"The Conjugal Ideal" Between Personal Choice and Parental Vision

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Abstract
Love is a theme at the center of everyday life, one we all experience regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, or religion. It is interesting to observe how love is regarded as important by individuals and how we choose to focus all our resources - social, economic, and material - to attain it. For this reason, relationships have not truly changed, but rather the angle from which we come to perceive them has shifted - this being due to the factors to which society exposes us. Classic sociologists demonstrate that the social nature of our most intimate feelings and the way we rethink love are tied to broader social changes. Factors such as passion, stability, stereotypes, and social pressure influence the choice of a future partner in a society often labeled as open, but which, in the end, has merely replaced the rules of the game. Illouz (2003) explains how the concept of love has evolved in contemporary society under the influence of several factors, such as the rationalization of suffering, aspirations shaped by society, and the ways in which modernity has brought about cultural and economic changes that, in turn, have fostered a certain affinity for a specific type of partner. In this context, the present research aims to explore how young people in modern society choose their "ideal" partner in relation to the expectations of their parents and the fluid society. It also investigates the factors projected by society onto the individual, which contribute to the "choice of the ideal partner."

Keywords: *Love; functionality; marital partner; extended family; marital commitment.*

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1. Love and Conjugal Involvement

Love is often regarded by sociologists as something elusive or difficult to understand, more suitably a subject of psychology rather than sociology. However, when we consider the immense social impact it carries, the perspective changes. Love emerges as a defining element in many aspects of an individual's life: it can become a desirable social status, and the search for a future partner can influence attitudes, perceptions, and stereotypes.

Moreover, love has become such a capitalized concept that it is difficult to ignore, regardless of our perception of it. It is so hard to define because it includes a wide range of attitudes, behaviors, and feelings that cannot be precisely determined. Added to this is the fact that the perception of love is influenced by society and culture, for example. Beall and Sternberg (1995) agree that there are three defining elements: intimacy, passion, and commitment, and these three are interpreted and understood depending on the definition adopted by the community in which we live (Beall and Sternberg, 1995).

In his work *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Anthony Giddens (1999) addresses the topic of passion and how it has evolved over time in modernity. What the Egyptians saw as a kind of "overwhelming of the heart", love is described as a kind of illness, though it also has healing powers. Today, the term passion has become rather generic and idealized - something we all seek but struggle to truly define. Giddens explains passionate love as the link between affection and sexual attachment, whose defining feature is emotional involvement (Giddens, 1999, p. 38). This form of love becomes omnipresent and may sometimes reach a level of intensity that leads to detachment from any kind of obligation related to everyday life. From the perspective of social order, it is seen as dangerous and a deviation from norms.

Precisely for this reason, passionate love is not recognized as necessary or sufficient for marriage or a stable relationship. In most cultures, it is framed as a relationship destined to fail due to the inherent instability it brings. The author supports this view by referring to the notion of marriage in premodern Europe, when marriage was regarded as a means to ensure economic well-being rather than as mutual sexual attraction or personal choice. Today, marriage is more closely associated with individual independence and similarity between partners. Giddens (1999) explains this by introducing the concept of the "pure relationship", which argues that marriage is no longer seen as a necessity or a kind of exchange between two people. A relationship exists as long as the needs of the partners are

met, as modern couples stay together because of love, sexual attraction, or the fulfillment of mutual needs. In contemporary society, a relationship is no longer considered essential (Giddens, 1999).

Individuals tend to think of choice as a fully rational trait - a kind of mental variable consisting of the ability to evaluate preferences and act accordingly, using the most efficient means. However, choice itself is strongly influenced by culture, by the way we have been socialized, and by the mental shortcuts we have acquired throughout life. A choice involves the process of ranking different types of emotions and thoughts that may influence a decision. In essence, we can say that the very process of choosing is shaped both culturally and socially.

Schwarz (2018), in his work *Cultures of Choice: Towards a Sociology of Choice as a Cultural Phenomenon*, discusses how culture not only influences the way we make decisions, but also provides techniques that can materialize in various forms: from consulting a specialist, to turning to religion, to interacting with an algorithm tailored to one's needs. These specific techniques are employed depending on the social context in which we find ourselves. The author emphasizes that decision-making techniques and norms evolve historically. For instance, today they are shifting toward individualism and encompass areas such as parental influence on children's decisions - ranging from career development to choosing a life partner, getting married, or selecting a place to live. According to the author, over time, such influences have seemingly lost their legitimacy. The same is true for the choice to cohabit with a partner without being married. The ethics of decision-making are shaped by space, social group, and historical moment (Schwarz, 2018).

