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license**EXPLORING THE UNDERLYING FACTORS
CONTRIBUTING TO MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION
Z'S DIFFICULTIES IN ENTERING MARRIAGE IN SOUTH
AFRICA****Phumuzani Mpofu^{1*}, Bakhe Dlamini²**¹Department of Psychology, School of Human & Community
Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
2000, South Africa²Department of Psychology, Eswatini College of Theology,
Mantenga Falls Road, Mbabane, Swaziland*Correspondence E-Mail: mpofup89@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol3iss3pp618-633>**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the factors underlying the difficulties faced by Millennials and Generation Z in entering marriage in South Africa, while examining the social, cultural, economic, and psychological dynamics shaping such decisions. Employing a qualitative case study design within the framework of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and a transformative paradigm, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected unmarried participants aged 18–45. The findings reveal that marriage is no longer perceived as an automatic life stage but as a reflexively negotiated institution balancing sacred values and transactional considerations. Key barriers include fear of divorce rooted in family experiences, economic constraints—particularly wedding costs and lobola practices—prioritization of education and career, shifting gender roles, the influence of social media in constructing unrealistic expectations, and the need for emotional readiness and psychological maturity. The study also identifies a shift in the meaning of marriage from a foundational life stage to a capstone achievement requiring financial stability, individual autonomy, and relational competence. This research contributes theoretically by applying CHAT to conceptualize marriage as a dynamic and contradiction-laden activity system, positioning delayed marriage as a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity rather than rejection. The findings highlight the need for adaptive social policies and interventions addressing relational skills, financial literacy, and culturally sensitive reforms.

Keywords: Capstone Marriage, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Financial Constraints, Generational Change, Marriage Delay, Social Transformation

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, patterns of marriage formation have undergone profound transformation both globally and within South Africa. Statistical evidence consistently points to a steady decline in marriage rates alongside a significant delay in the age at first marriage, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z. Historical census data indicate that the proportion of individuals entering marriage in South Africa has declined markedly over the twentieth century (Mhongo, 2013), a trend further confirmed by regional analyses demonstrating a sustained reduction in formal unions across Southern Africa (Pauli & van Dijk, 2016). This shift is reflected in the rising median age at marriage and the growing prevalence of

singlehood (Posel et al., 2011). More strikingly, single-person households increased by approximately 150 percent between 1995 and 2011, signaling broader transformations in household structure (Thornton, 2024). Longitudinal demographic data also reveal a sharp decline in the proportion of married African women, dropping from nearly half in 1970 to less than one-fifth by 2019 (Mugwendere, 2024). These patterns align with broader sub-Saharan trends, where delayed marriage has become increasingly common over the past two decades (Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2014).

Globally, similar trajectories are evident. In the United Kingdom, while over 90 percent of women born in 1940 were married by age 30, only a fraction of those born in 1990 had entered marriage by the same age (McClintock, 2015). In the United States, marriage rates have steadily declined since the mid-twentieth century as alternative family forms have gained social legitimacy (Miller, 2020). East Asian countries have witnessed comparable patterns, with the average age at first marriage surpassing 30 for men and approaching that threshold for women (Raymo et al., 2015). Even in Indonesia, traditionally characterized by early and near-universal marriage, the proportion of women remaining unmarried into their thirties has increased significantly (Himawan, 2019). Taken together, these trends suggest that the postponement of marriage is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader global restructuring of intimate life.

The implications of declining and delayed marriage extend beyond individual life choices, raising important concerns for social cohesion and institutional stability. Scholars have linked the weakening of marriage institutions to broader societal consequences, including the erosion of civil society and social capital (Anderson, 2013), declining fertility rates and demographic imbalances (Hayford, 2013), and the normalization of less stable union forms (Cherlin, 2004; McClintock, 2015). Additional risks include increased exposure to relational instability, infidelity, and sexually transmitted diseases (Bethmann & Kvasnicka, 2011), as well as adverse outcomes for child well-being (McClintock, 2015). At the psychosocial level, delayed or foregone marriage has been associated with mental health challenges, including loneliness and reduced emotional support systems (Beutel et al., 2017). Economically, the decline of stable family structures may also weaken long-term financial security and intergenerational support systems (Fagan et al., 2011). Furthermore, the diminishing centrality of marriage has implications for religious and cultural institutions that historically relied on family structures as foundational units of social organization (Khatun et al., 2022).

