held different views. They felt that social media did not significantly influence how they expressed affection. According to all three, romantic relationships were more determined by the daily personal dynamics than by the standards presented by social media. Informants I and Y also stated that although social media presented various representations of love languages, this did not necessarily change how they built relationships. However, informant N acknowledged that social media helped her realize the importance of love languages in maintaining relationships. Informants L and N positioned themselves in a more balanced position. They considered social media not dominant but useful in providing insight into love languages. Both frequently use Instagram to share content, particularly through the reels feature. They chose this platform for practicality, as TikTok and Instagram provide direct share buttons, while WhatsApp still requires users to copy links first. This simple practice demonstrates that social media is not just a space for entertainment, but has become a means of indirect communication that helps shape the interaction patterns of young couples.

In the context of digital interaction, emojis have become one of the most common symbols of affection among Gen Z couples. Informants L and I often described their use of emojis such as ❤️ (heart), 😘 (kiss), 😍 (admiration), 😊 (adoration), and 🤗 (hug) in daily conversations as a means to convey warmth and emotional closeness. The use of these symbols indicates that the expression of love has undergone a digital transformation, where emotional nuances that were once communicated through words or physical gestures are now mediated through visual icons. In this sense, emojis serve as a bridge between emotional expression and technological mediation, allowing couples to maintain intimacy even in virtual spaces. This phenomenon reflects how the five love languages, particularly words of affirmation and physical touch, are being reinterpreted within digital communication platforms.

Receiving gifts has also been transformed by the advent of e-commerce and digital wallets, allowing couples to send vouchers, e-wallet balances, and even in-game items to each other. Acts of service are no longer limited to direct assistance but manifest through simple digital actions, such as ordering food online or reminding each other about schedules through notifications. Even physical touch, synonymous with contact, has gained digital symbolism through hug emojis, heart stickers, and interactive video

calls. Meanwhile, all technology-mediated quality time can now be achieved through long video calls or online games.

3.2 The Meaning and Preferences of Love Languages

Four couples interviewed in person and by phone, and three others interviewed separately, revealed variations in love language preferences among informants. Some preferred acts of service, quality time, physical touch, receiving gifts, and words of affirmation. Four of the 11 informants involved in this study identified quality time as the most dominant form of love language in their relationship. Three others emphasized acts of service as the primary way to express affection, while three others preferred physical touch. Furthermore, two informants associated emotional closeness with receiving gifts, and one chose words of affirmation as the most meaningful expression of love.

Informant CU stated that acts of service are preferred in their relationship because actions are considered more meaningful than words. She prefers expressing affection by cooking meals, while her partner prefers quality time by visiting tourist attractions, and words of affirmation through praise or motivational words. For informant CU, acts of service play a crucial role because they demonstrate real-life interactions that demonstrate concern, presence, and support for their partner, making their relationship feel more balanced and reassuring than mere verbal expressions.

“I express my love language through acts of service, like cooking him lunch, because I want tangible action or evidence, not just words. My partner, on the other hand, tends to like going to tourist attractions or the mall and encourages me.” (Interview with CU, a student at Guna Bangsa Health College, Yogyakarta, March 12, 2025, 9:00 a.m. WIB)

Informant Z, on the other hand, feels more comfortable using multiple forms of love language simultaneously. Informant Z revealed that she prefers quality time, physical touch, and acts of service as real interaction over receiving gifts or words of affirmation. Quality time contributes to a sense of appreciation through the togetherness provided by her partner, and physical touch fosters a sense of security and emotional closeness. At the same time, acts of service are interpreted as a form of tangible support. For her, receiving gifts is simply a bonus in her efforts to please her partner. Informant Z appreciated her partner's frequent time with her, such as accompanying her on various errands or simply spending time together.

Furthermore, physical touch is an important expression of affection for her, especially in everyday situations, such as walking through a shopping mall or entering a public space, where her partner often holds her hand or puts his arm around her.