Sociologist Eva Illouz, in her book *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, discusses how love is, in fact, a complex social construct, as it is not an individual matter but also has a collective basis through the content of thoughts, desires, and expectations dictated by society. When society promotes both what we understand as "intense passion of love" and heterosexual marriage as the model for adult life, they end up shaping not only our behavior but also our values, aspirations, expectations, and hopes regarding happiness (Illouz, 2003, p. 13). The author also emphasizes that the way marriage is organized today - most often based on monogamy, cohabitation, and the pooling of all resources - tends to diminish the "passion" of romantic love in our society. The two are placed in contrast, showing how disappointment leads to lowered expectations regarding what we call "love" and marriage (Illouz, 2013).

Theodor Adorno (1969) argues in his work *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* that imagination was a key factor in the development of bourgeois societies, as it became a component of the capitalist culture we still face today. Since the end of the 18th century, imagination has become an institutionalized practice in the field of aesthetics and later in mass culture, spreading into all aspects of everyday life. This institutionalization transformed the general concept of desire into specific aspects such as romantic desires. The openness to imagination "codified" cultural fantasies through which love becomes a story. However, Adorno also points out that once imagination was introduced into the consumer circuit, the term gained a connotative meaning beyond certain domains. Romantic love ends up being opposed to fantasy, as it is the opposite of reality (Adorno, 1969, apud Keuth, 2015).

Although in theory the evaluation of a potential partner's character is an individual act, it becomes, by the nature of the society we live in, a public one - something we share and judge alongside others. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1998) addresses this topic in his book *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, where he rationally classifies the two aspects we consider when it comes to choosing a partner. He argues that in modernity, love is no longer reduced to emotions alone, as it is strongly influenced by the way love is displayed in contemporary society. This display becomes one of the most important characteristics that individuals consider in the partner selection process.

Moreover, Luhmann states that reason is a defining element in how love is shaped in the current social context. When discussing social and cultural norms, these exert a direct influence on how we experience love (Luhmann, 1998, pp. 94-96).

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) approaches romantic relationships from the perspective of a society defined by constant change. He claims that relationships are the only game worth betting on. What is seen as relevant or ideal in a society today may become a deviation from norms at a later point in time within the same society. The author illustrates how relationships have evolved according to the changing needs of the individual (Bauman, 2003, p. 8).

For example, Bauman discusses virtual relationships, renamed as "connections", which, beyond representing access to a type of relationship that did not exist before the modern era, are fundamentally based on the pattern underlying any relationship - namely: you lose something in order to gain something else (Bauman, 2003, p. 12). The core argument of his work is that salvation comes through change. When quality is no longer satisfying, we tend to opt for quantity. This is also the case in online

environments. When we cannot find a satisfying partner within our reference group, we shift our attention to the online space. However, the "trick" lies in the reverse side of the coin: when we want to enter a "serious" relationship, we may lack the skills we have abandoned in favor of relationships conducted online (Bauman, 2003).

An important aspect when discussing the socialization process and how it influences our decisions relates to the concept of homophily, which Merton defines as the tendency to form relationships or connections based on degrees of similarity, such as gender, social class, or age. This is a phenomenon often encountered in primary socialization, which can manifest through the influence that family has in forming prejudices and attitudes toward certain individuals or situations. These practices can lead to permanent labeling of gender differences, as boys and girls come to develop strictly within gender-based subcultures that directly shape long-term social interactions (Merton, 1954, apud Lawrence and Shah, 2020).

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1977) also addresses topics centered on the idea of role and socialization. He argues that each society develops its own model of what is considered "essential" and characteristic of the two sexes. Here, all ideals of femininity and masculinity are laid out - ideals that are transmitted from childhood and later reproduced, with non-compliance leading to norm deviation and thus to deviant behavior. These goals and ideals also serve to justify certain behaviors.

When discussing what he calls the "arrangement between the sexes", Goffman demonstrates how, from birth, certain roles are assigned to us that we are expected to accept. He thoroughly discusses how, in hospitals, newborns are given a specific status solely based on their genitalia, and this designation goes on to define their entire lives, as the way they are classified subjects them to different societal pressures. Each sex ends up having different experiences and expectations placed upon them by society (Goffman, 1977).

Researchers West and Zimmerman (1987) introduced the concept of "doing gender", which refers to the ongoing enactment of gender performed by individuals in society. They analyze the effort that social actors invest in everyday life to maintain their gender identity. This involves not only social interactions but also practices that come to be seen as defining elements for a certain category within society. Furthermore, they argue that gender is a social trait, as it can only truly manifest when we come into contact with others (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Cherlin (2004), in his work *The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage*, discusses how social norms change in meaning,

as individuals come to perceive them selectively, choosing to adapt certain social practices to their personal needs. The author argues that when society changes, norms that were once considered desirable lose their legitimacy, which opens the opportunity for them to be redefined (Cherlin, 2004, p. 848).