Despite these shifts, marriage continues to hold symbolic and aspirational value. Research indicates that many young adults still idealize marriage and family life, even as they postpone or reconsider entering into it (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). The desire for long-term partnership remains strong, suggesting that the decline in marriage is not necessarily indicative of its rejection but rather of changing conditions surrounding its realization. Historically, marriage has played a central role in the socio-economic and cultural fabric of Southern African societies, structuring kinship, inheritance, and communal identity (Kuper, 2016). It remains widely recognized as a

foundational institution for family formation and social continuity (Ayotola & Karim, 2015). This paradox—between enduring aspiration and declining participation—raises critical questions about the evolving meanings and conditions of marriage among younger generations.

A growing body of literature has sought to identify the factors contributing to the decline in marriage among Millennials and Generation Z. One of the most frequently cited explanations is the fear of divorce and relational instability. Young adults who have witnessed parental separation or community-level marital breakdown often develop cautious or ambivalent attitudes toward marriage (Mostafapour et al., 2025). Economic constraints represent another significant barrier. In the South African context, the rising cost of lobola has been identified as a major deterrent, transforming a culturally meaningful practice into a substantial financial burden (Yarbrough, 2018). Similarly, broader economic pressures—including unemployment, student debt, and rising living costs—have contributed to the perception of marriage as financially unattainable or risky (Haneman, 2017).

Institutional and policy changes have also reshaped the landscape of intimate relationships. Legal recognition of diverse union forms, including cohabitation and same-sex partnerships, has expanded the range of socially acceptable alternatives to marriage (Taylor, 2020). This diversification has, in turn, influenced how younger generations conceptualize commitment and partnership. At the same time, shifting cultural values emphasize emotional fulfillment and personal compatibility over traditional obligations, with many individuals prioritizing love and self-actualization in their relationship decisions (Kulathunga & Abeysinghe, 2024). These transformations are closely linked to broader processes of individualization, where personal autonomy increasingly takes precedence over collective expectations (McGuire, 2015; Uprety, 2024).

Gender dynamics further complicate these patterns. The expansion of educational and professional opportunities for women has contributed to delays in marriage, as individuals prioritize career development and financial independence (Maharaj & Shangase, 2020). At the same time, evolving gender norms have challenged traditional expectations within marriage, leading to tensions and renegotiations of roles and responsibilities (Uprety, 2024). Feminist critiques of patriarchal family structures have also influenced how marriage is perceived, with some viewing it as an institution requiring transformation rather than preservation. In parallel, the rise of cohabitation as a socially acceptable alternative has reduced the perceived necessity of formal marriage (Mugwendere, 2024).

The influence of digital technologies and social media has added a new dimension to these dynamics. Exposure to curated representations of relationships can create unrealistic expectations and intensify comparison, shaping how individuals evaluate potential partners and their own readiness for marriage (Radaev, 2021). Difficulties in finding compatible partners, coupled with trust issues and shifting norms around commitment, further contribute to delays in marriage formation (Blbas et al., 2025). At the cultural level, the gradual erosion of traditional norms that once reinforced marriage has weakened its institutional authority (Mulaudzi, 2013).

Education and career aspirations also play a central role, with many young adults postponing marriage until they achieve personal and professional stability (Dai & Chilson, 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2025).

While these studies provide valuable insights, they often approach the issue in a fragmented manner, examining individual factors in isolation rather than as part of an interconnected system. Less attention has been given to how these diverse influences interact within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, or how young people themselves actively negotiate these complexities in their everyday lives. Moreover, existing research tends to emphasize structural or economic determinants, sometimes overlooking the subjective meanings and lived experiences that shape decision-making processes.

In this regard, a more integrative perspective becomes necessary—one that not only identifies barriers but also captures the dynamic interplay between cultural traditions, economic realities, psychological readiness, and evolving social norms. By situating marriage within a broader activity system, it becomes possible to understand it not as a static institution in decline, but as a site of ongoing negotiation and transformation. Such an approach opens space for reinterpreting delayed marriage as a meaningful and intentional process rather than a simple deviation from normative life trajectories.