In more private settings, communication is often expressed through expressions such as hugs. On the other hand, Informant L revealed that she and her partner limit their expressions of love language through physical touch due to concerns about negative perceptions from those around them. This suggests that although this form of expression is comfortable for their partners, prevailing social norms remain a consideration in its implementation. Informant, I added that expressions of affection in physical touch are related to interaction patterns that emerge in public spaces, particularly in Public Displays of Affection (PDA). She acknowledged that even though these interactions may seem normal to her and her partner, others may perceive them differently. This reflects differing social standards for assessing physical intimacy in public spaces, where the boundaries between personal comfort and social norms must be considered.

Furthermore, interviews with informants FH, NS, LS, R, and N revealed that despite their differences in expressing affection, these couples stated that open and effective communication is the main factor in maintaining a harmonious relationship. Informant N emphasized that mutual understanding, good communication, and trust are crucial to maintaining a long-term relationship. Similarly, informant FH also believed that communication with one's partner is crucial in maintaining a harmonious relationship. According to couples, other supporting factors for love language include a shared vision and mission, support, mutual respect, patience, and a deep understanding of one's partner. Informant NS explained that having shared goals and dreams allows a relationship to thrive, enabling partners to support one another. She emphasized that partners must be ready to provide help and support in a harmonious relationship. Interviews with all informants revealed that quality time was the most dominant form of love language because it was frequently used and could simultaneously trigger physical touch, words of affirmation, receiving gifts, and acts of service.

Of the four couples and three women interviewed, six recognized the importance of the concept of love language in their romantic relationships. Of the five love languages, quality time and acts of service were the two most dominant for the couples. Quality time is considered crucial for strengthening a relationship, while acts of service are seen as a form of attention that increases feelings of appreciation in the relationship.

Informant GS stated that spending time together in person with your partner provides an opportunity to see their responses in real time while opening up space for other forms of love languages to emerge in the interactions.

“We both tend to spend quality time together because when we are together, even if we are not doing anything, or even small things that other people might find extraordinary, there is a sense of comfort that other love languages do not. During quality time, I can immediately see my partner’s response and give feedback. Quality time can also stimulate other love languages.” (Interview with GS, Amikom University Yogyakarta student, March 11, 2025, 11:00 a.m. WIB)

Meanwhile, informant Y revealed that acts of service and quality time are the primary forms of expressing affection. She said that when she misses someone, she tends to become more emotional, so spending time together and receiving real attention from her partner makes her feel more loved.

3.3 Social and Cultural Roles

Couples’ adoption of love languages is also based on cultural and social adjustments in Yogyakarta. Some couples feel that other regional cultures have distorted Yogyakarta’s culture, creating a standardized sense of harmony in romantic relationships, while others do not. Informant R explained that Yogyakarta’s culture, steeped in politeness, togetherness, and family values, remains the primary foundation for expressing affection. The polite and humble attitudes inherent in the local culture lead many couples to demonstrate affection through acts of service, such as helping their partners during difficult times or spending quality time together, rather than through other forms of affection.

“The culture in Yogyakarta, which is steeped in politeness, togetherness, and family values, also significantly influences the expression of love language. Because couples are accustomed to politeness and humility, they may be more inclined to show affection through acts of service or quality time rather than just words.” (Interview with R, a student at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, March 11, 2025, at 1:00 PM WIB)

In more private settings, physical touch is often expressed through meaningful yet straightforward gestures, such as hugs. For informant L, this closeness provides comfort and strengthens the emotional bond with their partner. However, she emphasized that she and her partner choose to limit such expressions due to concerns about negative judgment from those around them. In the context of Yogyakarta's culture, which values politeness and caution in public interactions, physical expressions of affection are often considered inappropriate in front of others. This social norm then shapes couples' behavior in channeling their affection in other, more socially acceptable ways, such as using digital media. They use emojis like ❤️ (heart) or 😘 (kiss) to represent emotional closeness that cannot be shown directly in public spaces.

Informant I expressed a similar sentiment, highlighting the connection between physical expression and interaction patterns in public spaces. She stated that displays of affection, such as holding hands or hugging, actually feel natural when shared with a partner. However, she realized that social standards do not always align with her comfort level. In the context of public display of affection (PDA), interactions considered normal by one individual or couple may be viewed as excessive or even a violation of propriety by others. This situation demonstrates a negotiation process between the personal need to feel emotional closeness with a partner and an awareness of prevailing social views.