In the current context, research shows that marriage occupies a completely different position compared to the past, not only because the society we live in allows us to experience life and personal choices more freely, but also because multiple alternative forms of marriage have emerged in the meantime (Cherlin, 2004, p. 853). The author also points out that in today's society, certain indicators of "marriage" once seen as essential can now be practiced without any formal status. For instance, cohabitation and the birth of a child - elements that have been "negotiated" throughout modernization - are now accepted and normalized in our society (Cherlin, 2004).

In her paper *Attachment Styles and Love Languages Among Young People*, Chicu (2020) explores the correlation between attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant) and the five love languages (words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, physical touch), in order to observe how these manifests within couples, as well as gender differences. The study is based on the premise that attachment is not limited to childhood but persists throughout life, as this system develops from birth and functions as a mechanism through which the individual seeks assurance of protection.

The research consists of administering a questionnaire to 100 respondents (50 couples) aged between 22 and 38, from various socio-economic backgrounds. It aims to observe attachment styles in relation to the "Love Languages" scale in order to analyze how these manifests among young people.

The results showed that most individuals in the sample had a secure attachment style, which implies openness to intimacy and attentiveness to the partner. This is interpreted as an attempt to maintain a romantic and harmonious relationship, which in turn becomes an instinctive internalization of certain secure behaviors or the pursuit of such characteristics in a future partner. Additionally, the avoidant style had the lowest representation (3 respondents). Chicu (2020) explains this by stating that individuals with this attachment style tend to end relationships more quickly, as they are prone to repressing their emotions, making them more open to seeking another partner.

The article *The Relationship Between Love Styles and Couple Satisfaction*, written by Svetlana Taras (2023), is highly relevant to my

undergraduate research, as it presents the models through which individuals approach love and how these are correlated with relationship satisfaction. The love styles refer to the ways individuals understand and express love, and include: Eros (passionate love), Ludus (playful love), Storge (friendship-based love), Mania (possessive love), Pragma (practical love), and Agape (altruistic love). The author correlates these styles with levels of couple satisfaction.

The sample consisted of 40 couples married for less than ten years, and the data showed a direct connection between Agape - characterized by altruism and responsibility - and a high degree of involvement in the relationship. There was also a significant correlation for the Eros style, suggesting a strong focus on maintaining passion, expressed through emotional intensity, sexuality, and romanticism. Furthermore, the study revealed an inverse correlation between Ludus and couple satisfaction, as it is interpreted as immaturity, low relationship involvement, or emotional detachment from the partner - factors not considered desirable in the context of a long-term relationship (Taras, 2023).

2. Methodology

This research paper focuses on young people's perspectives regarding the choice of the "ideal partner" in relation to the role they are expected to fulfill by society. The ideal cannot be a measurable concept in sociology; it becomes a subjective criterion, as each individual attributes to the notion of the ideal their own thoughts, expectations, and opinions shaped by the cultural environment they belong to.

From a sociological perspective, the "ideal" can only be analyzed through the lens of opinions that define the criteria for choosing a marital partner and individuals' views on marital happiness. These views are influenced by the culture in which individuals are socialized, by family members, and by personal expectations and opinions related to conjugal life.

The research question guiding this paper is: *What is the perception of young people regarding the choice of the "ideal" partner, and how is this perception influenced by social pressure and parental expectations in Romanian society?*

The objectives of the study are to analyze young people's opinions on the choice of the "ideal" partner and to examine their views regarding the influence of family factors on the selection of the "ideal" partner.

The respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method. The group consisted of eight female and eight male respondents.

3. The Conjugal Ideal - Between Utopia and Fulfillment in the Couple

The analysis of opinions regarding romantic love revealed fairly uniform responses, showing that despite the fact that "love" is perceived as something abstract, we tend to relate to it in quite a similar way. *D.* states: "I believe that romantic love is that strong feeling of attachment and devotion that makes you feel fulfilled with the person beside you."

Thus, we can observe a tendency to prioritize the self in the idea of love, rather than aligning with socially prescribed sets of values. Fulfillment appears primarily as a personal act and only secondarily as a general state that defines the couple's relationship. As expected, a clear definition of the concept of love cannot be established - respondents describe it through the lens of emotional experience, attachment, and the fulfillment of needs. *A.* also speaks about attachment and support: "Romantic love means passion, emotional attachment, trust - it is something that needs time to grow. It's that feeling I get when I'm next to my boyfriend and he touches my arm or hugs me just because he knows how much I like it."