This study therefore seeks to explore the underlying factors contributing to Millennials' and Generation Z's difficulties in entering marriage in South Africa through a holistic and context-sensitive lens. Drawing on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, it aims to examine how individuals navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, obligation and autonomy, and material constraints and emotional aspirations. In doing so, the research not only contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of changing marital patterns but also offers insights for developing more responsive social policies and interventions that support sustainable and meaningful family formation in contemporary society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is grounded in a transformative research paradigm, which is particularly suited to examining complex social issues that require not only interpretation but also critical reflection and potential social change. The choice of this paradigm is informed by its commitment to addressing structural inequalities and reshaping dominant narratives, especially in areas where social norms and institutional practices are in flux (Mertens, 2007). In the context of declining and delayed marriage among Millennials and Generation Z, the transformative paradigm allows the research to move beyond descriptive analysis toward a more engaged understanding of how young people negotiate meaning, identity, and agency within shifting socio-cultural landscapes. It also aligns with the broader intention of contributing to more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to family and relationship policies (Trevors et al., 2012).

A qualitative approach was adopted to capture the depth, nuance, and lived realities underlying young people's experiences with marriage. This approach is particularly appropriate given that decisions around marriage are not merely rational or economic choices but are deeply embedded in values, emotions, cultural expectations, and personal histories. Qualitative inquiry enables a closer engagement with participants' perspectives, allowing the researcher to interpret how meanings are constructed and negotiated in everyday life (Allan, 2020; Aspers & Corte, 2021). Rather than seeking generalizable patterns, this study prioritizes contextual understanding, recognizing that the "why" and "how" of delayed marriage are best explored through participants' narratives and reflections (Reich, 2021).

The research was conducted in South Africa, a context characterized by a unique intersection of strong cultural traditions and rapid socio-economic transformation. The persistence of practices such as lobola alongside increasing urbanization, educational expansion, and digital influence makes South Africa a particularly rich site for examining the evolving meanings of marriage. Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates significant shifts in marriage patterns within this setting, making it both relevant and urgent for sociological inquiry. By situating the study within this context, the research is able to capture the tensions between continuity and change that shape contemporary relationship trajectories.

The study employed a qualitative case study design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded social phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). This design was chosen because it facilitates a holistic understanding of complex social processes, integrating multiple sources of data to generate rich and credible insights (Eagly et al., 2001). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that those selected were directly relevant to the research objectives. A total of 24 participants were involved, consisting of unmarried Millennials and Generation Z individuals aged between 18 and 45, representing diverse socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. The inclusion of both men and women was intentional, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of gendered experiences and expectations related to marriage. Participants were selected based on their willingness to reflect on their experiences and their ability to provide insight into the challenges of entering marriage, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the data (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data were generated through a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely while still guiding the conversation toward key themes relevant to the study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Kallio et al., 2016). This method enabled the researcher to probe deeper into personal experiences, uncovering subtle meanings and emotional dimensions that might not emerge in more structured formats. In addition, two focus group discussions were conducted, each consisting of 6 participants, to capture collective perspectives and the social dynamics that influence attitudes toward marriage. Focus groups provided a space for participants to interact, challenge, and build upon each other's views, thereby enriching the data through shared reflection (McLafferty, 2004; Nyumba et al., 2018).

Field notes were also maintained throughout the research process to document non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and emerging insights.

Data analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach, involving systematic processes of transcription, coding, categorization, and theme development. All interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and depth in interpretation (Bailey, 2008). The researcher engaged in iterative reading and reflection, identifying patterns and relationships across the data (Ravindran, 2019). Themes were developed inductively, allowing findings to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation by integrating multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, and field notes) and comparing perspectives across participants. Methodological triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings by validating recurring themes across different forms of data collection. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of representations. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher critically reflecting on their positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' identities. Participation was entirely voluntary, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring that the study adhered to established standards of responsible research practice (Arifin & Roshaidai, 2018). Through this comprehensive and carefully considered methodological approach, the study seeks to generate nuanced and trustworthy insights into the evolving dynamics of marriage among younger generations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, interpreted through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as articulated by Lev Vygotsky and expanded by Yrjö Engeström. Marriage is conceptualised as a dynamic activity system in which Millennials and Generation Z individuals (subjects) pursue the object of stable partnership, identity formation, and family continuity within historically and culturally mediated contexts. The findings reveal that participants do not uniformly reject marriage; rather, they engage with it critically and reflexively, negotiating tensions between sacred covenant and transactional exchange, tradition and modernity, economic constraint and emotional readiness, as well as patriarchal scripts and egalitarian aspirations. These tensions reflect systemic contradictions within and between elements of the marital activity system, demonstrating that marriage among this cohort is undergoing transformation rather than decline.