Based on the interviews, all informants hoped to maintain good communication and continue to adapt to their partner's love language. Informants desired a more expressive relationship in expressing affection through words and actions. Several couples also recognized the need to improve their understanding of their partner's way of expressing affection. They emphasized the importance of balancing giving and receiving in a relationship.

The relationship between themes or categories obtained from the data analysis can be seen in Figure 2. This diagram is based on the findings of interviews with the listed informants, where seven of the eleven informants acknowledged the role of social media, such as TikTok and Instagram, in shaping the idealization of love languages, for example, through actions that promote content such as opening a car door or going to the mall as expected forms of affection. The relationship with the results section is clearly seen in the explanation that repeated exposure to such content shapes idealized perceptions of relationships, as expressed by informants such as CU, who highlighted the influence of social media posts on their personal expectations. Thus, it shows how media technology influences

the expression of romantic love languages, Yogyakarta's cultural values, and the negotiation of meaning and balance in relationships.

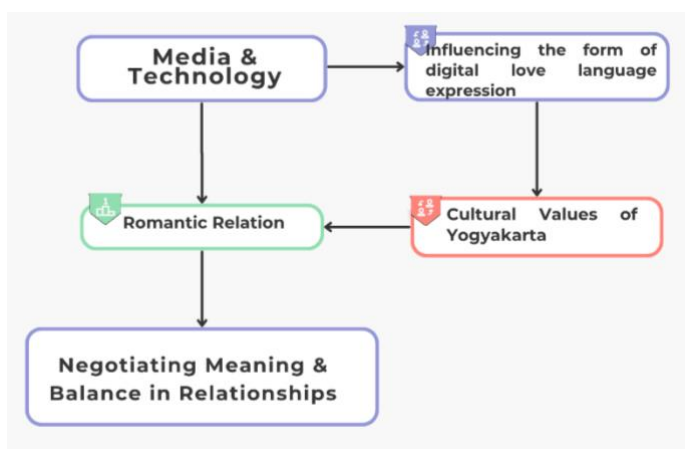


Figure 3. Diagram of relationships between themes or categories

4. Discussion

The study results indicate that quality time and acts of service are dominant. Both are not simply personal preferences but crucial to maintaining intimacy and harmony. This is in line with Chapman (1992), Azzahra et al. (2024), and Surijah et al. (2017), where concrete actions strengthen intimacy, with words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, and acts of service being the primary forms of love language used by Gen Z in building personal relationships. RDT reflects the connectedness-separateness negotiation, where digital communication enables virtual quality time but does not replace physical communication (Ellis et al., 2021). Words of affirmation are less dominant due to the preference for nonverbal communication in Javanese culture, but digital mediation, such as emojis, creates a contradiction: facilitating openness but risking surveillance (Fox et al., 2014).

The predominance of quality time interactions in this study indicates that young Gen Z couples consider togetherness a crucial aspect of maintaining a harmonious relationship. These results align with research by Jelita et al. (2025), which found that quality time is significantly related to emotional satisfaction and relationship harmony (Jelita et al., 2025). Quality time is considered a special space for building direct emotional connections. Most informants stated that the physical presence of a partner, even for simple activities, can strengthen feelings of belonging, increase empathy, and provide space for more honest two-way communication. From the perspective of Chapman's (1992) Love

Language theory, quality time allows couples to be fully present. It is a crucial moment in building intimacy, a key element of romantic relationships according to Stenberg's (2009) love theory.

Acts of service have a more contextual meaning, particularly in Yogyakarta culture, which is rooted in the values of politeness (*unggah-ungguh*), humility (*andhap asor*), and kinship (*guyub rukun*) (Linawati, 2024). These values guide individuals to express affection delicately and thoughtfully, making concrete actions like helping a partner or cooking a meal more meaningful than verbal expressions or physical touch like hugging or holding hands. This culture emphasizes harmony, caring, and cooperation, ultimately shaping Gen Z couples in Yogyakarta's tendency to express love through nonverbal forms that better align with existing social norms. This finding is supported by Bahtiar et al. (2023), who found that couples in long-term relationships tend to express love through acts of service because they are considered more practical and can strengthen commitment (Bahtiar et al., 2023). Within the context of Relational Dialectics theory (Putra et al., 2024), the choice of acts of service reflects couples' efforts to balance the contradiction between connectedness and separation, where social interactions in the form of mutual assistance act as a bridge to maintain connection without diminishing each party's independence.