We observe that what the two respondents expressed is reflected in the findings of Chicu's (2020) study, which emphasizes the idea that individuals develop attachments to their partners out of a desire to feel protected.

Furthermore, when defining love, respondents tend to use terms such as "passion" or "intimacy." *A.* defines romantic love as follows: "It involves passion, intimacy, and a constant desire to make your partner happy. Romantic love evolves over time, transitioning from the initial excitement of infatuation to a deeper and more mature connection, where partners come to know and accept each other's vulnerabilities and imperfections."

Thus, while some interviewees define love beginning with their own sense of fulfillment, for others, the feeling of duty toward fulfilling their partner's needs takes precedence. They engage in actions directed toward the other, with the expectation that the emotional feedback they receive will encourage their partner's affective involvement.

As a middle-ground attitude, a third category of interviewees considers love to be an act of ongoing reciprocity: "…I truly believe in

love in the full sense of the word, I believe in the passion that partners express toward one another, and I believe that love is when there is a commitment between two people that can lead to marriage and the creation of a family." This view aligns with what Beall and Sternberg (1995) argue, namely that there are three defining elements of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Additionally, a form of emotional maturity and conjugal experience identified among respondents was reflected in their views on passion: while they declared it to be a conjugal value, it was not seen as a defining one. Passion is desired, but it appears in respondents' opinions more as a triggering factor than as a state that sustains the euphoria of an ideal relationship. Passion is also regarded as a resource that motivates partners to remain cohesive, gradually transforming into interaction, mutual understanding, fusion, and solidarity.

Another value attributed to passion was its erotic dimension - its function in giving physical expression to emotional feelings toward the loved one.

The same opinion is shared by *M.*: "I don't really relate to this idea of passion in a serious way - like having sex four times a week or anything like that. I would associate the idea of passion with the small attentions partners give each other and with care. The fact that you actually care."

As Giddens (1999) and Eva Illouz point out in their respective works, the way society is organized today tends to diminish the passion of love, replacing it with stability or mutual understanding. Individuals are more likely to seek a stable partner rather than, as *A.* puts it, "a flame that burns out."

When asked about the process of selecting a future partner, no respondent provided a precise list of criteria; instead, most relied on terms like "shared interests" and "common values," indicating that the degree of similarity plays a decisive role in the process of choosing the "ideal partner." Nearly all respondents stated during the interviews that they want a partner who shares their values. *M.* states: "First of all, assessing general compatibility, which includes common interests, similar values, and shared life goals. Communication plays a crucial role, because it is important that we can talk openly and honestly about any topic."

The interviews also reveal that, although physical appearance is considered important, it was not prioritized in any of the respondents' answers. Contrary to expectations, physical attractiveness holds little relevance in the absence of communication,

chemistry, or shared interests. Young people appear to be much more patient when it comes to finding the "ideal partner," expressing a willingness to wait until they meet someone with whom they can build a "serious" relationship.

The investigation of opinions regarding the fundamental qualities a partner should possess in order to ensure happiness revealed characteristics based on reasoning, as also argued by Luhmann (1998) in his work *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*. The author claims that in modernity, love is not dictated solely by emotion; instead, our decision-making process tends to include factors with a higher probability of success.

For example, *A.* speaks about loyalty, fidelity, the ability to be a good mother, social responsibility, and emotional engagement. *D.* similarly states: "I would place great emphasis on honesty. Personally, I can't stand lying. Because as long as she's honest with me and I'm honest with her, that's how I think things work best."

An important aspect to highlight regarding the general expectations related to value systems is that nearly all respondents made specific references to fidelity. This is likely due to the broader social openness toward discussions involving sexuality, erotic desires, pornography, and so on - an openness which also raises awareness about potential risks of infidelity in intimate relationships.

Thus, it becomes evident that stability is essential when it comes to building a future relationship. Respondents were very vocal about the importance of honesty and loyalty, as from their perspective, without these needs being fulfilled, a long-term relationship cannot be sustained. This also reflects the desire to choose a partner who possesses the fundamental elements they consider relevant. The fact that none of the respondents mentioned specific material criteria and instead focused primarily on honesty and loyalty suggests that our value system has clearly shifted compared to the past.

If for previous generations it was important to have a house or a well-paid job - while other "flaws" were later renegotiated and tolerated - today we can clearly observe that fundamental relationship criteria are more emotionally oriented and are negotiated from the very beginning, as young people aim to avoid relationships doomed to fail.