Marriage as a Contested Activity System

Theme 1: Marriage as Sacred Covenant vs. Transactional Exchange

Participants constructed marriage as either a sacred, divinely ordained covenant or a transactional contract shaped by material exchange and individual benefit, revealing a contradiction within the object of the activity system. In the covenantal framing, marriage was described as spiritually ordained and morally binding: *“Marriage is a devine institution which was created with purity.”*; *“Marriage is covenant that 2 individuals enter to share their lives and is influenced by Godly principles.”*; and *“Marriage is sacred and to be respected.”* This aligns with recent scholarship showing that many individuals continue to interpret marriage through sacred and religious lenses that emphasise divine sanction, moral obligation, and communal accountability (Padgett et al., 2019). In contrast, other participants constructed marriage in explicitly instrumental terms: *“Even married I perceive marriage as transactional whether financially, emotionally or physically.”*; *“Marriage has become transactional.”*; and *“It’s all about what can one benefit.”* Contemporary research similarly notes the increasing individualisation and market-oriented evaluation of intimate relationships, where emotional returns, financial stability, and personal fulfilment become central criteria for marital success (Leavitt et al., 2021).

From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective, this tension reflects a primary contradiction within the object of marriage between sacred meaning (moral-spiritual use value) and material exchange value (instrumental benefit). Historically embedded religious-cultural mediating tools (faith traditions, covenant theology, communal norms) coexist and compete with contemporary socio-economic tools (financial readiness, legal contracts, emotional reciprocity, and individual satisfaction). This contradiction is not merely ideological but structural, signalling a broader socio-historical shift in how marriage is mediated, evaluated, and sustained within late-modern contexts (Cherlin, 2020).

Theme 2: Fear of Divorce and Exposure to Marital Breakdown

Participants’ remarks such as *“I fear divorce,”* *“Most of us are children of failed marriages,”* *“Divorce is hectic... the perpetrator acts like a victim,”* and *“Divorce parties... it is no longer shocking”* illustrate how early exposure to parental separation and community narratives about marital breakdown shapes cautious attitudes toward marriage. Research indicates that children of divorced parents often develop ambivalence toward long-term relationships and diminished confidence in marital stability (Amato & DeBoer, 2019) From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective, these fears are mediated by historical and social tools the family, community norms, and observed relational behaviors that transmit expectations and anxieties about marriage across generations (Vänninen et al., 2015). In this sense, the *internalisation of observed marital instability* functions as a cultural artifact influencing young adults’ perceptions of marriage and divorce, embedding relational caution within both individual cognition and collective social history (Brown & Lin, 2012).

Theme 3: Economic Pressures and Lobola as Structural Barriers

Economic pressures and lobola emerged as significant structural barriers to marriage, shaping how young adults perceive readiness and timing. Participants emphasized the financial burden of marriage, with statements such as *“Marriage feels expensive before it even starts”*, *“Lobola can exceed E60,000”*, and *“I took a loan to pay lobola”*. Lobola, traditionally a cultural symbol, was increasingly interpreted as a financial obstacle in contexts of unstable employment, student debt, and economic precarity, reflecting broader neoliberal pressures on youth (Parker, 2015; Posel et al., 2011). This aligns with findings that delayed marriage often results from the need to achieve economic benchmarks before committing positioning marriage as a “capstone” rather than a “foundation” in life course sequencing (Thornton, 2024). Consequently, cultural practices like lobola intersect with structural inequalities, making marriage contingent on financial stability rather than solely relational or cultural readiness.