Communication dynamics in expressing love language cannot be consistently implemented openly. For example, physical touch is often restricted due to social norms governing behavior in public spaces. Several informants stated that although they felt comfortable showing physical affection, they still maintained restraints in public spaces due to concerns about violating norms of decency. This indicates a trade-off between the need to demonstrate intimacy and the urge to adhere to local cultural norms of decency, as explained in the dialectic of openness versus closedness. This also confirms that Gen Z romantic relationships remain closely connected to the culture of Yogyakarta, as evidenced by a study by Jelita et al. (2025), which showed that local cultural norms can shape individual preferences in expressing affection (Jelita et al., 2025).

Interesting findings demonstrate the importance of communication with partners, but words of affirmation were not the dominant form of love language in this study. Nevertheless, some couples still consider creating positive and effective communication in their relationships crucial. Fernando et al. (2024) highlighted that words of support and appreciation can strengthen emotional bonds between partners and increase trust in relationships (Fernando et al., 2024).

In the digital context, this form of communication and expression has transformed, as it is no longer solely expressed verbally, but also through messaging on WhatsApp, direct messages on Instagram, and TikTok, using emojis to represent specific feelings. In other words, this love language is mediated by technology, resulting in young Gen Z couples increasingly expressing praise, attention, and emotional support through the digital spaces they use daily. This shift demonstrates that although words of affirmation are not the primary preference, they still play a crucial role in maintaining harmonious relationships, particularly through communication features on WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram.

In the digital realm, social media also plays a contradictory role. For some couples, social media serves as a space for inspiration and reference in understanding and adapting their love language within their relationship. Romantic content on social media, such as men verbally complimenting their partners or giving them small surprises, shapes certain expectations about expressing love. This demonstrates how digital technology expands the representation of love languages and creates social pressure and idealized expectations within relationships. Some informants even stated that social media has helped raise awareness of the importance of emotional communication and the expression of affection in certain forms.

In contrast, certain couples choose not to draw inspiration from social media, opting instead for relationships built on the internal dynamics that emerge from personal interactions. The presence of technology heightens the contradictions in Gen Z relationships. On the one hand, digital media enables virtual quality time through activities such as video calls or playing games together. On the other hand, social media presence cannot always replace the physical presence that most informants desire. This reinforces the idea in Relational Dialectics theory that romantic relationships are a constant tug-of-war between the desire for closeness and the need to maintain personal space, and between tangible and symbolic expression (Muniruddin, 2019; Nashrulloh, 2019). Furthermore, the presence of social media has expanded the forms of love languages and renegotiated the boundaries between the personal and public spheres in relationships.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that Gen Z couples in Yogyakarta negotiate love languages through digital mediation, with quality time and acts of service being dominant, influenced by local culture. These two forms are considered capable of building emotional closeness while demonstrating genuine care, which aligns with the values of politeness and togetherness

in Yogyakarta culture, thus limiting the expression of physical touch in public spaces. Social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp contribute to shaping romantic expectations and references for expressions of love, although they are not the primary focus. Open communication remains key to reconciling differing preferences and maintaining relationship harmony amidst cultural and technological influences.

This research has limitations due to its small sample size and geographic focus, which limit transferability. Future research could expand the geographic scope to compare variations in the meaning of love languages across different cultural contexts, explore changes in love languages in long-term relationships, and explore their application in counseling. Practical implications include developing relational counseling programs in Indonesia that integrate digital literacy, such as workshops on understanding love languages to prevent conflict. A mixed-methods approach could also be used to measure love language patterns across provinces or analyze the influence of social media algorithms on the relational dynamics of Generation Z. Thus, understanding of love languages can be further developed and contribute to communication science and interpersonal relationship practice.

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