In this section, we explored the respondents' perspectives on the role they identify with in a relationship, as well as the expectations they place on themselves or their partner based on gender. The responses confirmed what researchers West and Zimmerman (1987)

describe as "doing gender," which refers to the constant performance of gendered behaviors, resulting in the implementation of certain practices perceived as defining for particular individuals.

When asked whether she believes expectations differ by gender, *A.* explains: "In real life, women have more expectations when it comes to relationships. For men, it's secondary - it's more about sex. I mean, even in movies. They meet and two seconds later they're having sex. On the other hand, in movies made for women, they get to know each other in slow motion, and I think this reflects the way the genders perceive relationships."

Another similar perspective on the expectations imposed on the individual by society is offered by *C.*: "Because it's enough - I don't know, just think about any family gathering. Finish your studies so you can start a family too, because it's time for serious things. But for boys, the path is a bit different - people usually ask them how things are going in their relationships."

Despite the fact that interviewees challenge gender differences, stating that they are not beneficial and that the way they are internalized leads to unrealistic expectations - both from one's reference group and from society as a whole - they still tend to view them with a degree of acceptance. The two excerpts above support this idea. Respondents are aware of how expectations are structured in society, but since these are already internalized from within the family, they do not strongly oppose them, as they can also find justification for their existence.

This reflects, in fact, the very values of patriarchy, characterized by the notion that one gender is expected to seek family stability, while the other is encouraged to explore and search.

A different perspective on how men are socialized regarding partner selection is expressed in the following statement: "At first, boys want one of those gorgeous girls, the kind they dream about and love with all their heart. But then, when they mature, they want something else. They want someone serious, someone who will be at home or help them when needed. They want a mother for their children. It's possible they want someone increasingly serious, because they change too, and she has to change along with them, you know?"

Women are often pushed by both family and society to mature quickly - to be responsible not only in terms of their career path but also in romantic relationships. Traditional influences passed down from their families of origin still reinforce differentiated expectations regarding gender roles for men and women. In Romania, this gender-

based distinction remains quite common, reflected in the idea that girls should be decent, find a partner, and stay with him - if not for life, at least for a long period - while boys are not judged for “exploring” and avoiding commitment to a single relationship.

All of these stereotypes - such as the fear that men have of being faithful to one person or of getting married - affect the way relationship ideals are shaped. If you are told that reliable men are hard to find, you are more likely to appreciate a partner who simply doesn’t leave, even if he lacks other qualities essential for emotional fulfillment.

These examples clearly illustrate how gender leaves its imprint on the individual and on the way they communicate with their partner. These expectations and standards are socially constructed and accepted, and they end up being perpetuated by individuals in all areas of daily life - especially in romantic relationships - because gender is a social construct that can truly manifest only through the interpersonal relationships we develop.

We observe that when it comes to finding the ideal partner, respondents tend to reassess their strategy, weighing what they desire against what they believe they can realistically receive. As *M.* puts it: “We’ve had an image since we were little about what we want. Ideally, my partner would be a wizard, able to perform magic, wanting to uncover the mysteries of the universe. But now, the ideal partner for me is someone responsible enough, who doesn’t want to control me and gives me the freedom I need.” Ana shares a similar view: “When I was little, I told myself I would marry a man who could cook, clean, and do all those things so I wouldn’t have to. Now, I just want someone who’s honest and who’s there. I’ll figure the rest out.”

This reflects Adorno’s (1969) view that the individual’s imagination regarding romantic relationships is reshaped by the social context we live in. Given that we are currently undergoing significant societal changes and that the way we experience relationships has evolved, it is understandable that young people tend to prioritize pragmatic aspects over so-called “fantasies.”

Emotional maturity can also be observed in the way respondents reassess their strategies when it comes to choosing a future partner. Depending on the current social context, they no longer seek the kind of love portrayed in movies, but instead focus on elements that may bring emotional benefits in the long term, such as responsibility and honesty.

The analysis of how young people shape their idea of the ideal partner is deepened by the influence exerted by their parents. This

influence provides insight into the patterns individuals develop over time and how they wish to establish connections with a future partner. All respondents stated that their relationships are, or will be, different from those experienced by their parents. Common elements found in the interviews include: society, modernity, and technology.

For example, *A.* states: "Because, at least from what I've heard from my parents' stories, things were much simpler back then - there was no social media, not so many things like today, people just talked face to face." *D.* perfectly summarizes the idea that our behavior is shaped by a constantly changing society: "Yes, I think there is more diversity now, because, after all, we live in modernity." *A.* also adds: "For example, my parents got married six months into their relationship and were already trying to have me, while my boyfriend and I want to first be financially stable, and only then plan a wedding and have a child."