Theme 4: Gender Role Contestations and Patriarchal Tensions

The findings reveal ongoing tensions between traditional patriarchal norms and contemporary gender equality within marriage. Male participants emphasized provision and authority, reflected in statements such as *“A man must not vent... he must just provide”* and *“The law has put so much power on women empowerment such that as men we lose leadership,”* illustrating the stress men experience when traditional roles are challenged (Eagly et al., 2001). Women highlighted emotional safety, shared responsibility, and autonomy, exemplified by *“Women lose themselves in marriage,”* reflecting broader societal shifts toward egalitarian partnerships (Acker, 2012; Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). These tensions, including debates around polygamy and empowerment discourse, demonstrate marriage as a contested activity system where patriarchal legacies and modern gender norms coexist and are continuously negotiated (Zembylas, 2025). Overall, the findings underscore that contemporary marital dynamics involve both the assertion of women’s agency and men’s ambivalence regarding evolving gender expectations.

Theme 5: Education, Career Prioritization, and Delayed Marriage

Participants’ accounts strongly reflect broader research showing that higher education and career goals often lead to postponed marriage, as individuals prioritize financial independence and personal development before forming long-term partnerships, which in turn shapes marital timing (Cummins, 2025; Maharaj & Shangase, 2020). For instance, *“education and career are survival mechanisms”* and *“I need to be self-accomplished before attaching anyone to my life”* echo findings that young, educated women frequently delay marriage to secure economic stability and build careers (Maharaj & Shangase, 2020). Research also indicates that higher education is associated with later union formation more generally, suggesting that increased time spent in school and early career development postpones entry into marriage (Cummins, 2025). The idea that *“marriage is not survival but companionship”* aligns with the shift from traditional economic motivations toward relational quality and personal readiness as

central to marriage decisions. Invoking visible role models who embody career success and independence further illustrates how contemporary cultural narratives legitimize delayed marriage as a meaningful life choice. Finally, while some studies find complex links between age at first marriage and later outcomes, evidence suggests that later marriage is not inherently disadvantageous and may be associated with more deliberate partnership formation, which participants describe as reducing future relationship instability.

Theme 6: Cultural Expectations vs. Individual Autonomy

Participants highlighted the tension between cultural expectations and personal autonomy in relationships, where *“cohabitation is a big no-no in my culture,” “you are only considered a man when married,”* and *“family expects me to carry the family name”* reflect strong communal norms, while *“living together is widely accepted now”* indicates shifting attitudes. Research shows that cohabitation remains less accepted than marriage in many African contexts yet growing empowerment and changing gender dynamics allow young adults to negotiate between tradition and personal choice (Ayebe, Okyere, Arthur, et al., 2025; Ayebe, Okyere, Okantey, et al., 2025). Philosophical frameworks such as Ubuntu reinforce collective obligations, highlighting how individuals balance communal values with self-determination (Ajitoni, 2024).

Theme 7: Social Media, Comparison Culture, and Unrealistic Expectations

Participants constructed social media as both distortive and influential in shaping marital expectations. Many viewed it as producing unrealistic relational standards and comparison-driven pressure. As one participant stated, *“Social media presents a fake life.”* Another added, *“We see ‘relationship goals’ that are unrealistic,”* while others emphasized the normative overload: *“Everybody is a marriage counselor”* and *“One word: pressure.”* These accounts reflect how curated digital portrayals of intimacy intensify upward comparison and relational performance, often fostering dissatisfaction and idealized expectations among young adults (Abrams et al., 2018; Amoateng & Richter, 2003). Contemporary research shows that social media amplifies exposure to idealized romantic narratives, reshaping how commitment, success, and intimacy are evaluated (Nesi et al., 2018).

Yet participants also demonstrated reflexive agency. One noted, *“I neat pick what I take from the socials,”* suggesting selective engagement rather than passive internalization. From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective, social media functions as a mediating artefact that introduces new symbolic tools into the marital activity system. This produces tertiary contradictions between historically embedded marital scripts (e.g., permanence, covenant, communal accountability) and digitally curated ideals emphasizing visibility, aesthetic perfection, and public validation. Thus, social media does not simply distort marriage; it reconfigures the cultural tools through which marriage is imagined, negotiated, and performed in contemporary contexts.