All these responses further reinforce how modernity brings with it new values that are accepted and internalized by the respondents. All of them noted that the perspective from which a relationship is viewed has shifted from one generation to the next. However, none of the respondents expressed a desire for their own way of relating to mirror that of their parents. This is also supported by Cherlin (2004), who, in his work, states that marriage occupies a completely different position today compared to the past, as the society we live in now offers more opportunities to experience life and make personal choices.

Despite the fact that respondents emphasized during the interviews that, when it comes to choosing a partner, their opinion is the only one that matters - and that the decision belongs solely to them and not to society or the people around them - the results revealed otherwise. The degree of acceptance shown by the family environment toward a romantic partner proved to be extremely important for the interviewees.

They justified their answers by arguing that their parents' perspective is more reliable due to life experience, or by pointing out that having a partner who is not accepted by the family can become a barrier in maintaining family relationships. Ultimately, emphasis was placed on the idea that they would be willing to stay with someone despite negative opinions from family members, as long as the person "is worth it," with this process being described as a form of "sacrifice."

For example, *A.* shares: "It's not about doing what my mom says anymore, but her opinion still matters, and it always has, and I

think it always will. But if I'm ready to make that sacrifice, it absolutely has to be worth it, because I'd be exposing myself to a pretty big risk. That person would definitely have to prove later on that she's the right one, and eventually, she would be accepted."

In fact, it is not necessarily about a need for parental evaluation, but rather about a sense of dependency and insecurity. Many young people are used to relying on parental guidance for ideas and decisions. Because they have not yet fully developed the autonomy to make choices independently, they continue to seek evaluation, coordination, and validation from their families. *M.* also emphasizes the importance of this aspect but points out that it is not a concern for him personally, as partner similarity is quite common today - something that tends to eliminate future conflicts regarding family acceptance: "It is very important. I think for most couples. This is a primary criterion when choosing a partner, especially if you anticipate strong opposition from your parents". *A.* adds: "My family's opinion is important to me because they want what's best for me and can offer valuable perspectives. It's essential for my partner to be accepted and respected by my family."

These opinions stem, in fact, from the respondents' desire to fulfill the roles they have internalized through the process of primary socialization. The family's opinion matters so much because respondents believe that if a partner fails to integrate into the family, it could serve as a warning sign of potential character incompatibility that might surface later in the relationship. This view is supported by Merton's (1954, apud Lawrence and Shah, 2020) perspective, which introduces the term *homophily*, defined as the human tendency to form connections based on similarities such as gender, social class, or age.

Furthermore, the fact that respondents are more inclined to give up on a potential romantic interest rather than oppose their family's opinion demonstrates not only that the family holds a greater importance, but also that the way they were raised has led them to place more trust in their parents' perspective than in that of a romantic partner.

The one respondent who stated that her family's opinion does not matter at all admitted that she does not have a good relationship with them. She has been accustomed to making decisions independently from a young age, and her parents' authority holds almost no weight in her life. Moreover, she does not view her parents as a model she wishes to replicate in her future relationships: "Back to my parents - they were very foolish. My father was very young, and

my mother never managed to overcome her traumas. She didn't know how to handle her relationship. I want to believe I can do better. I already completed a university degree, so my chances compared to theirs have increased by 200%."

Primary socialization is a defining element in how individuals behave within society, and when it comes to relationships, the way individuals manage them is often a direct reflection of how they were taught to do so within the family. The analysis of opinions regarding the defining elements instilled by the family in relation to future relationships reveals three main themes: negative examples transformed into lessons of what to avoid, elements perceived as meaningless in today's society, and aspects that require improvement.

Several notable responses highlighted how the behavioral patterns observed in the reference group were primarily negative examples - things to be consciously avoided in the future. This was especially true for how traditional expectations were imposed from an early age and how those expectations are now seen as irrelevant. *A.* recalls: "Where I grew up, there wasn't really any encouragement to have a partner or boyfriend. I wasn't supposed to think about that, you weren't allowed to make mistakes or cry. In our community, a woman had to stay home, cook, clean. If something wasn't perfect, you were considered dumb or defective". *M.* also shares: "Cooking - for sure, a woman had to know how to cook. That, plus ironing. You had to know how to iron your husband's shirt. But no, I wouldn't want a relationship like my parents', and I don't think the so-called values they passed down help me in any way today. People focus on different things now."