Theme 8: Emotional Readiness, Healing, and Self-Development as Preconditions

Participants highlighted *emotional readiness, healing, and self-development* as essential before marriage, illustrated by statements such as “*Healing is the most important thing,*” “*Marriage is a living trigger,*” and “*Emotional intelligence and wholeness first.*” This reflects a shift from traditional markers of marital readiness toward intrapersonal competencies self-awareness, trauma resolution, and emotional intelligence which are linked to relational satisfaction and adaptive conflict resolution (Lo-oh, 2023). The idea that “*Marriage is a living trigger*” aligns with research showing unresolved personal wounds can affect intimate partnerships (McKenzie & Dales, 2017). Participants’ emphasis on self-development mirrors broader cultural trends in therapeutic thinking and mental health literacy (Furedi, 2013; Horwitz et al., 1996; Hunter, 2016), suggesting that young adults increasingly view psychological maturity and emotional preparedness as foundational to marital success.

Theme 9: Proposed Solutions – Education, Mentorship, and Structural Reform

Participants proposed practical strategies to strengthen marriage, highlighting education, mentorship, and structural change. The call for premarital counselling and therapy with comments such as “*Premarital counselling should be normal*” aligns with recent studies showing that structured premarital education improves communication, realistic expectations, and later help-seeking behaviours, which can bolster marital stability and relationship quality (Bahkali et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2023; Yuniarsih & Sumedi, 2025). Mentorship from healthy couples was expressed as “*Marriage education is required,*” pointing to the value of modeled relational skills and ongoing guidance, an extension of evidence that relationship skill education supports couples’ relational competence (Moore & Govender, 2013; Ribar, 2015). The emphasis on financial literacy and planning responds to evidence that financial understanding and shared money management enhance satisfaction and reduce stress within couples (Apostolou et al., 2020; Bagi, 2025). Regarding cultural practices, participants urged “*Adapt customs like Lobola to be symbolic rather than financial*” and supported micro-weddings, echoing research showing that adapting bridewealth/lobola can reconcile cultural value with economic realities, reducing financial barriers to marriage (Stetsenko, 2008). They also stressed honest communication “*Communicate, communicate*” consistent with broader findings that transparent dialogue about money and expectations is linked to higher marital satisfaction and resilience (e.g., financial communication research). Collectively, these proposals reflect a shift from romantic idealization toward relational competence, suggesting that premarital education, mentorship, financial preparedness, and culturally adaptive practices may contribute to more sustainable marriages.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Millennials and Generation Z perceive marriage as a highly negotiated, conditional, and intentional institution rather than an automatic life milestone. Participants described marriage along a spectrum from sacred covenant to transactional

contract, influenced by faith, culture, parental models, and community norms. Fear of divorce, financial strain, and exposure to parental conflict were pervasive, while lobola and wedding costs created structural barriers. Education, career development, and personal growth were prioritized before marriage, framing it as a “capstone” rather than a foundation. Social media amplified comparison culture and normalized divorce, but participants still valued marriage when aligned with emotional readiness, autonomy, and mutual respect. Gender dynamics and patriarchal pressures also shaped expectations, reflecting ongoing tensions between traditional and contemporary values. Premarital education should be widely accessible, combining moral guidance with practical skills such as conflict resolution, financial transparency, emotional regulation, and communication competencies to prepare couples before crises arise. Cultural practices like lobola should be modernized to preserve symbolic value while reducing financial strain through symbolic payments and transparent negotiation. Gender-equitable marriage models must be promoted, emphasizing shared leadership, joint financial decision-making, and recognition of unpaid care labour, alongside safe spaces for male vulnerability. Financial literacy programs for youth can increase relational confidence, covering budgeting, dual-income planning, and realistic wedding preparation. Positive narratives of sustainable marriages should be amplified to counter negative social media influences, and affordable, culturally competent therapy should be expanded to focus on preventative mental health support. Finally, future research should examine urban-rural differences, gender-specific anxieties, and the long-term effects of delayed marriage on family formation to inform policies and practices that support stable, intentional unions.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study received ethical clearance from the University of Witwatersrand, and the clearance number is Protocol H25/10/32. All the ethical consideration were observed during the process of research. The authors observed no potential conflict of disclosure.

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