The way family-shared values are linked to domestic tasks highlights that previous generations, having been socialized differently, tend to instill the same practices in their children - motivated by a desire to help them manage and to pass on the best of what they have learned. However, parents often fail to recognize that we now live in a fluid society, one defined by change, which naturally leads to a complete rethinking of the value system. These outdated values tend to do more harm than good, as they instill heightened expectations in younger generations - expectations that they should uphold the values of past generations while also adapting to contemporary social norms.

Other responses included a desire to improve upon what they saw in their families, such as the amount of time dedicated to the relationship, even after many years - an attitude consistent with the

findings of Taras (2023), whose study of 40 couples married for less than ten years showed that today's partners place greater emphasis on factors that help preserve well-being in the relationship, including active engagement, regardless of external circumstances.

This is illustrated in *I.*'s statement: "I'd like to do things in my relationship that I didn't see in my parents'. For example, going out together even after getting married". *A.* also emphasizes this idea: "For instance, their relationship wasn't really built around going out. I think, whether you're 80, 90, or 20 years old, love should stay the same. I'd like to spend more time with my partner, because in my mind, I think that would make her feel better and would help prevent our relationship from becoming fragile."

This section of the study outlines the aspects that respondents consider relevant when it comes to society's view of the desirable partner and the degree of agency they demonstrate.

Public opinion often tends to be polarizing, and when we talk about love, things can become particularly complex. We all want to experience love, and we are often willing to change many aspects of ourselves in order to attain it. If love is portrayed in a certain way, we may not adopt that image immediately, but over time, we tend to believe that this is how it should be experienced.

Our choices are frequently shaped by the community we live in and by the content we choose to consume. Clearly, the level of adaptation to society's expectations is quite high. This occurs due to a strong desire for acceptance and a fear of being excluded from society.

However, neither society nor individuals remain the same. Desires and ideals evolve, which in turn pushes society to adapt.

One defining aspect of contemporary society is mass media - a force so influential in our lives that previous generations often struggle to relate to it. In the past, the only expectations one had to meet were those of family and the surrounding community. Today, however, one must meet the standards of an ever-changing collective entity. Opinions are far more numerous and diverse, due to greater access to a wide range of people.

When it comes to relationships, "everyone seems to know better than you." You can find hundreds of websites full of advice and strategies for managing a relationship - advice that is often contradictory, depending entirely on the narrative you choose to follow. This idea is supported by the following statement: "The best example I can give here is related to social norms and expectations about marriage - more precisely, about the 'right' moment and age at

which we are supposed to get married. Moreover, the image presented in mass media plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions of relationships and love, because, most of the time, we copy exactly what we see being praised by those around us." *M.* also discusses mass media, though from a slightly different perspective. His frustration relates to the media coverage of what he considers to be erroneous or incomplete narratives that criticize the choices made by younger generations. This is captured in the following excerpt: "I can tell you what the media thinks just by looking at all the news reports out there, which frame the issue so poorly. They say young people haven't found their purpose in life because they're getting married so late. I see things differently: nowadays, the main priority is financial and professional independence, and only after that comes the desire to find a family, not rushing to have ten kids."

The responses to this question demonstrate that, although traditional influence is present in the values instilled by parents, this influence does not carry the same weight when society attempts to exert similar pressures on young people. Their value system tends to reject the societal pressure to start a family, despite the fact that all respondents expressed the desire to build long-term relationships - relationships they envisioned extending to marriage or even to how they would spend retirement with their partner.

What became evident is that they aspire toward traditional values associated with love in the context of Romanian society, but they do not wish for these values to be imposed on them or to be judged for not fulfilling them within a certain timeframe.

The analysis of the characteristics that constitute the desirable partner in our society revealed how this ideal is, in many ways, socially constructed. According to *C.*, the ideal partner promoted by society is defined by the stability offered by someone who is "family-oriented": "Someone who is family-oriented will, by default, take care of their family and fulfill their duties. Also, having a stable income is seen in our society as more important than being wealthy."

The recurring reference to stability in respondents' answers shows that the uncertainty we experience today prompts people to seek partners who can provide the support needed over time. However, this is not entirely different from how partners were perceived in the past. While previous generations looked for someone they could rely on in terms of physical labor or financial security, today's expectations center around a partner who is emotionally supportive and capable of self-sufficiency. *P.* also provides a concise yet clear list of the qualities promoted by Romanian society regarding

the ideal partner: “That is, to be white, to be Romanian, to have economic advantages. Sexual orientation - heterosexual. Ideally, also attractive, young. Somewhat religious, but not overly devout.”

This illustrates how individuals are aware of what society promotes as desirable, believing that there exists an unwritten list of criteria that any partner is expected to meet - criteria that can later expand through interaction with social groups. The point being emphasized here is that forming a relationship with someone is not simply the result of our individual attraction to a particular person. Often, we are attracted to someone because we have been taught that we should be. We evaluate potential partners using mental shortcuts acquired over time.

The analysis of the decision-making process regarding a future partner revealed that all respondents prioritized terms such as shared interests, values, communication, common topics of discussion, and loyalty. This suggests a clear preference for emotional qualities over physical appearance or financial status. It is possible that the lack of emphasis on these latter factors is due to their reduced relevance at this stage in life. However, another plausible explanation is that romantic aspirations are heavily influenced by societal norms - and today’s modern context is driving a major rethinking of all values, including those related to how we perceive love. *I.* states: “I would go with the idea of simple understanding, a connection - to get along reasonably well, not necessarily having the same mentality. I think having somewhat similar future aspirations matters”. *C.* also expresses similar aspirations: “Mutual respect is just as important. Open and honest communication is crucial for addressing any issue or misunderstanding. Emotional support - knowing that my partner is there for me during difficult times and supports me in achieving my goals.”

Romantic interest is interpreted as a partnership between two individuals, grounded in equality and shared life goals. The interviews revealed a strong preference for balanced power dynamics within relationships.

A different perspective on the subject is offered by *A.*, who internalizes societal pressure when discussing the qualities a potential partner should possess. This pressure is manifested both through gender stereotypes and traditional values, more commonly found in the relationships of previous generations: “I’m not saying that women shouldn’t work, but in my idea of a perfect relationship, I’d be the one bringing in the money, the one working and taking care of the

family. The whole family - not just my wife and children, but also my parents, my grandparents, and my wife's parents too."

This can be interpreted as the internalization of certain values promoted within the family. When one's parents' relationship serves as an ideal, individuals often try to replicate the dynamic they observed over the years, believing that by following the same pattern, they will achieve similar outcomes. However, the way society is organized today does not necessarily allow for the same model to be applied, as current needs and expectations are fundamentally different.

4. Conclusions

In terms of cultural and economic changes, we live in a fluid society where everything moves at a very rapid pace, and the uncertainty we face pushes us to reconsider our value systems - particularly regarding the characteristics we deem desirable in romantic relationships.

Another relevant factor is public opinion concerning how young people manage relationships, as shaped and presented by the mass media. This refers more specifically to the promotion of a single conservative mindset that is expected to be applied universally across all individuals. Despite the pressure exerted by news outlets and social media, the findings of this research show that young people tend to reject these influences. The pressure to start a family often produces the opposite effect, influencing them to approach future relationships on their own terms rather than conforming to externally imposed expectations.

The degree of similarity proved to be the defining element in what constitutes the "conjugal ideal." All respondents emphasized the belief that a high level of similarity not only guarantees a long-term relationship but also contributes to happiness and fulfillment within it. The presence of shared interests and values naturally fosters qualities such as passion, understanding, and chemistry, making it easier to overcome challenges that arise during the course of the relationship. This is also supported by Merton (1954, apud Lawrence and Shah, 2020), who defines the concept of *homophily* as the individual's tendency to form relationships based on the highest degree of similarity, such as social class or age. This phenomenon is commonly found in primary socialization and manifests through an individual's susceptibility to forming prejudices and attitudes based on certain individuals or situations.

The research also showed that young people view their family's opinion of a partner as valid and important - often described in the interviews as "the correct one" due to the life experience parents possess. Respondents tend to follow their parents' guidance out of fear of discovering something unpleasant later in the relationship.

Moreover, the increased influence of the family can also be explained by the aspiration for validation. Respondents expressed a desire to receive approval from their families regarding a future partner, precisely because they want to be confident that the decision made is the right one, and that the shared living environment will be a harmonious one. Additionally, when young people reported having a good relationship with family members, this clearly reflected that the way they were socialized not only shaped certain ideas and values they seek in an "ideal" partner, but also made it easier to rely on their family's opinion. This is due to the fact that rejecting a partner may signal a long-term incompatibility.

In this sense, the research shows that the conjugal "ideal" is influenced both by the context in which we live and by the external factors to which we are exposed. The way relationships are understood today differs significantly from how they were perceived a generation ago. Respondents stated that their parents' relationships are clearly different from the ones they are experiencing now, due to how social values and priorities have been reorganized over time.

They emphasized the fact that they now have the freedom to search for the "ideal" partner without setting a strict timeframe or placing particular importance on marriage or starting a family. The interests of today's youth have shifted, with greater focus on academic progress, financial stability, and couple compatibility.

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